

Greek and Roman Mythology

Ch13-1 The House of Atreus



授課老師：簡士捷 副教授

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Introduction

The ill-fated House of Atreus is one of the most famous families in mythology. Agamemnon, who led the Greeks against Troy, belonged to the House of Atreus.



All of Agamemnon's immediate family, his wife Clytemnestra, his children, Iphigenia, Orestes and Electra, were as well known as he was. His brother Menelaus was the husband of Helen, for whose sake the Trojan War was fought.

The cause of all the misfortunes could be traced back to an ancestor, a King of Lydia, Tantalus.



Tantalus and Niobe

Tantalus was the son of Zeus and honored by the gods beyond all the mortal children of Zeus.

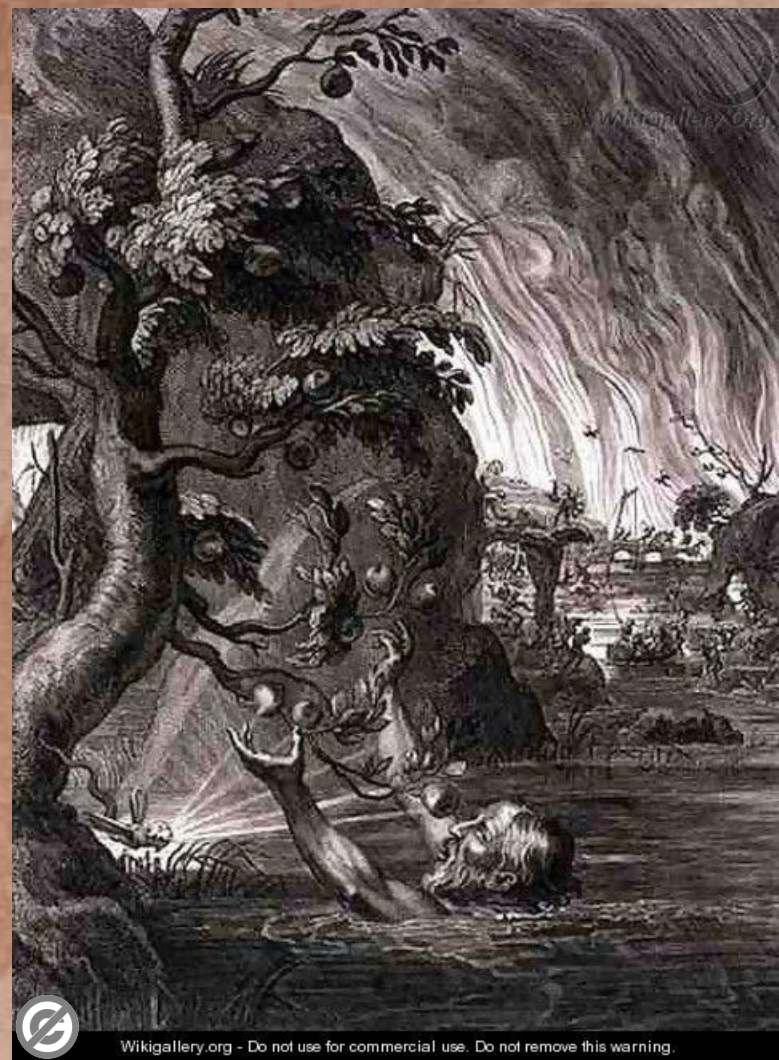


In return for their favor he acted so atrociously that no poet ever tried to explain his conduct. He had his only son Pelops killed, boiled in a big pot, and served to the gods.

The Olympians knew. They drew back from the horrible banquet and declare that they the criminal who had contrived the idea should be punished.



In the underworld, he was punished to be within reach of water he cannot drink, food he cannot eat. Thus he stood forever, his undying throat always athirst, his hunger in the midst of plenty never satisfied.



His son Pelops was restored to life by the gods, but they had to build a shoulder for him out of ivory for one of the goddesses, some say Demeter, some Thetis, inadvertently had eaten of the dish. Hence, when the boy's limbs were reassembled one shoulder was wanting.



Pelops was the only one of Tantalus' descendants not marked out by misfortune. Pelops killed the charioteer, Myrtilus, and Myrtilus cursed him as he died.

Some said that the misfortune of the House of Atreus came from Myrtilus' curse, but most writers said that the wickedness of Tantalus shadowed his descendants.



None of them suffered a worse doom than his daughter Niobe.

At first the gods had chosen her out for good luck as they had her brother, Pelops.



Niobe and her husband, Amphion, a son of Zeus's and an great musician, ruled in Thebes until she showed that the mad arrogance of Tantalus lived on in her.



She called upon the people of Thebes to worship her. “You burn incense to Leto, and what is she as compared to me? She had but two children, Apollo and Artemis. I have seven times as many. I am queen. She was a homeless wanderer until tiny Delos alone of all places on earth consented to receive her. I am happy, strong, great—too great for any, men or gods, to do me harm. Make your sacrifices to me in Leto’s temple, mine now, not hers.”

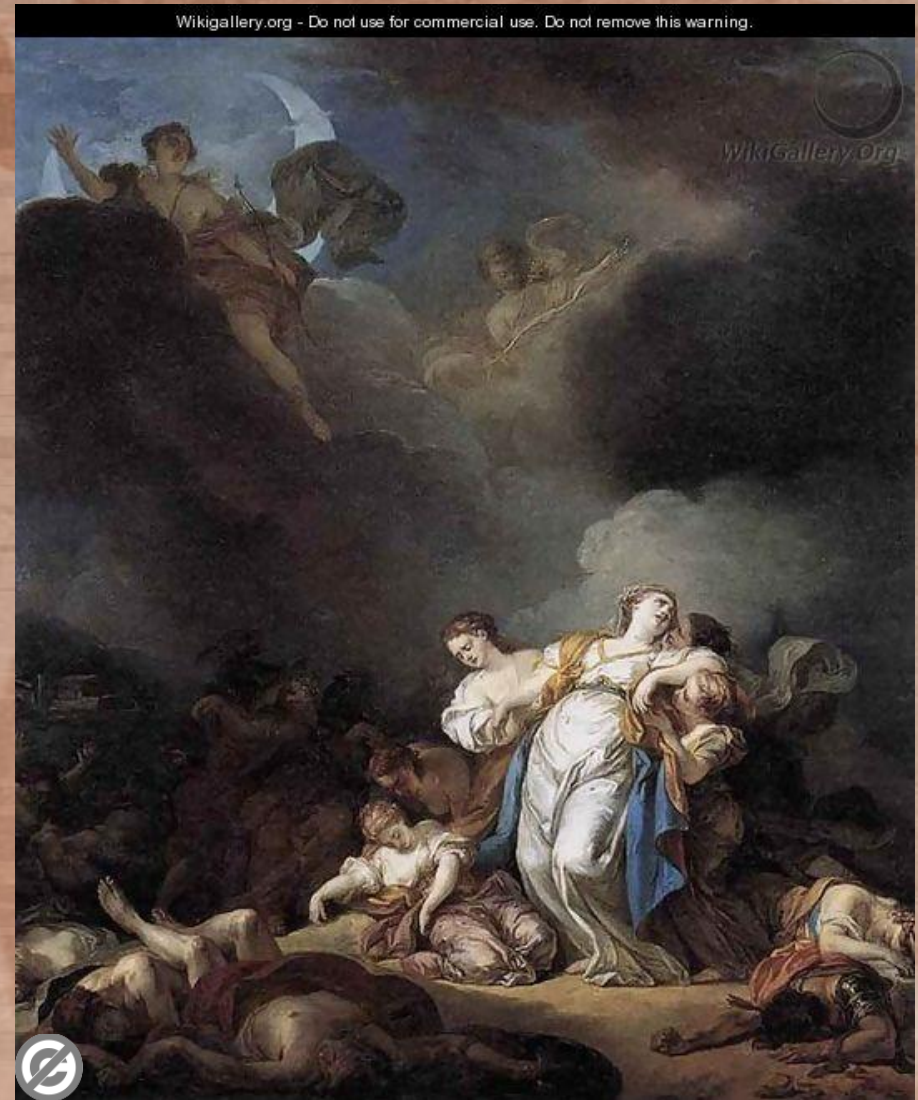


Source: Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes

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Apollo and Artemis fled swiftly to Thebes from Olympus, shooting with deadly aims they struck down all of Niobe's sons and daughters.



Niobe fell into great grief. She was changed into a stone which forever, night and day, was wet with tears.



Pelops' two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, inherited the wickedness in Pelops.

Thyestes fell in love with his brother's wife. Atreus found out and killed his brother's two children, boiling them to serve Thyestes. Atreus' children and his children's children suffered.



Agamemnon And His Children

The House of Atreus was first referred to in Iliad. In Odyssey, Odysseus also encountered the spirit of Agamemnon. The story was first told in this way: Agamemnon was killed by his wife's lover.



The two sons of Atreus, Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek forces in the Troy War, and Menelaus, the husband of Helen, ended their lives very differently.



After Troy fell, Agamemnon returned to his hometown. Ten years had passed since Iphigenia died, but the results of her death reached through to the present.



The queen Clytemnestra

did not keep faith with her husband who had killed her child;
she took a lover and everyone knew it.

The King dismounted, praying aloud, “O victory now mine,
be mine forever.” His wife went forward to welcome him.



Source: Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes

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Agamemnon pointed to the girl in the chariot. She was Cassandra, Priam's daughter, he told his wife that Cassandra was the Army's gift to him, the flower among all the captive women.



The crowd told Cassandra that it was where the son of Atreus lived. She cried out,
 “No! It is a house God hates, where men are killed and the floor is red with blood.”
 “I hear children crying.”
 “I will endure to die.” and moved into the palace.
 After Cassandra went into the gate, a cry rang out, the voice of a man in agony:” God! I am struck! My death blow—” and silence again.



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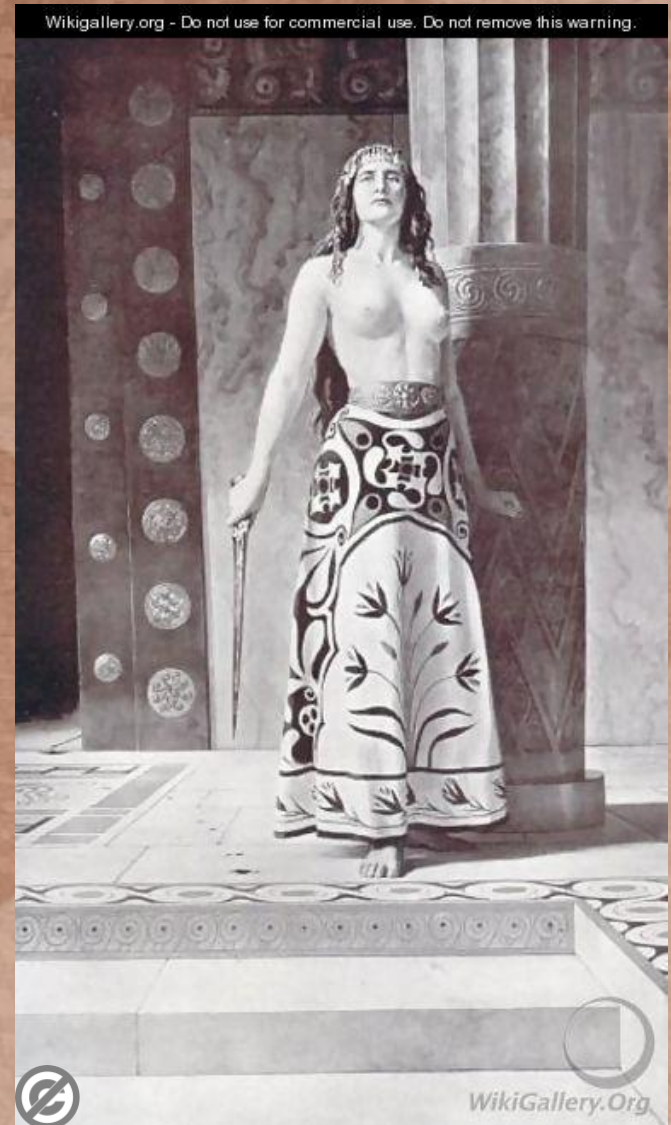


The door opened and on the threshold stood the Queen. She said: "Here lies my husband, struck down justly by my hand."



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Her lover followed her and stood beside her—

Aegisthus, the youngest child of Thyestes, born after that horrible feast. He had no quarrel with Agamemnon himself, but Atreus, Agamemnon's father was dead and vengeance could not get him. Therefore his son must pay the penalty for his father.



Iphigenia had been one of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's three children. The other two were a girl and a boy, Electra and Orestes.

Orestes was sent away to a trusted friend.



As Orestes grew up, he doubted if he should avenge his father and kill his mother. He must either be a traitor to his father or he must be the murderer of his mother.



He journeyed to Delphi to ask Apollo's oracle.

Apollo spoke to him:

*“Slay the two who slew,
Atone for death by death.
Shed blood for old blood shed.”*



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Orestes knew he must avenge his father and pay with his own ruin. He went back with his cousin and friend Pylades.



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One day, Orestes confronted his sister, Electra at his father's tomb. And she poured out to him all the love through the woeful years.



The three made their plans. They went to the palace, claiming to be the bearers of a message that Orestes had died. It would be a joyful news to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.



They were admitted and Electra waited.

A slave rushed out and screamed,

“Treason! Our master! Treason!”

“Orestes—alive—here.”



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Clytemnestra bade the slave bring her a battle-ax to fight for her life.

Orestes came through the doors, and his sword red with blood.



Orestes cried, “O Pylades, she is my mother.

May I spare—

Pylades told him solemnly,

“No. Apollo had commanded. The god must be obeyed.”



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Author: Edith Hamilton / Publisher: 書林出版有限公司 (Bookman Books Co.)



Orestes pushed her mother into the house, and then killed her. After the matricide, Orestes screamed with his eyes fixed on unseen horror: “Look! Look! Women there. Black, all black, and long hair like snakes.”

The crowd told him that it’s only his illusions. He rushed away alone, except for those invisible companions.



Source: Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes

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Orestes suffered from the pursuit of Erinyes for years. He made a plea to Athena, and Apollo was next to him.



Apollo said:

“It is I am answerable for what he did,”

” He killed at my command.”



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Orestes said:

“I, not Apollo, was guilty of my mother’s murder, but I have been cleansed of my guilt.”



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Athena accepted the plea and persuaded the avenging goddesses into accepting it. Therefore, from the Furies of frightful aspect they became the Benignant Ones, the Eumenides, protectors of the suppliant.



Therefore, Orestes went forth from Athena's tribunal as a free man. The curse of the House of Atreus was ended.



Iphigenia Among The Taurians

The Greeks, as has been said, did not favor stories in which human beings were offered up, whether to appease angry gods or make mother Earth bear a good harvest or to bring about anything whatsoever.



According to old accounts, she was killed because one of the wild animals Artemis loved had been slain by the Greeks and the guilty hunters could not win back her favor until the death of a girl was offered.



But to later Greeks this was to slander and discredit Artemis.

So another ending was given to the story.



Iphigenia was not killed at the altar. Artemis carried her to the land of the Taurians (today the Crimea) where fierce people there conducted their savage custom to sacrifice to the goddess any Greek found in the country.

Artemis took care that Iphigenia should be safe; she made her priestess of her temple.



One day, Orestes and Pylades came to the land of Taurians. Some of the Erinyes still pursued him after the quittance.



The Delphic priestess told him that he must go to the Taurian country and bring away the sacred image of Artemis from the temple. When he set it up in Athens he would at last be healed and at peace.



The two were caught. Iphigenia was informed that the two Greeks had been taken and were to be sacrificed immediately.



Iphigenia asked herself,

“Would a goddess command such things? Would she take pleasure in sacrificial murder? I do not believe it. It is the men of this land who are bloodthirsty and they lay their own guilt on the gods.”

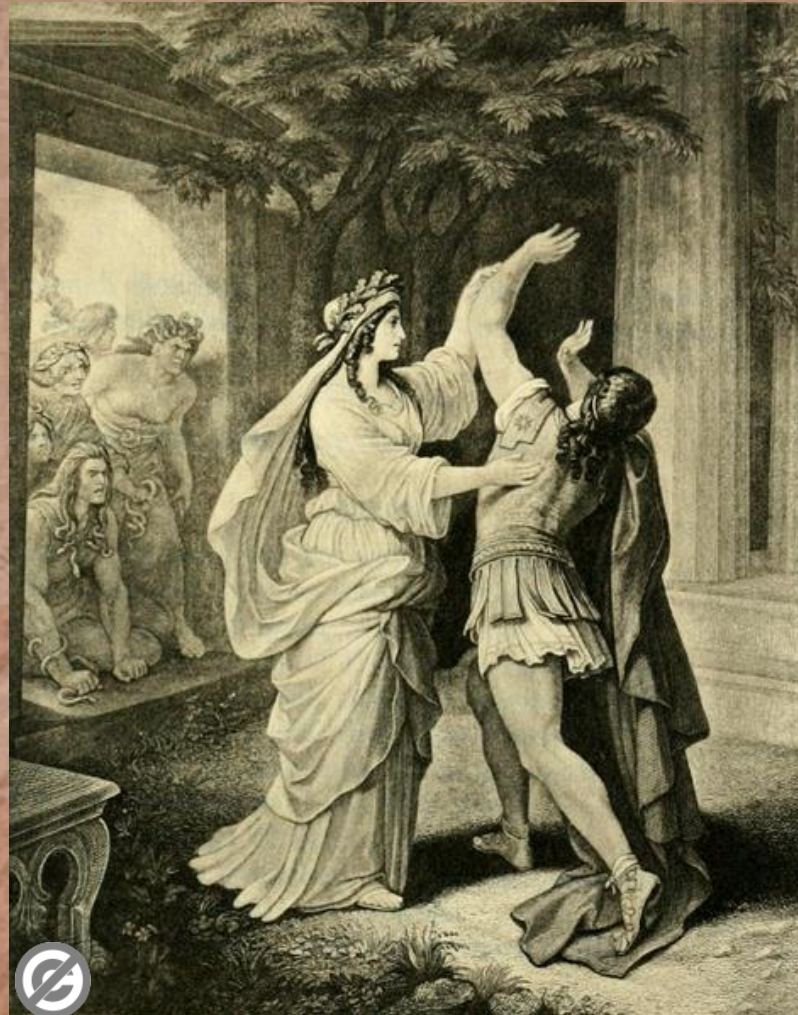


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As Iphigenia requested Pylades to send a letter to her brother, she found that another young man with Pylades is Orestes.



Iphigenia threw herself into his arms. She sobbed out ,
“Dearest! You are my dearest, my darling, my dear one. A
baby, a little baby, when I left you. More than marvelous is
this thing that has come to me.”



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They must leave. Orestes proposed, “Suppose we kill the King.” but Iphigenia rejected this idea with anger. King Thoas had been very kind to her.

She came up with a perfect plan and explained it to them.
All three then enter the temple.



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After a few moments Iphigenia came out taking the image in her arms. She told King Thoas that the two men he had sent her for the goddess were not pure, and Artemis was angry.



Iphigenia said: “I am taking the image to the seashore to purify it. And there too I will cleanse the men from their pollution. Only after that can the sacrifice be made. All that I do must be done in solitude. Let the captives be brought forth and proclaim to the city that no one may draw near to me. “



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“Do as you wish,” Thoas answered, “and take all the time you need.”
They passed out of sight on their way to the inlet where Orestes’ ship lay. It seemed as if Iphigenia’s plan could not fail.

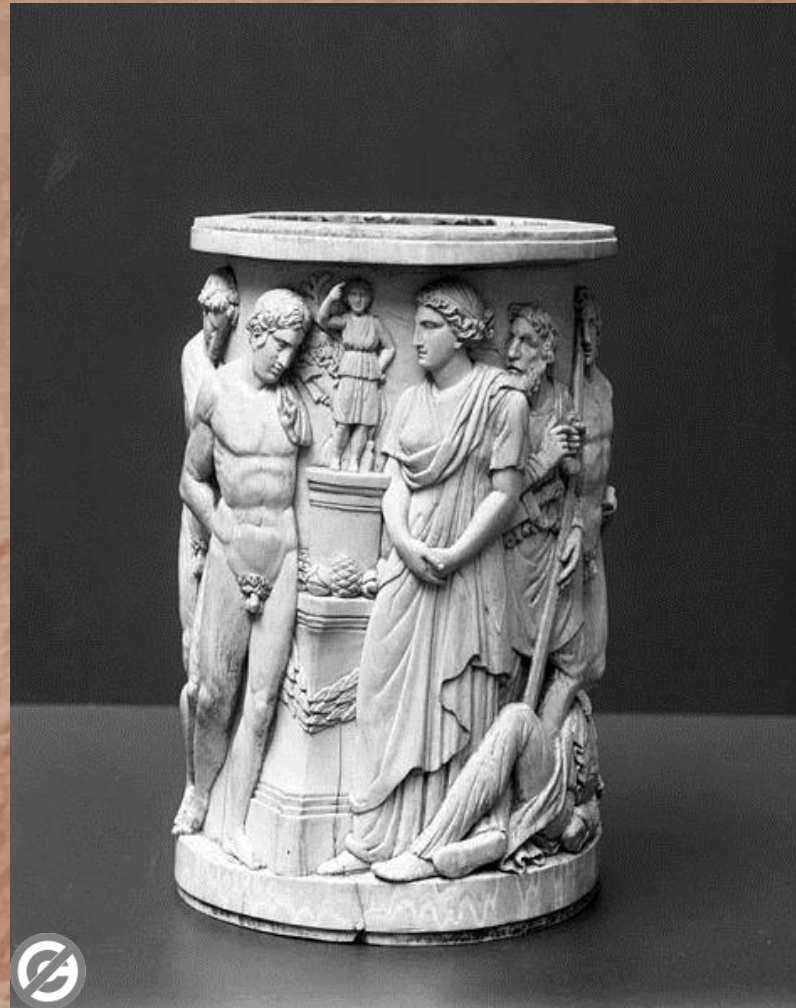


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And yet it did. They were driven back by a heavy wind. Furious with anger, the King hurried from the temple to capture and to put all of them to death.



Suddenly, Athena appeared. She bade him let them go. He did it accordingly.

And the Greeks' ship left the harbor, flying under full wind and sail to the sea beyond.



Discussion Questions

- ① If you were Orestes, would you choose to commit matricide or be a traitor to your father? Or, is there any other solution?
- ② In your opinion, what is the most important moral lesson in this chapter? Share with your classmates.









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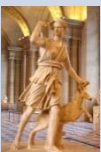



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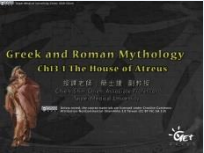



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