

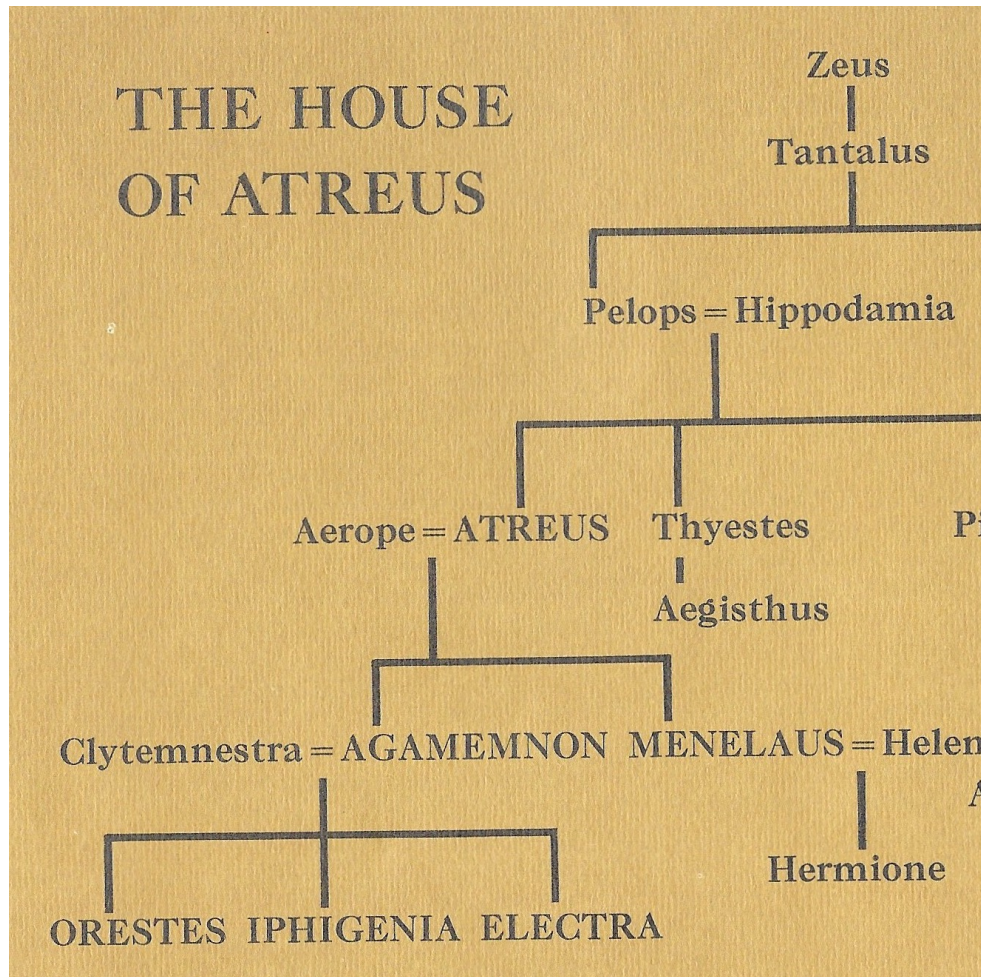
Why Do All These Greeks Want To Kill Each Other?

The Curse(s) on the House of Atreus

by
Jerry James

“The awful thing about life is this: Everybody has their reasons.”

— Octave, in Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game*



When the Athenians sat down to watch Aeschylus’ entry in the City Dionysia playwriting competition in 458 BC, they all knew the basics of the story, which the author would tell in his own way. Because we are not so fortunate, it seems fitting to provide some background, before we see how Ellen McLaughlin has told the tale. Following the playwrights’ example, we will also pick and choose among competing versions. As Barbara Tuchman wrote, “Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory.”

If the doings of the Greeks at Argos are bloody, they have come by it naturally, as an examination of the family tree (above), cropped to concentrate on the characters of *The Oresteia*, will demonstrate.

Zeus



Godhead was a bloody business. Zeus, King of the Gods, gained his stature by overthrowing his father, Cronos, who had first overthrown *his* father, Uranus, castrating him in the process.

Zeus, as Cole Porter would later write, was “positively teeming with sex.” Although married to his sister Hera, Zeus dallied with anyone, god or mortal, who caught his eye. One of these was a nymph upon whom he sired Tantalus.

Tantalus and his descendants would exhibit a streak of creative risk-taking verging on the wicked, combined with a certainty that they were far smarter than they were. The Greeks called this fatal combination hubris.

Tantalus



Tantalus, son of Zeus, was King of Sipylus, which should have been enough. Of course, it was not. Welcome at the immortals' table on Olympus, he would filch nectar and ambrosia, the Food of the Gods, hoping thus to gain immortality. But Tantalus had worse faults. Familiarity bred, if not contempt, then a dangerously questioning nature. Was it possible, he thought, that the gods did not know all? What if he, Tantalus, were smarter than they? He resolved to test this hypothesis.

Tantalus invited the gods to dinner. There, he served them a stew made from the body of his son Pelops. A very, *very* bad idea. The gods knew at once what had happened, all except Demeter. Distracted by the loss of her daughter Persephone to the Underworld, she absent-mindedly ate Pelops' left shoulder.

For the crime of trying to outsmart the Olympians, Tantalus was condemned by Zeus to eternal torment in a pool of water, which receded every time he tried to drink from it. Above his head was a bough of fruit, always just out of reach. Hence, "tantalize."

Pelops



Pelops and Hippodamia

Resurrected by the gods, Pelops was also furnished with a replacement shoulder fashioned of ivory. Poseidon brought him to Olympus as his lover and taught him how to drive the divine chariot. But Poseidon was unable to prevent Zeus from later expelling Pelops for his father's crime of daring to steal the Food of the Gods. Punishing later generations for the sins of their forebears will run throughout this saga.

Pelops then made his way to Pisa (in Greece), resolving to be smarter than his father. There, King Oenomaus had a highly marriageable daughter, Hippodamia. But in order to gain her hand, a suitor had to defeat the king in a chariot race—or die. To date, the losers numbered eighteen, as anyone who counted the severed heads impaled on the columns of the palace could see. But Pelops was no ordinary suitor.

Going down to the sea, Pelops called out to his old lover Poseidon, who furnished him with a set of winged horses. As insurance, Pelops also bribed the king's charioteer, Myrtilus, offering him half the kingdom and the first night with Hippodamia. Myrtilus replaced the bronze linchpins of the king's chariot with ones made of beeswax. These melted midway through the race, and the king was dragged to death by his horses. With a single stroke, Pelops had gained not only Hippodamia but the kingdom as well.

When Myrtilus showed up at Hippodamia's door to claim his prize, she screamed rape. Pelops, that clever son of Tantalus, had neglected to mention the bribe to her. This enabled him to burst in with a show of horror, grab Myrtilus and hurl him off a cliff to his death, thereby also keeping the entire kingdom.

But before being launched into the air, Mytilus cursed Pelops and all his descendants. This was the first curse laid on what would be known as the House of Atreus. It would not be the last.

Atreus



The Feast of Thyestes

Pelops and Hippodamia reigned in the region he named for himself, the Peloponnesus, and had fifteen children. But Pelops' favorite was not one of these. Chrysippus, his son from a sideswiping encounter with a nymph, was the chosen heir. This did not sit well with his legitimate twins, Atreus and Thyestes.

These two threw their brother down a well, then escaped to Mycenae, where the death of the king at the hands of someone else (for a change) led to the throne being offered to a son of Pelops. Atreus seemed the better choice, but Thyestes insisted it go to the one who could produce a golden lamb.

Wow, thought Atreus, what luck! I've got a golden lamb that I didn't sacrifice to Artemis. What a sucker Thyestes is!

Except that Atreus was the sucker. Thyestes had been having an affair with Aerope, Atreus' wife, and produced the golden lamb she'd given him. But he gave Atreus a break. He'd step down from the throne when the sun moved backwards.

Atreus went straight to his great-grandfather Zeus, who obliged him. The sun moved backwards, Thyestes was banished and Atreus threw Aerope off a cliff to her death, in accordance with family tradition. But that wasn't quite enough vengeance for him.

I shall be merciful, decreed Atreus, the new King of Mycenae, and I will prove it by inviting my brother Thyestes to a banquet in the palace at Argos.

What he did not say was that the banquet would consist of Thyestes' three sons. After the Feast of Thyestes, Atreus laughed and produced what was left of his nephews, their severed hands and feet. Vomiting up his dinner, Thyestes cursed Atreus and all his descendants, the second curse laid upon the house.

Thyestes fled. Later, an oracle told him that if he had a son with his daughter, the son born of that incestuous coupling would kill Atreus, which is exactly what happened. That son, Aegisthus, then ruled jointly with Thyestes, while the sons of Atreus—Agamemnon and Menelaus—were exiled to Sparta.

Agamemnon



The Sacrifice of Iphigenia

King Tynadareus of Sparta treated Agamemnon and Menelaus with respect, even marrying them to his daughters, Clytemnestra and Helen. When Tyndareus died, Menelaus succeeded to the throne and led the Spartan army to overthrow Thyestes/Aegisthus and place Agamemnon on the throne. Unfortunately, this happy ending came with a ticking bomb attached.

Almost every prince in Greece had pursued Helen. In order to avoid war against Menelaus, Tynadareus insisted that all the unlucky suitors had to swear to defend the marriage against any threats. Then Paris, Prince of Troy, arrived on the scene, intending to claim the bribe promised him by Aphrodite. She had offered the most beautiful woman in the world if he would name the goddess “The Fairest,” during that business with the golden apple. Paris promptly absconded with Helen, who was really the daughter of Leda and Zeus.

Menelaus invoked the Oath of Tyndareus, and the princes of Greece assembled their fleet at Aulis, there to sail for Troy. But the winds refused to cooperate. Artemis was angry, because Agamemnon, displaying that casual disregard for the rules that characterized his clan, had blundered into the goddess’ grove, accidentally killing a sacred deer. This might have been forgiven, but he had also boasted he was a better hunter than Artemis. Hubris.

This hubris would exact a cruel price. In order to appease the goddess, Agamemnon would have to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. The Oath of Tyndareus or his daughter, which was it to be?

Agamemnon chose war. Iphigenia was sacrificed. And from that moment, Clytemnestra hated her husband.

The Trojan War



Agamemnon's Murder

The Greeks sailed for Troy, where they remained for ten years. Aegisthus returned to Argos. He and Clytemnestra both had their reasons to hate Agamemnon, and ten years was a long time to be

alone. The inevitable happened, one more misstep on the trail of death that marks this line of Greeks.

When Agamemnon finally returns, at the beginning of the play, he makes it easier for the two lovers, showing up with a concubine, Cassandra, former Princess of Troy. You may recall that Cassandra had the temerity to reject Apollo. The god then cursed her with the gift of prophecy, with the caveat that no one would ever believe her. Cassandra acts out this charade for the last time just before Aegisthus and Clytemnestra kill her and Agamemnon.

Now, the remaining two children of Agamemnon come into play. Orestes joins with his sister Electra to avenge the death of their father. But the only way to do this is to kill their mother. Unfortunately, the gods award Orestes no points for avenging patricide with matricide. Instead, he is pursued by the Furies, those creatures of vengeance sprung from the blood of the castrated Uranus, way back at the beginning of this essay.

In Aeschylus, the gods intervene to end the torment of the House of Atreus. Ellen McLaughlin's version is somewhat different, as we will see.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.