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Iphigenia's Dream in Euripides' *Iphigenia Taurica*: Shifting Expectations

In this paper I will discuss the dramatic function of Iphigenia's dream in Euripides' *IT*. The dream influences Iphigenia and the plot, but it raises and thwarts the audience's expectations in a completely different way. I will analyse this difference in perspective between Iphigenia and the audience and show how the problem of interpretation of this dream relates to a main theme of the play, concerning the human limitations in understanding the supernatural. My attention will focus on the audience's shifting interpretation of the dream, an aspect which has been either overlooked or left unexplained.

In the prologue, Iphigenia, brought by Artemis to the Taurians after her sacrifice in Aulis, tells how she dreamt that her house in Argos collapsed completely apart from one pillar, which she sprinkled with water. Iphigenia interprets this dream to mean that her brother Orestes is dead: she believes that the pillar refers to Orestes and her sprinkling of the pillar to her Taurian duty of consecrating foreigners for sacrifice. In the next scene, however, Iphigenia's interpretation is disproved when the audience find out Orestes is still alive. Orestes and Pylades have come to Tauris to steal the cult statue of Artemis. They are caught and brought before Iphigenia who does not recognize them. When the two foreigners tell her that Orestes is still alive, Iphigenia immediately disposes her dream as false (569), a remarkable statement: in extant tragedy, there are few parallels of characters who dispose a prophetic dream as false.

In my paper I intend to show that from the prologue on, a wedge is driven between Iphigenia and the audience, based on Iphigenia's incorrect interpretation of the dream and the audience's superior knowledge that Orestes is alive. First, Iphigenia interprets the dream to mean that her brother is dead, but the audience know this interpretation to be false. Then, when Iphigenia thinks the dream is false, the audience think the dream is true, because Iphigenia is about to sprinkle her brother for sacrifice.

The expected prophecy of the dream, however, is not fulfilled, because Orestes and Iphigenia recognize each other just in time. The audience at this point can draw two different conclusions: either the dream has not proved true or their interpretation is wrong. Because of the literary convention that all tragic dreams prove true or significant, it is most likely that the audience are inclined to adapt their interpretation (contra Burnett [1971] 69-70).

I will argue that the audience can find a new interpretation of the dream in the mock-purification Iphigenia uses to help Orestes and herself escape. The shifting interpretation is made possible by the polysemy of the word *hudraïnein* in the dream (54). This word can refer both to the sacrifice preparation, elsewhere described by the more specific terms *kat'rxam'n* (56) and *chernipsomai* (622), and to the purification of Orestes in the sea, for which the terms *hagnisai* (1039), *metast'sÛ phonou* (1177) and *nipsÛ phonon* (1230, cf. 1338) are used. In this way, the audience can find an interpretation of the dream that proves true.

The dream creates a suspense which lasts till the end of the play. Its complexity and obscurity make the audience experience the difficulties of interpretation. The correct interpretation is revealed only by a process of gradual unfolding. I think the dream's ambiguity fits in very well with a main theme in the *IT* about the human limitations in understanding the divine, described by Cropp (2000) 37: "what happens to us is so variable and unpredictable that we can never know what to expect next, nor why what happens happens -- not because there are no gods' designs and no pattern, but because the designs and the pattern are obscure and complicated."

In short, I will show the complexity of Iphigenia's dream in Euripides' *IT*, which is created by the different perspectives of Iphigenia and the audience, and by the audience's shifting and frustrated expectations.