

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 1996, Issue 15

1996

Article 15

Iphigenia at Zero

Lisa Schlesinger*

*

Copyright ©1996 by the authors. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijcs>

IPHIGENIA AT ZERO

Lisa Schlesinger

Place: The Smithsonian Institute
Time: 1995 Opening of the Enola Gay exhibit

IPHIGENIA

Ladies, gentlemen, please no pushing.
My name is Iphigenia and I
will be your guide on this tour.
I want to tell you all about the Enola Gay
even though whenever I speak
it turns out it's a lot about sex.
How they are related one to the other,
I don't know. Rumors and talk maybe.
You know, about who did what to who when.
Or it could be the *secrecy and shame factor*.
You know, who did what to who when.
And most importantly,
no one is supposed to talk about IT,
or even know about IT.
It gets so silent
it's like IT never even happened at all.
I find that mysterious and it sparks my curiosity.

If at any time you FALL OUT of interest
you may gently slip off the ear phones
or simply switch the channel.
Remember we are here to serve you.

Today I am honored to be your guide
to this great unveiling in world history

Here at zero
I find myself once again.
The funeral pyre.

My name is Iphigenia.
I came when I was called for.
The first time I was merely a girl
Fifteen, I had barely started to bleed.
The messenger came.
My mother unfolded the letter.
Send Iphigenia to Aulis to be married to Achilles.
ΑΧΙΛΛΕΑΣ

The noble. Famous throughout Greece.
Brown sinewy archer with bowed arms, straight thighs.
Achilles the hero.

The trip took five long days
over mountains in the burning sun.
It was August and hadn't rained since May.
The only moisture in the air
was my own sweat which stung my eyes
and evaporated into the sky.
The wind didn't stir.
Mother seemed nervous and kept
touching my face.
But I laughed and said inside myself
After this I will never be a virgin again.
I thought of the blood I bleed sometimes and
I said inside myself. Life. No life. Life. No life.
Five days we passed the olive trees,
hunched over and withdrawn.
Their silver tongues hung low and silent.
The brilliant red poppies
lay now like spots of dried blood on the ground.
Only the mules feet made a sound
and the dust they kicked up was the only motion.
There was a horrible stillness over the world.

At night I didn't sleep but dreamed
half awake the way that seers do.
Just before dawn when the world is blue.
I am a bride veiled in white but there is no groom
The wedding procession follows behind
but there are only men
and the music is broken by foreign voices
men, as if from very far away
"Dimples Eight two from north tinian tower.

Taxi out and take off instructions.
Dimples Eight two from north tinian tower.
Take off to the east on runway A for Able.
Dimples Eight two cleared for takeoff.
15 seconds to go, 10 seconds, 5...”¹
a thunderous noise, I hold my ears,
a flash of light so bright I am blinded
but then I see myself floating up up.
White birds fall all around me.
Dawn brings only devastation.

We came over the hill then, and there was the sea,
more beautiful than my dream of the sea
and I could already feel the cool bathing me.
When we saw the men we nearly turned back.
There were tens of thousands of them,
there on the beach
scattered and sloppy as street dogs,
mangy men, half naked,
so many of them it was hard to tell they were men.
And there was a hum, like the low moan of worker bees.
As we got closer, we could see what it was they were doing
scraping their knives back and forth across the stones
Like insects rubbing their useless wings
thousands of men sharpening their knives.
Their too sharp edges hummed and whined.
Nothing stirred. No wind.
As you know, the thousand boats sat moored in the harbor.
The sun rose so hot they seemed to melt beneath it.

Agamemnon
my father
the king.
And his brother Menelaos
the betrayed, the forsaken one.
Imagine that. A whole war for Helen.
The queen bee in absentia. But it wasn't Helen's
war, everyone knew, she was a mere excuse.
They'd shipped Helen off to Egypt.
Where she was basking in the sun.
Mother and I knew right away.
It's true we knew but didn't turn around.
Protect me, cried my blood. But I didn't say a word.
This was no wedding party.
We were headed straight towards zero.

(Time: August 6, “The hour was early,
the morning still, warm, and beautiful...”²)

I saw my daddy from a distance.
He reached out his arms as I approached him.
His knuckles were gnarled like olive branches.
I’d always called him Aggie
and I was his favorite darling
though it’s true—before the war
he used to tickle me till it stung.

Beyond him I saw the boy warrior.
He took off at the seashore.
His feet like the stormwind-running.
Achilles whom Thetis bore
and Chiron trained into manhood.
In full armor on the sands racing
He strove, his legs in contest
*with a chariot and four...*³

Just a boy racing horses! I had to laugh.
And it’s true, my heart fluttered. Life. No life.
I said inside myself. I’ll never be a virgin again.
He approached us then, breathless still.
His eyes were dark, his hands as soft as a girls.
Brown sinewy archer with bowed arms.
It was so easy to be fooled.
He had a perfect bite.
Someone called out:
A marriage offering to Artemis.
Let the lutes be played
and there should be dancing in the Pavilion
since for the maid
this day should dawn in happiness.
I tried not to look his way
but I couldn’t help noticing
he also tried not to look at me.

Euripides wrote the play
according to the rules of tragedy.
There was bound to be a sacrifice.
But we didn’t know it would be me.
The funeral pyre was burning.
We could almost smell the meat.
But perhaps we were just hungry.
We had been on the road for days.

But I’m telling this all too slowly

and by now you must want to know
that the soldiers had been stuck on that beach
for months and months and the wind would not blow.
The men had finished sharpening, patching, preparing.
There was little left to eat, no women,
and they were starting to have eyes for each other,
not just for love, but also as easily for death.
They had the taste of it all in their mouths;
and if the wind didn't move soon
they were going to snap into one another,
a civil war made of hunger and spite.
Or worse, overthrow their leaders
the two war brothers
and feed them to the dogs.
King Agamemnon,
so anxious to lead
the Greek army into Troy
But the wind would not blow in his direction.
You know the story.
So Menelaos consults the prophet Calchas.
He wants to know if he'll ever get his Helen back.
He wants to know if he'll ever fuck his wife again
or will he be the biggest ΧΕΡΑΤΑΣ
in the history of Greece.
Each brother has his own motivation.
Calchas answers back:
If only Agamemnon sacrifices his eldest daughter
Iphigenia, that's me,
to the goddess Artemis
the wind will begin to blow
the Greek ships will set sail
with such gusto, with such force
you get the picture,
the Greek soldiers will arrive at Troy
to bludgeon and batter, scuttle and swarm
those goddamn sons of Priam,
those barbarian mother fuckers
half to death
(they have to talk this way
to get their blood riled)
and watch them,
drowning in their own blood
begging for pity in the cramped
over crowded streets
without shelter

from the wretched decomposing bodies
their houses blown apart
their women raped their children orphaned
their skin burned off their bones...
...you get the picture...
...it was a guy thing...
and leave the city like an anthill
inhabited only by ants
so that it would go down in history just so.
Troy.

All's well that ends well.
Agamemnon paid his dues.
They say he was quite a politician.
Didn't like paperwork.
Got straight to the heart of the matter.
Sort of like Truman.
Slaughtered his daughter and trotted off to battle.
Needless to say, the Greeks won that war.
Later they changed the ending
and said that I, Iphigenia, didn't die
but went flying off with the gods
into the twentieth century
living on clouds, living like a god.
Homer documented it all.
He was the original CNN.
He made men heroes
while women passed their time at home
waiting, weaving, and slowly disappearing.
The rest is HISTORY.

* * *

Agamemnon took Achilles' arm
and walked him towards the regiments.
Mother placed a veil over my face
before I could ask why
she was pulling at my arm
and shrieking with such terror
I thought the sound of her would make me faint.
That's when they tore her away from me
and I never saw her again.

I'd seen sacrificial altars like it before.
For lambs. And other innocents.
Now it was my turn.
I would know what it was like.

But I would never have the taste
of my taste on Achilles fingers
never have the smell of his smell
just above my upper lip.

* * *

My name is Iphigenia
and I like to talk about sex
because I died so young the first time
I never got to get into it.
For me sex is a metaphor for everything I never did
It was the ending that stopped me.
It was the beginning middle and end thing that stopped me.
And I blame it on Aristotle.
I could've been so much more
if I could've had a different ending.
But then it wouldn't have been what it was which was
an Aristotelian Tragedy
Iphigenia at Aulis
a drama of "some magnitude"
with a beginning a middle and end.

* * *

Sex, like Aristotelian drama.
Let me give you a taste.
It's night. You are out on a date.
You can feel the air tremble with anticipation.
You're in a world surrounded by water.
The breeze is sweet and slips under your clothing.
You want it, get into it.
You begin with the prologue
and it tells you everything you need to know.
It's all about lineage, you see,
the past thrusting itself towards the future.
In your gut you know what's about to happen
because you've seen this picture before
and you play your part so well
you know it by heart.

You're a girl but you've learned to fuck like a boy.
It's all about lineage, you see,
the past thrusting towards you,
beyond you into the future.
You share the same rules

and you're satisfied with the plot:

scene 1

You've got the protagonist
and you like him
and he looks okay
and then it's
the kiss, hands here and there
it's all a bit familiar
he likes it you like it
sound it out.
So far so good.

scene 2

The titillation of conflict
it gets a little hotter a little wetter
the tension's rising
I mean the rising action,
I mean,
you know what I mean.
Everybody likes it
if it's healthy and fun
and no one gets hurt
and so on.

scene 3

I don't have to tell you
if it's clean healthy fun
and no one gets hurt
even if someone does
because this is the 20th century
and everybody's bound to get hurt
one way or another
sooner or later.

scene 4

You barely know this guy
you barely remember his name,
but you identify with him
he tastes good you like it,
you taste good he likes it
the drama is set in motion.
This is the way it has to happen
or it wouldn't be Aristotelian
it wouldn't be good drama.

scene 5

A little bit of give and take
it's hard to get enough rising action

and we're not talking about bread.

scene 6

So you get into it
because you know the rules
somehow it makes you feel
like you're a member of the community
and everybody's doing it
and no one gets hurt
and even if someone does
because this is the 20th century
this is Aristotelian drama
and someone's got to

Die

(That's foreshadowing, by the way)

scene 7

Then there's the recognition
and you realize,
not only don't you know him
but you don't even like him
besides you're not even sure you know yourself
but that makes you more likable
more human
you're about to head into a quick climax
and before you can stop it
it's happening
and before you know it
before you even question
how it could be
how it might be
what it would be
you are part of the lineage
the past thrusting itself
toward you through you beyond you into the future.

scene 8

So you wrap it up.

Beginning middle and end.

But you don't get it

because the linear narrative's not working for you
and it's keeping you on the low end of the pay scale
and the language doesn't work for you
because what you think is not in a straight line.

You still get paid 68 cents to his dollar
and when your check's no good it bounces
and the only way to keep your hips straight
is by not eating

so you get back into your diet
so you can fit back into your jeans
which works just fine for him
because he's hungry
and the less you eat
the more you leave for him
the resolution is like a sigh
and then you go home and
and throw up
and he tells you
that's just catharsis
it's part of the
technique
get into it.

* * *

The funeral pyre was at the top of the hill
closer to the gods.
I hadn't seen my father in two years.
More importantly he hadn't seen me.
He remembered me sexless and innocent as a little lamb.
Did that make the decision easier?
We were walking forward.
The masses of men cheering us on.
He paused as if to say something.
He never explained but I knew. What he would say if he could.
The sacrifice of one for the many.
I spoke instead.
I have a secret, I said.
You do.
Yes.
It's red and it runs.
He thought it was a riddle and he went quiet for a moment looking for a
solution. I stopped him.
I came from your life now I can give life back.
Are you trying to tell me something?
Don't tell mommy I told you.
Told me what?
She doesn't think anyone should know. She thinks it should be a secret.
What should be a secret?
Guess. I said. It was as if he hadn't noticed the plum colored nipples which had
blossomed beneath my blouse.
How should I know? Aggie asked.
It's red. I said. Blood. Don't you know anything about it? The wind whispers in
my ear and then the blood comes out.

Out of where?

Daddy! I said, He disappointed me so.

Oh, he said, you mean there. Why did you tell me? I'm your father. I don't want to know.

He looked down at my legs as if I might embarrass him. Walking to the altar with blood running down my legs. We both suddenly stopped walking.

I said, I make life now. And life recognizes life.

And so it recognizes no life too. Life. No life. Life. No life.

He blushed. For him it was a life sentence.

I knew there was something different about you, he said. It frightened me.

Ten thousand seething soldiers on the beach and it is my blood that frightens him.

What is it like to burn?

* * *

Later they changed the ending
and said I flew off with the gods
who spun me from point to point.
Zero to zero.

Dimples Eight two from north tinian tower.
Taxi out and take off instructions.

Agamemnon's ears still ring with death.
Fate chains me here, he said.
Like Truman he thought
the moon and stars had fallen on his head.
At least Agamemnon knows the implications now.
2000 years of destruction
is a hard thing to live with.
It's his own private hell.
His incurable mental disease.
He knows everything
there is to know about weaponry.
And he hates every body
which takes a tremendous
amount of effort believe you me.
He's Ares boy.
He split the first atom
between his two front teeth.

Dimples Eight two from north tinian tower.

It's our actions which make us noble.
So they say. And nobly I went to slaughter.
For my father's war.

I was already tired of pretending
to be this thing they wanted me to be
but which I couldn't quite make out
because they said something about
nobility bravery sacrificial lamb martyr
but it was grotesque,
the whole construction,
the whole charade.
The whole big performance.
They torched the pyre then.
The gods began to tug at me.

Dimples Eight Two

Take off to the east on runway A for Able.

Later they changed the ending
and said I flew off with the gods
who spun me from point to point
and dropped me down at zero
on the back of Little Boy,
my brother in war crimes.
You don't believe me
because you're too busy believing Euripides.
He won the contest, after all.
And I just disappeared.

Dimples Eight two cleared for takeoff.
15 seconds to go,
The gods spun me from zero to zero.
10 seconds,
I was opposite the sun, I rose up at dusk
and fell back to earth at dawn.
5 seconds to
Take off.

(Time: 8:16 and 2 seconds)

* * *

I saw Achilles up ahead.
He stood tall for a boy of sixteen.
His cheeks were rosy from the flames.
O noble heart!
He wanted to marry me then.
You're the real thing, he said
and placed the ring around my head.
I shall arrive
With these arms at the goddess' altar

And wait there till you come.
But his words flung me
through the time
so that what I lacked in foresight
I gained in hindsight and I thought
how did I end up
in the twentieth century
married to this hero guy.
He was a real Achilles.
Homer should've seen him.
He would've recognized him in a minute.
His long eyelashes and his perfect bite.
It was a long journey,
I tell you, from Mycenae, to Aulis, to Taurus,
to Hiroshima on and on into the future,
And if you want to blame me
for making a myth of my life go right ahead.
Everyone's got to make sense of things any way they can.
I loved him. It's true.
And if that was my biggest mistake, commit me.
But it's true, I can see it
in the future I come home from the hospital
with the baby in my arms
and find him gone.
He returns at five A.M.
with grass in his shoes
and a medal of honor still pinned on his chest.
And with the baby on my breast,
I bend down to pick up those shoes
and I hold them up because they are full of grass
and there is no grass where we live.
And I ask him
with our baby in my arms
how he could have possibly got grass
in his shoes
and he looks at me,
fingering the faint
and expressionless eyebrows
of our son,
and says, gosh, you know,
I was so stoned
well, not exactly like that
it sounded more like
*Ιμουν τόσο μεθισμενος
χθες το βραδι που δεν*

μπορουσα να δω τα ποδια μου
you get the picture
he says, I don't remember.
In the future I love him so
I want to believe him.
So you know
I do
even though
inside myself
I know he is lying
and you see,
this is how one's vision
of reality gets distorted.

(slide: The hour was early the morning still. Shimmering leaves reflecting sunlight from a cloudless sky made a pleasant contrast with shadows in my garden.⁴)

We stood together for a moment.

Achilles, the warrior,
with his arms tight at his sides,
wept.
Little did he know, within minutes
he would turn on his weak heel
and head towards the boats.

Aggie, I say, a person who has been roasted becomes very small, doesn't she?
Ελα τορα κοριτσι μου,
κοιτα τι οραια μερα ειναι σιμερα
κοιτα τι οραια μερα.

They said I was sacrificed to Artemis.
but it was she who taught me love.
Artemis above me now,
the sky so clear and clean above her.
I placed my fingers there at the hollow of her throat.
I could feel her pulse quicken.
The men began to shout and run off towards their fleet.
I heard Artemis hum
and that was how the breeze began
to stir and blow.
We lifted gently above the pyre.
Her mouth was all around me.
This was how I learned the landscape of the world.
In her breath it was mapped out for me.

They dropped
little boy

and flew away.
We went soaring down
little boy and I,
straddled across his gut
he was a big waste can with wings.
It took 43 seconds to fall.
The soldiers flew away
and looking back
saw the world, a funeral pyre
but no, you're right,
it wasn't Troy.
War crime is war crime, you know,
no matter what time.
Ares doesn't wear a watch.
8:16 and two seconds.

We were opposite the sun.
The light rose up
and the world fell down.

We spun from zero to zero.
I promised myself when I get back to earth
the first thing I'm going after is love,
a real human enormous possibility of love,
in whatever shape or form
write the physical properties of it
eat drink and sleep it
in whatever shape or form,
male female,
I don't mind
old bodies young wrinkly smooth
prophetic edible bodies
all as long as they smell good
and aren't burnt to a crisp.
In the twentieth century that has been a big problem.

And then I flew up into the world
and I promised myself
if I ever came back I would learn
everything there is to know
about nuclear weapons
because one day I'd like to have children
and if I do I don't want them
to die young like I did,
and how sex and love
are related to the
nuclear weapons industry

maybe
maybe I could know
if there was only a little more time.

(slide: Only the living can describe the dead but the dead are radically changed without voice or civil rights or recourse. Along with their lives they have been deprived of participation in the human world.)⁵

Within no time
you're thinking
I'm thinking
it's the ending that stopped me
it's the ending
if only
if only
this wasn't the twentieth century
if it didn't have to end
with this
a burnt out city
of human beings
and a single man left
to tell the story
one man
a fucking liar
of a man, for Christ's sake,
to tell the story,
with some grass in his shoes.
end of play

Notes

¹Hachiya, Michihiko. *Hiroshima Diary*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1955, 1.

²Rhodes, Richard. *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1987, 714.

³Euripides. *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Trans. Charles R. Walker. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1958. Further quotes from this edition will be denoted with italics.

⁴Hachiya 1.

⁵Rhodes 720.