

Iphigenia in Tauris

Goethe's play in five Scenes

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Iphigenia
 Thoas, *King of the Taurians*
 Orestes
 Pylades
 Arkas

Setting: Grove in front of the temple of Diana

Scene One

IPHIGENIA

Into your shadows, stirring treetops
 Of this long sacred, leafy grove, into
 The tranquil sanctuary of the goddess
 I still step with deepest awe, as if today
 Were the first time. And here my spirit
 Does not come to rest. I answer to
 The will and wisdom of the goddess who
 Has sheltered and protected me these many
 Years, but as I was, so I remain,
 A stranger. Those I love are far beyond
 The sea, and on the shore I spend long days
 Searching within myself to find the lost
 Greek land. Goddess, I shamefully admit
 I do not serve you gladly, you, who saved
 My life and brought me here!

Iphigenia. Arkas.

ARKAS

I hail you, priestess of Diana, with
 A message from the king. Trust me and be
 Guided by one who means you well and serves
 You with devotion. When today the king
 Comes to the temple, I advise that you
 Should let yourself be swayed by him.

IPHIGENIA

Your kind words trouble me. The king will press
 A suit that I have many times resisted.

ARKAS

Consider well and do what you think best.

Iphigenia. Thoas.

THOAS

To this temple I have often come to
 Ask for victory and to give thanks for
 Victories received. Today I carry in
 My heart a long-held wish: as bride to lead
 You to my dwelling. End your silence now,
 Do not refuse again! The goddess
 Brought you to us here. As you were sacred
 To her, so you were to me. And more,
 She made me understand what I accept
 As law: If to your home you can hope
 To return, then I let go of any claim on you.
 Speak freely, and you know I keep my word!

IPHIGENIA

Hear then! The race of Tantalus I call my own.

THOAS

I hear you calmly speak astounding words.
 Is *he* your ancestor to whom the gods
 Gave favour long before our time? Was Tantalus
 The one they welcomed to their table and
 From whom the gods themselves took counsel?

IPHIGENIA

Defiant treachery plunged him from high
 Into the shameful abyss of old Tartarus.
 Alas, the hatred of the gods touched all
 The members of his race!

THOAS

Was it their own, or did they bear his guilt?

IPHIGENIA

The sons of Tantalus and those after them
 Were known for courage and for strength;
 They all possessed the Titans' valour.
 But the god struck them, marking their brow.
 He hid restraint and wisdom, sense and
 Judgement from their dark and furtive eyes.
 All their desires turned to fury
 Which unleashed knew no restraint.

THOAS

Enough of horrors now! Let me repeat
 My offer: Come, follow me to have
 And share what I possess.

IPHIGENIA

Believe me when I say, I understand
Your happiness only too well. Not knowing
Either you or me, through closer ties
You mean to lead us to a happy union.
With good heart, with good intention, boldly
Now you press me to give in. But here
I thank the gods; they guide me to stand firm
And to refuse a bond to which they have
Not given their consent.

THOAS

You do not hear a god; your own heart speaks.

IPHIGENIA

Only our hearts can hear them.

THOAS

Do / not also have the right to hear their voice?
I too am human; but better to break off.
My word stands firm: The goddess
Chose you as her priestess; serve her as
You wish. I ask her pardon for denying
Her the ancient sacrifice.

IPHIGENIA

Gods do not lust for blood.
We misconstrue what they desire, to satisfy
Our own cruel drives.

THOAS

Do your duty, and I will attend
To mine. Two strangers were discovered hiding
On the shore and have been captured. Now
The goddess can reclaim what I withheld.
They will be sent to you; your service is
Required.

Scene Two

Orestes. Pylades.

ORESTES

Each step we take leads only to our death.

PYLADES

I am not ready yet like you, Orestes,
To descend into the realm of Shades.
Apollo gave his word: We would find help
And comfort in his sister's sanctuary,
From there a safe return. The words of gods
Are not ambiguous as they appear to one
Weighed down. Perhaps the gods in council
Have in mind a great design. Diana
Longs to leave this hostile shore. I hear
The law of sacrifice has been suspended
By the priestess. She, who came here
As a stranger, is now revered by all.

ORESTES

With skill and art you intertwine your wishes
And the gods' intent. The king is ruled
By his wild passion and his anger. A woman's
Voice will not restrain him.

PYLADES

Give thanks it is a woman! For the spirit
Of a man, even the best, will turn
To what is cruel, and in the end he shapes
What he abhors into a law to guide
Himself. She comes; you leave us now. I think
Our names should be withheld. We will confer,
Before she speaks with you.

Iphigenia. Pylades.

IPHIGENIA

O stranger, speak and tell from where you come!
Where is your home? You seem more Greek
Than Scythian to me.
(She removes his chains.)
I free you now; the freedom that I grant
Brings danger. May the gods protect you!

PYLADES

We are from Crete, sons to Adrastus:
 I, the youngest, am called Cephalus;
 My brother is Laodamas, the eldest
 Of the House. Our wild, unruly middle
 Brother was eager to disrupt our games
 As we enjoyed our early youth and shared
 Its pleasures. We remained calm, our mother
 Guiding us, our father in the field with forces
 Battling Troy. But when he returned, laden
 With booty, only to pass away, the siblings
 Fell to quarrel over rule and fortune.
 The eldest, whom I favoured, killed
 Our middle brother. For this crime of blood
 The Fury follows and torments him.
 We have been taken prisoner and as
 You know, we are to die.

IPHIGENIA

Troy fell? Dear man, can you confirm its fall?

PYLADES

It lies in ruins. Save us, our lives depend
 On you!

IPHIGENIA

Do not, unfortunate as you may be,
 Think of yourself until my questions have
 Been answered.

PYLADES

Troy was reduced to rubble after holding
 Out against the Greeks for ten long years.
 It will not rise again. Achilles lies
 There with his handsome friend. Palamedes
 And Ajax lie there too. They did not live
 To see their fatherland again.

IPHIGENIA

He does not say, whether my father
 Is alive or dead! He has not mentioned him.

PYLADES

Have you not heard, what has been shouted out
 For all to hear? Have all the sighs of grief
 Filling the Mycenaean halls not reached
 You? Clytemnestra, aided by Aeghithus,
 Overcame her husband Agamemnon. He
 Was murdered on the day of his return.

IPHIGENIA

Was this vile deed the fruit of lust?

PYLADES

Also of vengeance long and deeply felt.
Agamemnon lured his spouse to Aulis.
To appease a god and gain propitious
Winds, he sent his eldest daughter
To Diana's altar. Here Iphigenia
Lost her life, a sacrifice of blood
To bring good fortune to the Greeks.

IPHIGENIA (*veiling herself*).

It is enough. You will see me again.

Scene Three

Iphigenia. Orestes.

IPHIGENIA

Unhappy prisoner, I free you from your chains
But not from worse to come. And yet
I cannot, dare not tell myself that you
Should die. How could I raise a hand against
You or your friend? Soon I shall tell you more.
But first relate to me what I did not hear
Fully from your brother.

ORESTES

You have heard but half the horror.

IPHIGENIA

Weep, shamed Mycenae!
So Tantalus' descendants sowed
Curse on curse with wild and reckless hand.
How did Orestes manage to evade
The day of blood? Speak openly and lay
My fears to rest. Tell me of Orestes!

ORESTES

The son struck down his mother.
I wish it could be told that he had died.
Her raging spirit rose from the steaming
Blood and called upon the ancient daughters
Of the night to hound the culprit with the words:
"Do not let him escape! Torment him to revenge
A mother's death! He is your prey!"

IPHIGENIA

Poor man! You share Orestes' plight and feel
For him, a fugitive yourself.

Orestes

What do you mean? How do I share his plight?

IPHIGENIA

Your youngest sibling told me of the heavy
Guilt you carry; you killed a brother.

ORESTES

It cannot be, revered priestess, that false
Words should deceive you.
Let there be truth between us!
I am Orestes! And this guilty head
Bows down to find a grave and death.

IPHIGENIA

Can you, Orestes, hear a friendly word?

ORESTES

Save it for one the gods regard with favour.

IPHIGENIA

They show the light of hope to you.

ORESTES

Through smoke and fumes I see the feeble
Light of Styx that draws me on to hell.

IPHIGENIA

Orestes, you, can you not hear me?

ORESTES

Who are you, whose voice with so much power
Stirs my innermost being?

IPHIGENIA

Your beating heart will tell you that your sister
Lives: It is Iphigenia whom you see!
She stands before you!

ORESTES

You!

IPHIGENIA

My brother!

ORESTES

Let me be! Get back!

IPHIGENIA

You will survive! If only I could hear
A calmer word from you! Brother, compose
Yourself and recognize your sister!

ORESTES

I weep for you! The light of day will see
The spilling of more blood! A sister's love
Will not escape the curse.
(*He faints.*)

IPHIGENIA

I am too weak to bear this weight
Of joy and pain alone. – Where are you, Pylades?
(*She goes to find him.*)

ORESTES (*regaining consciousness and raising himself*).

Hand me one last cool quenching cup from Lethe's Waters! Life's inner turmoil soon will end
 And memories will fade as now my spirit
 Calmly moves to be with you, you Shades,
 In the eternal mists. This restless
 Son of earth, may he find comfort in your peace.
 Who can these be, a happy crowd,
 Like princes gathered here to celebrate
 Their House? I see my ancestors! Thyestes
 And Atreus are among them,
 Brothers sharing thoughts as friends;
 The boys at play running about.
 Has enmity between you all been laid
 To rest? In life the watchword of the House
 Of Tantalus was certain death. And those
 Belonging to this ancient race
 Find their joys beyond the night. You call,
 You welcome me, as I advance
 To join you.

Orestes. Iphigenia. Pylades.

ORESTES

Have you too descended to this lower
 Region? Welcome, sister! Pylades,
 I feel for you and pity you, my friend.
 Join me! I lead the way to Pluto's throne.

PYLADES

Do you not recognize us and this holy
 Grove, the sun above that gives light
 To the living, not the dead? Do you not feel
 The arms that hold you close? We are of flesh
 And blood, not disembodied Shades.

ORESTES (*to Iphigenia*).

I feel my heart at last beat freely in
 Your arms. It tells me that the curse is lifted.
 I feel a joy not felt by me before.
 The Eumenides have left for Tartarus,
 And I can hear the distant thunder
 As the brazen gates fall shut behind them.

PYLADES

Follow me! There is no time to waste.

Scene Four

IPHIGENIA

You gods, bless our Pylades and speed
Whatever plan he has devised to save
Us from the king. He drew me from my brother's
Side, for I saw no one else but him.
I would not let Orestes go and could
hardly believe that he was there
And that my joy was real. I held him close,
Not thinking of the dangers that
Still lie ahead. To carry out their plan,
They now have set off for their ship, moored
In a sheltered cove, to signal to the hidden
Crew that they are ready, and they cleverly
Suggested what answer I should give
The king, who will soon press me to surrender
Both of them. I hear the sound of arms.
It is the messenger! The false words that
I learned must now serve to mislead.

Iphigenia. Arkas.

ARKAS

Priestess, make haste, the sacrifice is to begin!
The king and the impatient crowd are waiting.

IPHIGENIA

I would obey and do as you require,
Had not an obstacle come in my way
To stand between me and my duty.

ARKAS

What is it, that is holding up the king's command?

IPHIGENIA

Chance, of which we are not master.

ARKAS

So tell me what the king will want to know!
The strangers are to die; that is his will.

IPHIGENIA

The gods have not decided on their death.
 The older of the captives spilled familial
 Blood. The Furies follow in his steps, and even
 In the inner temple he succumbed
 To his distress. His presence in the shrine
 Defiled the holy site. My maidens now
 Will hasten with me to the shore, where we
 In secret rite intend to wash all blemish
 From the holy image of Diana
 And to sanctify it once again.
 The ritual cleansing may not be disturbed.

ARKAS

I hasten to inform the king of this new
 Obstacle. Do not proceed before
 He gives permission.

Iphigenia. Pylades.

PYLADES

Where can she be? I know she longs to hear
 From me that we are saved.

IPHIGENIA

Pylades, at last! I anxiously
 Await the comfort you have promised.

PYLADES

Then hurry, lead me to the temple,
 And in that sacred place my eyes will see
 What we were sent to find. I only have
 To lift the precious image on to steady
 Shoulders and bring it to the shore.
 You hesitate! Why are you silent?

IPHIGENIA

The messenger sent by the king arrived.
 I told him word for word what you had urged.
 He showed surprise, and then he left in haste
 To tell the king of the unusual rite.
 I am expecting his return to hear
 What the command will be.

PYLADES

Calmly wait here until the messenger
 Returns, but then stand firm, no matter
 What he brings. That will give us time
 To seize the holy treasure from this rude
 Unworthy people and to flee.

IPHIGENIA (*alone*).

I have to follow him, to save the ones
I love from danger. But oh, the fate that
Brought me here forbids rash deeds
And warns against allowing them. If fortune
Wanes, and if life's highest powers fade
In time, why does the curse not end?
The heavy hand of harsh necessity
Now lays a double crime on me,
To rob the sacred image of the goddess
And deceive the man to whom I owe
My life and destiny. Let me not turn
Against the gods! I fear that in my heart
The deep hatred the Titans felt
For the Olympians is taking hold to claw
And crush me. Save me, gods, and save
Your image in my soul! The ancient song
Sounds in my ears – I long forgot
and was pleased to forget it – the song
The Fates intoned when Tantalus
Fell from the golden chair.

“Let all humans
Fear the gods!
They hold eternal power
In their hands to use
Against the mortals
As they please.”

Scene Five

Thoas. Arkas.

ARKAS

I am confused and must admit I do not know
Where my distrust should lead me.
Are the prisoners about to flee? The priestess,
Is she aiding and abetting them?

THOAS

Summon her to appear without delay!

THOAS (*alone*).

I rage against the priestess for deceiving me;
I rage no less against myself, for kindness
And indulgence prompted her betrayal.
My hope that she would turn to me in time
Was vain; she seeks instead to claim
A destiny of her own.

IPHIGENIA

You wish to see me! What has brought you here?

THOAS

You have delayed the sacrifice; why so?

IPHIGENIA

I gave a full account to Arkas.

THOAS

I am not satisfied, speak on!

IPHIGENIA

From earliest years I learnt obedience to
My parents and then to a goddess, and in this,
I always felt my soul to be most free.
Yet neither there nor here in Tauris did I learn
To submit to unfair words spoken by men
Or bow to harsh demands.

THOAS

Not I, an ancient law commands you.

IPHIGENIA

We eagerly embrace a law if it will
serve as weapon to promote our passion.
But there is an older law that calls
The priestess to obey it and resist you.
It declares all strangers to be sacred.

THOAS

It seems the fate of these two captives stirs
Your spirit deeply. Who are they, whose lives
You hold so dear?

IPHIGENIA

They are – they seem – I think they must be Greeks.

THOAS

Your countrymen? Have they renewed in you
The hope and happy image of return?

IPHIGENIA

Yes, my king, I dare to speak. A secret
Plan has been devised. The prisoners
Will not be found; you look for them in vain.
They have escaped and will unite with friends
Whose ship is ready to depart with them.
The elder, here on Tauris overcome
By deep despair, but now bowed down
No longer, is the brother I have found again.
He and his childhood friend, named Pylades,
Companion of his youth, have come to Tauris
And this holy site to carry out the god's
Command. When his sister's image is returned
To Delphi, Apollo promises to free Orestes
From the Furies who pursue him to avenge
The murder of his mother. I place
These two last members of the House
Of Tantalus in your hands: Use force
Against us – if you may.

THOAS

Do you believe that the rude Scythian
From a barbaric race will hear the voice
Not heard by Atreus the Greek,
That of humanity and truth?

IPHIGENIA

What fate, o king,
Will you find in your heart for me?
Is this to be the end? Then kill me first!
If a return to those I love should ever
Come about, you swore to let me go;
That time is here.

THOAS

Not willing to give in, as fire fighting water
Counters it, so the anger in my heart
Resists your words.

IPHIGENIA

Will you not offer me your hand in peace?

Thoas

You ask for much to happen all at once.

Orestes armed. Iphigenia. Thoas.

ORESTES (*towards the scene*).

Stand firm and hold them back! We are outnumbered,

But do not retreat! Secure the way;

Let us reach shore and ship in safety.

(*To Iphigenia, without seeing the king.*)

Come, we are betrayed. Make haste!

(*He sees the king.*)

Thoas (*drawing his sword*).

No man shall in my presence bare his sword

And not be challenged!

IPHIGENIA

Do not profane the temple site with deadly

Anger! Heed the priestess, the sister!

ORESTES

Tell me! Who is it that threatens us?

IPHIGENIA

Respect the king in him who has become

My second father. I have confessed

To him what you intended and saved

My soul from harm.

THOAS

Peace cannot be! They wish to rob

Us of the sacred image of the goddess.

Do you expect me to consent?

ORESTES

Let not the image be a cause of strife!

Apollo has revealed our error. We see

Now how he veiled our eyes. I asked

The god for guidance and deliverance

From the Furies. Hearing my appeal,

He spoke: "Should you return the sister from

The shore of Tauris, where she stays against

Her will, to Greece, the curse will end." Apollo

Did not mean the sacred image of

The goddess, he meant *you*, Iphigenia,

You, who brought such blessing to this land.

O king, grant what is right now to us!

IPHIGENIA

Recall your promise and be moved by what
You have been told and see. A noble deed
Is yours to do. What you may not deny,
Is yours to give.

THOAS

Then go!

IPHIGENIA

My king, I cannot part against your will!
To banish us will not undo your loss;
A blessing from you speeds us on our way
And hastens our return. Let us affirm
A bond of friendship which will draw us to
Each other. You are as dear to me
As was my father. And this feeling
Will stay with me where I go. The gods
Of generous deeds will bless you
For them! Fare well then! Seal lasting
Friendship with your hand!

THOAS

Fare well!

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