

The Tie That Binds: Woman's Blood As Social Contract

by
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The double meaning of the word “altar,” both marriage altar and sacrificial altar, is the key to some of the most poignant lines in Racine’s *Iphigénie*. But the parallels between marriage and sacrifice go far beyond the fact that they share the same altar. Both are religious rites in which the spoken word is an act in and of itself, and both are spectacles enacted before the community. In both rites a man offers a woman to another man or group of men. Both acts bind disparate groups of men together as one community, and both are based on rights to a woman’s body and, ultimately, the shedding of her blood by the consummation of their marriage or her death as a sacrificial victim. It is no accident that the events which take place in *Iphigénie* have Helen’s marriage as their starting point and end with the death of Eriphile.

The introduction of Eriphile into the story of Iphigenia does more than create a love triangle; it transforms the play into a story of mistaken identity terminating with a recognition scene. Russell Pfohl persuasively argues for seeing tragic recognition in this play as Iphigenia being “taken against her will to an awareness of the terrifyingly unfamiliar ambiguities of identity,” finding herself alone and disillusioned about the nature of the relationships in her life (Pfohl 199). The psychological form of self-recognition has often been trumpeted in Racine’s plays to the disparagement of the more basic recognition of nominal, biographical, and genealogical identity that defined the recognition scene for much of the seventeenth century and which is still present in Racine’s plays (Cave’s terminology, *q.vv.*). The scene in which Eriphile is identified as Iphigenia by Calchas is a recognition scene that attempts to establish her nominal, genealogical, and biographical identity. Whether it succeeds or not is questionable; it does however succeed in establishing her relationship to the community of Greeks. We will explore the issues at stake in this very public act of identification and the social or communal aspect of the recognition scene. These characteristics —the public, communal nature of the act of recognition, and its role in establishing social hierarchy— are present in the final scene, where Ulysses recounts the death of Eriphile, but also in the scene he recounts in Act I, scene 3, where Agamemnon is named chief of all the Greeks.

Helen's father, fearing that the rivalry between her suitors would lead to war, made all of them swear to protect the rights of the man whom she chose as husband. Helen's marriage to Menelaus not only bound her family to his, but it also theoretically united the Greek princes. This unity was put to the test when Helen was abducted by Pâris. Agamemnon, Menelaus's brother, went to all the Greek chiefs reminding them of their oath and persuading them to put the common good above their personal interests. In addition, Achilles, who was not one of Helen's suitors, offered his allegiance to Agamemnon in return for his daughter Iphigenia's hand in marriage. Thus Agamemnon was recognized as chief of all the Greek kings and became the leader of the Greek army going to war against Troy.

When Racine's play opens, the Greek army is becalmed at Aulis. An oracle requesting the death of Iphigenia in exchange for the winds to carry the army to Troy has put Agamemnon in a no win situation. Regardless of his feelings as a father, he cannot both maintain the unity of the Greek force and remain its leader. As the Chief of the Greeks, he is called upon to sacrifice his daughter, yet if he sacrifices Iphigenia, he will lose the support of Achilles, and if he is opposed by Achilles, he can no longer be Chief of the Greeks. The sacrifice of Eriphile, although it is not his doing, effectively solves his problem. With her death, an Iphigenia is sacrificed. She is not the Iphigenia that Achilles wants, so there is no challenge to Agamemnon's authority. The actual recognition scene, in which Eriphile is identified as Iphigenia and then dies, clearly demonstrates the impending chaos and disintegration of the community which is averted by her death, and how her death serves to bind the community of Greeks together in a way that Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia's death could not have done. As Philip Lewis has noted in "Sacrifice and Suicide: Some Afterthoughts on the Career of Jean Racine":

The chosen leader's act of sacrificing his own child would irrevocably seal his capacity to act as leader at the expense of his private self, the father would in effect position himself above the parent's all-too-human genealogical imperatives; the sacrifice would thus be a supreme act of kingly identification, would ground before awed witnesses of his superhuman self-mastery his claim to partake of the divine (Lewis 62).

However in the case of Agamemnon, sacrificing his daughter would cause Achilles, whose support lends a divine sanction to his leadership, to contest him and ultimately threaten rather than affirm his kingly identification — a threat which is not posed by the sacrifice of Eriphile (Apostolidès 113).

Eriphile is a young unknown princess, using an assumed name, whose only link to her true identity was severed with the death of her guardian. Everything we learn about her seems to lay the groundwork for a traditional cliché recognition scene, but the actual scene has some peculiar twists.

The scene described by Ulysses is one of incredible violence:

Jamais jour n'a paru si mortel à la Grèce.
 Déjà de tout le camp la discorde maîtresse
 Avait sur tous les yeux mis son bandeau fatal,
 Et donné du combat le funeste signal.
 De ce spectacle affreux votre fille alarmée;
 Voyait pour elle Achille, et contre elle l'armée;
 vv. 1729-34¹

The whole camp, alerted by Eriphile, knows that Iphigenia is to be the sacrificial victim and is up in arms against Achilles, who has come to Iphigenia's defense. The army has become a mob intent upon self-destruction. The gravity of the situation and the potential for mass carnage is underlined by the use of the words *mortel*, *discorde maîtresse*, *fatal*, and *funeste*.² It is "tout le camp," "la Grèce," who will be sacrificed in this spectacle, rather than Iphigenia. Then Calchas, the prophet, speaks:

Entre les deux partis Calchas s'est avancé,
 L'œil farouche, l'air sombre et le poil hérissé,
 Terrible et plein du dieu qui l'agitait sans doute:
 "Vous, Achille, a-t-il dit, et vous, Grecs, qu'on
 [m'écoute."
 Le Dieu qui maintenant vous parle par ma voix
 M'explique son oracle, et m'instruit de son choix.
 Un autre sang d'Hélène, une autre Iphigénie
 Sur ce bord immolée y doit laisser sa vie.
 Thésée avec Hélène uni secrètement
 Fit succéder l'hymen à son enlèvement.
 Une fille en sortit, que sa mère a celée;
 Du nom d'Iphigénie elle fut appelée.
 Je vis moi-même alors ce fruit de leurs amours.

D'un sinistre avenir je menaçai ses jours.
 Sous un nom emprunté, sa noire destinée
 Et ses propres fureurs ici l'ont amenée.
 Elle me voit, m'entend, elle est devant vos yeux
 Et c'est elle, en un mot, que demandent les Dieux."

vv. 1739-56

This identification by Calchas is a curious matter. First he says that he was there when Eriphile was born and knew that she was named Iphigenia. He was even the one who pronounced the oracle that threatened her with death. If all this is so, then why didn't he correctly interpret the original oracle demanding the death of "une fille du sang d'Hélène," of Iphigenia? It would seem that oracles, being the word of the gods, should be true, and yet Doris liberally interprets the oracle warning of Eriphile's death if she were to seek her true identity, and Clytemnestra and Achilles cast doubt on the veracity of oracles. If anyone is to correctly interpret the oracle, Calchas, with his additional knowledge as prophet, seems to be the most likely one to do so, and yet he has misled everyone. The "sans doute" qualifying the statement that he is moved by the gods to speak undermines any interpretation of his identification of Eriphile as a divine revelation.

Unlike the traditional recognition scene, no physical signs are called upon as evidence of Eriphile's identity, no scars or locketts or letters. No one is there to tell how Eriphile came to be on the island of Lesbos. The only other person who could confirm or deny Calchas's identification of her, Doris's father, was killed by Achilles. And although blood ultimately flows, no one's blood "speaks" in recognition of her (Cherpack, *q.vv.*). Calchas testifies that she is of the blood of Helen and is named Iphigenia, but his actual words, "une autre Iphigénie" and "un autre sang d'Hélène," are in conflict with this act. If there is "une autre," a second example of the same characteristic, then that characteristic is no longer a distinguishing trait for it no longer marks a difference. In this case not even the combination of identifying characteristics is unique, for they have been applied by Calchas to both of the young women.

Calchas has told the Greeks that the winds will return and they will be reconciled with the gods by means of a sacrifice. If he does not fulfill that promise, and do so at the appointed time, he will lose all credibility. Perhaps Eriphile is not the "true" Iphigenia, but merely an expedient solution for Calchas, "éperdu" in the face

of armed resistance from Achilles, and without the open support of Agamemnon:

Achille est à l'autel. Calchas est éperdu.
 Le fatal sacrifice est encor suspendu.
 On se menace, on court, l'air gémit, le fer brille.
 Achille fait ranger autour de votre fille
 Tous ses amis, pour lui prêts à se dévouer.
 Le triste Agamemnon, qui n'ose l'avouer,
 Pour détourner ses yeux des meurtres qu'il présage,
 Ou pour cacher ses pleurs, s'est voilé le visage.

vv. 1699-1706

The facts that Calchas, who with his oracles embodies the future destinies of all the characters, is “éperdu,” and that the sacrifice is suspended are significant in that, although we know the outcome of the myth and the future of these characters in the Trojan War, nothing has happened yet. As Jean-Marie Apostolidès and J.D. Hubert have remarked, the whole play is a moment suspended in time (Hubert 187, Apostolidès 117). All possibilities are still viable. Achilles could save Iphigenia.

After Calchas identifies Eriphile as Iphigenia and the army calls for her death, when Calchas reaches for her to kill her, Eriphile refuses to let him touch her and commits suicide:

Déjà pour la saisir Calchas lève le bras:
 “Arrête, a-t-elle dit, et ne m'approche pas.
 Le sang de ces héros dont tu me fais descendre
 Sans tes profanes mains saura bien se répandre.”
 Furieuse, elle vole, et sur l'autel prochain
 Prend le sacré couteau, le plonge dans son sein.

vv. 1767-1772

The characterization of Calchas's hands as profane and the “ces héros dont tu me fais descendre,” as well as the use of *tu*, suggest contempt and scorn for the priest on the part of Eriphile, not an expression of awe at finally learning who she is or an acceptance of Calchas's authority.³ By taking her own life rather than allowing Calchas to perform the sacrifice, she refuses the identity he tries to impose upon her in a heroic act of defiance, and takes the only recourse open to her in the face of mob that wants her death. In so doing she also profanes the sacred, committing an act of violence at a holy site in an unsanctified manner. Above all, her act of self-destruction is in direct contrast to Iphigenia's willing-

ness to sacrifice herself in obedience to her father and for the good of the community.

Although Eriphile commits suicide and is not sacrificed, in the terms of René Girard's *La Violence et le sacré*, her death functions like a human sacrifice, serving as a conductor carrying violence out of the community. Basing his theories on studies of primitive peoples that practice sacrifice and on Greek tragedy, Girard says that sacrifice is the means by which man's natural violent tendencies are projected to the margins of the society or outside of it, where they will not harm the group itself. In a culture that does not have a judicial system, an act of violence threatens an endless chain of reprisals because there will always be family members ready to avenge the victim and in turn to protect the aggressor. In a sacrificial society, ritual sacrifice functions as a preventive measure. The victim "tricks" the violence into attacking him/her, thereby removing the threat to the community. In order for this "trick" to work, it is important that the victim resemble the person or persons for whom he/she is substituting; however, too close a resemblance is dangerous because it could result in confusion.

Eriphile, "cette autre Iphigénie" is obviously a double for Iphigenia. She is young and of noble blood, and thus a suitable substitute, but she is also a disruptive force that must be controlled or eliminated. Because she has no name and no position within the relationships that connect Greek society, Eriphile is an element of disorder; she doesn't fit. Her lack of paternity makes her monstrous:

O monstre, que Mégère en ses flancs a porté!
Monstre, que dans nos bras les enfers ont jeté!

vv. 1675-76

These lines are said by Clytemnestra upon learning of Eriphile's betrayal of Iphigenia, but they are more than words said in anger. Here, Eriphile, who does not know her origins, is said to be born of one of the Furies, in contrast with Achilles, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra who all are descended from gods and mortals. In this alternate birth story, rather than being placed into paternal arms, or even "bras étrangers" as she claimed earlier in the play, she is thrown from hell into the arms of the Greeks. No father figure is present in this story. If she has no father, there is no one to give her to another man in marriage. She has no maiden name to exchange for a married name. Although a woman's sexual virginity is prized in a system in which her exchange value de-

pend upon her reproductive powers, Eriphile's nominal virginity bars her from this system. Because she does not bear the linguistic marker of male possession (a last name), she cannot enter into this system of circulation whereby a woman is an object of exchange for men, and thus Eriphile is unproductive (Richman 46-53). This lack of productivity makes her monstrous also.

Eriphile becomes literally the bearer of disorder when she precipitates the crisis by running to inform the Greeks that the gods have requested the sacrifice of Iphigenia.⁴ Regardless of her true name, Eriphile is the perfect sacrificial victim for the play because she has no identity among the Greeks. She has no family to oppose the sacrifice as does Iphigenia. Nor does she have a husband or lover to champion her. Comparing her situation to that of Iphigenia, she says:

Moi, qui de mes parents toujours abandonnée,
 Etrangère partout, n'ai pas même en naissant,
 Peut-être reçu d'eux un regard carressant!
 Du moins si vos respects sont rejetés d'un père,
 Vous en pouvez gémir dans le sein d'une mère;
 Et de quelque disgrâce enfin que vous pleuriez,
 Quels pleurs par un amant ne sont point essuyés?
 vv. 586-92

Her only position among the Greeks is that of a slave as a result of her capture by Achilles:

Vile esclave des Grecs, je n'ai pu conserver
 Que la fierté d'un sang que je ne puis prouver.
 vv. 451-2

Or:

C'est peu d'être étrangère, inconnue et captive:
 Ce destructeur fatal des tristes Lesbiens,
 Cet Achille, l'auteur de tes maux et des miens,
 Dont la sanglante main m'enleva prisonnière,
 Qui m'arracha d'un coup ma naissance et ton père,
 vv. 470-4

In capturing her and killing Doris's father, Achilles destroyed what few links she has to her true identity and uprooted her from the position she has established as Eriphile. Once Achilles frees her, she is no longer even someone's property. She is completely

out of the circuit of relationships in this community and has no other community to go to.

It is this community of Greeks that makes her identification as Iphigenia by Calchas a possibility. They confirm his pronouncement:

On admire en secret sa naissance et son sort.
 Mais puisque Troi enfin est le prix de sa mort,
 L'armée à haute voix se déclare contre elle,
 Et prononce à Calchas sa sentence mortelle.

vv. 1763-6

The army is not an objective judge in this matter. Her life is the price to be paid for the conquest of Troy. They forfeit it in spite of the fact that they “admire en secret sa naissance et son sort.” Eriphile has not merited death for any crime. She is not being judged for a crime even though they pronounce her “sentence mortelle.” She is an object of exchange, being exchanged here for glory at Troy, much as Agamemnon was willing to exchange the life of his daughter for his personal glory.

The identification of Eriphile seems to be confirmed by the gods when the winds rise and the sea begins to move, however her death is not the sacrifice of a virgin to the gods. This play is not about the satisfaction of the gods' will or about the relationship between man and the gods.⁵ It is about the network of relationships that bind a community together and the restoration and maintenance of order within that community.

Throughout the play we are witness to the escalating tensions within the camp, not to further signs of the gods' disapproval. After Arcas reveals Agamemnon's true plans at the beginning of Act III, “Il l'attend à l'autel pour la sacrifier” (vv. 932), and the initial reaction of Achilles, Clytemnestra, and Iphigenia to the oracle, the conflicts existing between the principal characters become increasingly intense. The last act of the play finds the entire camp in disorder. Achilles and his men are preparing to defend Iphigenia from the rest of the camp, who have been averted by Eriphile as to the identity of the sacrificial victim. Agamemnon is powerless to control the situation. The conflict intensifies up until the moment of Calchas's pronouncement:

Mais, quoique seul pour elle, Achille furieux
 Epouvantait l'armée et partageait les Dieux.

Déjà de traits en l'air s'élevait un nuage;
Déjà coulait le sang, prémices du carnage.

vv. 1735-38

Achilles could succeed in saving Iphigenia. The fact that he “partageait les Dieux” implies that the gods are no longer asking for her death as one voice and that her “fated” death is perhaps not fated after all. However, if he does succeed, it would only be at high cost of life, with total carnage. This scene of chaos and imminent destruction changes totally after Eriphile’s death. The violence within the camp is redirected toward Troy in an ordered and societally condoned way, as an act of war against the enemy, not as armed insurrection or rioting. Just as God ordered and controlled the original chaos by an act of violence —the division of the heavens and the earth— and through naming, the chaos caused by the “feminine” energies trapped within the camp is controlled, and those energies are separated from the community by the naming of Eriphile and by her designation as sacrificial victim, an act which separates her from the community. In naming her Iphigenia, the Greeks exert control over this element of disorder; Eriphile becomes the release valve for everything that does not fit into the structure of this society. No more questions about who Eriphile is, no more conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, no more tension within the camp, even nature resumes its course. When she is eliminated, order, in terms of the unified pursuit of specific goals by the community, once again becomes possible.

As we have already remarked, the identification of Eriphile as Iphigenia is not a divine revelation but an act of the community. In this play, recognition is an act that performs the function of naming and ordering the various people in the community. It is not a divine revelation of essence in which a unique name and unique being join. It is a social convention, invested with a certain authority based upon the common consent of all present. In the two recognition scenes which frame this play, a ritual act of recognition is performed by the community which establishes the individual’s relationship to that community. In the first, the gathered Greek princes name Agamemnon as their chief. This creates a structure of leadership with implied duties for each party. The second, taking place before an altar, is also ceremonial in nature. While it does not incorporate Eriphile into the community, it does establish her relationship to it as a sacrificial victim.

Eriphile, rather than finding her place on earth or accepting the role of victim, chooses suicide, the most radical rejection possible

of the world in which she finds herself. Her rejection of the identification by Calchas, and consequent suicide, is an act of self-determination, guarding her identity from its appropriation by the community. The violence which threatens to destroy the community is contained only by an act of greater violence, self-destruction.

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NOTES

¹ All quotations are from *Théâtre complet de Racine* (q.v.).

² Discord truly is the mistress of the situation, for it was Eris, goddess of discord, who threw the golden apple marked "for the fairest" into the wedding reception for Thetis and King Peleus parents of Achilles, which resulted in the judgement of Pâris and the Trojan War.

³ Hubert sees in Eriphile's act of suicide an acceptance of her identity as Iphigenia, which is emblematic of a quest for heroic identity undertaken by each of the characters. In his reading of this play, identity is that image attached to the character's name in legend, and future gloire is all-important. However, Eriphile is Racine's creation; she had no identity in legend, nor does she seem moved by gloire to accept the identity Calchas gives her. Philip Lewis argues, as do I, that her suicide is an act of will and of rejection, but where he sees rejection of the priest's attempt to take the father's position in the execution of an act of infanticide, I would argue there is a rejection of the priest's attempt to take the father's place in naming the child.

⁴ Knight (318) notes that the name Eriphile is usually spelled Eriphyle, and that although y and i were used interchangeably in the seventeenth century, this choice of spelling suggests that the name comes from the Greek *erisé philein*: "who loves discord".

⁵ Although the request that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter recalls the biblical tale of Abraham and Isaac, there is no indication that Agamemnon must do this to show his faith in a god as Abraham was asked to prove his faith in God. In Rotrou and LeClerc's versions of the play, Iphigénie was promised to Diana, a virgin goddess, as a priestess. The demand for her sacrifice stems from

this unfulfilled vow, and she is accordingly rescued by the goddess once her willingness to be sacrificed in fulfillment of the vow and her patriotic duty to the Greeks has been confirmed. These elements are missing in Racine's interpretation of the myth.

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