

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Iphigenia

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

'Iphigenia' is the beginning of a play by Sylvia Townsend Warner. The typescript, held in the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive at the Dorset History Centre in Dorchester, is dated 1947 and comprises seven typed pages. The play is set in a villa in the Azores in 1947, where a group of Nazi soldiers, thinking they are isolated from the rest of the world by an electric barrier, pass the time of day, listen to propaganda on the wireless and speculate about the history of the Jews.

Keywords Nazism; Jews; anti-Semitism; theatre of the absurd

Iphigenia

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Editorial note: 'Iphigenia' is the beginning of a play by Warner. The typescript is dated 1947 and comprises seven pages.

1947. A beach in the Azores. Background of lemon trees, palms, bougainvillea, etc. centre back, steps leading to a very coquettish villa, painted pale pink. Its entrance, trimmed with pink geraniums in fancy pots, is guarded by four sentries. Swastika flags. Soldiers are sitting around on the beach. Some are playing cards, dominoes, others sucking lemons. One reads. One is polishing his nails. The beach is untidy, despite litter baskets and notices.

1st SOLDIER (*staring to footlights, counting slowly*). One hundred and eighty one. One hundred and eighty two. One hundred and eighty three. One hundred and eighty four. One hundred and eighty –

2nd SOLDIER (*staring at watch*). Time! Three o'clock precisely.

3rd SOLDIER. What? Hell. My watch is losing again.

2nd SOLDIER. I shouldn't fuss about that. Lose or gain, what's the difference?

3rd SOLDIER. Yes, but look here. If my watch loses, then time goes slower, doesn't it? Goes slower by me, I mean. *I* don't want time going any slower. It goes slow enough anyhow on this damned island.

4th SOLDIER. On the contrary, if your watch is losing, then time goes faster than you think.

3rd SOLDIER. I don't see that.

4th SOLDIER. I'll explain it more simply. Suppose your watch says 2.55 and the real time is three. You think it's still five minutes to three, don't you, going by your watch? Then you look at *my* watch and find it's three. What follows? You find you are five minutes behind, that is to say, you gain five minutes...

3rd SOLDIER. Gain? But my watch *loses*?

4th SOLDIER. I will explain it yet more simply. Suppose your watch ...

3rd SOLDIER. Oh stow it. Explain, explain, explain. Who wants all your explainings? What do you think you are? An intellectual?

4th SOLDIER. Blockhead!

3rd SOLDIER. Intellectual! Einstein! Jew!

1st SOLDIER. Go to hell all of you. You've made me lose count. Chatter chatter chatter. Now I can't remember where I left off when Kurt said three.

4th SOLDIER. But what does it lead to, counting the waves, what's the object?

1st SOLDIER. I want to know. Why shouldn't I? It interests me to know how many waves there are in an hour.

3rd SOLDIER. Why?

2nd SOLDIER. Why not? It's something to do, anyway. Here we are, and there are those bloody waves. If we've got to sit here staring them in the face [we] might as well count them as not. Got to pass the time somehow,

4th SOLDIER. Why not count the sands?

3rd SOLDIER. Abraham and Moses! All the little jew-kids like the sands of the seashore in number. That's what it's like in America. And here we sit and can't get at them.

1st SOLDIER (*resignedly*). Well, I'm going to count again. Got the time, Kurt?

2nd SOLDIER. 3.6. Go.

1st SOLDIER. One. Two. Three.

He counts under his breath up to ten. 2nd SOLDIER stares at watch. 3rd and 4th SOLDIERS sit gloomily listening. Talk begins in second group of SOLDIERS.

5th SOLDIER. But what do you suppose it is that keeps us here?

6th SOLDIER. Electric rays ... some sort of electric barrier. It stops planes. It stops ships. It stops submarines. It stops everything. Yes, do you know, if we had a gun that could shoot so far, when the shell reached the barrier it would stop dead in mid-air. Yes, and it even stops wireless.

5th SOLDIER. What? Do you mean they can't even hear our propaganda?

6th SOLDIER. Not a word. Not a word. There they sit, those Americans, inside their electric barrier like coffee in a thermos.

5th SOLDIER. And it goes right round?

6th SOLDIER. Right around those United States. From the Canadian border to Mexico. Up the Pacific coast-line to Yukon and the Arctic. You can't fly over it. You can't burrow under it. You can't break through it. I know I'm right. My cousin Heinrich is an orderly, and he heard his officer talking about it. And I'll tell you another thing, too. The fellow who invented it is a refugee. A Jew!

NAIL-POLISHING SOLDIER. Clever fellows, those Jews. Did you ever read the Bible?

5th SOLDIER. What bible?

NAIL-POLISHING SOLDIER. Oh, the Jewish bible, you know.

5th SOLDIER. I read a Jewish book? What do you take me for? I'm a German.

NAIL-POLISHER. Well, I've read it. I read lots of it when I was a kid. And it's full of stories of the tricks Jews have invented at one time and another. Once, when they were running away from a king of Egypt, he chased them to the river's edge. A big river, a deep river. And they stopped it.

6th SOLDIER. What do you mean? You can't stop a river.

NAIL-POLISHER. Oh yes, you can. They could, anyway. Probably one of these same electric contraptions. One end of the river reared up and the other ran on; and in between there was a gap and the Jews went over the river-bed dry-shod. Then when the pursuers came on they let the river loose again. Another time they were besieging a town, one of those old-fashioned walled towns. And they knocked down the walls with amplifiers. You know you can break a mirror by a noise if it's loud enough. This noise was loud enough to break fortifications. Another time, when they were fighting a battle, they magnified the heat of the sun till it burned up the enemy like ants under a burning-glass.

A SERGEANT has crossed stage behind him and stands listening. He goes on.

These Jews, I tell you. They're at the bottom of everything. Our fatherland will never be safe, all our victories and our glorious dead will be frustrated unless we can finish off Jewry.

3rd SOLDIER. Yes, that's what I say. Perish Judea! Chop them up. Burn them. Drown them in the cesspools.

SERGEANT. Stefanitz.

NAIL-POLISHER jumps up and salutes.

SERGEANT. Keep those damned bible-stories to yourself. We don't talk about Jews in our army. We deal with them.

NAIL-POLISHER salutes again. SERGEANT walks off.

2nd SOLDIER (*quietly*). Do you know what I think? I wish whoever it was who invented this barrier, Jew or not Jew, had stayed in the Reich. Then we could have protected our own country with this barrier, instead of spending all these years fighting.

A pause.

1st SOLDIER. Fifty one. Fifty two.

5th SOLDIER. Well, it looks now as though we'd spend the next seven years waiting. Waiting heaped up on this bloody island. I've fought, and now I've waited. Waiting's worse. Do you know, they carried off 350 more dead last night. Those inoculations are no use at all.

1st SOLDIER. Fifty three.

4th SOLDIER. It wasn't 350. It was 349.

3rd SOLDIER. That makes a difference, doesn't it? (*Mimicking.*) Let me. I will explain it yet more simply. One soldier less died of plague last night, that is to say, the list of the dead goes up.

1st SOLDIER. Fifty four. Fifty five.

A WIRELESS VOICE (*enormously amplified.*) Attention. Attention. Attention. This is our afternoon bulletin. In addition to normal patrol work our air-force this morning carried out reconnaissance flights in the direction of Key West. Valuable information as to the nature of certain obstacles was obtained, though not without losses. It is learned from a reliable source that the rioting continues in Chicago and New York, and has spread to many other cities. An epidemic of smallpox has broken out in Washington. Senators are in flight.

In the course of the last twenty four hours seventeen spies, natives of the Azores, have been shot.

The health and morale of our forces remains admirable.

Troops will now immediately reassemble in their respective parade grounds where they will hear a broadcast address on sanitation.

Hail.¹

1st SOLDIER. I shall never get these waves counted.

2nd SOLDIER. Another lot of poor devils smashed up on that barrier.

They go out. The stage is empty except for the sentries, and the NAIL-POLISHING SOLDIER, who dallies. Enter SERGEANT.

SERGEANT. Well?

NAIL-POLISHER. I can't see it. You might as well try to get a spontaneous demonstration from a field of turnips. What's more, I don't believe it's there. What's more, I don't believe it ever will be.

SERGEANT. But it's all over the place. They're all talking about it.

NAIL-POLISHER. They aren't. Believe me, they aren't.

SERGEANT. But I heard them, just now.

NAIL-POLISHER. No you didn't, you heard me. God help you, don't you know the difference between the noise of a vacuum cleaner and the noise of the man trying to sell it?

SERGEANT. Then you don't do it right, that's all.

NAIL-POLISHER (*peevishly*). I must say, I'd like to know exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. Am I noting signs of a widespread spontaneous movement among the troops or am I putting across Captain Rathenau's patent cure?

SERGEANT opens his mouth to answer, remains silent.

NAIL-POLISHER. Eh? Which?

SERGEANT. You've got your instructions, I suppose.

NAIL-POLISHER. Because if it's the first, then there's nothing doing. And if it's the second, then it's an impossibility. The history of the Nazi party teaches us that the deathless Hitler was able to sell an idea to the great German people. But you can't do it more than once in a century. The mind of the great German people is like the night-blooming aloe. It opens once in a hundred years.

The sentries clatter a salute. CAPTAIN RATHENAU and MAJOR BRILL come from the villa.

RATHENAU (to NAIL-POLISHER). Well, Schmoltz? Have you been – observing anything?

NAIL-POLISHER. Yes, sir. Certainly, I have been observing all day.

RATHENAU. Ah! And what have you gathered? Speak frankly. This is no time for formalities.

NAIL-POLISHER. I would say that the idea is gathering force, is taking hold. Naturally, it is bound to take time. They don't talk about it much. They don't allude to it very directly.

RATHENAU. You seem to be unlucky in your observations, then. I have had very different reports from others.

NAIL-POLISHER. No doubt it varies in different sections, different regiments.

RATHENAU. Observers may vary, too.

Dorset History Centre reference D/TWA/A32 (P/front right/6/24),
Dorset County Museum reference STW 2012.125.0885

Note

- 1 The typescript at first read 'Hail Hitler', but 'Hitler' has been crossed through with typed 'x's.