

STIJN TIMMERMANS, *Agamemnon and Iphigenia in the Divine Comedy: how Cicero determined Dante to differ from tradition*

Introduction

In the reception studies of classical antiquity, the mythological narrative of the Greek leader Agamemnon and the perils after his homecoming from Troy seem to be an often-recurring theme, to which complete plays, books and movies have been dedicated. Throughout the history of reception, the theme has appealed to the imagination time and again. Far less extensive, for it is rather an allusion than a complete reception, is this theme in the *Divine Comedy*, the *magnum opus* of the Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri (1265 – 1321), in which he dedicates, within the abundance of numerous cultural and literary allusions, a mere five verses of the 14.223 in total to this story, focused on the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia by her father (*Paradiso* 5.68-72). Other prominent characters from this mythological collection of stories, such as Electra, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, do not appear¹. Due to the lack of knowledge of the ancient Greek language and the limited availability of the Latin sources in his time², the question rises how Dante was able to take notion of this theme and on what sources his depiction in the *Divine Comedy* was based.

The consensus exists that the literary works by the Roman author and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 – 43 BCE) were at least accessible and that Dante was familiar with them³.

¹ We find the name Electra in *Inferno* 4.121. However, Dante does not indicate Agamemnon's daughter here, but the mother of Dardanus, the mythical founder of Troy (Glenn (1999), p 93). Orestes's name is mentioned in *Purgatorio* 13.31-33, but rather as a symbolical invocation of close friendship in general than as his concrete character (Van Dooren (1987), p 503).

² Ziolkowski (2014), pp. 47-52.

³ Di Giammarino (1996), p. 123.

One particular passage in Cicero's work, *On duties (De officiis)* 3.25, *caput* 95, is to be viewed in my opinion as a direct source for Dante. In this article I will examine if and in what way this is the case, and furthermore if Dante's representability for the classical tradition of the Agamemnon theme in its entirety comes into question because of this possible influence by one particular source. In order to answer these questions, I will oppose the five lines from the *Divine Comedy* to the most important sources in the tradition of Iphigenia's sacrifice in antiquity, focusing on the telling of the narrative, the story elements and especially the moralising depiction of the characters' deeds.

I have not been able to find former extensive research on the addressed topic and the secondary literature is rather scarce. The connection to this passage in Cicero was made earlier in commentaries, but in general these limits themselves to a mere interpretation of the five lines, only to identify the event as indeed the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aulis⁴. In light of this, I particularly make use of the primary Greek and Latin sources about Iphigenia's sacrifice and studies about Dante's use of the classical authors and languages in general. For the text edition and notes on the *Divine Comedy* I used Van Dooren (1987) and Fallani, Maggi & Zennaro (1993). For Dante's dealing with the classical sources Di Giammarino (1996) and Ziolkowski (2014) were very useful.

Dante's account of Iphigenia's sacrifice

As mentioned above, we find Dante's allusion to the sacrifice of Iphigenia in *Paradiso* 5.68-72. The context in which we must position these lines is the following. The protagonist Dante finds himself accompanied by Beatrice in the first celestial sphere, that of the Moon. This is described as the place where the 'failing spirits' wander, people who made a vow during their lifetime but were not able to keep it due to an act of violence by someone else. In response to conversations with Piccarda Donati and empress Constantina (*Par.* 3.34-123) three questions arise to Dante, which he presents to Beatrice. The third one is Dante's contemplation whether these people, who could not keep their vow, can make this up by

⁴ Van Dooren (1987), p. 541; Fallani, Maggi & Zennaro (1993), p. 464.

Some remarks ought to be made in terms of the interpretation of the lines. Although we tend to connect these lines immediately to the myth as we all know it, it is important to stress that the brevity of the allusion implies the omission of several elements. It is not stated where the sacrifice takes place, but Aulis is an obvious choice since the canonical versions of the myth situate the sacrifice there. Furthermore, we also do not read to which deity it was made, but it is agreed in all classical accounts that this is Artemis/Diana. In my opinion, only four parts of a possible interpretation can be stated with certainty. First, the whole event as it happened was the result of a vow by Agamemnon. Beatrice names his vow as an example of a short-sighted one, so the existence of this vow before the sacrifice is not in doubt. Second, we read an apparent value judgement. The vow itself is thus depicted as short-sighted and a clear disapproval of Agamemnon's deed is uttered by the words *così stolto* and the description of the grieving reaction of *i folli e i savi* (which means everyone) who heard about it. Third, it is sure that Iphigenia is portrayed as a victim here (it is not said explicitly that she dies) and that this is the case because of her *bel volto*. Iphigenia's beauty must be seen as the reason why she is sacrificed. Fourth, we read of a *così fatto colto*, a rite that is to be seen as a sacrificial ritual. These are the things we know and that can help identifying the source Dante used in his perception of the mythological narrative. With these four elements in mind, I will outline the literary tradition in both Greek and Roman antiquity of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, in order to demonstrate which versions are to be included and excluded as the possible sources for Dante's five verses. Despite the fact that Dante probably did not read it directly, the Greek literature is included in this overview, since it is the fundament of the myth and it might have influenced Dante nevertheless via translations or other adaptations by Roman authors.

Iphigenia's sacrifice in Greek and Roman literature

In Homer, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Iphigenia's sacrifice is not mentioned at all. The most extensive account on the theme is the tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis* by the Greek author Euripides (c. 480 – 406 BCE). In the later tradition, we merely find short allusions or

summaries of the tale. The different descriptions of the sacrifice by several authors in general agree on the following: Iphigenia was sacrificed by her father Agamemnon to the goddess Artemis/Diana, whose wrath had resulted in adverse winds that kept the Greek fleet in Aulis. When it comes to the preceding events causing the need for the sacrifice, different versions are to be distinguished within Greek and Roman literature.

In Sophocles' (496 – 406 BCE) *Electra* we read that Elektra tells how Agamemnon landed in Aulis and went hunting in a forest that was consecrated to Artemis. He killed a deer that was sacred to her and in addition boasted that he was a better hunter than the goddess (πατήρ ποθ' ούμός, ὡς ἐγὼ κλύω, θεᾶς παίζων κατ' ἄλσος ἐξεκίνησεν ποδοῖν στικτὸν κεράστην ἔλαφον, οὗ κατὰ σφαγὰς ἐκκομπάσας ἔπος τι τυγχάνει βαλῶν)⁹. These two insults caused the rage of Artemis, who demanded the sacrifice of his daughter and refused to send favourable winds for the Greeks to sail from Aulis to Troy until this sacrifice had been performed. Elektra adds that the sacrifice was necessary for the voyage but happened against Agamemnon's will. According to the prose summary in Proclus' (second century) chrestomathy, also the *Cypria* agreed with this tale. The same two insults are mentioned (Ἀγαμέμνων ἐπὶ θήρας βαλῶν ἔλαφον ὑπερβάλλειν ἔφησε καὶ τὴν Ἄρτεμιν)¹⁰. In Latin literature the same story is confirmed by Hyginus (second century) in his *Fables*, where Agamemnon is even called ignorant or unaware in his killing of the deer (*Agamemnon Dianae cervam occidit ignarus, unde dea irata flatus ventorum removit*)¹¹. This specific word *ignarus* seems to imply that he is not to blame in any way: the sacrifice of his daughter was the consequence of his error.

In a less common version Artemis' wrath is not caused by the killing of a deer, but by the non-fulfilment of a vow Agamemnon once made. This agrees with Dante's description. Although Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis* deals extensively with the sacrifice to

⁹ Sophocles, *Electra* 566-569 (My father, as I heard, once caused a dappled, horned deer to escape by his footfall while hunting in the sacred grove of the goddess, about the slaughter of which he chanced to make a certain boast).

¹⁰ *Cypria argumentum* 8 (After he had killed a deer while hunting, Agamemnon said to surpass even Artemis).

¹¹ Hyginus, *Fables* 261 (The ignorant/unaware Agamemnon killed Diana's deer, causing the furious goddess to remove the blowing of the winds).

Artemis, the cause of her wrath is not expressed. We find the first attestation of this version in his *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In the beginning of the tragedy, Iphigenia tells the audience that the Greek fleet was not able to leave Aulis due to the lack of right winds. She tells how the seer Calchas exhorted Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter:

ὦ τῆσδ' ἀνάσσων Ἑλλάδος στρατηγίας,
 Ἀγάμεμνον, οὐ μὴ ναῦς ἀφορμίσῃς χθονὸς
 πρὶν ἂν κόρην σὴν Ἰφιγένειαν Ἄρτεμις
 λάβῃ σφαγεῖσσαν· ὅ τι γὰρ ἐνιαυτὸς τέκοι 20
 κάλλιστον, ἠϋξω φωσφόρω θύσειν θεᾶ.
 παῖδ' οὖν ἐν οἴκοις σὴ Κλυταιμῆστρα δάμαρ
 τίκτει— τὸ καλλιστεῖον εἰς ἔμ' ἀναφέρων—
 ἦν χρή σε θῦσαι¹².

Apparently, in this version Artemis' wrath has been caused by the non-fulfilment of a vow by Agamemnon. He vowed to sacrifice the fairest thing that the year brought forth to Artemis, which is his daughter Iphigenia. It is therefore plausible that the vow was made in the year that Iphigenia was born. This undoubtedly must be the vow Dante speaks about. The same vow appears in Cicero's *On duties* 3.25, *caput* 95, when he speaks of the preferable behaviours concerning deals and promises. He states that these may be considered as non-binding when: someone's life or health is at stake, when someone's reputation is at stake or when it is not opportune for the one to whom the deal or promise has been made. Serving as an example for that third category, he writes:

¹² Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 17-24 ('Oh Agamemnon, lord of this high command of Greece, you will certainly not unmoor your ships from the land until Artemis receives your daughter Iphigenia as a slaughter. For you vowed to sacrifice the fairest thing the year brought forth to the light-bearing goddess. Your wife Clytaemnestra indeed bore a child in your house,' he said, calling me the fairest, 'and you must sacrifice her').

*Quid, quod Agamemnon cum devovisset Dianae, quod in suo regno pulcherrimum natum esset illo anno, immolavit Iphigeniam, qua nihil erat eo quidem anno natum pulchrius? Promissum potius non faciendum quam tam taetrum facinus admittendum fuit*¹³.

The words *tam taetrum facinus* do not leave any doubt about it: Cicero firmly disapproves the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon. Apart from this disapproval, Cicero completely agrees with Euripides. A slightly different version, because it combines the two variants, is known to us via Apollodorus (first/second century). He tells in his *Epitome* that not Agamemnon, but his father Atreus had made a vow to Artemis to sacrifice the finest of his flocks, but that he broke it (ὁ δὲ Ἀτρεὺς εὐξάμενός ποτε τῶν αὐτοῦ ποιμνίων, ὅπερ ἂν κάλλιστον γένηται, τοῦτο θῦσαι Ἀρτέμιδι, λέγουσιν ἄρονος φανείσης χρυσοῦς ὅτι κατημέλησε τῆς εὐχῆς)¹⁴. It is for this reason and for the fact that Agamemnon claimed to be a better hunter than Artemis after the killing of a deer, that the goddess wants Iphigenia to be sacrificed to her (διὰ τὸ μηνίειν τὴν θεὸν τῷ Ἀγαμέμνονι, ὅτι τε βαλὼν ἔλαφον εἶπεν: οὐδὲ ἡ Ἄρτεμις, καὶ ὅτι Ἀτρεὺς οὐκ ἔθυσεν αὐτῇ τὴν χρυσοῦν ἄρνα)¹⁵.

Five other short depictions do not mention the reason for Artemis/Diana's wrath. In the tragedy *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus (c. 525 – 456 BCE) mentions the sacrifice several times in the parados by the chorus and makes Clytaemnestra blame Agamemnon for it after she has killed him (ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλάτην ἐμοὶ ὤδιν', ἐπωδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων)¹⁶. Ovid (43 BCE – 17 CE) tells in the beginning of the twelfth book of his *Metamorphoses* how the Greek fleet, on its way to Troy to take back Helen, was stranded in Aulis due to the

¹³ Cicero, *On duties* 3.25, *caput* 95 (What about the fact that Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia, when he had promised to sacrifice to Diana what was born most beautiful in his kingdom that year, then whom nothing more beautiful was born that year? It was better not to fulfil the promise than to allow such a heinous crime).

¹⁴ Apollodorus, *Epitome* 2.10 (They say that Atreus, after he once vowed to sacrifice to Artemis what was born as the most beautiful of his flocks, neglected to perform his vow after a golden lamb had appeared).

¹⁵ Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.21 (Because of the fact that the goddess was angry with Agamemnon, both because, after shooting her deer, he said, 'Artemis could not do it better' and because Atreus did not sacrifice the golden lamb to her).

¹⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1417-1418 (He sacrificed his child, my dearest offspring, as a spell over the Thracian winds).

boisterous winds. After an unsuccessful sacrifice to Jupiter, the winds remained hostile and many of the Greeks believed that Neptune tried to spare Troy. It is the seer Calchas who argues that Iphigenia must be sacrificed (*nec enim nescitve tacetve sanguine virgineo placandam virginis iram esse deae*)¹⁷, but a reason why is not provided. However, in the following Ovid tells that Diana replaced Iphigenia with a deer on the altar. This might imply the killing of Diana's deer as the reason of her anger as well. Prominent is the absence of any kind of vow by Agamemnon. Calchas simply received an omen that a not specified girl had to be sacrificed to Diana and Agamemnon, out of responsibility and leadership, offered his daughter. Virgil (70 – 19 BCE) makes a very short remark of two verses in his *Aeneid* that reminds the reader of the mythological event. Aeneas tells how Sinon quoted the oracle of Apollo in his mendacious story to the Trojans, which states that the winds were appeased by the blood of a girl when the Greeks first came to Troy (*sanguine placastis ventos et virgine caesa, cum primum Iliacas, Danai, venistis ad oras*)¹⁸. Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE) makes Clytaemnestra remind her daughter's sacrifice in his tragedy *Agamemnon* (*lustrale classi Doricae peperit caput; cruore ventos emimus, bellum nece*)¹⁹. A negative undertone is likely to be seen, since Clytaemnestra is the speaking character and she names the sacrifice as one of the reasons for the murder of her husband. The Christian philosopher Boethius (c. 480 – 525), at last, mentions the sacrifice shortly in his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*, when he tells how Agamemnon bought the winds with the blood of his daughter's throat (*ille dum Graiae dare vela classi optat et ventos redimit cruore, exiit patrem miserumque tristis foederat natae iugulum sacerdos*)²⁰. Also, here the reason for Diana to be angry is unknown. The words *exiit patrem* seem to contain a moral judgement.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 12.27-29 (For neither did he not know, nor did he conceal that the wrath of the virgin goddess had to be appeased with the blood of a virgin).

¹⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.116-117 (You appeased the winds with blood and a killed virgin, when you, Greeks, first came to the Trojan shores).

¹⁹ Seneca, *Agamemnon* 163; 170 (I bore a lustral sacrifice for the Greek fleet; we bought the winds with blood and the war with murder).

²⁰ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* 4.7.4-7 (When he wished to give sails to the Greek fleet and bought the winds with blood, he put of the father and as a priest made an agreement of the unhappy throat of his sad daughter).

Cicero as Dante's source

As stated above, Dante's allusion consists at least of four elements that can be considered certain and that may link the allusion to his used source. First, the sacrifice happened because of the non-fulfilment of Agamemnon's vow, which is characterised as short-sighted. In Greek and Latin literature, we find this vow in the depictions of Euripides and Cicero. Hyginus attributes it to Atreus and Sophocles and the *Cypria* differ from it since they mention the killing of Artemis's deer as the cause of her anger. Second, Dante conveys an apparent value judgement. This only is the case in Cicero's version, when he expressly speaks of a *taetrum facinus* that could better have been prevented by breaking the vow. The third and fourth element, the portrayal of Iphigenia as a victim because of her beauty and the sacrificial ritual, which are also present in the other discussed sources, can both be observed in Cicero's words *immolavit Iphigeniam, qua nihil erat eo quidem anno natum pulchrius*. Due to the similarity of the four elements in both Cicero and Dante, it is convincing enough to conclude that Cicero's *On duties* 3.25 has been Dante's source for the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon.

In addition, we have seen several sources that do not mention the reason for Artemis/Diana's anger. The treatment of the story in these works from Roman literature limit themselves to short allusions, comparable to the way Dante used the theme. Dante's knowledge of Virgil's *Aeneid* is evident, to be deduced already from his choice to make Virgil his guide through hell and from his remark *vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume*²¹. It is certain that Dante was familiar with Virgil's allusion to Iphigenia. The fact that the allusion is so short and so many details are not mentioned results in a simplified version of the tale. This is the same in the allusions by Ovid, Seneca, and Boethius. What is more, Di Giammarino notices that Dante knew all these authors²². The

²¹ Dante, *Divine Comedy Inf.* 1.83-84 (May the long study and the great love that made me search your volume serve me).

²² Di Giammarino (1996), pp. 122-124.

benefit of these allusions without the goddess's cause of wrath, is that they all can be combined with Cicero without any contradictions in the narrative. Therefore, it is plausible that Dante's idea of the sacrifice, which he extracted from Cicero, was confirmed for him by his reading of Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Boethius. It is however possible that these four authors did in fact not agree with Euripides and Cicero, but rather with Sophocles, the *Cypria* and Hyginus that Agamemnon killed Diana's deer. We cannot tell with certainty since they do not explicitly mention it.

Important to stress as well, is the fact that Dante has also copied the disapproval of Agamemnon's deed from Cicero. The rejection of his vow and/or the sacrifice is an element that is not present in the *Cypria*, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, Hyginus and Apollodorus. Only Boethius shows a bit of the same judgement, perhaps rationalising from the same Christian moral standards. Moreover, in most sources it is shown that Agamemnon had no intention to offend the goddess and only sacrificed his daughter after much resistance. This acquisition of moral (dis)approvals from Cicero is not an unfamiliar habit of Dante, as it was a common practice of classical studies in Dante's time. Di Giammarino states: «Tra i classici che compaiono nell'opera dantesca Cicerone non subisce trasfigurazioni allegoriche, ma viene assunto come maestro di vita morale e perfetto modello nella formulazione di specifiche questioni» and «Il pensiero ciceroniano è utilizzato da Dante per approfondire due concetti fondamentali della sua meditazione sull'uomo e sulla storia: il bene e la virtù»²³. This is the case here as well since Dante has followed Cicero in his moral rejection of Agamemnon's deed to sacrifice his daughter.

Conclusion

These two elements, the vow as a reason for the wrath and the disapproval of Agamemnon, are convincing enough to state that Dante derived his knowledge about the sacrifice of Iphigenia from Cicero's *On duties* 3.25. All in all, two important remarks ought

²³ Di Giammarino (1996), p. 121; p. 126.

to be made in terms of Dante's representability for the classical tradition of Iphigenia's sacrifice. He aligns himself with only one reason why Artemis/Diana demanded Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter, while at least two reasons were generally known and respected throughout classical literature. Of course, it is possible that Dante knew them both, perhaps from other sources (such as Sophocles) in a Latin translation. But in that case, he picked one: after all, the tale had to be in line with the moralising message he wanted to convey in *Paradiso* 5, which is to not act short-sightedly in the making of vows (perhaps Agamemnon functioned as an archetype to admonish the people in Italy or the Church). It is also plausible that Dante merely knew the one he picked. The killing of the deer by Agamemnon is mostly told in the Greek sources and most Latin sources do not mention the reason at all. Dante came into contact with the theme in his studying of Cicero's *On duties* 3.25. The reading of Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Boethius may then have confirmed what he read in Cicero. Dante's account voices at least Euripides's and Cicero's versions but is not representable for the entire classical tradition of the theme.

What is more, Dante took over the disapproval of Agamemnon's deed (*così stolto*) from Cicero (*promissum potius non faciendum quam tam taetrum facinus admittendum fuit*), which was a common way of reading Cicero, and used this idea to reject the idea of acting short-sightedly in the making of a vow. This disapproval is certainly not openly present in all versions of the tale in the primary sources. Due to Dante's incorporation of these two elements in the allusion in the *Divine Comedy*, it can be concluded that the reading of Cicero's account of Iphigenia's sacrifice has incited Dante to differ slightly from the classical tradition. This creates space for further research. It may be interesting to find out whether Dante's allusion has in its turn functioned as a model for other literary receptions of the theme, by his contemporaries or later authors in the tradition. After all, Dante's works remain to be of inestimable value.

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In this short paper it is argued that Cicero's De officiis 3.25 (caput 95) has been the primary source for Dante's depiction of the sacrifice of Iphigenia in the Divine Comedy (Par. 5.68-72). By reading Cicero, Dante came into contact with the narrative that Artemis/Diana demanded the sacrifice due to the vow Agamemnon had made earlier to sacrifice the most beautiful thing the year would bring forth. Agamemnon's vow that led to the sacrifice is mentioned in both sources and Dante may have find the confirmation of this tale in Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Boethius. Dante took over both Cicero's reason for Artemis/Diana's wrath and his moral disapproval of Agamemnon's deeds to convey in Paradiso 5 the rejection of short-sightedness in the making of vows. By doing so, Dante made an allusion that is not fully representable for the entire classical tradition of the tale.

Keywords: Agamemnon; Cicero; Dante; reception of antiquity; sacrifice of Iphigenia.