



The Way to Windy Troy

How the Greeks Got Themselves Into This Mess

By Jerry James

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Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory. — Barbara Tuchman



Yes, it's the Trojan Horse, to the surprise of absolutely no one

“Rage! Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles...” But wait a minute. Before these words that begin Homer’s *Iliad* are spoken, how did we get here?

The Greeks are encamped on the shores in front of the walled city of Troy. They’ve been here for nine years, and what have they achieved? Nothing. Nada. Zero. Zip. But they can’t go home empty-handed after spending so much time, blood and treasure. (Add the Sunk Cost Fallacy to Things the Greeks Invented.) And it will still be some time before the famous horse shown above makes its appearance. So, we ask again, how did we get here?

Homer’s works (and the lore surrounding them) have been a cornerstone of the Western Canon for over 2,700 years. The movies have loved him, from the 1924 silent epic, *Helena*, to the 2004 Brad Pitt version, *Troy*. Homer has also been refurbished as a masterpiece of literary modernism (*Ulysses*); a Broadway musical (*The Golden Apple*); and an episode of *Star Trek* (“Elaan of Troyius”). But one cannot comprehend works like the 2017 film, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, without first knowing how we got here—how the Trojan War began.

Picking and choosing among the contradictory threads of Greek legend, it might be best to begin with a wedding. A wedding, and a snub...

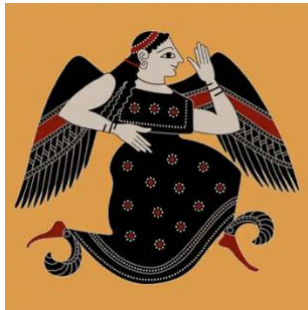
The Wedding of Thetis



"The Wedding of Peleus & Thetis" (Detail)
Joachim Wtewael (1612)

Zeus, King of the Gods and his brother Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, are both enamored of the nymph Thetis. But before push comes to shove, they learn of a prophecy that says Thetis will bear a son who will be greater than his father. (Indeed, she will later give birth to Achilles, the greatest of Greek heroes, and one of the protagonists of the *Iliad*.)

Greater than his father? None of that for us gods! Marry her off to a mortal, Peleus, stat. In a big wedding! And invite everybody!!



Eris

Which they do, with one exception—Eris, the Goddess of Discord. Whether this is an oversight or a deliberate breach of etiquette—well, Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory. Whatever the reason, it's a very, *very* bad mistake, because Eris shows up anyway, bearing her gift, a Golden Apple—the Apple of Discord—which she tosses into the midst of the revelers.

The Judgement of Paris

The Apple of Discord is marked, "To the Fairest," and the 3 major goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite—Power, Brains and Beauty—all contest it. Zeus knows better than to judge *this* contest, so the goddesses finally decide to put it to an impartial juror, a shepherd named Paris. Zeus agrees, noting that Paris once judged fairly in another contest. That, as we shall see, was an aberration.



"The Judgement of Paris"
Peter Paul Rubens (c. 1636)

This is the same Paris who was born a prince of Troy, but whose parents set him out on a mountain top to die, due to a prophecy that he would be the cause of Troy's destruction. However, Paris was saved due to the intervention of a kindly shepherd. (Greek legend would be a lot less bloody if there were fewer kindly shepherds; cf. Oedipus.)

Zeus lets Paris set the rules of the contest, so his first rule is to see all the goddesses naked. And wouldn't you know it, he still can't choose a winner!

The goddesses, figuring that all's fair in Golden Apples, immediately offer bribes. Hera offers kingship over Europe and Asia. Athena offers wisdom and skill in battle. These are both pretty good offers, but Aphrodite has noted that what Paris really likes are naked women. Therefore, she

offers him the most beautiful woman in the world—Helen of Sparta. Sold!

Unfortunately, Aphrodite fails to mention that Helen is already married...

The Oath of Tyndareus



“Helen” (Detail)
Evelyn de Morgan (1898)

Backstory: Sparta was ruled by King Tyndareus and his queen, Leda, with whom Zeus coupled, disguised as a swan. Because Leda was also consorting with her husband at around the same time, Tyndareus could not be sure which of her 4 children, hatched from 2 eggs, were his. (Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory in biology.)

But *we* know that Helen’s father was Zeus. He seems to have placed her on earth in order to decrease the surplus population.

When Helen reached a marriageable age, every prince in Greece came seeking her hand, bearing lavish gifts. Tyndareus saw all too clearly what would happen: Whomever was chosen to be Helen’s husband, the others would go to war against that man—and against Tyndareus. (Helen was already threatening to be a *casus belli*.)

Enter Odysseus, King of Ithaca, who alone among the suitors had brought no gift. Because (alone among the suitors) he didn’t want to marry Helen. He preferred her cousin, Penelope. Odysseus offered to show

Tyndareus a way out of this mess, if Tyndareus would secure Penelope for him. Sold!

Tyndareus called the suitors together and said he would honor his daughter’s choice, but first, all the suitors must swear an oath: Whomever Helen chose, the others must swear to defend and protect that man against any wrong done him that concerned the marriage. And thus they swore.



Various Suitors of Helen

Helen picked Menelaus—his brother Agamemnon had to be content with Helen’s half-sister Clytemnestra—Odysseus got Penelope, and all might have been well.

Except that Paris, restored as a prince of Troy, comes to Sparta on a visit—Menelaus is now king—and when he leaves for Troy, Helen goes with him. The Oath of Tyndareus is invoked, and the princes of Greece prepare for war.

The Gates of Aulis



The Sacred Deer of Artemis

The Greek fleet gathers at Aulis, there to launch the thousand ships later to be apostrophized by Christopher Marlowe. Agamemnon, having gotten there early, decides to pass the time by doing a little hunting. Bad choice.

Agamemnon kills a deer. Maybe it was an accident, maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was in the Sacred Grove of Artemis, maybe it wasn't. Maybe he boasted he was a better hunter than Artemis, maybe he didn't. Because Greek legend is hopelessly—oh, you know. But two things are sure. The deer was sacred to Artemis, and she isn't happy.

Note that up to this point, a lot of bad things have happened, but no one's blood has yet been shed. That's about to change. Because Artemis demands blood.



Artemis

Artemis stops the winds. No Greek will sail for Troy unless her demand is met. And what she demands is a sacrifice. A *human* sacrifice. The sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia.

Iphigenia and her mother Clytemnestra are summoned to Aulis. And it is then that the most terrible thing of all happens.

Iphigenia consents. *Consents...*

One might here write "Sold!" for a third time, but the call sticks in the larynx.

Euripides renders her words thus. "I give my body freely, on behalf of my country, for all the land of Greece. Lead me to the altar. May this gift from me bring you success. May you win the crown of victory and win thereafter a glorious homecoming. In peace and in good heart, I offer you my throat."



Sacrifice of Iphigenia, from a fresco

But because this is Greek legend, there is, of course, a contradictory story. At the last moment, it's said, Artemis substitutes a deer for Iphigenia and spirits her away. (Isn't killing a deer how this whole thing started?) But if this act of grace is what really happened, Clytemnestra doesn't believe it. Her revenge on Agamemnon will be a long time coming, but it will come, as surely as the winds that now fill the sails of the Greek armada, bound for Troy.

And there the Greeks will stay, through "ten years of futile, indecisive, noble, mean, tricky, bitter, jealous and only occasionally heroic battle." (Tuchman) At last Athena, an enemy of Troy ever since she lost the Golden Apple, inspires Odysseus to devise the Trojan Horse. You know what happens next...

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