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Strange bargain: a dramaturgical rationale for the comparative study of two sacrificial women

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University of Iowa

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STRANGE BARGAIN: A DRAMATURGICAL RATIONALE FOR THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
TWO SACRIFICIAL WOMEN

by

Madison Colquette

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Theatre Arts (Dramaturgy) in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2016

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Art Borreca

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Madison Colquette

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Theatre Arts (Dramaturgy) at the May 2016 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Art Borreca, Thesis Supervisor

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Dare Clubb

To the women in my life who taught me the right time to speak
and the right time to listen.

“This same day has seen your daughter dead and brought to life again.”

Euripides
Iphigenia at Aulis

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The two women contributing to this comparative analysis have existed in print, in performance, and in people's minds for centuries. One, from India, is praised as the epitome of the honorable and devoted wife and mother. The other, from Greece, is commended as the noble and benevolent daughter. The analysis, and the accompanying performative work, is a cross-cultural investigation of sacrificial women in literature using two women from two ancient mythologies: Sita from Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Iphigenia from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. In various forms of literature and performance, Sita is presented as the role model of wifely duty. Iphigenia is praised as the sacrificial daughter by honoring her father, and her country, with her sacrifice. This work seeks to remain close to the original texts, while also re-shaping them to fit a modern argument.

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1. Torelli, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*..... 1

INTRODUCTION

The two women contributing to this comparative study have existed in print, in performance, and in people's minds for centuries. One, from India, is praised as the epitome of the honorable and devoted wife and mother. The other, from Greece, is commended as the noble and benevolent daughter. This paper, and the accompanying performative work, is a cross-cultural investigation of sacrificial women in literature using two women from two ancient mythologies: Sita from Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Iphigenia from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

In Felice Torelli's eighteenth century painting, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, the artist effectively illustrates the chaos and desperation of the moment before her impending sacrifice. The young, pale virgin has been adorned and garlanded in preparation for her death. A robed official, presumably her father Agamemnon, is



Fig. 1 Torelli, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*

depicted as ready to commit the sacrifice that will ensure favorable winds for the journey to Troy. An observing warrior has dropped his weapon and shield and instead strongly grips a cistern in anguish. Though this painting only topically deals with one of the aforementioned women, its subject matter befits both Iphigenia and Sita: the innocent victims who are praised for their willingness to enter the sacrificial arena. As the painting displays Iphigenia's sacrifice as a celebrated affair, Sita's *agnipariksha*, or trial by fire, is also honored as an act of devotion. Sita submitted to this trial in order to prove her chastity to her husband. She entered the fire, emerged unharmed, and was praised by the gods for her purity. Though Sita is not literally sacrificed during her *agnipariksha*, her willingness to submit to the trial by fire and the subsequent praise she receives for her willingness substantiates her as a sacrificial woman. She serves as a model in which to understand the unconventional role of self-sacrifice presented in tragedy in comparison to Iphigenia's conventional sacrifice.

Originally this work was conceived to be a dramaturgical sourcebook for a play exploring the intercession of Sita and Iphigenia. Part of my function as a dramaturg is to discover, gather and share material that encourages connections to a script and/or a production. This associative research produces tangible material that inspires creative thinking within an artistic team. The more material I accumulated, related to both Sita and Iphigenia, the more I wanted to see these women interact with one another in a performance space. What would they talk about? I imagined they would commiserate over their exhaustion of being sacrificial objects – and how they are romanticized in literature as such. This led to the associated questions: did these women consent to

their sacrifice? Did they see sacrifice as their duty? Historically, they both accepted their sacrificial roles and went willingly: Iphigenia to the altar and Sita to her *agnipariksha*.

I could not, however, locate a play that explored the connection between Sita and Iphigenia. Therefore, it was essential for me to write scenes of one so a sourcebook could be drafted. The play was a process in which I could examine the use of the sacrificial woman onstage by blending the stories of these two women. The original idea for a sourcebook evolved into a comparative analysis with accompanying scenes. In addition to the two mythological women, a third, modern, woman was added to narrate the supporting scenes. This woman, Luce, is based on a woman who was burned alive by her husband, along with their infant daughter, over a disputed dowry. As the storyteller, Luce directs these scenes as a way to process the violence that was committed on her. With the inclusion of her story, the work challenges the idealization of the sacrificial woman by connecting Sita and Iphigenia to an actual victim of female-centered violence.

I acknowledge my limited experience with both Indian and Greek culture and their ancient histories. I do not wish to appropriate the rich cultures of India and Greece into my own understanding of American social standards. Nor do I intend to present these three stories as a collective representation of all women's stories. My deepest wish is to respect the rich customs of both India and Greece and portray these culturally significant women honorably. Sita and Iphigenia have, for centuries and for countless productions all over the world, submitted to their sacrificial place – one as an oblation for a punitive war and the other as a symbol of wifely duty sacrificing her own happiness

repeatedly for her husband's. These women have collided in this performance space, facilitated by a modern narrator, and now have the opportunity to make a choice – something they are so rarely given the opportunity to make.

STRANGE BARGAIN: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND SCENES

In Greek tragedy, the figure of Iphigenia embodies the question: why would anyone sacrifice his daughter's life in order to fight an unreasonable war (Merwin 4)? In her play *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart (A Rave Fable)*, an adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Caridad Svich poses the question: "How much for her flesh?" (Svich 8). Her question ignites the associated query: how much is a sacrificial object, especially a woman's body in this case, worth? Even Iphigenia's mother, Clytemnestra, castigates her husband in Euripides' play: "Strange bargain: you'll pay your child's life/As the price of a worthless woman" (Merwin 75). The worthless woman she refers to is Helen, wife of Agamemnon's brother, whom the Greeks are traveling to Troy to recover. Agamemnon decides that the reclamation of his brother's honor, and his own honor for that matter, is worth the life of his daughter. Clytemnestra implores him to see the horror in sacrificing one woman for another, especially considering that his daughter is the offering. Though he may be a celebrated warrior and the leader of the Army – who is he to decide the worth of one woman over the other? These questions were pivotal to my dramaturgical analysis for the University of Iowa's Department of Theatre's production of *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls...* In fact, the idea for this comparative study occurred while I was preparing the sourcebook for the production. The similarities between the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the *agnipariksha* of Sita are numerous – the most pertinent is that both women are held in high esteem due to their sacrificial nature.

In January 2014, according to CNN correspondent Harmeet Shah Singh, a young woman named Annu Devi was set on fire while breastfeeding her one-year-old daughter. The perpetrators were Devi's husband and parents-in-law. The police superintendent N. K. Mishra stated that the motive could be related to the fact that Devi had given birth to a girl. Surpassing the possible factor of failing to produce male offspring, Mishra stated that the murders were committed due to a disagreement regarding Devi's dowry. The husband's family harassed Devi and her family over presumed gifts and money they felt entitled to (Singh). Devi's father stated that Devi's husband and in-laws were "demanding a TV set and a motorcycle. I had already given them [1.6 acres] of land in dowry. They started harassing and torturing [Devi] until they decided to end her life" (qtd. in Akinyemi). After learning about this abhorrent crime, I wanted Annu to contribute to the comparative study as an actual, modern, victim of violence. Especially considering that fire was used against both Sita and Annu, but with the tragic difference that Sita lived and Annu was murdered. The character Luce is based on Annu Devi, though she has been renamed to be more regionally neutral. In addition to her role as one of the sacrificial women, Luce serves as the storyteller of the accompanying scenes and facilitates the meetings between Sita and Iphigenia. In this way she is similar to Valmiki who, in his original Sanskrit *Ramayana*, is a pivotal character whose actions contribute to the narrative (Richman 7).

The scenes included in this paper are dramaturgical explorations of the use of the sacrificial woman onstage. These scenes are adaptable, as exercises in dramaturgy require; they are by no means exhaustive and only cover specific moments of a possible

creative work. The intercession of these two notable, and literary, women is inherently performative. I understand I may not be the only person to see the creative benefit in uniting these women onstage. Should a playwright wish to construct a similar narrative around these extraordinary women, these scenes are merely suggestions.

CHARACTERS

- Luce: A woman; Originally silenced, she's now motivated to tell this story.
Sita: A woman; Reserved and dignified. She's an old soul. With sass.
Iphigenia: A woman; Privileged and energetic. She's younger than the other two women.
Nurse: A woman; An enabler

SETTING

A waiting room

NOTES

Punctuation marks [...,?] indicate a non-verbal response or interaction.

A "/" indicates that the next character begins speaking simultaneously.

A *pause* should last at least 5 seconds.

PROLOGUE: THE STORYTELLER

Luce enters the waiting room.

LUCE

Listen, my friends –
I'm going to tell you an old story
If you'll hear it, listen to...

Actually, it's a blending of stories. These aren't my stories, but I've been charged, no gifted, the authority to tell them.

I'm going to quote a really old guy named Valmiki. He penned the *Ramayana*. Perhaps you've heard of it? The *Ramayana* is from India, which has a long, long tradition of storytelling. Storytellers, oral historians if you will, have narrated its history. I'm only continuing the tradition.

"Tell me again an old story
If you would hear it, listen to *Ramayana* as it happened.
Valmiki the poet put the deeds of Rama into musical verses; he clothed them in the sound of singing. Before *Ramayana* there was no poetry on Earth."¹

The story of the *Ramayana*, or the Song of Rama, was given to Valmiki to tell.

"Rama rules as King in Ayodhya. He is brave and gentle and firm in fight. By Rama's command his queen Sita is being brought here into the forest on a chariot, and though she suspects nothing yet, here she will be left abandoned."² She needs comfort or I fear she will drown herself from sorrow, thereby killing her two unborn sons in the process. 'What did she do wrong,' you ask? Absolutely nothing. "Rama must let her go because his people talk against her. Get up, save her life and teach the song of Rama to Rama's two sons."³

But there are too many people telling Rama's story. I want to tell Sita's.

(singing) "Oh Sita,
I sing this song.
Rama will untie your braid;
He will free you.

Remember his love for you.

¹ William Buck. *Ramayana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 3.

² Ibid. 5.

³ Ibid. 5-6.

(continued)

My poem will outlast Time;
I sing this song,
Oh Sita.”⁴

I’ll do that occasionally -

Do you remember Iphigenia? Her father sacrificed her in order to have favorable winds to sail to Troy. To rescue Helen. You remember this story. The whole cast of characters. Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Achilles. Oh yeah, you remember Achilles.

This is part of the storytelling process. I set the stage, so to speak, so you don’t get lost and the whole argument at the end makes sense.

Pause

We’re going to have a good time here. I’ve put my heart and soul into telling this story.

“Act now storytellers; call out and the rest must follow.”

She exits. Lights down.

⁴ Buck 325.

R. K. Narayan, in his adaptation of the ancient Indian *Ramayana*, asserts that almost every individual living in India today has heard the story of Rama and Sita in the aforementioned epic. Originally composed by Valmiki around 1500 B.C.E, according to certain early scholars, the impact of the *Ramayana* extends far beyond its use as religious instruction. The text has inspired countless writers, of all mediums, to pen his or her own adaptation of the story. Narayan goes so far as to say, “the *Ramayana* has thus been the largest source of inspiration for the poets of India throughout the centuries” (xii). Adaptations of the *Ramayana* contributing to this paper include: Narayan’s 1972 adaptation of the 11th century Tamil Version by Kamban and William Buck’s prominent 1976 retelling of Valmiki’s original Sanskrit text.

The *Ramayana*, literally “the journey of Ram,” tells the story of Rama and more importantly, considering the present topic, his wife Sita. Due to an unfortunate usurping, Rama and Sita are exiled from Ayodhya, the capitol of Kosala, to the wilderness for fourteen years along with Rama’s brother Lakshmana. They live in the Dandaka forest for nearly thirteen years, somewhat peacefully, until Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravana. Sita is eventually rescued from her captor by Rama and Lakshmana with the help of an army of monkeys and bears. The reunion between Rama and Sita, however, is mired in retribution and condemnation. Though Rama spent a year pursuing the rescue of his wife, he hastily accuses her of adultery. Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger, in her recent book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, translates Rama’s admonishment of Sita:

Doubts have arisen about your behavior. Go, then, wherever you wish. I can have nothing to do with you. What man of good family could take back, simply

because his mind was so tortured by longing for her, a woman who had lived in the house of another man? How can I take you back when you have been degraded upon the lap of Ravana (224)?

Sita vehemently denies the rumors and responds to Rama's allegations by asking Lakshmana to build a pyre, stating that such is the "medicine for this calamity. I cannot go on living, ruined by false accusations...As my heart never wavered from Rama, so may the fire, the witness of all people, protect me" (224). She then enters the blaze of her *agnipariksha*, or trial by fire. The gods affirm her purity by reproaching Rama for his distrust and deliver Sita unscathed back to him. Finally, fourteen years after they were banished, the royal couple returns to Ayodhya as King and Queen.

Unfortunately, the rumors return and Rama banishes Sita even though she is pregnant. It is highly debated, according to Doniger, whether Rama knew she was pregnant or not. After being banished, Sita goes to Valmiki's hermitage and gives birth to twin sons (226). Years later, Rama's sons stumble upon Rama's horse sacrifice (i.e. an auspicious ceremony of royal consecration) and unaware of Rama's paternity, they recite the *Ramayana* to Rama as Valmiki had instructed it to them. Once Rama learns that the raconteurs are his own sons, he summons Sita to return to him stating that if she is blameless of previous allegations, then she will be allowed to prove her innocence again (227). Rama demands that Sita undertake *agnipariksha* a second time to appease his subjects and assuage their doubts, supposedly for good, even though she had passed the first trial by fire. Unwilling to dishonor herself again, or perhaps tired of Rama's distrust, she asks the Earth Mother to return her whence she came (i.e. Sita has no biological mother, she was conceived when King Janaka ejaculated into a furrow after

observing the celestial nymph Menaka flying through the sky). Both Sita's birth and death are framed by sacrifices. Her "birth" happened while Janaka was plowing the sacrificial arena, in preparation for a religious ceremony, and she returns to the Earth during Rama's horse sacrifice (229).

Due to the reality of gender roles in both ancient India and ancient Greece, the characters Sita and Iphigenia in the included scenes are not specific to the time period from which they originate, nor do they comment upon their appearance in the Twenty-First Century. They are merely my own interpretations of these women in a timeless setting. Including their interactions with Luce, there are no mentions of a specific time or time period. Allowing the past to merge seamlessly into the present gives these characters pertinency and agency. Paula Richman, in the introduction to her anthology *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, comments on the efficacy of modernization: "A writer depicting Sita in modern times must portray a character recognizable as the Sita in the ancient epic but also a Sita relevant enough to modern readers for them to care about her" (38). In part one, titled "Sita in Context," of Richman's anthology, the selected works uproot the perception of Sita's behavior and Sita's own perception of what happens to her (37). One modern retelling included is a translation of Gudipati Venkata Chalam's *Sita Agnipravesam* (trans. *Sita Enters The Fire*), a Telugu play in which Sita refuses Rama's stipulation of *agnipariksha* to test her purity. The use of language in Chalam's play, published in 1924, modernizes the story because Sita defends her actions using discourse surrounding the social reform occurring during that time (39).

Modernizing Sita and Iphigenia allows them to dialogue using rhetoric that was unavailable to women in their respective time periods.

SCENE A: THE WAITING ROOM

Lights up. Two women in an undisclosed waiting room. There's nothing in this waiting room besides two chairs. The only reason we know this is a waiting room is that the two women are waiting.

At first, they do not speak to one another.

A nurse enters. She calls out a name. It's indiscernible.

NURSE
Mmmrrrsss Jssshonsher

Pause

NURSE
Mmmrrrsss Jssshonsheerrrr

Pause

SITA
?

IPHIGENIA
...

Nurse exits

Pause

IPHIGENIA
I really like your boots.

SITA
These? Oh. Thank you. That's nice. Thank you.

IPHIGENIA
You're welcome.

SITA
...

IPHIGENIA

...

SITA

They're new.

IPHIGENIA

Really? Yeah I got a great new pair of sandals recently.

SITA

This is the first / thing I've -

IPHIGENIA

They're brown with -

SITA

What? / I'm sorry.

IPHIGENIA

I'm sorry. Go ahead. You said this is your first time -

SITA

Oh yes. I was just saying that these are the first pair I've gotten for myself in awhile.

IPHIGENIA

They're great.

SITA

Thank you.

Were you saying your sandals were brown / with -

IPHIGENIA

Oh yeah. They're brown with blue accents.

SITA

...

IPHIGENIA

I got them to go with this really cute dress. For a dinner thing. With my parents.

SITA

That should be fun.

IPHIGENIA
Not really.

SITA
?

IPHIGENIA
My dad is...nevermind. Anyways. I'm Iphie.

SITA
Nice to meet you Iphie

IPHIGENIA
Iphigenia

SITA
I'm sorry?

IPHIGENIA
I grew up being called Iphie, but I've recently decided to go by my actual name.
Iphigenia.

SITA
Iphigenia. I'm Sita.

IPHIGENIA
That's really pretty.

SITA
Thank you.

IPHIGENIA
Well, nice to meet you.

Nurse enters

NURSE
Mmmrrrrssss Ttttaaabbbeersshhheenn

Pause

Nurse exits

SITA

Are you in school?

IPHIGENIA

I was. I just graduated.

SITA

Oh that's outstanding. Any particular focus?

IPHIGENIA

Well yes actually. I focused on socio-economic policies within Monarchical regimes. And monetary motivation in acts of violence against women. Really in any sort of position of power, money has an enormous effect on the decision making process. So, strangely enough, or not I guess, the two are greatly related.

We were studying this one case of this woman who was killed by her husband, and even her husband's parents participated in the murder. She was murdered over inheritance, I think. Oh! And their year old daughter too. Her name was Luce. The wife. I'm not sure what the daughter's name was.

SITA

That's terrible that that happened. But I agree with you about the connection between monetary motivations and violence. In positions of power. I believe that's what you said.

IPHIGENIA

I think about this a lot in terms of my father also.

SITA

...

IPHIGENIA

What do you do?

SITA

Oh, this and that. My husband was in politics. Actually, I'm looking forward to an extended, and long awaited, vacation.

IPHIGENIA

Oh that'll be great. Yeah, I've been thinking of taking a long trip myself. Like I'd love to just disappear somewhere. Like with a couple of friends or something.

Nurse enters

NURSE
Mmmrrrsss Lllloonnbbgurdeenn

Pause

Nurse exits

IPHIGENIA
Man, I feel like we've been here for hours. What do you think is taking so long?

SITA
I'm not sure. They must be busy.

IPHIGENIA
Yeah. Pretty busy.

Pause

SITA
Are you scared Iphigenia?

IPHIGENIA
A little...

Pause

(*out*) "I said to my father, 'Here I am.
And I give my body
Willingly as a sacrifice
For my country, for all of Greece.
I will offer my neck in silence,
I will not flinch."⁵

SITA
(*out*) "And everyone who heard marveled
At the girl's bravery and nobility."⁶

IPHIGENIA
(*out*) "Lead me to the altar

⁵ Euripides. *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Trans. W.S Merwin and George Dimock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*

(continued)

If this is what destiny has decreed.
For my part, I hope
It turns out well for all of you.”⁷

SITA

(out) “Daughter of Zeus, who brings death
To the wild creatures, who turn
Your gleaming star through the darkness, accept
This sacrifice offered to you by us
This pure blood
From the throat of a beautiful girl.”⁸

IPHIGENIA

(to Sita) How do I know? How do I know that...this...is -
What am I doing?

SITA

(to Iphigenia) “At every step I’ve tried to see
The right way to act.
That’s not the vacillation of a weakling.”⁹

Nurse enters

NURSE

Iphigenia

Iphigenia stands

IPHIGENIA

I really do like your boots.
Enjoy your vacation. It was really nice meeting you.

SITA

...

Iphigenia and Nurse exit

⁷ Euripides 93.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 44.

SITA
"This same day has seen
your daughter dead and brought to life again."¹⁰

Lights down

¹⁰ Euripides. 95.

One of the earliest, and the most popular, dramatizations of Sita is the outdoor cycle play the *Ramlila*. An enormous endeavor, the *Ramlila* generally lasts between ten and thirty-one days, depending on the performance, annually in North India. The performance is based on Tulsidas' *Ramacaritamanas*, a sixteenth-century Hindi retelling of Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana*. Theatre and performance scholars Richard Schechner and Linda Hess attended the 1976 Ramnagar *Ramlila* in Varanasi in North India. They recounted each of the thirty-two days of the epic cycle play in their article "The *Ramlila* of Ramnagar" published in *The Drama Review*. The *Ramacaritamanas* narrates Rama's journeys, beginning with his childhood adventures, to his marriage to Sita, the banishment to the forest, to the great battle at Lanka, and the royal couple's return to Ayodhya (65). Many *Ramlilas* are peripatetic and the audiences move between multiple areas imitating Rama's travels. The performance area of the Ramnagar *Ramlila*, specifically, encompasses more than fifteen square miles (66).

In the article, Schechner and Hess provide a summary of each day's events as they relate to the Ramayan story. Sita is introduced to the story, and the spectators, on day six when Rama breaks Shiva's bow in order to win Sita's hand (52). She accompanies Rama on his exile to the forest, as she does in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. On day sixteen of the cycle, while still in forest exile, Sita's abduction by Ravana is performed. Spatially, this is very important because after her kidnapping, the actor Ravana places the actress Sita in a designated area of the playing space near his palace (69). She remains there for the majority of the cycle, in a physical representation of Sita's imprisonment blurring the lines between performance and reality, until day twenty-seven when she is finally

rescued by Rama (64). A curious detail that Schechner and Hess noticed was that after her abduction, Sita becomes surrounded by female spectators and that this remained true for the majority of the entire cycle (55). Therefore, when Sita becomes separated from Rama and begins her imprisonment, male and female spectators also become separated. The women remain by Sita throughout her imprisonment, sharing in her solitude (69).

In addition to Sita's rescue, day twenty-seven is also the presentation of Sita's *agnipariksha*. According to Schechner and Hess, this moment of the performance is one of the most rowdy: "Cops [push] people around, [kick] them back, women especially who strain to see Sita...A regular riot to clear the space for her to be carried in." A crowd of about 10,000 spectators, Schechner estimates, form a tight circle around where the fire will be lit (78). Lakshmana, Rama's brother, lights the pile of straw and the spectators near the flame must shield their faces. Sita verbally commends the trial and walks into the circle. She then walks out of the circle, symbolically unharmed, and is reunited with Rama (79). The Ramnagar *Ramlila* does not include Rama's banishment of Sita after their return to Ayodhya, or her return to the Earth. Tulsidas' *Ramacharitmanas*, on which the cycle play is based, omits those scenes and the text ends with Rama and Sita's return to Ayodhya as King and Queen.

In her article "Yes to Sita. No to Ram," Madhu Kishwar tracked the adoration of Sita's character among women in India. Kishwar writes that Sita "has played a vital role in molding the psyche of too many Indian women, especially in North India," leading to Kishwar's exploration into why the *Ramayana's* heroine continues to be revered by

women as upholding ideal behavior (286). The danger, according to Kishwar, is that that model presents an unachievable ideal for both women and men, independently and as couples. Sita is portrayed as an ideal wife who “acts as the moral anchor in a marriage, and stays unswerving in loyalty and righteousness, no matter how ill-matched [her husband’s] response” (285). Kishwar clarifies that Indian women are not championing “female slavery” by revering Sita. In actuality, she is seen as a woman whose *dharma* (righteousness; right way of life; duty) is superior to that of her husband’s. Rama allowed his own beliefs of his wife’s honor to be sullied solely by unconfirmed rumors. Her years of total devotion were completely put aside. According to Kishwar, Rama’s esteemed character is put to shame by Sita’s loyalty (304).

SCENE B: SITA'S ABDUCTION

Lights up. The waiting room, as before. Luce sits reading in a chair. Nurse is cleaning the room. She tidies up the few items present.

NURSE

Have you seen Sita?

LUCE

(flipping through a magazine) No, I haven't.

NURSE

So you don't know where she went?

LUCE

Can't say that I do. Maybe she left.

NURSE

What do you mean she left? *(Flustered, she looks through her clipboard)* Well that's not right.

Sita enters

SITA

I've not gone yet.

NURSE

(to Sita) Oh good. You're still waiting.

SITA

I don't mind waiting. I know what it's like to wait.

Pause

For a long time.

NURSE

...

LUCE

...

SITA

Once I had to wait for a whole year for my husband to come get me. When I was

(continued)

kidnapped by Ravana. Ravana took me to what is now Sri Lanka. Then it was just called Lanka. There I waited. I waited for so long.

(laughs) Whew. I'm sorry. You didn't ask for all that.

NURSE

No, no. I enjoy the company. Please continue.

SITA

I was waiting for Rama and my brother in law to return from...I think they were hunting? Anyways, I was waiting inside the, um, house when I saw the most beautiful deer I, just, had ever seen. So I rushed outside and, of course, scared it away and I proceeded to follow it. We lived in the woods at the time, so this wasn't completely out of the ordinary for me to go gallivanting across the woods. So I was just running after this deer, it was a really beautiful day outside, and then Ravana – have I mentioned him yet?

NURSE

Um yes earlier.

SITA

Ok. So he just appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me. He literally grabbed me and took me away.

NURSE

(excitedly) What?

LUCE

(out) "Ravana bent down, a black mountain come to life." He saw Sita and wanted her for himself. "Her skin was golden, she was like sunlight in among the trees, and Ravana reached for her." In one left hand, he held her long dark hair. In two of his right arms, he held her legs and lifted her. He carried her to his chariot in the sky.¹¹

SITA

Yes. It was terrible. I screamed for Rama and I screamed for Lakshmana. But neither of them heard me. No one heard me.

NURSE

(excitedly) No one saw him take you?

LUCE

(out) "Ravana carried Sita south across a dark river and looking down she saw two

¹¹ William Buck. *Ramayana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 171.

monkeys standing on a hill by a lake watching them. Sita reached down and broke the anklets off her legs and let them fall.” And she took off her earrings and dropped them. The two monkeys carried these adornments to Rama and told him of Sita’s abduction.¹²

SITA

So I waited for Rama to come get me. And THIS is very important – I remained utterly faithful to him. Completely. Even though I was living in that creeper’s house, I remained faithful. Do you understand?

NURSE

Yes

LUCE

Yes

SITA

No matter what Ravana said or promised me. I was faithful to my husband.

LUCE

(*out*) And Indra appeared to Sita saying ‘There is nothing worse than the tears of the innocent. Sita, there is no sign of widowhood on your body. Do not worry. Rama will rescue you. Those monkeys told him where you are. You will not dwell here long’.¹³

SITA

So I waited.

Luce walks downstage to spotlight.

LUCE

One of my roles as storyteller is to conspicuously inform you of themes you should pay attention to. But I’ll be creative about it.

This is a theme. False scenerios created to deceive these women. Ravana had one of his minions transform into a beautiful deer to lure Sita away from the protection of her home. Agamemnon deceptively persuaded Iphigenia and her mother to travel to Aulis by blatantly lying that he had arranged a profitable marriage between Iphigenia and the eligible Achilles.

Oh, and the deer I just mentioned. You should remember that also. That will come up again later.

Lights down

¹² Ibid. 175.

¹³ Ibid. 180.

SCENE C: SITA SINGS

Lights up. Sita is kneeling on the floor, undoing her braid and brushing her hair. Luce is sitting in a chair.

SITA
(singing) "Oh Sita,
 I sing this song.
 Rama will untie your braid;
 He will free you.

SITA & LUCE
(singing) Remember his love for you.
 My poem will outlast time;
 I sing this song,
 Oh Sita."¹⁴

SITA
 Luce, dear. Come sit by me.

She does.

LUCE
 Sita, I didn't know...I didn't...I couldn't protect my daughter

Sita undoes Luce's braid and brushes her hair.

SITA
 Luce. You are only a child yourself.

LUCE
 I could not give my husband what he wanted.

How did you do it? When you were separated from your husband. When you were abducted by Ravana. You were honorable. And your husband Rama disgraced you.

Luce stands and walks downstage.

LUCE
 Rama said to Sita: 'I cannot take you back as Queen. You've lived in another man's house and there are rumors of your disgrace. What kind of man, what kind of King

¹⁴ William Buck. *Ramayana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 325.

(continued)

would I be if I ignored these rumors? If I took back a woman who had lived with another man? Your absence is your shame. You have shamed me.'

SITA

(to Luce) Build me a pyre. This is the only remedy. If I ever waivered in my love for you, in body or in spirit, may the fire consume me. I will not go on living. If I have been faithful, may the gods protect me.

Luce returns to sit next to Sita.

LUCE

And you entered the fire. And were left unscathed.

SITA

I was left unscathed.

LUCE

That difficult test of your chastity has made you famous above all other women.

SITA

Yes. Yes it has.

Lights down. Sita exits.

Iphigenia's role in the Greeks' victory in the Trojan War is the subject of several Dionysian dramas and various international adaptations, both ancient and modern. The following account of Iphigenia's story is based on Edith Hamilton's renowned sourcebook on Greek and Roman myth, *Mythology*. Hamilton herself cites Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Trojan Women*, all three Fifth Century Greek plays, as central sources to her summary of the Iphigenia story.

During a banquet at Olympus, a golden apple appeared that bore the simple message: *For the Fairest*. Of course all the goddesses wanted the distinguished title, but it was narrowed down to three: Aphrodite, Hera and Athena. The three asked Zeus to judge between them, but he refused. He recommended, instead, that the three ask the young prince Paris. He was an excellent judge of beauty, according to Zeus. Paris was the son of King Priam of Troy, but he was working as a shepherd due to a prophecy that he would be the ruin of the country (Hamilton 179).

Following Zeus' suggestion, the three goddesses appeared to Paris. Rather than consider their beauty specifically, he was asked to choose the fairest based on each goddess's prospective bribe and present the winner with the golden apple. Athena promised that he would lead the Trojans to victory against the Greeks. Hera vowed to make him Lord of Europe and Asia. Aphrodite promised that she would give him the fairest woman in the world. Paris gave Aphrodite the golden apple (179).

The fairest woman in the world was Helen, the daughter of Zeus and the mortal Leda. The account of her beauty was so well known that every young prince in Greece wanted to marry her (179). When her suitors assembled in her home to make a formal

proposal they were so large in number and from such powerful families that her reputed father, King Tyndareus (i.e. Leda's husband) was afraid to select one among them fearing that the others would unite against him. He therefore first required a solemn oath from all the suitors that they would champion the cause of Helen's husband, whoever he might be, if any wrong was done to him throughout his marriage. It was, after all, to each man's advantage to take the oath since each was hoping he would be the person chosen. They all bound themselves to punish anyone who carried or tried to carry Helen away. Then Tyndareus chose Menelaus and made him King of Sparta as well (181).

When Paris gave the apple to Aphrodite, the goddess took him directly to Sparta where Helen, and her new husband Menelaus, invited him to be their guest. Menelaus, trusting Paris to be a gracious visitor, left for Crete. As the story goes, Paris and Helen absconded to Troy. Menelaus, in his anger and grief, called upon all of Helen's previous suitors and invoked the solemn oath they shared (181). So the great fleet made ready, a thousand ships strong, and met at Aulis to prepare to sail for Troy. Aulis was a place of strong winds and dangerous tides, impossible to sail from as long as northern winds blew. The winds blew, day after day, and the fleet was forced to wait (182).

The army was desperate. The soothsayer, Calchas, declared that the gods had spoken to him about the Greeks' dilemma. The violent winds were due to Artemis' anger. The only way to calm the wind and ensure a safe voyage to Troy was to sacrifice the royal maiden, Iphigenia, to Artemis. Iphigenia was the eldest daughter of Agamemnon, the commander of the Army and the brother of Menelaus. Agamemnon

yielded to the abhorrent demand. His reputation with the Army, his promise to his brother, and his ambition to conquer Troy were all at stake. He wrote to his wife, Clytemnestra, that she and Iphigenia should travel to Aulis as he had arranged a profitable marriage for her. The marriage, he deceptively wrote, was to Achilles who was already lauded as a great warrior. On the day of her fabricated wedding, she was instead brought to the altar to be sacrificed. She died and the northern winds ceased to blow and, thus, enabled the Greek fleet to finally begin the journey to Troy (182).

SCENE D: IPHIGENIA PREPARES

Iphigenia is seated. Nurse enters.

IPHIGENIA

Ay me! What news? Why dost thou wring thy hands?¹⁵

Nurse, will you go with me into my closet,
To help me sort such needful ornaments
As you think fit to furnish me to-morrow?¹⁶

NURSE

Get you to bed; faith, you'll be sick to-morrow
For this night's watching.¹⁷

IPHIGENIA

No, not a whit: what! I have watch'd ere now
All night for lesser cause, and ne'er been sick.¹⁸

Nay, come, I pray thee, speak: good, good nurse, speak.¹⁹

NURSE

But now I'll tell thee joyful tidings, girl.²⁰

IPHIGENIA

And joy comes well in such a needy time:
What are they, I beseech you dear Nurse.²¹

NURSE

Well, well thou hast a careful father, child;
One who, to put thee from thy heaviness,
Hath sorted out a sudden day of joy,
That thou expect'st not nor I look'd not for.²²

IPHIGENIA

To answer that, I should confess to you.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. René Weis. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 250.

¹⁶ Ibid. 297.

¹⁷ Ibid. 302.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. 227.

²⁰ Ibid. 278.

²¹ Ibid. 278-279.

²² Ibid.

(continued)

Tell me not, nurse, that thou hear'st of this,
 Unless thou tell me how I may prevent it:
 If, in thy wisdom, thou canst give no help,
 Do thou but call my resolution wise,
 And with this knife I'll help it presently.²³

NURSE

Now comes the wanton blood up in your cheeks,
 They'll be in scarlet straight at any news.
 Hie you to church;
 I am the drudge and toil in your delight,
 But you shall bear the burden soon at night.²⁴

IPHIGENIA

My grave is like to be my wedding bed.²⁵

NURSE

God in heaven bless her!²⁶

IPHIGENIA

O shut the door! And when thou hast done so,
 Come weep with me; past hope, past cure, past help!²⁷

What say'st thou? Hast thou not a word of joy?
 Some comfort, nurse.²⁸

Give me, give me! O, tell me not of fear!²⁹

NURSE

Marry, I will; and this is wisely done.³⁰

IPHIGENIA

Speakest thou from thy heart?³¹

²³ Shakespeare 291.

²⁴ Ibid. 229.

²⁵ Ibid. 178.

²⁶ Ibid. 223.

²⁷ Ibid. 290.

²⁸ Ibid. 285.

²⁹ Ibid. 294.

³⁰ Ibid. 287.

³¹ Ibid. 286.

NURSE

And from thy soul too;
Or else beshrew them both.³²

IPHIGENIA

Tell my father
Where I have learn'd me to repent the sin
Of disobedient opposition
To him and his behests³³

If all else fail, myself have power to die.³⁴

NURSE

Ah, lady, I already know thy grief;
It strains me past the compass of my wits:
I hear thou must, and nothing may prorogue it,³⁵
Thou hast the strength of will to slay thyself,
Then it is likely thou wilt undertake
A thing like death to chide away this shame,
That copest with death himself to scape from it:
So smile the heavens upon this holy act,
That after hours with sorrow chide us not!³⁶

IPHIGENIA

Ay, those attires are best: but gentle nurse,
I pray thee, leave me to my self to-night,
For I have need of many orisons
To move the heavens to smile upon my state,
Which, well thou know'st, is cross, and full of sin.³⁷

NURSE

Good night:
Get thee to bed, and rest; for thou hast need.³⁸

IPHIGENIA

Hie to high fortune! Honest nurse, farewell.³⁹

³² Shakespeare 286.

³³ Ibid. 296.

³⁴ Ibid. 287.

³⁵ Ibid. 290.

³⁶ Ibid. 292.

³⁷ Ibid. 298.

³⁸ Ibid. 299.

³⁹ Ibid. 229.

Nurse exits

IPHIGENIA

Then, window, let day in, and let life out.⁴⁰

Luce enters, dropping flowers onto the stage.

LUCE

“And the miracle happened.
Everyone distinctly heard the sound of the knife
striking, but no one could see
the girl. She had vanished.
The priest cried out, and the whole army
echoed him, seeing
what some god had sent, a thing
nobody could have prophesized. There it was,
we could see it, but we could scarcely
believe it: a deer
lay there gasping, a large
beautiful animal, and its blood ran
streaming over the alter of the goddess.”

“The goddess has placed this victim
on her alter, a deer from the mountains,
and she accepts this instead of the girl,
rather than stain her alter with noble blood.”⁴¹

IPHIGENIA

...

Lights down

⁴⁰ Shakespeare. 274.

⁴¹ Euripides. *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Trans. W.S Merwin and George Dimock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 94.

The dialogue of the previous scene between Iphigenia and the Nurse is text from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet, like Sita, is a model of self-sacrifice romanticized in tragedy. The opportunity to deconstruct the original dialogue between Juliet and her nurse, and subvert the sentimental language, was appealing. By redistributing that text to Iphigenia's story, this connects Juliet's excitement regarding her relationship with Romeo, and potential marriage, to Iphigenia's impending sacrifice. Juliet's famous line: "My grave is like to be my wedding bed" is given a new, and profoundly unsettling, weight.

The catalyst in both Sita's and Iphigenia's unfortunate dilemmas is, curiously, another female figure. Female figure must be specified because in the case of Sita, the catalyst is Ravana's sister Shurpanakha; since she is a demoness, she is only representationally female. While in the forest, Rama and Lakshmana encounter Shurpanakha disguised as a beautiful woman (Narayan 67). She attempts to seduce Rama who, citing the fact that he is already married, refuses her advances. He does offer his brother as a replacement, citing the fact that Lakshmana is unmarried. Lakshmana immediately responds to this proposition by cutting off Shurpanakha's nose and ears (Buck 157). In her agony and anger, Shurpanakha appeals to her brother, Ravana, to avenge her deformity and bring suffering to the two brothers. She kindles the flame by describing Sita's infinite beauty and that he, Ravana, deserves a wife of such splendor. He takes the bait (160).

As previously discussed in the summary of the Iphigenia myth, the stimulus for the Trojan War, and hence Iphigenia's sacrifice, is Helen's departure from her husband.

Because of the oath that each of Helen's suitors took on the day of her betrothal, her disappearance with Paris is not only an assault upon her husband, but also the state as a whole and, therefore, requires military action. Both Iphigenia and Sita are offered up as sacrifices for war. Iphigenia's case is more explicit and has already been defined in this paper; Sita's circumstances are less so. Typical of the *Ramayana*, in order to clarify this situation, an earlier story must be recounted. At the beginning of the story, the purpose of Rama's birth is described. The gods were having trouble with the demon king, Ravana. The ten-headed Ravana had received, from the gods themselves, a very powerful blessing. Ravana had been given the boon of protection from all celestial beings and, therefore, could not be defeated by any gods. Due to Ravana's bad behavior, and the fact that no god could dominate him, this was a precarious situation (Narayan 4). An important detail that Ravana possibly overlooked, and therefore the reason the *Ramayana* exists, is that he did not ask the gods for protection against a human. Realizing this critical oversight, the gods asked Vishnu to be reborn as a human in order to defeat Ravana and restore order to the universe (Narayan 5). To tie this all together, when Lakshmana mutilates Shurpanakha and she appeals to her brother in shame, the offering of Sita as bait triggers the great war as the gods had intended from the very beginning (Doniger 233). Or as Doniger writes, Sita is "set up precisely so that Ravana would fall in love with her and steal her, thus giving Rama an excuse to destroy him" ("Sita" 35).

Establishing that both women were excuses for a war, there is curiously another similarity between the two's respective sacrifices. In Scene B of the script, Luce entreats

the audience to pay special attention to the deer in Sita's story. The woodland creature is pivotal to both Sita's and Iphigenia's stories. Ravana's uncle Maricha transforms into a deer in order to lure Rama and Lakshmana away from the house, so that Ravana can abduct Sita. Sita, seeing the golden deer, asks Rama to retrieve it for her. He agrees but commands Lakshmana to stay with Sita (Buck 166). Rama does retrieve the deer, but correctly fearing it a demon, kills it. As Maricha dies, he cries out "Help me!" imitating Rama's own voice (168). Sita, hearing this and falling prey to Maricha's deception, sends Lakshmana to help Rama. Once Lakshmana leaves, Ravana disguises himself as an old Brahmin and asks Sita for water and food (169). She, unfortunately, accepts his company and is kidnapped (171). When Sita relays this story to Luce and the Nurse in Scene B, the narrative above is shortened to Sita simply chasing after the deer herself instead of sending Rama to do it.

As Luce orates at the end of scene D, just as the knife was about to strike Iphigenia, a deer suddenly appeared in the girl's place and Iphigenia's body was nowhere to be found. In certain accounts, specifically Euripides' play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Artemis took pity on the young Iphigenia and substituted the deer in her place. This completes the sacrifice and, symbolically, saves Iphigenia's life (Hamilton 249). The core idea of the deer, in both women's stories, is substitution. Ravana used a deer, as proxy, in order to abduct Sita and Artemis offered a sacrificial deer as a substitute for Iphigenia. Additionally, since deer are innate prey animals, the deer's appearance in both sacrifices associates these women to prey. Hence, objects that can be hunted for a

purpose. The sacrificial deer is even present in the depiction of Iphigenia's sacrifice in Torelli's painting (see Fig. 1).

SCENE E: THE END

Sita and Iphigenia are seated. They're still waiting.

SITA

(singing) "Oh Sita,
I sing this song.
Rama will untie your braid;
He will free you.

IPHIGENIA

...

SITA

(singing) Remember his love for you.
My poem will outlast time;
I sing this song,
Oh Sita."⁴²

IPHIGENIA

...

SITA

?

IPHIGENIA

?

SITA

Fuck it. I'm tired of this shit.

IPHIGENIA

Yeah. You know what you're right. I'm sick of it.

SITA

(out) I will no longer be your sacrifice.

IPHIGENIA

(out) My body is not a temple.

They exit.

⁴² William Buck. *Ramayana* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 325.

The prominent differences between Sita and Iphigenia, besides geographical location, are the nature of their sacrifices and the outcomes. Iphigenia is sacrificed to appease a presumably angry Artemis and, subsequently, gain Artemis' aid in travel to Troy. Sita submits to *agnipariksha* in order to demonstrate her faithfulness to Rama. Iphigenia is laid upon the sacrificial altar and, according to certain sources, dies. Sita enters the sacrificial fire, emerges unharmed, and lives. It is difficult, however, to explicitly define their differences. In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* for example, Iphigenia is rescued and a deer is sacrificed in her place. She is then taken to Tauris to serve as the priestess of Artemis' temple (Hamilton 249). Sita, as previously stated, returns to Ayodhya as queen, but is subsequently banished to the forest. So in the end, depending on the translation, both women are displaced from their home and estranged from the men who incited their sacrificial trials.

Caridad Svich, in the Afterward to *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls...*, describes Iphigenia: "She belongs to everyone but herself" (Svich 78). Agamemnon was able to declare her worth and put a price on her head. Sita, even after all her years of devotion to Rama, was turned away due to false rumors of her unfaithfulness. Annu Devi and her infant daughter were murdered because of Devi's husband's distorted view that a woman's worth is connected to her financial viability, and should that viability lessen, she becomes disposable. These three women, as sacrificial women, belonged to everyone but themselves.

Beginning with my initial impulse for the project, analyzing performances of the *Ramayana*, into the association between Sita and Iphigenia triggered by my

dramaturgical work on *Iphigenia Crash Land Falls...*, this comparative study has been a dramaturgy-driven project. My own notions of what dramaturgy contributes to a production, and to a script, expanded beyond the common, and inaccurate, presumption that dramaturgs solely supply research. This project required me to assume a role I have been hesitant to approach in the past. The only way to articulate the dramaturgy of the proposed play was for me, the dramaturg, to write the scenes. In order to successfully examine the use of the sacrificial woman onstage, I had to compose scenes in which these women processed their own sacrificial place. Additionally, I wanted these women to have the agency to tell their own stories. I fully commend Valmiki and Euripides for giving these mythological women dramatic life, and for creating rich and culturally significant characters. I do, however, question the exaltation of these women based on their respective sacrifices. Luce tells us that it is problematic to honor the historic Sita and Iphigenia for something they had little consent in. In the final scene, Sita and Iphigenia make the choice to leave the waiting room and, therefore, abandon their sacrificial place. These characters decide, instead, to honor themselves as independent thinkers and exercise their own sense of duty.

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