Clytemnestra's Bind

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THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

Susan C Wilson



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For Jacqueline,
We shared such happy times immersed in the magic of Greece.

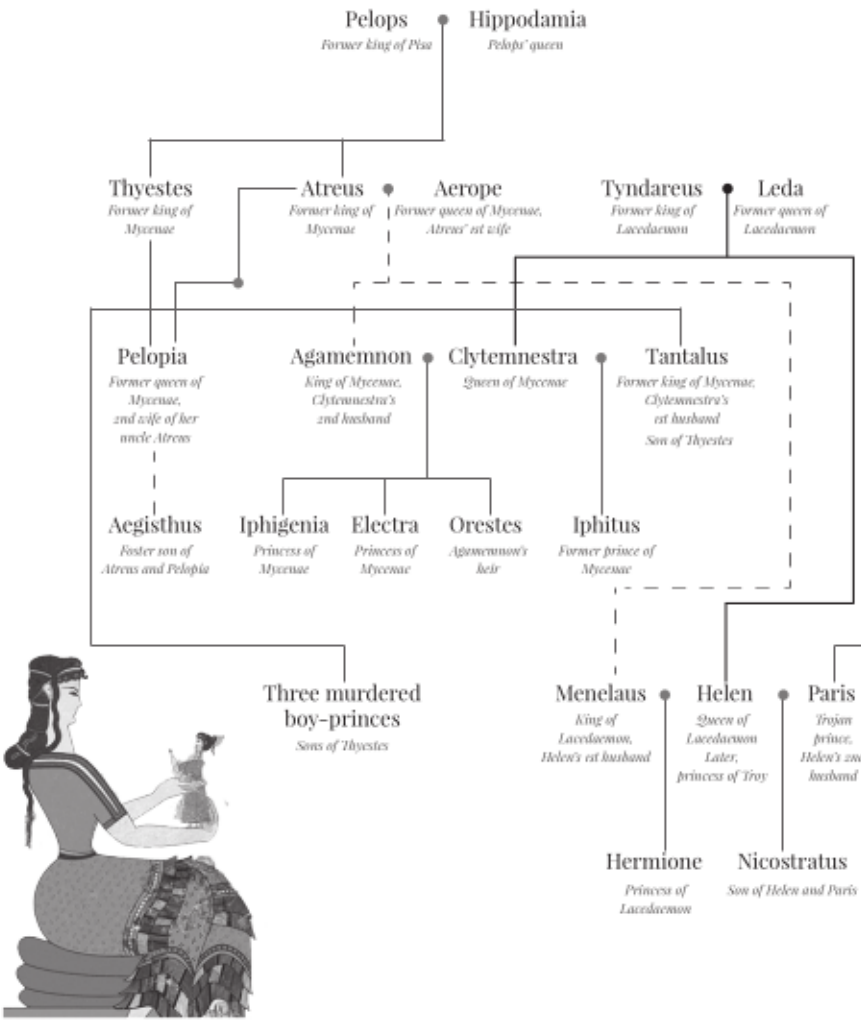
And it is the eternal rule that drops of blood spilled on the ground demand yet more blood.

Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*
(Translator: Herbert Weir Smyth)


THESSALY
Phthia
ACARNANIA
ITHACA
LOCRIS
EUBOEA
Dolphi
BOEOTIA
Aulis
Thebes
Athens
PELEPONNESE
Mycenae
ARGOLIS
SALAMIS
Lacedaemon
Pylos
LACONIA
IONIAN SEA
AEGEAN SEA
Troy
CYCLADES
N
W
E
S
BRONZE AGE GREECE
LAND OF THE ACHEANS

CHARACTERS APPEARING IN THE HOUSE OF ATREUS TRILOGY

HOUSES OF ATREUS & LACEDAEMON





HOUSE OF TROY

HOUSE OF AEACUS

Chiron
Teacher, healer

Laomedon — **Strymo**
Former king of Troy — *Former queen of Troy*

Endeis — **Aeacus** - - - **Menoetius**
Former queen of Aegina — *King of Aegina* — *Maternal half-brother of Aeacus*

Hecabe — **Priam** — **Hesione** — **Telamon** — **Periboea** — **Peleus** — **Thetis**
Queen of Troy — *King of Troy* — *Trojan princess, Telamon's slave* — *King of Salamis* — *Queen of Salamis* — *King of Phthia* — *Queen of Phthia*

Teucer
Prince of Salamis, archer

Aias
Prince of Salamis, war leader

Achilles — **Deidamia**
Leader of the Myrmidon warriors — *Princess of Scyros*

Neoptolemus
Prince of Scyros and Phthia

Andromache — **Hector** — **Cassandra** — **Polyxena** — **Deiphobus** — **Patroclus**
Hector's wife — *Trojan heir* — *Trojan princess* — *Trojan princess* — *Trojan prince* — *Healer*

Astyanax
Hector's heir



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part One	1
Part Two	71
Part Three	209
Character List – Mortals	269
Character List – Divinities	271

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Sometimes I hear murdered children in the corridors of the palace. I told my husband once. He said it was only foxes crying on the hillside below the citadel, pigs squealing within the walls. He hates to be reminded of his family's crimes, but the murdered children beg for justice. They sob and whisper, and I make plans.

My husband is waging war overseas. How natural it feels to rule in his place, instead of listening from the shadows while he decides our destinies. When he returns, I'll arrange a celebration feast. He will not attend it.

A homecoming marked the first of his family's crimes, and his homecoming will end them.

*

His father, Atreus, plotted the atrocity that began our troubles. Long years have seared it into my mind as if I'd been there. I heard it from Thyestes, Atreus' brother, who told it over and over in his drunken waking hours and in his screaming, nightwalking sleep. Thyestes and Atreus had cherished a bond of mutual loathing, which Thyestes considered unbreakable. A throne, of course, was the source of their enmity – the throne of Mycenae. Small wonder, then, that Thyestes experienced a pang of misgiving when Atreus invited him back to Mycenae for a reconciliation feast, after a spell in exile. But a man who takes no risks makes few gains.

The scene: Atreus' hall. A log fire crackles on the hearth. All else is silence – no bard, no tumblers, no guests attend Thyestes' homecoming celebration, besides his hard-faced host Atreus and, occupying a separate table, a boy of eight cheerless winters and a cringing lad of six.

Atreus' lips twitch in a rare smile. "Fill a bowl for my brother."

A slave lifts a lid from a tripod cauldron over the hearth, releasing a waft of something piggish, and carries a steaming bowl to Thyestes.

Thyestes raises the rim of the bowl to his mouth, tips a stew of some description down his throat. Greasy globules scald his oesophagus. He belches, offers his verdict: "Stinking. Still, I've known worse dangers than bellyache since you flung me into exile."

The smile doesn't reach Atreus' eyes. "That's enough of our quarrel, Thyestes. Our family is reunited, and more closely than ever. I've been thinking, if I made you Guardian of the Host would you stop hankering after my throne? You'd have landholdings second only to my own."

Thyestes scratches his neck, shrugs. "Might consider it. Not having any stew, Atreus? What about the whelps? Your youngest lad looks used to first and second helpings, third too, and licking the cauldron clean."

The younger boy rises, trots towards the hearth with his empty bowl.

"Sit down, greedy little turd!" shouts Atreus. "You'll eat when I tell you."

Crimson-faced, the boy shuffles back to his table. His brother quiets his sniffling with an elbow in the ribs.

The feast continues, hardly a feast at all. Atreus nibbles bread dipped in olive oil, and his sons do the same. The two boys and two men glance up at the sound of footsteps pattering on the balcony overlooking the hearth, the swish of tiered skirts, plumage of a bird in flight.

"Aerope, you spying bitch," Atreus bellows, and the bird – his queen – steals back to the balcony. "Get down here and show my brother your famous hospitality. I'm sure he's missed it."

While they wait for the queen to make her way downstairs, Atreus watches Thyestes, and Thyestes watches him back. An age seems to pass before the scarlet curtain in the doorway peels open and Aerope, stalked by an armed guard, enters the hall. The youngest boy jumps up and squeaks a filial greeting; the elder grabs the child's hand, jerks him back to his stool. The guard sets

a third stool at the children's table, and the queen accepts it. She sits with her head bowed. She wears a traditional open-fronted jacket designed to expose bare breasts, the nurturing potential of womankind. A thin blouse disappoints Thyestes' probing eyes.

"She covers her tits these days," says Atreus. "I'd make her veil her sly face too, if it didn't betray her secrets. Well, Aerope, aren't you greeting Thyestes? Doubtless you'd be friendlier if I left you alone together."

The queen murmurs, "Atreus, why don't you ask the bard to sing?"

"Woman, why don't you eat something? Perhaps I'd find you more palatable with some meat on your skeleton. What about you, Thyestes, how do you like my wife?"

"Just spit out whatever you have to say," says Thyestes.

"Oh, I won't be the only one spitting something out tonight. You've always wanted what was mine, haven't you, Thyestes?"

"If you mean the throne of Mycenae, it was never your birthright."

"No!" Atreus' fist crashes against the table. "I won it through merit. The Mycenaeans wanted me, they didn't want you. Our nephew was a fool to name us his joint successors when he went to war. If we'd ruled together, we'd have torn this kingdom apart."

"Only one arse can fit on a throne," agrees Thyestes.

"His Followers begged me to rule alone after he got himself killed. We were strangers in Mycenae, but the Mycenaeans knew you for what you are. And, be sure of this, they will always remain loyal to me. They have men's faithful hearts." Atreus tips his cup, tosses the contents in his wife's face.

Aerope sits frozen, makes no sound. Then she rises, dabs at her blouse with fluttering hands. Her younger son whimpers. The elder gnaws a hunk of bread.

"Did I give you leave?" shouts Atreus, and the queen falls back to her stool. "You took it anyway. Whore! I know what you did."

He gestures brusquely at the slave to refill Thyestes' bowl. Thyestes forces down another mouthful of stew. The seasoning

is pungent, probably to disguise rancid meat. His stomach, though, has tensed for a different reason. Somehow his brother has learned the truth at last.

"It was you who stole the fleece of kingship," Atreus accuses Aerope.

Her gaze fastens on the flexing and unflexing of his fingers.

"You gave it to Thyestes so he could wear it on my coronation day. Because of your treachery, the Mycenaeans decided the gods had chosen him instead of me. We spent years in exile before I won back my throne and exiled him. Did you think he'd seize you too, make you his queen? Stupid bitch. Well, Thyestes, was she a good tumble before you threw her away?"

Thyestes picks a sliver of gristle from between his teeth with his thumbnail and flicks it at a hound padding hungrily around the hall. "As you say."

Soundless tears mingle with the wine on Aerope's cheeks. A womanly mistake, to imagine a lover must love her in turn, to believe he will deliver her from a miserable marriage bed. Some women see only what they long for, raise towers on foundations of wax.

"A scribe told me of her whoredom after I caught him trying to crawl inside her skirts himself," says Atreus. "He saw the two of you, all those years ago, sprawled over a bench in her throne room. Seemed to think his tardy information would save him. I cut off his cock and watched him bleed to death in the courtyard."

"Can't blame a man for trying," says Thyestes.

Veins bulge in Atreus' neck. "Blame? If I'd known how far you'd betrayed me, I'd have killed you when I won back my throne, not let you fornicate in exile with other men's wives."

"It certainly hasn't all been bad," says Thyestes. "But enough now, stop flirting with me. Return my spear and we'll decide this as men, or else I'll take my leave. Your wife's hospitality is always my pleasure, but I've other beds to warm."

At last a smile reaches Atreus' eyes. "Oh? Thinking of visiting another old lover or two, catching up with some stray pups? I always say a man should acquaint himself with his children. Yet you haven't recognised yours tonight."

Thyestes frowns at the two boys seated with their mother. The elder has Atreus' dirty-bronze hair and sunburned complexion. The younger is paler, lentils and curds. Thyestes himself is dark as an Egyptian.

"They're your brats, Atreus."

"Agamemnon and Menelaus? No doubt. Well, off you go, Thyestes, and take some stew with you."

Before Thyestes manages a scornful rebuff, the queen's sword-wielding guard seizes him. He considers resisting, but he didn't survive in exile by acting the hothead. The guard steers him to the tripod cauldron over the hearth. The slave raises the lid. Cold bronze presses against the nape of Thyestes' neck, makes him bow. Steam stings his eyes. His cheeks swell against a strange familiar reek. He peers through the swirling vapour, roars, falls back, clutches his mouth.

The heads of his sons have an amber sheen. Their hair sways in the bubbling sauce like tentacles. It catches at three pairs of armless hands, which bob around the children's faces as if girlishly directing attention towards pretty lips, a dimpled cheek.

Thyestes grapples with the guard, screaming, kicking, lashing out. He thinks he will die tonight, would welcome death, if first he kills his brother. Atreus has doomed them both, made them abominations in the eyes of the gods. He has daubed a circle in blood, a prison for the generations, a cycle of eternal destruction. Fathers must avenge murdered sons, and sons avenge murdered fathers, brothers will kill brothers, nephews kill uncles, and on and on it goes.

When men plunge a family into self-destruction, women must find a way to break the curse.