



CHAPTER I

The House of Atreus

The chief importance of the story of Atreus and his descendants is that the fifth-century tragic poet Aeschylus took it for the subject of his greatest drama, the Oresteia, which is made up of three plays, the Agamemnon, the Libation Bearers, the Eumenides. It has no rival in Greek tragedy except the four plays of Sophocles about Oedipus and his children. Pindar in the early fifth century tells the current tale about the feast Tantalus made the gods and protests that it is not true. The punishment of Tantalus is described often, first in the Odyssey, from which I have taken it. Amphion's story, and Niobe's, I have taken from Ovid, who alone tells them in full. For Pelops' winning the chariot race I have preferred Apollodorus, of the first or second century A.D., who gives the fullest account that has come down to us. The story of Atreus' and Thyestes' crimes and all that followed them is taken from Aeschylus' Oresteia.

THE HOUSE of Atreus is one of the most famous families in mythology. Agamemnon, who led the Greeks against Troy, belonged to it. All of his 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.

It was an ill-fated house. The cause of all the misfortunes was held to be an ancestor, a King of Lydia named Tantalus, who brought upon himself a most terrible punishment by a most wicked deed. That was not the end of the matter. The evil he started went on after his death. His descendants also did wickedly and were punished. A curse seemed to hang over the family, making men sin in spite of themselves and bringing suffering and death down upon the innocent as well as the guilty.

TANTALUS AND NIOBE

Tantalus was the son of Zeus and honored by the gods beyond all the mortal children of Zeus. They allowed him to eat at their table, to taste the nectar and ambrosia which except for him alone none but the immortals could partake of. They did more; they came to a banquet in his palace; they condescended to dine with him. 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 great cauldron, and served to the gods. Apparently he was driven by a passion of hatred against them which made him willing to sacrifice his son in order to bring upon them the horror of being cannibals. It may be, too, that he wanted to show in the most startling and shocking way possible how easy it was to deceive the awful, venerated, humbly adored divinities. In his scorn of the gods and his measureless self-confidence he never dreamed that his guests would realize what manner of food he had set before them.

He was a fool. The Olympians knew. They drew back from

eats
son
served
him to
Gods.

the horrible banquet and they turned upon the criminal who had contrived it. He should be so punished, they declared, that no man to come, hearing what this man had suffered, would dare ever again to insult them. They set the arch-sinner in a pool in Hades, but whenever in his tormenting thirst he stooped to drink he could not reach the water. It disappeared, drained into the ground as he bent down. When he stood up it was there again. Over the pool fruit trees hung heavy laden with pears, pomegranates, rosy apples, sweet figs. Each time he stretched out his hand to grasp them the wind tossed them high away out of reach. Thus he stood forever, his undying throat always athirst, his hunger in the midst of plenty never satisfied.

torture

His son Pelops was restored to life by the gods, but they had to fashion a shoulder for him out of ivory. One of the goddesses, some say Demeter, some Thetis, inadvertently had eaten of the loathsome dish and when the boy's limbs were reassembled one shoulder was wanting. This ugly story seems to have come down in its early brutal form quite unsoftened. The later Greeks did not like it and protested against it. The poet Pindar called it

Shoulder
was
eaten

A tale decked out with glittering lies against the word of truth. Let a man not speak of cannibal deeds among the blessed gods.

However that might be, the rest of Pelops' life was successful. He was the only one of Tantalus' descendants not marked out by misfortune. He was happy in his marriage, although he wooed a dangerous lady who had been the cause of many deaths, the Princess Hippodamia. The reason men died for her was not her own fault, but her father's. This King had a wonderful pair of horses Ares had given him — superior, of course, to all mortal horses. He did not want his daughter to

marry, and whenever a suitor came for her hand the youth was told he could race with her father for her. If the suitor's horses won, she would be his; if her father's won, the suitor must pay with his life for his defeat. In this way a number of rash young men met their death. Even so, Pelops dared. He had horses he could trust, a present from Poseidon. He won the race; but there is a story that Hippodamia had more to do with the victory than Poseidon's horses. Either she fell in love with Pelops or she felt the time had come to put a stop to that sort of racing. She bribed her father's charioteer, a man named Myrtilus, to help her. He pulled out the bolts that held the wheels of the King's chariot, and the victory was Pelops' with no trouble at all. Later, Myrtilus was killed by Pelops, cursing him as he died, and some said that this was the cause of the misfortunes that afterward followed the family. But most writers said, and certainly with better reason, that it was the wickedness of Tantalus which doomed his descendants.

None of them suffered a worse doom than his daughter Niobe. And yet it seemed at first that the gods had chosen her out for good fortune as they had her brother Pelops. She was happy in her marriage. Her husband was Amphion, a son of Zeus and an incomparable musician. He and his twin brother Zethus undertook once to fortify Thebes, building a lofty wall around it. Zethus was a man of great physical strength who despised his brother's neglect of manly sports and his devotion to his art. Yet when it came to the heavy task of getting enough rocks for the wall, the gentle musician outdid the strong athlete: he drew such entrancing sounds from his lyre that the very stones were moved and followed him to Thebes.

• sands like orpheus

There he and Niobe ruled in entire content until she showed that the mad arrogance of Tantalus lived on in her. She held herself raised by her great prosperity above all that ordinary mortals fear and reverence. She was rich and nobly born and powerful. Seven sons had been born to her, brave and beautiful young men, and seven daughters, the fairest of the fair. She thought herself strong enough not only to deceive the gods as her father had tried to do, but to defy them openly.

She called upon the people of Thebes to worship her. "You burn incense to Leto," she said, "and what is she as compared with me? She had but two children, Apollo and Artemis. I have seven times as many. I am a 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."

Insolent words uttered in the arrogant consciousness of power were always heard in heaven and always punished. Apollo and Artemis glided swiftly to Thebes from Olympus, the archer god and the divine huntress, and shooting with deadly aim they struck down all of Niobe's sons and daughters. She saw them die with anguish too great for expression. Beside those bodies so lately young and strong, she sank down motionless in stony grief, dumb as a stone and her heart like a stone within her. Only her tears flowed and could not stop. She was changed into a stone which forever, night and day, was wet with tears.

To Pelops two sons were born, Atreus and Thyestes. The inheritance of evil descended to them in full force. Thyestes fell in love with his brother's wife and succeeded in making

her false to her marriage vows. Atreus found out and swore that Thyestes should pay as no man ever had. ^{ATREUS} ~~THYESTES~~ He killed his brother's two little children, had them cut limb from limb, boiled, and served up to their father. When he had eaten —

Poor wretch, when he had learned the deed abhorrent,
He cried a great cry, falling back — spewed out
That flesh, called down upon that house a doom
Intolerable, the banquet board sent crashing.

Atreus was King. Thyestes had no power. The atrocious crime was not avenged in Atreus' lifetime, but his children and his children's children suffered.

AGAMEMNON AND HIS CHILDREN

On Olympus the gods were met in full assembly. The Father of Gods and Men began first to speak. Zeus was sorely vexed at the mean way men perpetually acted toward the gods, blaming the divine powers for what their own wickedness brought about, and that too even when the Olympians had tried to hold them back. "You all know about Aegisthus, whom Agamemnon's son Orestes has slain," Zeus said, "how he loved the wife of Agamemnon and killed him on his return from Troy. Certainly no blame attaches to us from that. We warned him by the mouth of Hermes. 'The death of the son of Atreus will be avenged by Orestes.' Those were Hermes' very words, but not even such friendly advice could restrain Aegisthus, who now pays the final penalty."

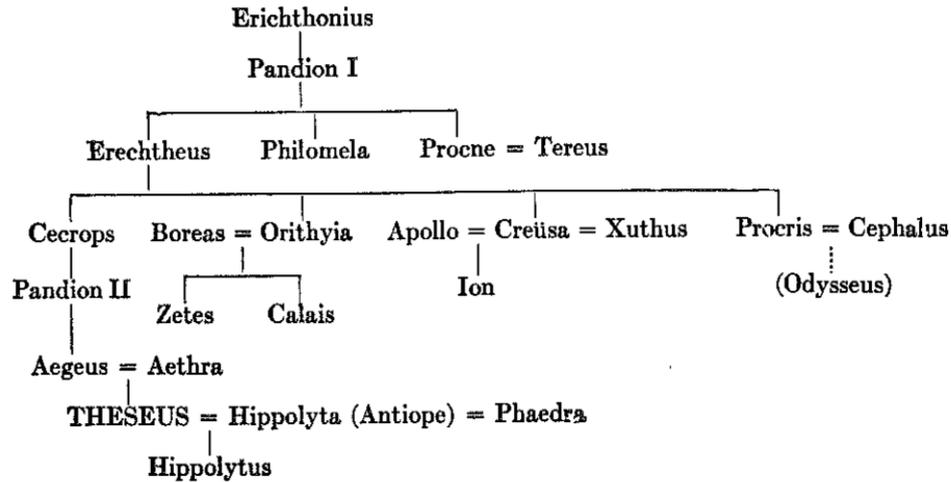
This passage in the *Iliad* is the first mention of the House of Atreus. In the *Odyssey* when Odysseus reached the land of the Phaeacians and was telling them about his descent to Hades and the ghosts he encountered, he said that, of them all, the spirit of Agamemnon had most moved him to pity.

He had begged him to say how he died and the chief told him that he was killed ingloriously as he sat at table, struck down as one butchers an ox. "It was Aegisthus," he said, "with the aid of my accursed wife. He invited me to his house and as I feasted he killed me. My men too. You have seen many die in single combat or in battle, but never one who died as we did, by the wine bowl and the loaded tables in a hall where the floor flowed with blood. Cassandra's death-shriek rang in my ears as she fell. Clytemnestra slew her over my body. I tried to lift up my hands for her, but they fell back. I was dying then."

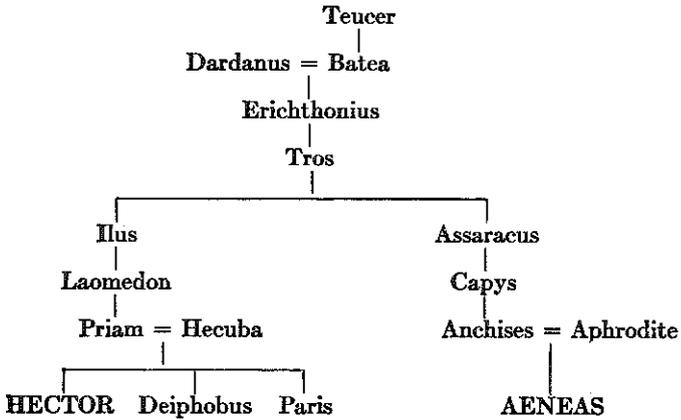
That was the way the story was first told: Agamemnon had been killed by his wife's lover. It was a sordid tale. How long it held the stage we do not know, but the next account we have, centuries later, written by Aeschylus about 450 B.C., is very different. It is a great story now of implacable vengeance and tragic passions and inevitable doom. The motive for Agamemnon's death is no longer the guilty love of a man and a woman, but a mother's love for a daughter killed by her own father, and a wife's determination to avenge that death by killing her husband. Aegisthus fades; he is hardly in the picture. The wife of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, has all the foreground to herself.

The two sons of Atreus, Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek forces at Troy, and Menelaus, the husband of Helen, ended their lives very differently. Menelaus, at first the less successful, was notably prosperous in his later years. He lost his wife for a time, but after the fall of Troy he got her back. His ship was driven all the way to Egypt by the storm Athena sent to the Greek Fleet, but finally he reached home safely and lived happily with Helen ever after. It was far otherwise with his brother.

The House of Athens



The House of Troy



The Family of Helen of Troy

