

# From Iphigenia to Polyxena - Parallels between the Twin Sacrifices of the Trojan War

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**Abstract:** *Over the millennia, Ancient Greek art and literature has frequently depicted the representations of traditional legends and myths. The story of the infamous Trojan War has often been a central theme - from the factors that brought it to be, to the fall of Troy and the aftermath of war. This paper seeks to examine a set of evidence in relation to the twin sacrifices of Iphigenia, Princess of Mycenae, and Polyxena, Princess of Troy at the beginning and end of the Trojan War, respectively. In order to effectively understand and study how the two instances show similarities, the various retellings and versions of the original myth are highlighted. The victims, Iphigenia and Polyxena had several striking similarities with regards to their social positions, the factors that led to their deaths, as well as the depictions of their final moments. It is said that the two stories can be seen as mirrors of each other, and bookend the overarching myth of the Trojan War.*

**Keywords:** Iphigenia, Polyxena, Trojan War, Tragic heroines, Sacrifice, Classics

## 1. Introduction

In her fictional retelling of the Trojan War, **George, M. (2006)**, writes, “As the innocent blood of a Greek princess sent the ships here, the innocent blood of a Trojan princess sent them home, ”. Thus she highlights the macabre duality of human sacrifice that the Greeks committed during the atrocities of the Trojan War.

Ancient Greek art and literature frequently depicted the representations of traditional legends and myths. These stories, passed down through generations, formed an integral part of the culture of the Ancient people that inhabited the Greek mainland and surrounding areas for centuries. The story of the infamous Trojan War was often a central theme – from the factors that brought it to be, to the fall of Troy and the aftermath of war.

This paper seeks to examine the twin sacrifices of Iphigenia, Princess of Mycenae, and Polyxena, Princess of Troy at the beginning and end of the Trojan War, respectively. While the instances of executions do not originally appear in the Homeric epics, **Nooter, S. (2011)**, fittingly writes that they are an “essential part of his portrayal in tragedy”.

The paper studies a set of evidence in relation to the ancient Greek myth of the Trojan War. Representations of this mythological story appear in literary media during antiquity, of which these literary sources have been studied to highlight the lives of the girls themselves – in order to provide a better background to the instances of sacrifice at Aulis and at Troy, and the parallels between them.

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## 2. Review of Literature

This research paper aims at studying the parallels between the two virgin sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena, during the course of the legendary Trojan War in Late Bronze Age Greece.

To effectively understand and discern how the two instances show similarities, it is imperative to first examine the various retellings and versions of the original myth.

### IPHIGENIA

**Ovid** writes that after the Greeks gathered at Aulis, they were wind - bound for days on account of unfavourable weather conditions. The great king Agamemnon was informed by his seer Calchas that the goddess Artemis had been gravely offended, and demanded a sacrifice – the daughter of the king himself, the Mycenaean princess Iphigenia. It is said that Agamemnon initially refused, but was forced to concede, and agreed to summon Iphigenia under the ruse of her marriage to Achilles.

He states that Iphigenia understood the intention of the rite only when she saw the sacrificial altar where she was to be slain, surrounded by weeping attendants. **Ovid** writes that she never forgot who she was, and said, “Take my noble blood and delay no longer. I am prepared. All you need to do is bury your sword in my throat or my breast. ”

**Suaria, T. (2018)**, writes that the seer Calchas understood that the gods were indicating the Greeks’ inevitable victory over Troy, but feared that in exchange for glory, the goddess Artemis would demand a sacrifice of her own “one without law, without feast”. From the outset, Iphigenia’s sacrifice, though demanded by the gods themselves, is seen as a “crime against the laws of men and gods.”

**Hughes, B. (2007)**, in her book ‘*Helen of Troy: The Story Behind the Most Beautiful Woman in the World*’, notes that the story of Iphigenia’s sacrifice deals with fundamental issues of the conflicts between of love and duty, ambition and humility, and of superstition and belief. She writes that Iphigenia was sacrificed seemingly to appease the goddess Artemis, but in actuality for “Greek honour, to ensure that men can fight for an emblem of beauty. ”

### POLYXENA

**Smith, W. (1910)**, writes that Polyxena was the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. It was believed that she was beloved by Achilles, and was thus demanded by the

shade of Achilles after his death, to be sacrificed to him. When the Greeks still lingered at Troy before their *nostoi* (homecoming), Neoptolemus slew Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles as an offering to appease his father.

**Calder, W. M. III. (1966).** states that Polyxena was a hopeless victim of the Greeks. She was in no reasonable position to plead her case before Agamemnon, nor any of the other men, for she was a captive slave.

**Friesen, C. F. P. (2016).** notes that Euripides' Polyxena accepts her fate "with courage and gracefulness, desiring death over slavery". She states that Polyxena's willingness to offer herself as sacrifice, as well as the "distinctive manner" of her eventual death was admired throughout antiquity. Euripides' play can thus be said to be an example of the valiant acceptance of death.

**Skinner, M. B. (1976).** elucidates that after Achilles' death, his heroism had its reward, "the headless corpse of Polyxena, the *praeda* (spoil of war) earned by his achievements" was laid upon his grave mound as "a final witness to his prowess."

### 3. Parallels

Several parallels can be drawn between the two instances of sacrifice. The victims, Iphigenia and Polyxena had several striking similarities with regards to their social positions, the factors that led to their deaths, as well as the depictions of their final moments.

It is perhaps due to these very reasons, that **Eginton, F. (2012)** aptly writes that the "sacrifice of Iphigenia is typically seen as a bookend to Polyxena's sacrifice."

**Skinner, M. B. (1976).** in her book '*Iphigenia and Polyxena: A Lucretian Allusion in Catullus*' states that the two sacrifices show similarities as in each of their cases, Iphigenia and Polyxena accept fate, even in disastrous circumstances. They each display valour and control, "manifesting confidence in the essential rightness of her choice".

**Calder, W. M. III. (1966).** writes of the sacrifice of Polyxena, "A calm was preventing the sailing of the Greek ships and only the sacrifice could stop it. It was Sophocles who first transferred this Aulis - motif to the moment of departure and forced the Greeks to act under compulsion."

This shows a clear portrayal of how the factors that surround the death of Polyxena directly mirror the earlier sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis.

### AGAMEMNON'S VICTORY

Both myths heavily portray the Mycenaean king Agamemnon as a vital character in the story. This is primarily due to the entire expedition to Troy being led by Agamemnon himself, under the pretext of returning Helen to his brother Menelaus.

At Aulis, a weather phenomenon believed to be from the Gods has prevented the Greeks from sailing to Troy to commence the war. Agamemnon is told to sacrifice his own daughter, so that his own army may depart. Here, he takes on the role of primary antagonist due to the moral implications of his decision to execute his own daughter for the sake of his own eventual, assumed *kleos* (glory).

For Iphigenia, the victim, to have a close relationship of kinship with her executioner is not only jarring, but further highlights Agamemnon's unwavering greed and desire of an eventual victory – no matter the cost. **Lefteratou, A. (2014).** writes, "Agamemnon is presented as a man driven by a thirst for power; according to Clytemnestra the whole heroic expedition was based on a crime that served the private ambitions of the Greek generals."

In the case of Polyxena, the war is over. Troy has fallen, and Agamemnon has his victory. But now he desires his triumphant return to his kingdom, with all the gold of Troy and his new concubine, the princess Cassandra. A similar calm prevents his fleet from sailing back to Greece.

One Again, Agamemnon plays antagonist, and fulfils the demands of the sacrifice – even after his decade - long clash with Achilles during the hero's lifetime. Polyxena is executed, a final atrocity committed by Agamemnon during the course of his devastating Trojan expedition. **Skinner, M. B. (1976).** states, "The killing of Polyxena will occur immediately after the capture of the city as a death offering to the chief instrument of Agamemnon's victory."

### ACHILLES'S BRIDE

In the two myths, Achilles is another primary figure – even after his death. This could primarily be due to the fact that his heroism, which spanned decades, set him apart as a man to be bound to, and a spirit to be feared.

Iphigenia was summoned to the gathered fleet at Aulis under the false pretext of marriage to the already famed hero Achilles. Her mother, Clytemnestra, brings her from Mycenae under the assumption that a wedding is to be held. **Kovacs, D. (2003).** writes that Euripides tells us that Agamemnon ensures that the whole army keeps up the ruse, and that they do not reveal the truth ahead of time to Clytemnestra. **Lefteratou, A. (2014).** elucidates that instead of marrying Achilles, as believed, Iphigenia marries death on her sacrificial altar.

**Skinner, M. B. (1976).** notes, "For the honors paid Achilles after his death are no less a form of *religio* than the rites at Aulis."

After the sack of Troy, the Trojan women are held in captivity by the remainder of the Greek army. It is demanded by the *psukhe* (shade) of the dead hero Achilles, that the princess Polyxena become a sacrificial offering to appease his spirit, and allow the Greeks to sail home. Eventually, it is Achilles' own son that wields the final blow – Neoptolemus is Polyxena's executioner.

**Friesen, C. F. P. (2016.)** states that in Seneca's Troades, the procession to the sacrificial altar of Polyxena is depicted as if "in the manner of a wedding".

#### FEMININE PURITY & VIRGINITY

A crucial aspect of the two instances of sacrifice is that the two girls were young virgins. In this context, the term 'virgin' has less to do with its sexual connotations of the modern age, and more to do with the feminine purity and inexperience of the girls.

**Ovid** notes of Iphigenia, "The wrath of a virgin goddess must be appeased by a virgin's blood."

**Friesen, C. F. P. (2016.)** writes that both Ovid's and Euripides' depictions of Polyxena emphasise her gender, describing her as "a brave and miserable girl, and more than a female".

This serves to highlight the princesses' femininity, their lack of experience, and of all the time in their lives that they were so cruelly robbed of – for the glory of men.

#### ANIMAL MOTIFS

**Detienne, M. & Vernant, J. (1989.)** write of ritual sacrifice in Ancient Greece, that domesticated animals – not wild, were chosen for sacrifice. It was considered to be an honour, based on the criteria for which they were chosen. The sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena can be seen as being animalistic, due to the elevated status of honouring the sacrifice, while simultaneously meeting their tragic end.

**Loroux, N. (1987.)** writes in her book 'Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman', writes about the process involved when men sacrifice maidens. She states that the women are first "animalised", and are depicted in two crucial ways – either figuratively, as some form of domestic beast, or mythologically, wherein the girl is replaced by an actual beast at the moment of sacrifice.

In the case of Iphigenia, **Suaris, T. (2018.)** notes that Agamemnon gives the command that Iphigenia be lifted above the altar, as though she were a sacrificial lamb. He also commands that she be prevented from speaking. By taking away her voice, he further trivialises her as a human girl, and treats her as if she is a beast.

During the final execution of Polyxena, **Eginton, F. (2012.)** states that the way Neoptolemos sacrifices her by slicing through "the channels of her breath" further highlights the animalistic nature of her sacrifice.

**Skinner, M. B. (1976.)** states that technical terms of sacrifice, which were primarily utilised for animals, are applied to both girls. However, the animalising of the two princesses does nothing to take away from the true brutality of human sacrifice.

#### 4. Conclusion

**Hughes, B. (2007.)** writes of Iphigenia, "An innocent who has come to represent the inexorable brutality of war and of blind ambition." The same could be said of the fate of Polyxena. **Skinner, M. B. (1976.)** writes that the maidens are the victims of an "archaic superstition – and of an equally archaic concept of military glory".

The legendary Trojan War, which felled countless of mythology's greatest warriors, can be said to have begun and end with the death of two young girls. The Twin sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena has gone down in history and legend as two of the major atrocities of the war.

Iphigenia holds a vital role as the first true victim of the Trojan War. Polyxena, her mirror, holds the role of the last. The true brutality of the war is seen through the loss of innumerable lives, through strife and suffering, through grief and loss, though none as atrocious and devastating as the sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena.

In conclusion, one can state that the essence of the Trojan War can be felt not from the countless warriors of the Bronze Age of heroes, not from Achilles, nor Hector – but from the sacrifices of two innocent girls.

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