

Mythological Background to Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*

By Prof. Roberto Nickel

The plot of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* is based ultimately on the Greek tragedian Euripides' play, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which recounts how the Greek hero Orestes, shipwrecked on the shores of the Black Sea community of Tauris is unexpectedly reunited with his sister Iphigenia and how together they escape from the barbarous Taurians to return to Greece.

Iphigenia, Orestes, and many of the other characters in this story were well known to both Euripides' 5th century B.C. and Gluck's 18th century audience from their frequent representation in other myths, plays, sculpture, and painting. For many of us, however, in the 21st century they no longer readily call to mind the abundance of often complicated stories that attach to them. Therefore, what follows is a brief history of Greek mythology's most famous and most dysfunctional family.

Iphigenia and her brother Orestes are the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. They also have a sister who remains well known to opera lovers through her unforgettable appearances in Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Richard Strauss' opera named after her, *Electra*.

Agamemnon, the king of Argos and Mycenae, was the most powerful Greek king of his day. Together with his brother, Menelaus, the king of Sparta, they controlled much of the Greek world. Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, enjoyed a privilege no other mortal man could boast of – he was the son-in-law of Zeus, or as the Romans called him Jove or Jupiter. For Menelaus had married Zeus' only mortal daughter Helen.

When the Trojan prince, Paris, came to visit Sparta, he, like many before him, was smitten with Helen; on this occasion, however, Helen too was smitten; Paris was, after all, the most beautiful man of his day. When Paris left Sparta, Helen left with him. Her departure provoked an international incident, with Greek envoys going to Troy demanding the return of Helen. When the Trojans refused, a great army was mustered from all over the Greek world, led by Agamemnon.

The army gathered at Aulis, a town on the eastern coast of Greece, from which the armada was to set sail for Troy, on the coast of northwestern Turkey. This is the famous armada to which Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus refers when he sees Helen in the underworld: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium."

At Aulis, however, something happened that angered the goddess Artemis (Diana, to the Romans and to Gluck), and as a result of which she would not allow the winds to blow, effectively preventing the fleet from setting sail. Our sources give varying accounts of

what had occurred, but one common story is that Agamemnon, after killing a stag, boasted that he was a better hunter than the goddess of the hunt herself, Diana. Whatever the reason may have been, the goddess' anger had to be propitiated or Agamemnon would be humiliated and dishonoured, having gathered a vast army for nothing and having to leave Helen with the Trojans.

Luckily, perhaps, the prophet Calchas was able to offer a way to appease Diana's wrath. The goddess, Calchas said, demanded a life in return for a life. All wild animals fall under the protection of Diana; they may be hunted, but thanks must be given. In place of thanks, Agamemnon had made his foolish boast. Now Diana was demanding that he sacrifice a life that belonged to him, that of his eldest child, Iphigenia.

Torn between the equally strong demands of family and the heroic code of honour, Agamemnon chose the latter. Clytemnestra was tricked into bringing their daughter to Aulis, induced by the lie that there Agamemnon intended to marry her to the great Achilles. When Clytemnestra arrived, however, what she witnessed instead was the ritual murder, the sacrifice, of her daughter. The Greek tragedian Aeschylus describes how Iphigenia's hands and feet were bound and her mouth gagged so that she could not cry out, and how she continued to plead for mercy with her eyes as she was hoisted up onto the altar, her throat about to be slit by her own father.

Two different versions of what occurred next have come down to us. In one, Agamemnon does kill his daughter. But in the other, at the very last moment, Diana substitutes a stag and whisks Iphigenia away to the distant land of the Taurians, where she serves as her priestess. Obviously, this is the version that Euripides and Gluck are using. Significantly, however, those present at the sacrifice continued to believe that it really was Iphigenia who had been sacrificed.

Diana now allowed the winds to blow, and the Greeks sailed to Troy, where after 10 brutal years, Agamemnon finally conquered Troy, burned it to the ground, killing all the men and enslaving the women and children. Helen was restored to Menelaus, and they returned to Greece.

Clytemnestra, however, did not forget her daughter's murder at the hands of her father. For 10 years she waited for Agamemnon to return so that she could exact vengeance. On the day of his arrival, she greeted him warmly and opulently as a conquering hero, luring him, all unsuspecting, into the palace, where a bath awaited him. Once he was in the bath, disarmed and naked, she threw a net over him, and hacked him to death with an axe. In Aeschylus' tragedy, *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra describes her joy as she murders her husband: "spouting out a sharp jet of blood he struck me with a dark shower of gory dew, while I rejoiced no less than the crop rejoices in the Zeus-given rain."

Prior to Agamemnon's murder, Clytemnestra had sent the young Orestes to stay in a nearby kingdom, knowing that it would be a son's duty to avenge his father. After 8 years, Orestes, now grown up, does return, together with his good friend Pylades. In disguise and with the assistance of Electra, the two men gain entry into the palace, where Orestes murders his mother Clytemnestra.

Orestes now falls prey to the Furies (in Greek, the Erinyes, also known as the Eumenides). These are the ancient goddesses of vengeance, who are particularly concerned with violence in the family. When the blood of a family member is spilled by another family member, the Furies come in pursuit, slowly driving the guilty party mad with fear and eventually bringing about a slow and gruesome death. Many people ask why Agamemnon was not punished in this way after he murdered his own daughter. The tragedian Aeschylus perhaps provides the answer, when he has Clytemnestra proclaim that she herself is the Fury come to take vengeance for her daughter's murder. Her statement echoes the Greek belief that the next of kin were responsible for exacting vengeance. Just as Clytemnestra was responsible for avenging her daughter's murder, so Orestes was responsible now for avenging his father's murder. Orestes, however, is put in the position of avenging the murder of one parent by killing his other parent. His refusal to avenge his father's murder could well bring down upon him the anger of the Furies; his murder of his own mother most certainly will. And as soon as Orestes murders his mother, the Furies do come in pursuit.

Orestes leaves in flight, coming eventually to Athens, where Apollo and Athena (Minerva, to the Romans) arrange a trial – the first ever trial by jury. The jury is split evenly as to whether to convict or acquit Orestes. Athena/Minerva breaks the tie in favour of Orestes and acquittal. In the version of the myth that Euripides and Gluck follow, the Furies refuse to halt their pursuit of Orestes, who must now continue his

flight. Eventually he comes to Tauris, where he is reunited with the sister he presumes has been dead for almost two decades.

In *Iphigenie en Tauride*, many of the themes of the early part of the myth are reversed, and that reversal seems to bring about a resolution that involves the end of the Furies' pursuit. Just as Iphigenia had earlier been sacrificed by a family member, so now she almost, unwittingly of course, sacrifices a family member. Earlier it had been the male who sacrificed the female, and now it is the female who almost sacrifices the male. Where Agamemnon had had no pity for his own child, Iphigenia is filled with love for her brother and even risks her own life to help him. Through this mirroring of early events and by a sort of sympathetic magic, the violence that has consumed and driven apart this family comes to an end with the unexpected and loving reunion of brother and sister.

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