

IPHIGÉNIE EN TAURIDE

CHRISTOPH WILLIBALD GLUCK (1714–1787)

Background

The Greek armies have assembled in Aulis in order to go to war with Troy. However, there is no wind, so the fleet is marooned in the harbour. A seer tells the Greek general, Agamemnon, that the lull has been caused by the anger of the goddess Diana, who demands that he sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to him. Agamemnon indeed has Iphigenia brought to Aulis and even leads her to the slaughtering block. However, the goddess Diana rescues her at the last minute; Agamemnon kills a doe in her place. Iphigenia's whereabouts remain unknown and she is believed dead. Nobody knows that she has been living on the island of Tauris as a priestess of Diana ever since the incident.

Act One

A storm is raging. The priestesses implore the gods to release them from their murderous obligation to sacrifice human beings. Even when the storm subsides, Iphigenia remains in turmoil. She has dreamt of her family during the night: in the dream, her father Agamemnon is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, who in turn presses Iphigenia to kill her brother, Orestes.

Thoas, ruler of Tauris and king of the Scythians, demands fresh human sacrifices from Iphigenia. An oracle once prophesied to him that a foreigner would kill him one day. Ever since, driven by mortal terror, he has had any foreigner stranded on Tauris killed. Thoas also intends to sacrifice two young Greeks who have just been discovered on the coast. Nobody suspects that they are Iphigenia's brother Orestes and his friend Pylades.

Act Two

Orestes is tormented by terrible feelings of remorse. He has killed his mother and now feels responsible for taking his only friend to his death with him. Conversely, Pylades finds consolation in the idea of being buried together with Orestes. The captives are separated. Left alone, Orestes is tormented in his sleep by the Eumenides, goddesses of vengeance. He is startled by an apparition of his dead mother – who when he wakes up, however, proves to be Iphigenia. She has come to question her prisoner about his origins. She learns that he, like herself, comes from Mycenae. When she asks him about the king's family, he tells her that Agamemnon was slain by Clytemnestra and that her brother took vengeance on his mother for murdering her husband. Orestes himself is dead; only his sister Electra still lives in Mycenae. In despair, Iphigenia sees her premonitions confirmed: her family has been annihilated, and she can no longer hold any hope for Orestes.

Act Three

Iphigenia decides to oppose Thoas's wishes and sacrifice only one of the two captives; she wants the other to hurry to Mycenae and deliver a letter to her sister, Electra. Iphigenia wavers for some time before eventually deciding to sacrifice Pylades. Orestes, however, sees himself cheated of the fulfilment of his death wish and deliverance from his inner torment. He forces Iphigenia to revise her decision. She hands the letter intended for Electra to Pylades. Left alone, Pylades swears to save his friend.

Act Four

Iphigenia is dreading having to execute the sacrifice. Orestes, by contrast, sees death as a liberation. He is touched by Iphigenia's compassion. At the moment she is about to kill him, Orestes laments that he is having to suffer the same sacrificial death as his sister Iphigenia once did. The siblings recognise one another.

Thoas has learned of Iphigenia's treachery and demands that the victim be killed immediately. He is unmoved by the fact that Orestes is Iphigenia's brother. When Thoas seizes the dagger with the intention of killing them both, Pylades, who has since returned, appears and stabs him to death. It seems that pandemonium is about to break out.

At that moment, however, the goddess Diana appears and announces the will of the gods: Orestes shall be liberated of his feelings of guilt and return with Iphigenia to Mycenae.