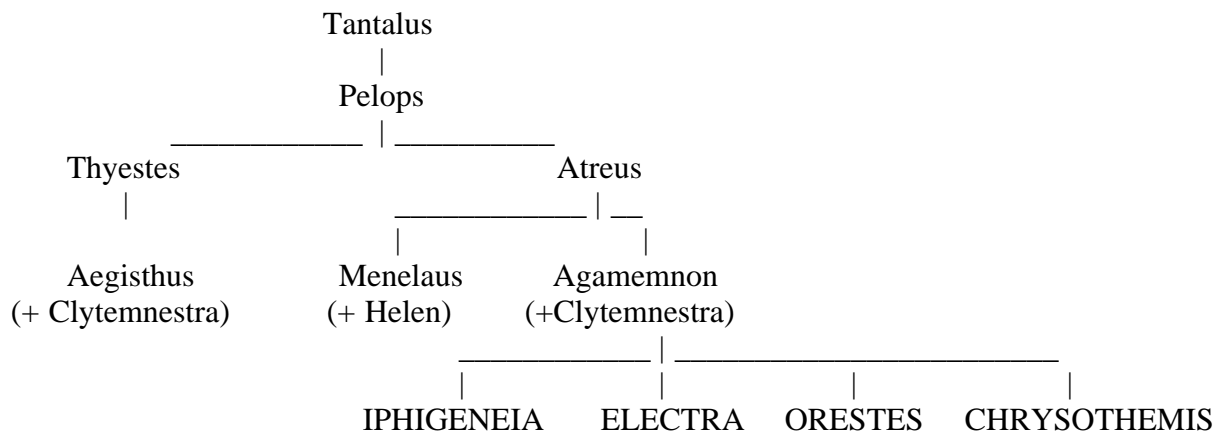


The House of Tantalus



That is the genealogy according to Aeschylus. The atrocities begin with Tantalus who slaughters his sons and offers them as a meal to the gods, his friends. Thyestes seduces Atreus' wife who in turn kills Thyestes' children and offers them as a meal to their father. Thyestes son Aegisthus kills him. Clytemnestra will not forgive her husband Agamemnon for having sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia (in reality Artemis saves her and takes her to Tauris) and, together with her lover Aegisthus, kills him upon his return from Troy. She kills Cassandra, Agamemnon's war booty and concubine, first. Orestes grows up among peasants, where his sister Electra had hidden him, returns home to kill Clytemnestra and her lover. The Furies torment him mercilessly. The oracle of Delphi advises him to go to Tauris and return the idol of Artemis. He finds his sister Iphigeneia as Artemis' priestess. King Thoas expects her to sacrifice the Greeks. That's where we begin.

Find additional material in Karl Kerényi, **Die Heroen der Griechen**.

Promise yourself to read the accounts by **Euripides** and **Aeschylus** and **Sophocles**, eventually.

Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) composed two operas based on the story of Iphigeneia: **Iphigénie en Aulide** (Paris, 1774) and **Iphigénie en Tauride** (Paris, 1779). **Glimmerglass Opera** near Cooperstown, NY, in association with the **New York City Opera**, had a splendid production of the latter in the summer of '97. The Greeks kill Thoas in Gluck's version which is based on Euripides.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) devotes an entire bloody opera to Iphigeneia's sister **Elektra**'s hatred of her mother Clytemnestra (Dresden, 1909). The libretto, based on the tragedy by Sophocles, is by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929). Elektra's much neglected sister **Chrysothemis** plays an important role in this version.

Carolyn C. Heilbrun, a respected scholar, offers what I believe to be an exceptionally silly reading of the text. But judge for yourself. "Method in Madness" in [Opera News](#), January 22, 1994. My **Letter to the Editor** appeared in a subsequent edition (orig. ms):

Dear Editor,

reading Carolyn Heilbrun's astonishing remarks on **ELEKTRA** (**Opera News** 1-22-94) one isn't quite sure whether she knows that this bloody family affair does not begin with the intended slaughter of Iphigenia (she is spared by Artemis), and does not end with Elektra's death after the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, or even with the trial of Orestes.

Agamemnon "tricks his daughter Iphigenia into being sacrificed to aid the faltering Greek army." More precisely and worse, he tricks Clytemnestra into bringing her daughter to the port city of Aulis where the Greek army is still stuck waiting for favorable sailing conditions.

"Orestes is ennobled by his act" (killing his mother). The Erinyes certainly do not think so. "Orestes is tried ... and pardoned." According to **Kerényi** the sources are not at all unanimous here. And in any case, his tribulations are far from over even after the Athenian court has spoken.

And why the condescension toward "the properly timorous Chrysothemis?" She bitterly resents Elektra's mad preoccupation with revenge and will have no part of it. She wants out. Among this ghastly clan that stretches back to Tantalus and whose members grow up to commit new atrocities to avenge older ones (if they are not slaughtered

and eaten as children) she is one who simply wants to be left alone to live her own life. Given the thrust of her argument, this sensible woman should have Heilbrun's standing ovation.

Note Iphigenie's often overlooked references to the fate of women. "Der Frauen Zustand ist beklagenswert" in her opening lines is not only a reflection of her own fate as a woman far from her kin and country. It is a pressing concern of Goethe's time; witness the equal rights provision of the French constitution and the proverbial "emancipated English woman." "Ich bin eine freie Engländerin," says Blondchen in Mozart's **Abduction** (Vienna, 1782), und rotze jedem, der mich zu etwas zwingen will." Osmin is aghast. "Ihr Engländer, seid ihr nicht Toren, ihr lasst euren Weibern den Willen!" Iphigenie's somber view of heroics, namely that men survive in heroic song and saga while their women survive in grief, finds a distant echo in Brecht's **Mother Courage** (Zurich, 1941) who is similarly unimpressed: "Ihr vergeht wie der Rauch! Und die Waerme geht auch / Denn es waermen uns nicht eure Taten!" Christa Wolf's **Kassandra** (1983) is informed by much the same sentiment.