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Aporia and action in Euripides' Iphigeneia at Aulis

Tragedy, Aristotle tells us, is a *mimēsis* of a *praxis*. Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* not only imitates an action: it is an exploration of the very possibility of action, both dramatic and political. Produced posthumously in the Spring of 405 BCE, the play is structured by *aporia*, a paralysis of political will that also paralyzes the plot and threatens to unwrite reality itself. The play attempts to loosen this bind by rooting political decision in the individual will of an autonomous agent, first Agamemnon, then Iphigeneia. But this process fails: the play's many and notorious changes of mind identify decision as the political act *par excellence*, but also represent the moment of decision as a madness (in Kierkegaard's phrase), as the agent, far from generating his or her own act, is subsumed and obliterated by it. The dramatic *aporia* resolved by the character's choice is merely shifted to that choice itself, which exposes the mysterious gap between *praxis* and *prattōn*. Moreover, to the extent that the play succeeds in suturing action to an agent, that individual agent – simultaneously savior and scapegoat – effaces the collective deliberation of democratic politics: real political agency is replaced by the fantasy of a super-subject who will act on behalf of and in place of the *demos*. Staging *praxis* as a problem, the play's *mimēsis* becomes a meditation on the failure of political agency and of democratic politics.