IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS
by Euripides

Adapted, edited, and rendered into modern English
for the express purpose of dramatic performance
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Dramatis Personae

IPHIGENIA, daughter of Agamemnon
ORESTES, brother of Iphigenia
PYLADES, friend of Orestes
THOAS, King of the Taurians
HERDSMAN
MESSENGER
ATHENA
CHORUS of captive Greek women who serve Iphigenia

SCENE Before the temple of Artemis in Tauris.

(Iphigenia, dressed as a priestess, enters and stands before the altar.)

IPHIGENIA From Asia Pelops came to the shores of Greece;
His son was Atreus and from him came
Two greater sons, skilled in the arts of war.
The eldest, Agamemnon, rules Mycenae
While Menelaus holds the throne of Sparta.

For Helen’s sake they raised a mighty fleet
And set their sails for Troy. But Artemis,
Beloved sister of the god Apollo,
Sent vexing winds to wrestle with their sails
And strand them on the rocky shore of Aulis.

Eager to conquer Troy and so avenge
His brother’s bed, my father, Agamemnon,
Ordered Calchas, prophet of the host,
To seek the will of Zeus and to proclaim
The cause of their misfortune—and the cure.

“O King,” he spoke, “You must fulfill the vow
You made to Artemis: to offer up
The dearest treasure that the year would bring.
The daughter born to you and Clytemnestra—
*She* is the treasure you must sacrifice.”

I was and am that daughter—oh the pain,
That I should give my life to still the winds!
The treacherous Odysseus devised
The plot that brought me, innocent, to Aulis.

A messenger arrived with joyous news:
“*Iphigenia is to wed Achilles;*
Now dress her in her bridal gown and send
Her quick to Aulis.” So I went,
But the groom that waited for me at the altar
Was the sacrificial knife of Agamemnon.

But father did not kill me as he thought.
Artemis caught me up into the air
And left a deer to spill her blood for me.
Since then I serve the goddess at this altar,
Here in barbarian Tauris, far from home.

Thoas, the King of Tauris, is a savage
Who sacrifices any Greek who lands
Upon his shores. And I must say the blessing,
Though others carry out the bloody deed.

Last night I had a dream that frightened me.
I seemed to be transported to Mycenae,
To the room I slept in when I was a girl,
When suddenly an earthquake shook the palace,
And tore the roof and pillars to the ground.
Yet in the wreckage one lone pillar stood
That seemed to have the visage of a man.
At once I rose and washed the pillar clean
As I do here upon this bloody altar
To prepare the Greeks whom Thoas puts to death.

I fear the meaning of my dream is clear.
The pillar is Orestes, my dear brother,
The son of Agamemnon and his heir,
The last support of the house of Atreus.
And since all those whom I anoint with water
Are destined to be killed . . . my dear Orestes . . .
You must be dead as well. Where are my maids,
Poor captive Greeks whom Thoas gave to me?
With their assistance I shall mourn my brother.
(Iphigenia goes into the temple; a moment later, Orestes and Pylades enter.)

ORESTES I’m sure of it, Pylades; this is Tauris!

PYLADES If so, we must keep watch.

ORESTES Agreed, but look,  
The altar here is red with human blood,  
And here hang trophies taken from the victims.

PYLADES The workmanship is Greek . . . as is the blood!

ORESTES Apollo, will you never give me rest?  
You chose me to avenge my father’s murder  
By killing her who gave me birth. You let  
The vicious, snake-haired Furies, hated by  
The gods, pursue me as their prey, and drive.  
Me ever onward, over sea and land:  
A weary outcast exiled from the world.

And now you promise you will end my pain  
By sending me here to this barbaric land,  
Where shipwrecked Greeks are sacrificed upon  
The altar of your sister, Artemis.

PYLADES What promise did Apollo make to you?

ORESTES That if I find the statue of the goddess,  
Which men of Tauris claim fell from the sky,  
And take it with me safely back to Greece,  
That I will find an end to all my toils.

PYLADES Why then, Orestes, do you look so troubled?

ORESTES The walls are high, Pylades, and the temple  
Is guarded day and night by watchful eyes.  
If we are found this stone shall drink our blood.  
Shall we not flee?

PYLADES We must obey the god!  
Along the coast on which the Black Sea beats  
Are caves where we can hide till darkness falls.  
Under the cloak of night we can return  
And force the temple doors apart
ORESTES
They say
That Jason and his crew of Argonauts
Once braved this god-forsaken sea to find
The Golden Fleece. We too must trust the gods.
Our youth and strength shall help us win the prize.

(Exit Orestes and Pylades; a moment later Iphigenia and the Chorus enter.)

CHORUS
Virgin maidens we
To serve the virgin goddess
In the land of Greece we all were born
But now we make our home at the edge of the world.

Daughter of Agamemnon,
Who led the Greeks to Troy,
Why do you call us to this shrine?
Share with us your hidden grief and pain.

IPHIGENIA
Dreams in the night have told me
Orestes is no more:
O pour the milk and honeyed wine;
My only brother lies beneath the earth.

CHORUS
Together we shall mourn,
Stranded here in Asia
Far from the Greece we dearly love.
We fear, dear lady, that your house is cursed.

IPHIGENIA
Cursed and crushed by fate:
My father thinks me dead,
While I, alone and childless,
Must help a bloody king to kill my people.

CHORUS My lady, look, a herdsman fast approaches.

(Herdsman enters; he has been running and is out of breath.)

HERDSMAN Hail, child of Agamemnon and his queen.

IPHIGENIA Why do you look so pale? What have you seen?

HERDSMAN Two foreign youths have landed on our shore;
Prepare the altar for their sacrifice.

IPHIGENIA What country are they from?

HERDSMAN They are from Greece.

IPHIGENIA What are their names?

HERDSMAN The one is called Pylades.

IPHIGENIA And the other youth?

HERDSMAN We did not hear his name.

We found them where the water meets the cliffs
In a cave the sea had hollowed from the rock.

IPHIGENIA What cause could lure a herdsmen to the sea?

HERDSMAN To wash our cattle in the salty foam.

IPHIGENIA I sense there is some terror in your eyes.
Now tell me quickly how you captured them,
And why you look as if you’ve seen a god.

HERDSMAN When first we heard their voices in the cave,
We drew back to discuss our strategy.
But as we stood our watch upon the cliff,
One of the youths ran yelling from the cave.
He dashed himself upon the rocks, and tore
His hair, and cried aloud to his companion:

“Pylades, can’t you see the snakes that twist
About her head? And are her wings and claws
Not visible? She hungers for my blood!
A flood of fire issues from her throat!
I must escape!” But there was nothing there:
Only the cattle lowing on the sand.

The stranger grabbed his sword and in a rage
Swooped down upon our poor defenseless herd.
You’d think that they were demons straight from hell
The way that madman lunged and lashed at them.
The surging tide grew crimson with their blood.

At last the stranger dropped his sword and fell
Upon the sand. Seizing the chance we rushed
The beach and pelted him with stones. That’s when Pylades left the cave, and flung his cloak around his friend, and lifted high his sword. I would sooner fight a dragon than that man. Like something more than human he repelled each stone we threw, and drove us from the beach.

By then the stranger’s fit had passed, and he, with sword in hand, exhorted his companion: “Pylades, let us die, if die we must, but let us die as heroes.” Then they charged like men who welcome death. More herdsmen came to swell our ranks and fill the air with stones. But not a single stone could reach those men; I swear it, Priestess, not a single stone.

In the end exhaustion overtook them both. We used our stones to knock away their swords and brought them, bound in chains, before the king. He sends them now to you for preparation. Soon, Priestess, two Greek youths shall feel the knife along their throats. A few more Greeks like these and you shall be avenged for Aulis.

IPHIGENIA Well done! Go now and bring the strangers here to me.

(The Herdsman exits.)

IPHIGENIA Oh how my heart has changed. Before this day I pitied Greeks who landed on our shores and wept for those whose sacrificial rites I had to sing. But now that my Orestes no longer sees the sun, my heart has turned against my fellow Greeks. Let all of them receive a bloody death. I will not weep.

If only Menelaus or his Helen could crash their ship upon our eastern shore—there, my friends, would be another Aulis. How, father, could you dare to kill your daughter while all the women chanted marriage rites? Black Hades, not Achilles, was the groom you chose for me. A bridal drenched with blood!

O, fickle goddess, how can you be trusted?
You say the man who sheds another’s blood
Cannot come near your altar. Even those
Who touch a corpse are judged by you unclean.
And yet upon your altar you demand
The bloody sacrifice of living men.
Such things cannot be true. The Taurians,
Who take a savage joy in slaying men,
Project their lust for blood upon the gods.
I never will believe the gods do wrong!

(Iphigenia exits into temple.)

CHORUS
The lust and greed of men
Drives them to the sea;
They sail on ships for wealth and fame,
But all they bring is ruin, war, and death.

But if the sea would bring
The ship of Helen of Troy,
How would our lady’s heart be glad
To slay the cause of all her pain . . . and ours.

(Orestes and Pylades, bound in chains, are led in by a guard.)

Indeed these men are Greeks;
They make us pine for home:
For peaceful beds and simple joys,
Away from these barbaric rites of blood.

(Iphigenia returns from temple.)

IPHIGENIA These prisoners are sacred; loose their chains.

(The guard removes their chains and then exits.)

IPHIGENIA (aside) O most unhappy youths, what mother bore you?
And from what father did you get your names?
Perhaps you have a sister back in Greece
Who longs for your return, but shall not see it.
The gods are silent; destiny is dark.

(to Orestes and Pylades) Unhappy strangers, what has brought you here?
Alas, you nevermore shall see your homes.