

The mythologies of Iphigenia

By Judith Fletcher

The virginal Iphigenia, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, king of Argos and commander of the Greek expedition against Troy, is one of the most appealing and enigmatic figures of Greek mythology. Gluck adapted his operatic version from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* a sophisticated melodrama produced around 412 BCE in Athens (technically a "tragedy" because of its structure and performance context). The definitive moment of Iphigenia's tale occurred a decade before the play begins when Agamemnon, compelled by divine injunction, sacrifices his daughter. The goddess Artemis demanded this offering (Gluck uses her Latin name, Diana), and different poets give different reasons for her harsh command. In some accounts Agamemnon kills the favorite stag of the goddess who then restrains the winds that would let his fleet sail to Troy. Euripides simply says that Agamemnon vowed to sacrifice his most beautiful possession to Artemis, and she requested his daughter. Taurian Iphigenia survives this sacrifice; she is plucked at the last moment from the altar of death by Artemis who substitutes a deer in her place and instates the maiden as a priestess assisting in human sacrifice in the barbaric land of Tauris. The maiden remains here for the duration of the Trojan War until her brother Orestes arrives with his companion Pylades. While Gluck makes an army of Greeks rescue the brother and sister, Euripides' version highlights the resourcefulness of bold Iphigenia who tricks the barbarian king Thoas into releasing the siblings.

There is an alternate version to this story: Iphigenia is not rescued, but dies, a helpless child victim slaughtered by her father like a beast. Euripides' predecessor Aeschylus narrates her poignant last moments in his magnificent tragic trilogy, *The Oresteia* produced in 458 BCE. In *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra avenges the death of her daughter by murdering her husband when he returns home victorious with his Trojan concubine Cassandra. The second play, the *Libation Bearers*, features the retaliatory murder of Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus by her son Orestes and his accomplice Pylades.

In the final installment of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, the vengeful Furies, fearful demons who seek retribution for the matricide, persecute Orestes. Although Apollo had demanded that Orestes kill his mother to redress her crime, the god cannot protect him from the onslaught of these vindictive fiends. He sends the young man to Athens where the goddess Athena institutes the first homicide court which votes by a narrow margin to acquit him. Athena persuades the offended Furies to take up residence in Athens and act as protective fertility spirits.

In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, however, there is a residual group of unappeased Furies who still haunt Orestes. In other words Euripides has revised the Aeschylean version or used an alternate narrative tradition. Indeed stories of the accursed family of Agamemnon and

especially of Orestes' matricide had been in circulation since Homer's *Odyssey*, composed some four hundred years earlier. Roughly one quarter of surviving Greek tragedy deals with some aspect of Agamemnon's family. Sophocles and Euripides each produced an *Electra* focusing on Iphigenia's surviving sister who abetted Orestes in the matricide. Euripides reworked the story again in his *Orestes* which depicts its eponymous hero as a mentally unstable political conspirator. His final play, which inspired Gluck's first French opera, returns to Iphigenia, taking us to the moments before her sacrifice and representing her as a brave patriot who dies willingly for her country. *Iphigenia at Aulis* was brilliantly adapted as an Oscar nominated film by Greek director Michael Cacoyanis (1977). It is a text that resists narrative closure, wavering between the story of the maiden's final rescue and her ultimate death. The substitution of the deer for Iphigenia is now only a story created to appease her mother Clytemnestra, and the audience must decide for itself whether her family will reunite at Tauris or destroy itself at Argos.

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