

THE REVERSAL OF AGAMEMNON AND MENELAUS IN EURIPIDES' *IPHIGENIA AT AULIS*

The rapid action in *Iphigenia at Aulis* arises largely from the characters' altering states of mind and related matters of knowledge or ignorance of each situation. This article considers the motivation of Agamemnon and Menelaus in particular. Both characters reverse their stance dramatically, but the creation and receipt of false impressions makes it difficult for us to determine precisely what lies behind each change of mind.

In the *Iph. at Aulis* there is a rapid succession of «changes of mind». The drama begins by focusing on the vacillation of Agamemnon¹. His speech (378-401) elicits a response from the chorus (402-03) which would be similar to our own. They note how he has completely changed his position, indicating how unexpected this outburst is. This reaction serves to emphasize Agamemnon's fickleness and insincerity².

Menelaus adheres to his original arguments, stressing the point of Agamemnon's obligation to Greece. At 412 he departs, with a last parting shot at Agamemnon's kingly authority and with the overt threat that he will turn to other means of persuasion.

¹ The old slave queries his sealing and re-sealing of the letter (35-40). At first Agamemnon refused, then allowed himself to be persuaded and summoned Iphigenia under the pretext that she was to be married to Achilles. He changes his mind again and dispatches a messenger to Argos to prevent her arrival. However, upon his daughter's arrival on the scene, Agamemnon has yet again another change of mind. Menelaus' words at 333 are true:

πλάγια γὰρ φρονεῖς, τὰ μὲν νῦν, τὰ δὲ πάλαι, τὰ δ' αὐτίκα.

Agamemnon's reply: εὖ κεκόμψευσαι πονηρά (334) is applicable to himself, especially in regard to the deception he practised on Iphigenia. He has set out, from the moment he sent the first letter, to create false impressions and this is highlighted in his conversation with Clytemnestra (691-750) where he continues the pretence concerning the supposed marriage with Achilles.

² It is quite fitting that Conacher (p. 256) describes Agamemnon as a man «of mixed and uncertain motives». D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama. Myth, Theme and Structure*, University of Toronto Press, 1967.

The messenger announces Iphigenia's arrival accompanied by Clytemnestra and Orestes. He then relates the men's reaction at the camp upon hearing about her presence. There is much speculation about her marriage and they ask: *τίς νιν ἄζεται ποτε;* (434). This discussion highlights the lengths to which Agamemnon has gone in his deception and prepares for Achilles' reaction to this contrivance and the great shame and embarrassment attached to it³.

Agamemnon's first response upon hearing of Clytemnestra's and Iphigenia's arrival is to bemoan his fate and repeat his lament that the lowly-born are to be envied, for they are allowed to express their feelings and display their emotions (446-48)⁴. It is clear, however, that he has no intention of resisting Calchas' demands.

... προστάτην δὲ τοῦ βίου
τὸν ὄγκον ἔχομεν τῷ τ' ὀχλῳ δουλεύομεν (449-50).

Our opinion of him as a weak, vacillating character is strengthened by the tone of the rest of his speech. He expresses his annoyance at Clytemnestra's presence (... ἴν' ἡμᾶς ὄντας εὐρήσει κακοῦς, 459). It is only after he voices his fears about the army and the difficulties he will encounter as a result of Clytemnestra's presence, that he considers Iphigenia herself. Even then, as Grube rightly observes⁵, his main concern is that she and Orestes will plead with him which would be unpleasant. Finally, at 472, Agamemnon ends with these words of submission:

δίδωμι· σὸν γὰρ τὸ κράτος, ἄθλιος δ' ἐγώ.

At this point (Agamemnon having completely submitted to the pressure placed upon him), Menelaus reverses his stance in a most dramatic speech (473-503). He now adopts the same arguments against carrying out the sacrifice —namely that Helen is not worth the sacrifice of the life of Iphigenia— that as Agamemnon had advocated earlier. This admission at 485 ff. especially so at 488: *Ἐλένην ἔλωμαι, τὸ κακὸν ἀντὶ τὰγαθοῦ*; if indeed genuine, suggests all the more the worthlessness of the expedition.

³ On the preparation for Achilles' part see W. Ritchie, «Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis* 919-974», *Dionysiaca. Nine Studies in Greek Poetry*, edited by R. D. Dawe, J. Diggle, P. E. Easterling, Cambridge 1978, pp. 180-99.

We are made aware of the great anger Achilles will feel at discovering the deception: 124-35, 206-30, 695-715.

⁴ I agree with G. Grube (*The Drama of Euripides*, London 1973) that «to worry about proper behaviour at this time goes far to justify Menelaus' accusation...» (p. 426).

⁵ *Ibid.*

Menelaus sees the situation in a different light when he realizes Agamemnon's despair. He puts himself in Agamemnon's place (480, *εἰμι δ' οὔπερ εἰ σὺ νῦν*) as he comes to the realization that the «justice» of the enterprise needs to be questioned when such tragic sacrifices are involved. Perhaps he is thinking of the consequences for himself if it were he who had to sacrifice his own child. In fact, Clytemnestra later echoes these words here as she argues with Agamemnon in her attempt to sway him⁶. Here, at 482-84, Menelaus comprehends the injustice of the situation and urges Agamemnon to allow the army to be disbanded.

The question to consider is how genuine is Menelaus' sudden change of heart? Grube suggests that «the proposal is completely insincere»⁷. Bates claims: «Menelaus cunningly pretends to urge him to forget the Greek fleet and to save his daughter but Agamemnon will not permit any such thing.»⁸ As for Agamemnon's reasons for sacrificing his daughter, and Menelaus' objections (506-537), Grube describes this as «unkind insistence» on Menelaus' behalf. «Menelaus maliciously exposes Agamemnon's bad motives.»⁹ I agree wholeheartedly that Agamemnon's bad motives are exposed and this is surely the purpose of this exchange. But it can be said that if he had no intentions of allowing Agamemnon to save Iphigenia, he would not have countered all of Agamemnon's objections so readily. Agamemnon claims that the situation is out of his control:

ἀλλ' ἤκομεν γὰρ εἰς ἀναγκαίης τύχας,
θυγατρὸς αἱματηρὸν ἐκπράττει φόνον (511-12).

The Achaean forces will demand the sacrifice. Menelaus' response is that Iphigenia could be sent back to Argos, which Agamemnon admits. Agamemnon then raises the problem of Calchas, expressing his fear that the latter will report the prophecy (518). Both, however, agree that Calchas can be overcome. Menelaus even goes so far as to suggest murdering the prophet: οὐκ, ἦν θάνη γε πρόσθε· τοῦτο δ' εὐμαρές (519). Agamemnon reacts to this suggestion not with shocked indignation, but with a strong affirmation of the harm caused by the whole race of pro-

⁶ ἢ Μενέλεων πρὸ μητρὸς Ἑρμιόνην κτανεῖν,
οὔπερ τὸ πρᾶγμ' ἦν (1201-02).

All citations in this paper are derived from *Euripides*, Vol. III of Murray's Oxford Classical Text (1963).

⁷ Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 426.

⁸ W. N. Bates, *Euripides. A Student of Human Nature*, Univ. of Penn. Press, 1930, p. 148.

⁹ Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 427.

phets (520). Both of the brothers agree that Calchas' presence is evil as Menelaus repeats his proposal to dispose of this particular threat (521). Agamemnon responds with a catalogue of reasons why he is compelled to kill Iphigenia.

And then there is the fear of Odysseus; that he will expose him before the army, thereby being able to take control and be in a position to attack Argos and kill Agamemnon, Menelaus and whoever else stood in the way of the expedition to Troy. It is certainly true that Odysseus' cunning and ambition pose a definite threat in that he would be likely to enlighten the army as to Agamemnon's fickleness. However, that Argos be razed seems most unlikely (533-35). To Menelaus: *οὐκ ἔστ' Ὀδυσσεύς ὃ τι σὲ κάμει πημανεῖ*¹⁰ (525). Agamemnon, however, is resigned:

*τοιαῦτα τὰμὰ πῆματ' ὦ τάλας ἐγώ,
ὥς ἠπόρημαι πρὸς θεῶν τὰ νῦν τάδε* (536-37).

Agamemnon, of course, was aware of all these factors when he made his earlier decision not to sacrifice Iphigenia. It is clearly a case where he must decide what are his priorities. His fear of losing his power is made quite explicit especially at 449-50:

*... προστάτην δὲ τοῦ βίου
τὸν ὄγκον ἔχομεν τῷ τ' ὀχλῷ δουλεύομεν.*

At 1012 Clytemnestra also notes Agamemnon's fear of the army. Agamemnon himself continually specifies the necessity of this circumstance:

*... τοῦτο γὰρ πράττει με δεῖ.
ὁρᾷ' ὅσον στράτευμα ναύφρακτον τόδε* (1258-59).

There is no question that he is acting according to the demands that Greece lays upon him (*ἀλλ' Ἑλλάς, ἧ δεῖ...*, 1271). The point is that he is compelled to sacrifice his daughter if the demands laid upon him by virtue of his kingship are of the utmost importance to him. He chooses the course that will help him retain his power and give him the opportunity to win fame. When Clytemnestra asks at 1194-95:

*... ἦ σκηπτρά σοι
μόνον διαφέρειν καὶ στρατηλατεῖν μέλει;*

¹⁰ On the other hand, although this action may seem unlikely, it should be remembered that no other character indicates the extent of Odysseus' power. Also, Menelaus himself agrees: *φιλοτιμία μὲν ἐνέχεται, δεινῷ κακῷ*. Therefore, it is difficult to arrive at a firm conclusion regarding how limited was Odysseus' power.

the answer is simply «yes».

Menelaus' change of mind differs from Agamemnon's in that while it is made clear where ultimately the latter stands, there is still the element of doubt regarding the former. It is certainly possible that upon seeing Agamemnon effected as he is and viewing the situation in terms of how he himself would feel, he genuinely sympathises. However, it must be conceded that there is some difficulty in discerning exactly how sincere he is. Although it appears that he does not deserve Bates' recrimination that «he is a Spartan and has nothing admirable about him. He is merely contemptible»¹¹, we are left with the nagging doubt that his «reversal» is a calculated attempt to appeal to his brother's fears and ambitions. It could be argued that Menelaus, being shrewdly aware of Agamemnon's frame of mind, counters the king's arguments in such a way as to strengthen his decision. One can never be certain, for instance, whether Menelaus would really carry out his proposal to murder Calchas (519). Those who suspect his motives point especially to 498-99:

εἰ δέ τι κόρης σῆς θεσφάτων μέτεστι σοί,
μὴ μοι μετέστω· σοὶ νέμω τοῦμόν μέρος.

There could well be an element of self-interest here. This is not to suggest that he does not genuinely feel for Agamemnon and Iphigenia, but he may have mixed feelings and be relieved that his brother will not change his mind again. Should it eventuate (as it does) that Iphigenia is sacrificed, Menelaus, in his mind, can absolve himself of responsibility, as he leaves Agamemnon with the decision. At the same time he can continue with the expedition and pursue the object of his «lust». At 485-88 Menelaus has admitted that Helen is worthless. That his lust for Helen is an important factor is made clear. I must agree that the whole projected war is «a shabby affair» —the result of personal ambition on the one hand and of lust on the other—¹². Euripides makes it difficult for us to know precisely what lies behind Menelaus' «change of mind» at each moment. His reversal is sudden and quite unexpected. What is made certain is Agamemnon's ambitious desire and fear of the army.

The reversal of positions (genuine or otherwise) by Menelaus and Agamemnon is completed when the latter, after firmly making it clear that he is determined to sacrifice Iphigenia, appears to take the former's

¹¹ Bates, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹² Conacher, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

role. That is, previously it was Menelaus who wished to ensure that Clytemnestra knew nothing of the treacherous plans. Now, at 538 ff., Agamemnon requests from Menelaus that all precautions be taken so that she will not learn of it until after their daughter has been killed. His self-interest is again apparent in his wish to make this ordeal as least uncomfortable as possible:

ὥς ἐπ' ἐλαχίστοις δακρύοις πρᾶσσω κακῶς (541).

When Clytemnestra inquiries about Achilles' family, Agamemnon persists with the elaborate pretence about the marriage, supplying the details of the ceremony (691-741)¹³. He makes a last attempt to persuade his wife to return to Argos immediately, saying that she should look after their other daughters (731). The weakness of Agamemnon's character is most evident in the scene with Clytemnestra where she asks him directly:

τὴν παῖδα τὴν σὴν τὴν τ' ἐμὴν μέλλεις κτενεῖν; (1131)

At this stage, even after Clytemnestra has obviously discovered her husband's true intentions, he still professes not to understand. At 1144-45:

*ἰδοὺ σιωπῶ· τὸ γὰρ ἀναίσχυντον τί δεῖ
ψευδῆ λέγοντα προσλαβεῖν τῇ συμφορᾷ;*

He told lie after lie when he thought they would serve his purpose, but now he suddenly professes to feel shame at such a thought. The height of his cowardice is reached at this point (1144-45). Yet he is unable, in spite of Clytemnestra's feelings, to bring himself to tell the truth.

The encounter between Iphigenia and Agamemnon exacerbates the situation. Clytemnestra bears witness that of all the children she has borne, Iphigenia has always loved her father most:

*ἀλλ', ὦ τέκνον, χρὴ φιλοπάτωρ δ' αἰ ποτ' εἰ
μάλιστα παίδων τῷδ' ὅσους ἐγὼ 'τεκον (638-39).*

The dialogue at 640-90 contains much tragic irony and ambiguity. Iphigenia's enthusiasm is met with evasive replies from her father. She asks

¹³ Agamemnon plays a convincing part giving details of Achilles' background even including information regarding his education that he was taught by Chiron (709).

him to relinquish his command for a time so that he can return home and be with his children (656). His reply: θέλω γε · τὸ θέλειν δ' οὐκ ἔχων ἀλγύνομαι (657), is not strictly true. Much earlier in the play we were informed that he could have disbanded the army. When the voyage was delayed by unfavourable winds, the men had urged that all the ships be returned (see 350-53). He himself had later ordered Talthybius to dismiss the whole army (94-95); and still later, Menelaus afforded him the opportunity to return home¹⁴. In Agamemnon's attempt to justify himself he claims that no Greek woman will be safe from barbarian invaders if Helen's abduction is not avenged. His contention here is surely exaggerated as he envisages the rape and seizure of Greek women and the possible defeat of Greece (see 1264-75).

It is sometimes asserted that Agamemnon's integrity is much restored by his words here. Grube asseverates that «Agamemnon... achieves a certain dignity... his ambition is here more closely linked with the greatness of Greece...»¹⁵. Agamemnon supposedly arrives at the realisation that this war needs to be waged for the sake of Greece. The individual is unimportant. Pohlenz, however, justifiably questions the sincerity of these supposedly new motives. «Ihn zwingt nicht die sachliche Notwendigkeit, die in der Pflicht gegen das Ganze gegeben ist, sondern persönliche Feigheit, die Angst vor der Menge, die das Opfer verlangen wird.»¹⁶ Agamemnon is driven by personal cowardice in the face of the crowd, by his fear of the army which will demand the sacrifice.

It may be positively asserted that Agamemnon's motives are being undermined. Weakness in terms of his fear of the multitude and his own desire for recognition are the evident motivating factors for Agamemnon. It is indeed ironic that due to weaknesses he derives the strength for his immovable stance. Pohlenz suggests that «Fast grotesk wirkt es und ist doch nur zu menschlich, dass gerade diese Angst dem schwachen Manne die Kraft gibt, sich gegen alle anderen Gefühle zu wappnen und den einmal betretenen Weg zu Ende zu gehen.»¹⁷ Agamemnon has indeed oscillated but his fears and selfish desires ultimately prevail. Nothing can deter him from his final stand. Along with Pohlenz I find no basis for imputing noble motives to Agamemnon. He is more concerned with his own glory than with that of Greece. However,

¹⁴ Regardless of whether Menelaus' offer was sincere or not, the important matter to observe here is Agamemnon's reaction.

¹⁵ Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

¹⁶ M. Pohlenz, *Die Griechische Tragödie*, Göttingen 1930, p. 497.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

it is in his interests to extol the virtues of this expedition and stress «Necessity» in order to conceal his true motives.

The vacillation of both Agamemnon and Menelaus is not at the service of melodramatic purposes. There is realistic character portrayal as Agamemnon at first wavers between affection for his daughter and the desire for glory, while Menelaus struggles with his desire to retrieve Helen and his unwillingness to accept responsibility for Iphigenia's sacrifice. Thus, Pohlenz' description of Agamemnon as «ein weicher Schwächling»¹⁸ is apt. The complexity of determining motivation is deepened by the altering states of mind of the characters; Agamemnon's position becomes clearer in the end, but Menelaus' reversal is far from straightforward. Thus the claim that the characterisation lacks depth is itself in doubt¹⁹.

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Grube, *op. cit.*, p. 421.