

**Martin Robertson**

## **Pelopia and Thyestes**

### **I**

Under the spring sun moves the innocent band  
white-dressed, green garlanded, under the blue  
bright sky, keeping their rhythm fairly true,  
snaking in line or circle, hand in hand

between temple and altar and the crowd  
of worshippers, the crowded offerings,  
statues, tripods, the rest, to ringing strings  
and high pipe, pretty and innocently proud.

But at such fêtes, that honour may be done  
duly to deity, fine steers are brought;  
and by the altar where they slashed the throat  
blood stood in puddles, slopped on grass and stone.

The leader skirts these hazards. Several more  
follow her skill. One, dreaming after these,  
treads in the slippery mess, skids to her knees,  
gets up, her dress and hands dripping with gore.

Red smears down her white skirt, the red of shame  
hot in her face, friends giggling, crowd's rude cracks  
barking about her, the poor child makes tracks  
out of the temenos. Outside she came

to silence—or rather to cicada-shrill  
stillness, where thickly-bushed steep mountain-side  
broke to a torrent summer had not yet dried.  
On hard bare feet she hurried down the hill.

## II

The maddened father, fed  
by his own brother's hate  
his own children for meat,  
learning the horror, fled  
... night and day, day and night...  
came to the Delphic fane,  
burst in (uncleansed his stain)  
crying on the Lord of Light

not to be purified  
but to be shown the way  
to vengeance—how repay?

The oracle replied:

“Vengeance condign may come  
indeed, but it must grow  
from seed yourself shall sow  
in your own daughter's womb.”

One horror makes another  
easy, makes heart and mind  
horror-blunt, horror-blind  
—a sword drawn on a mother,  
a daughter's innocence  
perverted to a tool  
of irresistible  
perpetual revenge.

His daughter, sent away  
(the hospitable stranger  
would hold her out of danger  
against a happier day)  
must now be coming on  
her ripe, her bearing age.  
Still in his cloud of rage  
he came to Sicyon.

He heard the hum and buzz,  
the shrilling and the twang,  
snatches of what they sang,  
“Goddess, be good to us”,  
knew his polluted state  
(the cloud a moment thinning)  
—for that unwitting sinning  
dared not approach the fête,

crept in the scrub below  
the holy place. He lay  
under the hot, bright day,  
watched bright, cool water flow,  
drowsing (he had not slept  
nights, days) saw—in a dream?—  
a girl come to the stream  
and strip herself. He leapt

awake. The girl was there.  
Slender and firm and white,  
formed for a man’s delight,  
lovely and unaware,  
he watched her kneel and bend.  
She turned her face. It all  
—horror, lust, oracle—  
flared to one hideous end.

### III

She fought the hard sinews, the horribly  
cloaked face she could not glimpse; but she was caught,  
trapped, pinned on the rough bank; yet still she fought,  
biting him, scratching him, and suddenly

this was a hilt her fingers fastened on.  
Twisted, no purchase, she tugged pitifully,  
and then at last the naked blade came free. . .  
but he had done his business and was gone.

She sat a long time on the stony ground,  
the naked sword across her naked thighs,  
staring down at it with unseeing eyes.  
Then she saw it, and knew it, and there found

a truth she dare not meet. Trembling and cold  
she wrung the water from her blood-cleared dress,  
sluiced her own dried blood from the aching place,  
put the wet dress back on. She hid the sword,

seeming to hide her knowledge and his deed;  
straightened herself, turned slowly, and still slow  
made her way up the hill again, as though  
heavy already with the vengeful seed.