



Iphigenia in Tauris

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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ACT THE FIRST.

SCENE I.

A Grove before the Temple of Diana.

IPHIGENIA.

Beneath your leafy gloom, ye waving boughs Of this
old, shady, consecrated grove, As in the goddess'
silent sanctuary, With the same shudd'ring feeling
forth I step, As when I trod it first, nor ever here Doth
my unquiet spirit feel at home. Long as the mighty
will, to which I bow, Hath kept me here conceal'd,
still, as at first, I feel myself a stranger. For the sea
Doth sever me, alas! from those I love, And day by day
upon the shore I stand, My soul still seeking for the
land of Greece. But to my sighs, the hollow-sounding
waves Bring, save their own hoarse murmurs, no
reply. Alas for him! who friendless and alone, Remote
from parents and from brethren dwells; From him
grief snatches every coming joy Ere it doth reach his
lip. His restless thoughts Revert for ever to his
father's halls, Where first to him the radiant sun
unclos'd The gates of heav'n; where closer, day by
day, Brothers and sisters, leagu'd in pastime sweet,
Around each other twin'd the bonds of love. I will not
judge the counsel of the gods;

Yet, truly, woman's lot doth merit pity. Man rules
alike at home and in the field, Nor is in foreign climes
without resource; Possession gladdens him, him
conquest crowns, And him an honourable death

awaits. How circumscrib'd is woman's destiny!
Obedience to a harsh, imperious lord, Her duty, and
her comfort; sad her fate, Whom hostile fortune
drives to lands remote: Thus I, by noble Thoas, am
detain'd, Bound with a heavy, though a sacred chain.
Oh! with what shame, Diana, I confess That with
repugnance I perform these rites For thee, divine
protectress! unto whom I would in freedom dedicate
my life. In thee, Diana, I have always hop'd, And still I
hope in thee, who didst infold Within the holy shelter
of thine arm The outcast daughter of the mighty king.
Daughter of Jove! hast thou from ruin'd Troy Led back
in triumph to his native land The mighty man, whom
thou didst sore afflict, His daughter's life in sacrifice
demanding,— Hast thou for him, the godlike
Agamemnon, Who to thine altar led his darling child,
Preserv'd his wife, Electra, and his son. His dearest
treasures?—then at length restore Thy suppliant also
to her friends and home, And save her, as thou once
from death didst save, So now, from living here, a
second death.

SCENE II.
IPHIGENIA. ARKAS.
ARKAS.

The king hath sent me hither, and commands
To hail Diana's priestess. This the day,
On which for new and wonderful success,
Tauris her goddess thanks. The king and host
Draw near,—I come to herald their approach.

IPHIGENIA.

We are prepar'd to give them worthy greeting;
Our goddess doth behold with gracious eye
The welcome sacrifice from Thoas' hand.

ARKAS.

Oh, priestess, that thine eye more mildly beam'd,—
Thou much-rever'd one,—that I found thy glance,
O consecrated maid, more calm, more bright,
To all a happy omen! Still doth grief,
With gloom mysterious, shroud thy inner mind;
Still, still, through many a year we wait in vain
For one confiding utt'rance from thy breast.

Long as I've known thee in this holy place,
That look of thine hath ever made me shudder;
And, as with iron bands, thy soul remains
Lock'd in the deep recesses of thy breast.

IPHIGENIA.

As doth become the exile and the orphan.

ARKAS.

Dost thou then here seem exil'd and an orphan?

IPHIGENIA.

Can foreign scenes our fatherland replace?

ARKAS.

Thy fatherland is foreign now to thee.

IPHIGENIA.

Hence is it that my bleeding heart ne'er heals.
In early youth, when first my soul, in love,
Held father, mother, brethren fondly twin'd,
A group of tender germs, in union sweet,
We sprang in beauty from the parent stem,
And heavenward grew. An unrelenting curse
Then seiz'd and sever'd me from those I lov'd,
And wrench'd with iron grasp the beauteous bands.
It vanish'd then, the fairest charm of youth,
The simple gladness of life's early dawn;
Though sav'd, I was a shadow of myself,
And life's fresh joyance bloom'd in me no more.

ARKAS.

If thus thou ever dost lament thy fate,
I must accuse thee of ingratitude.

IPHIGENIA.

Thanks have you ever.

ARKAS.

Not the honest thanks
Which prompt the heart to offices of love;
The joyous glance, revealing to the host
A grateful spirit, with its lot content.
When thee a deep mysterious destiny
Brought to this sacred fane, long years ago.
To greet thee, as a treasure sent from heaven,
With reverence and affection, Thoas came.
Benign and friendly was this shore to thee,
Which had before each stranger's heart appall'd,
For, till thy coming, none e'er trod our realm
But fell, according to an ancient rite,
A bloody victim at Diana's shrine.

IPHIGENIA.

Freely to breathe alone is not to live.
Say, is it life, within this holy fane,
Like a poor ghost around its sepulchre
To linger out my days? Or call you that
A life of conscious happiness and joy,
When every hour, dream'd listlessly away,
Leads to those dark and melancholy days,
Which the sad troop of the departed spend
In self-forgetfulness on Lethe's shore?
A useless life is but an early death;
This, woman's lot, is eminently mine.

ARKAS.

I can forgive, though I must needs deplore, The noble
pride which underrates itself It robs thee of the
happiness of life. And hast thou, since thy coming
here, done nought? Who cheer'd the gloomy temper
of the king? Who hath with gentle eloquence
annull'd, From year to year, the usage of our sires, By
which, a victim at Diana's shrine, Each stranger
perish'd, thus from certain death Sending so oft the
rescued captive home? Hath not Diana, harbouring no
revenge For this suspension of her bloody rites,

In richest measure heard thy gentle prayer?
On joyous pinions o'er the advancing host,
Doth not triumphant conquest proudly soar?
And feels not every one a happier lot,
Since Thoas, who so long hath guided us
With wisdom and with valour, sway'd by thee,
The joy of mild benignity approves,
Which leads him to relax the rigid claims
Of mute submission? Call thyself useless! Thou,
Thou, from whose being o'er a thousand hearts,
A healing balsam flows? when to a race.
To whom a god consign'd thee, thou dost prove
A fountain of perpetual happiness,
And from this dire inhospitable shore
Dost to the stranger grant a safe return?

IPHIGENIA.

The little done doth vanish to the mind,
Which forward sees how much remains to do.

ARKAS.

Him dost thou praise, who underrates his deeds?

IPHIGENIA.