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Negative Capabiliy:  
Shifts and Ambivalences in *Iphigenia at Aulis*

Aristotle notoriously levelled the charge of inconsistency against Euripides when he complained of *IA* that «the girl who beseeches is in no way like her later self» (*Poetics* 1454a31-3). He had a point. There is indeed an extreme discrepancy between her declarations at 1251-1252, «The person who prays to die is mad. To live basely is better than to die nobly», and at 1394, «It is better that one man should see the light of life than any number of women». Of course she is not the only character to change radically in the play. At 332 Menelaus accuses his brother Agamemnon of constantly shifting: «your thoughts are crooked, shifting with every moment». Then at 471 Menelaus himself totally reverses his own position and at 511 Agamemnon reverses his<sup>1</sup>. The Old Man assures Agamemnon of his trustworthiness in 45 but then betrays him at 870-887. Clytemnestra makes her belief in a sense of shame clear in her first scene with Achilles (see especially 851-852) but later casts it aside (994, 1343-1344, cfr. 901) and, of course, will be totally transformed after her daughter has been sacrificed, as she foresees at 1171-1184. Changes of mind are embedded in the language of the tragedy: see 346, 388, 402-403, 500-501. Following in the footsteps of Bernard Knox<sup>2</sup>, modern scholars have acknowledged the way in which Euripides has by this means prepared the ground for Iphigenia's famous reversal at 1368. Indeed, we are unlikely to be surprised when Achilles

<sup>1</sup> This article draws on the Introduction to a new edition of *Iphigenia at Aulis* which I am producing in conjunction with Christopher Collard for Aris and Phillips. It will be published in 2016. I am most grateful to Professor Collard for his comments on my draft.

I suspect that I shall not be alone in failing to be convinced by the argument of SYNODINOU 2013 that «Agamemnon never changed his mind with regard to Iphigenia's sacrifice».

<sup>2</sup> KNOX 1979 (chapter first published in 1966).

suggests that she may change her mind again when she sees the sword at her throat (1428-1429). And if the play's ending (1578-1629), the work of a far later writer than Euripides<sup>3</sup>, reflects his original conclusion (and a passage in Aelian suggests that it may well do so)<sup>4</sup>, overarching all is the change of mind of the goddess Artemis when she saves Iphigenia from the sacrifice that she has demanded if the Greeks are to sail to Troy.

Euripides has also set the scene for these reversals. For the play is located by Euripus, the narrow strait which separates the island of Euboea from Boeotia in mainland Greece. The current in this strait changes seven times a day (Strabo 1.3.12) and we know from Aeschines (3.90) and other writers that the name was used proverbially of an unstable man. The word Euripus recurs throughout the play (11, 166, 804, 813, 1323). The playwright may have stressed the setting of his tragedy by this strait with its famously shifting currents because he wished it to be an external symbol – an 'objective correlative', to use T.S. Eliot's term – for the psychological shifts that his characters undergo. Indeed, the shifting currents of human motivation are an essential feature of the play's mental geography<sup>5</sup>. It may be worth adding that just such labile traits in human behaviour would have been familiar to Euripides' contemporaries in Alcibiades, the most famous Athenian of the day, who would be likened by Plutarch to a chameleon in view of his extreme transformations<sup>6</sup>.

The volatile patterning of the play is compounded by two disconcerting moments which challenge complete confidence in what a speaker is saying. At the start of his speech of recantation Menelaus invokes his forebears Pelops and Atreus when he swears that he will be totally sincere (473-474); to make an oath by two famously treacherous characters in Greek mythology, the latter a notorious infanticide<sup>7</sup>, is certainly unsettling. And at the end

<sup>3</sup> WEST 1981, 61-78.

<sup>4</sup> NA VII 39; Eur. fr. 857 K.

<sup>5</sup> MORWOOD 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *Alc.* 23.4. For the ancient sources on this figure, see RHODES 2011, 1-4.

<sup>7</sup> Another disconcerting moment comes when Clytemnestra speaks of Atreus with apparent approval at 1457.

of his speech the chorus' apparent commendation of his words, that they were worthy of Tantalus, another family member who is being punished in the Underworld for his evil dealing on earth (504-505), does nothing to add clarity. Thus it is surely unsurprising that Erasmus was just the first of a number of scholars who regard Menelaus' speech as insincere<sup>8</sup>. My own feeling, however, is that to take that view is unjustifiably definitive and that Euripides is undermining straightforward certainties. Who can say once and for all that the speech is sincere or insincere?

The whole presentation of the play's central political figures is in line with this pervasive ambivalence. To demonstrate this it will be helpful to give some impression of the political world of Athens as it manifested itself in the last years of the Peloponnesian War when Euripides wrote his tragedy. He died in 407/6 BC. S. Scullion has exposed the tradition of his death in Macedon, possibly torn to pieces by hounds, as an invention<sup>9</sup>. In his *Frogs*, staged early in 405 BC, Aristophanes causes his Euripides to participate in the discussion of the city, and, as Scullion remarks (392), «there is no hint that this is in any way inappropriate; the play lends itself naturally to the conclusion that Euripides died in Athens still fully involved in Athenian life».

All the evidence suggests that the vast majority of Athenians cherished their democracy. Established in 508/7 BC and developing along increasingly radical lines, it was interrupted only once before the end of the Peloponnesian War. This occurred in 411 after the catastrophic failure of the Sicilian expedition had undermined confidence in democratic government, when the assembly was induced to set up the regime of the Four Hundred, conceived as a powerful council of 400 and a notional body of 5,000 citizens «able to serve with their wealth and their bodies», i.e. men of hoplite status and above<sup>10</sup>. The Four Hundred have impressed nobody – they come across as self-serving Quislings vis-à-vis the Spartans – and after the latter had defeated an Athe-

<sup>8</sup> ERASMUS 1506-1507, 270.

<sup>9</sup> SCULLION 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Thuc. VIII 65-70; Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 29-32.

nian fleet near the Euripus (the location, of course, of *IA*)<sup>11</sup>, an *ad hoc* assembly deposed them and set up an intermediate regime based on the Five Thousand. That body won high praise from Thucydides who dubbed it «the best government the Athenians ever had, at least in my time»<sup>12</sup>.

At this time the bulk of the Athenian fleet were on the other side of the Aegean on the island of Samos and the sailors committed themselves to the democratic cause. They thought of themselves as the true city of Athens and the fundamental indispensability of the fleet meant that it was their cause that prevailed. Thus the Five Thousand were doomed and were replaced by the restored democracy and it was the ναυτικὸς ὄχλος (the naval mob: 526, 914) who brought this about. They were the champions of democracy.

The theatre of Dionysus at Athens was a focal point for the expression of democratic feeling. In 410/9 the city Dionysia witnessed a set of highly politicized rituals, the taking of the oath of Demophantus against anti-democrats by the assembled citizens and the announcement of honours for the assassin of the oligarch Phrynichus, architect and leading agent of the anti-democratic revolution of 411 (ML 25.8-13). Furthermore a regular feature of the dramatic festival, probably continued through most of the fifth century, was the reading of a decree proclaiming a reward for killing any of the tyrants<sup>13</sup>.

The morale of the restored democracy was heightened by a succession of military successes under the inspirational leadership of Alcibiades. Euripides was to die before this (as we have remarked) deeply ambivalent figure fell into disfavour. Nor was he alive to witness the renewed democracy's most deplorable hour when the assembly illegally condemned to death eight victorious generals after the battle of Arginusae (406 BC) because bad weather had prevented them from saving the living sailors and the dead bodies from the wrecked ships – an episode which

<sup>11</sup> Thuc. VIII 95.

<sup>12</sup> Thuc. VIII 97.2

<sup>13</sup> Aristoph. *Av.* 1074-1075 with Dunbar's note.

incidentally illustrates the citizens' care for the ναυτικὸς ὄχλος.

This time of upheaval and triumph but not yet of disaster was the backdrop against which *IA* was written. Clearly the question must be raised of how Euripides will have anticipated his fundamentally democratic audience's reaction in a number of significant ways. How would they have felt about the eagerness of the kings to fix things the way they want in secret (the fact that Agamemnon's planning in the prologue is set in the darkness of night may be relevant here)? What would have been their response to Agamemnon's view of Odysseus as a dangerous rabble-rouser on the grounds that he always sides with the ὄχλος (526) and that he might communicate their shady dealings to the army (528-533)? When told that Odysseus had been 'chosen' to lead Iphigenia to her death but was 'willing too' (1362-1364), would they have seen him as a malevolent abuser of popular feeling or a democratic agent of its expression? Above all, would they have viewed the ναυτικὸς ὄχλος with the mixture of contempt and fear with which the play's royal figures regard them (450, 526, 528-535, 914, 1264, 1357)<sup>14</sup>. These questions may be certainly worth asking if they make us pause before forming simplistic judgements on the participants in the tragedy at Aulis.

A reading which draws attention to the play's lack of stability will of course be able to accommodate the apparent double vision of Agamemnon's and Menelaus' account of the former's appointment as commander in chief and his reaction to Calchas' prophecy (84-105, 337-362).

Indeed, so comprehensively has Euripides created a sense of instability in this play that the search for clear answers to the questions it raises can prove seriously misleading. As Pascal remarked, the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing about<sup>15</sup>. The poet John Keats identified the quality that «went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously as *Negative Capability*,

<sup>14</sup> They turn nasty later (1346-1357) but their initial enthusiastic welcome of the royal ladies (425-434) has shown them in a warmly sympathetic light.

<sup>15</sup> *Pensées* 4.277.

that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason». Coleridge, he felt, was «incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge»<sup>16</sup>. In *IA* Euripides surely evinces this quality in abundance. He immerses himself in his characters' situations and far from following scholarly logic he traces the contours of human motivation, responding to all its untidiness, its ambiguities, contradictions and perversities.

The question now arises of how such an analysis of the play's shifting currents may mould our response to the great speech of Iphigenia's later self in which she willingly embraces her destiny to die for the Greek cause (1375-1401). She assures her mother that she wishes to die gloriously; all of Greece looks to her, she says, to enable the sack of Troy and prevent future abductions of women such as that of Helen; Clytemnestra gave birth to her for the advantage all the Greeks and it is proper that one woman, herself, should sacrifice her life for wronged Greece; Achilles must not be endangered; better that one man should see the light of life than countless women; she cannot oppose Artemis; the sack of Troy will be her memorial and her legacy; Greeks must rule over barbarians, not barbarians over Greeks.

As an exemplar of the editorial approach to the play which aims to offer a text free of inconsistencies, seeing them as imported in subsequent interference with Euripides' original, I have settled on David Kovacs, a fine scholar from whom I have learned much and who has made a significant contribution to the debate on the play in the present century<sup>17</sup>. For him, Iphigenia's 'great turn-about speech' is in no sense ironic. We should not adopt «a suspicious critical stance» or be deterred «from reading the play in its plainest and most natural sense» (KOVACS 2002, 162-163). But what if the most natural way to read the speech is in fact rather complicated? Clearly Kovacs' approach to *IA* finds no room for *Negative Capability*!

<sup>16</sup> Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Dec. 22, 1817.

<sup>17</sup> I could equally well have chosen MARKONATOS 2012 who fully endorses Kovacs' editorial solutions.

Here a highly relevant factor is how we should view the cause of «Greece in all its greatness» (1378) and «all the Greeks» (1386), in other words, what response to the concept of the Panhellenism for which Iphigenia is sacrificing herself could Euripides have expected from his audience? Here we need to look back at the poetic tradition and (again) at the history of the fifth century BC and earlier.

Homer's *Iliad* is set in the final year of the Greeks' siege of Troy (12th century BC; the poem dates from c. 700 BC). 29 Greek communities have sailed against the barbarians in 1,186 ships. There is tension in the Greek high command, but fundamentally the Panhellenic force is united. Even Achilles, who withdraws from the fighting for a time with devastating consequences, returns to the battlefield. Thus a rudimentary form of Panhellenism was on display in the first work of Greek literature: indeed, the poet uses the word *Panhellenes* at II 530. And, as was to continue to be a key factor in the understanding of the concept, the values of «all the Greeks» were defined in part by their contrast with the barbarian culture of the Trojans<sup>18</sup>.

Lynette Mitchell has argued that «Panhellenism as a group of ideas with political significance dated from the earliest expressions of that identity (as a discrete and political entity) in the mid sixth-century»<sup>19</sup>. Such ideas seemed to Greeks looking back on the events of the early fifth century to have then found real-life expression. In 490 a Persian force invaded Greece and was defeated by 10,000 Athenians and 1,000 men from their ally Plataea at Marathon. The Spartans sent a force to help but its departure was delayed by a religious festival and it arrived only after the battle was over. Ten years later, in 480, the Persians returned in overwhelming force. Their progress was obstructed for a time at Thermopylae in North Greece by a small band of 300 Spartans but this was massacred. Subsequently, however, Panhellenic forces under Spartan leadership conquered the Persians in a sea battle at Salamis and in 479 on land at Plat-

<sup>18</sup> The key texts here are HALL 1989 and 2005.

<sup>19</sup> MITCHELL 2007, xxi, Chapter 1.

aea. The Greeks then conquered the Persians by land and sea at Mycale in Ionia. But in point of fact just *how* Panhellenic were these forces? We read in Herodotus that many Greek city-states fought alongside the Persians (VI 48-49; VII 138, 172-174) or did not take part at all (e.g. VII 148-153.1, 157-162, 168-169, VIII 73). Mitchell observes (78) that «rather than actually creating unity, the Persian Wars came to *represent* unity and the idealized condition of the Hellenic community». The unified community, in fact, was a 'utopian ideal'.

And indeed even the unity that had been achieved among the Greeks in the Persian Wars soon began to unravel. The Spartan commander Pausanias was recalled because of his tyrannical, indeed Asiatic behaviour and the Athenians were left as the leading members of the Greek fleet. Over the next twenty-five years what had started out as a league of allied Greek cities (called the Delian League by modern historians) became an Athenian empire from whose members the imperial city extorted money in a protection racket based on the threat – and at times the reality – of force. The second half of the fifth century was marked by more or less continuous warfare between Greek cities, most notably in the Peloponnesian War (431-404), which was a conflict between Sparta and her allies and the Athenians and hers. The war was in its final decade when Euripides wrote *IA*. In his lifetime he had witnessed the corruption of an ideal that was unattained until King Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great unified the Greek world by force of arms. Certainly his presentation in our play of a united Greek force (echoing Homer's catalogue of ships in the *parodos*) will have offered to his audience a stark contrast with the reality of the warring city states that confronted them. For one thing, Euripides' choice of women from Euboea for his chorus may have reminded the Athenians of the revolt of almost all of that island from their empire in 411 – an event that caused an unprecedented panic in the city (Thuc. VIII 95.7-96.1). Iphigenia sacrifices herself for the Panhellenic cause. But is it in reality a mirage, an empty ideal?

Panhellenism was to find its most eloquent exponents in the fourth century in the speeches of Lysias and Isocrates (the lat-



ter's espousal of the cause being vitiated by the fact that he saw Philip of Macedon, that enemy of the freedom and independence of Greek city states, as the Panhellenic leader). However, Xenophon reports a Spartan admiral called Callicratides complaining in 406 BC that the Greeks were very wretched because they were fawning on the barbarians for the sake of money, and saying that if he got back home safely (he didn't) he would do his level best to reconcile the Athenians and the Spartans (*Hellenica* I 6.7). And if Gorgias' *Olympic Oration* can be dated to 408 as seems probable, it too is contemporary with Euripides' writing of his tragedy. Philostratus says that because Gorgias saw that the Greeks were divided among themselves, he advocated concord (*homonoiia*) «by turning against the barbarians and persuading them [i.e. the Greeks] to make the prize of arms not each other's cities, but the land of the barbarians» (DK 82 B 8a)<sup>20</sup>. His counsel finds its echo in *IA* when Agamemnon says that if he runs off to Argos rather than sacrificing his daughter and thus enabling the fleet to sail against the Trojans, the Greeks will come to Argos and sack it (533-535). In causing Agamemnon to assert the primacy of war against the barbarians, Euripides is invoking what was to become a mantra of the Panhellenic ideal<sup>21</sup>.

In view of all this, in any objective sense the jury must surely be out on whether Euripides' could assume a favourable understanding of Panhellenism in his original audience<sup>22</sup>. Here too there is a characteristic ambivalence. My own (subjective) feeling is that the Panhellenic motif has been hammered out in the play with such monotonous insistency (370, 410, 965-967, 1271, 1352, 1378, 1386, 1393) that it has taken on the hollow boom of an empty slogan. Iphigenia's great speech (from 1375 to 1401) is, among other things, an extended set of variations on the theme enunciated in Agamemnon's tawdry rhetoric at 1271-1275<sup>23</sup>. So

<sup>20</sup> MITCHELL 2007, 12.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Lysias, *Olympic Oration*, Isocr. *Paneg.*, Xen. *Hell.* VI 5.33-34.

<sup>22</sup> MARKANTONATOS 2012 sums up the critical debate on this in his valuable note 6 on 192.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. MASTRONARDE 2010, 238: «This dramatic coup should, I suggest, be viewed in terms of a kind of automatism of character-shaping rhetorical elaboration that asks

yes, she is sacrificing herself for an empty ideal. I also find a strong element of hysteria in her speech. This is partly because it is delivered in trochaic tetrameters, a metre well adapted to agitation<sup>24</sup>, and partly because her expression is so extreme, above all in the notorious 1394, valuing the life of one man above that of countless women. The speech of «the girl who beseeches» (1211-1252) certainly has its extreme moment when Iphigenia declares – shockingly for a Euripidean princess – that «to live basely is better than to die nobly» (1252), but, as she confronts the reality of extinction in the earlier speech, its direct iambic trimeters communicate the genuine emotional truth that I feel is lacking from her change of heart in the later one.

Such speculation is altogether alien to Kovacs' methodology with *IA*. «By the end of the play – he writes – the whole community is playing its part: the Greek chieftains and their soldiers are eager to fight and risk their lives, Agamemnon [...] sees the necessity of sacrifice, and Iphigenia is willing to offer her life for Greece. Only Clytemnestra holds out» (KOVACS 2002, 163). Does this bland and temperate summation really square with Agamemnon's assertion that «among the Greeks there rages some mad desire (some Aphrodite is mad)» to sail to Troy (1264-1266)<sup>25</sup>? Has the poet of *Trojan Women* been converted at the end of his life to a view of the Trojan War as a commendable Panhellenic enterprise? Surely not, in the light of the horrors of that war so vividly conveyed at 773-793<sup>26</sup>. At least one Greek chieftain, Achilles, is

an audience both to appreciate the noble gesture and to suspect that it involves some self-delusion». Note Iphigenia's constant (obsessive?) use of the words *Hellas* and *Hellen* at 1378, 1381, 1384, 1386, 1389, 1397, 1400, 1401, 1420, 1446, 1456, 1473, 1502. TURATO 2001, 44-45, finds in Agamemnon's Panhellenic utterance «un altro, ambiguo, livello di intenzionalità»: as well as the obvious possible pressures that lead him to speak «è difficile non cogliervi *anche* l'intenzione di indurre Ifigenia ad accettare il sacrificio della vita, a trasformarlo da violenza subita in 'morte bella' [...], da atto crudele e impuro in propiziatorio rito panellenico».

<sup>24</sup> Her speech follows on the trochaic tetrameters of the exchange between Clytemnestra and Achilles (1345-1368) with its extraordinary sense of excitement, tension and pressure.

<sup>25</sup> See E.K. Anhalt's review of Kovacs, *Euripides*, Vol. 6, in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 23 Dec. 2003.

<sup>26</sup> I concede, however, that there are good reasons for deleting these lines.

still game to try to save Iphigenia and dubs her patriotic decision ἀφροσύνη («folly», 1424-1430). Kovacs brackets these lines, as do other editors. Most tellingly of all, the Loeb editor ignores the observation of the chorus of Calchian women, who comment at the end of her turn-about speech. In their two lines (1402-1403) they balance their tribute, «The part you play, maiden, is a noble one», with the words «But fate and the goddess – that is where the sickness lies» (τὸ τῆς τύχης δὲ καὶ τὸ τῆς θεοῦ νοσεῖ). The chorus see that something is terribly wrong and attribute this in part to Artemis' role in the matter. An attack on a divinity is fighting talk from a Greek tragic chorus and should not be ignored. It comes across with particular emphasis since the chorus say nothing else in the course of this episode<sup>27</sup>.

I would follow the chorus in their balance of admiration and distress. Yes, Euripides endows Iphigenia with a kind of heroism when she makes a coherent pattern out of her own life in the cruel and anarchic world of *IA* where humans are at the mercy of malevolent or chaotic forces whether divine or human. However, I also believe that the high patriotic ideals adopted by Iphigenia are viewed by Euripides as false ones – a belief prompted in part by the fact that the play was written as the Peloponnesian War neared its end, a war in which the Greek city states had torn each other apart and the fighting had lost any sheen of glamour and nobility. Spartans and Athenians may be moored in alliance with each other around the bay at Aulis (247-249, 265-267) in our play, but in historical fact within two or three years of its composition Sparta finally defeated and occupied her hated rival Athens<sup>28</sup>.

In his sensitively calibrated discussion of Iphigenia's change of heart – a discussion to which this paragraph is greatly indebted – J. Gibert summarizes the numerous attempts that have been made to discover plausible motivations for Iphigenia's new-found self-dedication to death<sup>29</sup>. These are interesting, if only in showing how various commentators have found her transformation

<sup>27</sup> Strangely enough, Kovacs does not bracket these lines.

<sup>28</sup> For a similar reluctance to find a single significance in Iphigenia's change of heart, see GAMEL 1999, 310.

<sup>29</sup> GIBERT 1995, 227-248.

understandable. Albin Lesky feels that she is influenced by two factors: Agamemnon's Panhellenic justification of the war (1269-1275) and the reported threat against Achilles' life (1373, 1392)<sup>30</sup>. He shies away, however, from saying what Foley states explicitly: that Iphigenia's emphasis in her monody (1283-1335) on Paris and Helen shows an «awareness of her own dilemma in the larger mythical/historical context»: she accepts the demand of the myth that she must die so that the Trojan War can take place<sup>31</sup>. G. Mellert-Hoffman argues that Iphigenia is no longer a childish little girl. She has heard the Panhellenic justification for war and achieves maturity<sup>32</sup>. A. Green proposes that Iphigenia's change of mind is the result of her Oedipal love for her father<sup>33</sup>. H. Siegel finds consistency in her character in that she cracks under pressure and goes mad<sup>34</sup>. M.A. Harder argues that she is putting on an act<sup>35</sup>. A hardy perennial among would-be solutions, one founded on Lesky's view, is that Iphigenia is motivated by love for Achilles and chooses to sacrifice herself for her intended husband<sup>36</sup>. What strikes me as a more convincing suggestion than any of the above is that Iphigenia has been caught up in the war hysteria that has swept through the army.

None of these suggestions can be 'proved' from the text. If any of their proponents believe that they have definitively unlocked a mystery, they are fooling themselves. In fact, the main value of these ideas would presumably be their usefulness for a director of the play or an actor of the role of Iphigenia seeking to make her change of heart convincing psychologically. However, the va-

<sup>30</sup> LESKY 1972. For the second motivation, see also SANSONE 1991 and MICHELAKIS 2002, 84.

<sup>31</sup> FOLEY 1985, 83.

<sup>32</sup> MELLERT-HOFFMANN 1969, 86. MARKANTONATOS 2012, 193 argues the same, adding that she presents us with the convincing manifesto for Panhellenism that Agamemnon has so singularly failed to deliver («In an admirable and opportune display of strategic intelligence Iphigenia has the strength of mind to espouse a compelling vision of Panhellenic achievement in spite of all the horrible consequences of her sacrifice. Indeed, her deliberate self-abnegation serves as a dim foreshadowing of hope for the future»).

<sup>33</sup> GREEN 1983, 154; FOLEY 1985, 101 with n. 67; RABINOWITZ 1983, 24-25.

<sup>34</sup> SIEGEL 1980, 315; cf. O'CONNOR-VISSER 1987, 123.

<sup>35</sup> HARDER 1986, 29 with n. 33.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. SMITH 1979, 174.

riety of these more or less plausible suggestions is very much in line with the overall argument of this article. The tragedy resists attempts to classify its themes and characters in any simplistic, straightforward manner<sup>37</sup>. To take it seriously is to find the space to respond to its shifts and ambivalences, to the *Negative Capability* of a great playwright. Only thus shall we be able to see it for the mature masterpiece that it so triumphantly is.

#### ABSTRACT

One key feature of *Iphigenia at Aulis* is the readiness with which the characters change their minds. This is appropriate to the location of the play by the Euripus, a strait well known for its shifts of current; indeed, its name was used proverbially of an unstable man. These shifts are reflected in an ambivalence that characterizes much of the play: definitive assessments of what characters are saying prove elusive. The poet John Keats identified the supreme quality in creative literature as «Negative Capability», the capability of being «in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts». If Euripides possessed this quality, it is inappropriate to form a conclusive judgement on whether Iphigenia's turn-about speech is sincere, self-deluding or ironic: it could be all or any of these. This lack of definition is characteristic of the tragedy as a whole.

#### KEYWORDS

changes of mind – Euripus – objective correlative – democratic theatre – Keats – Negative Capability – Iphigenia – Panhellenism

<sup>37</sup> MICHELAKIS 2002, esp. 84, 112, feels the need to pass a final verdict on Achilles as he appears at the end of the play. His definitive single-minded summation strikes me inappropriate to *IA*.

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