Agamemnon

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus is considered by many to be the father of tragedy. He is the first known playwright to have written characters that interact with each other onstage, rather than just speaking to the Chorus. Very little is known about Aeschylus' life for certain. Some accounts say that he worked on a vineyard until Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre, visited him in a vision and told him to become a playwright. In addition to being a playwright, Aeschylus and his brothers were also soldiers, and fought during the Persian Wars. His award-winning play, *The Persians*, is surely influenced by his time on the battlefield. Of the ninety-odd plays he wrote, only seven survive today. According to one account, Aeschylus was killed by a falling turtle, which was dropped out of the sky by an eagle. His two sons also became playwrights and poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events that take place in *Agamemnon*, and *The Oresteia* in general, would have been well known to the play's original audience. According to Greek mythology, the Trojan War began as a result of Paris, a Trojan prince, stealing Helen, who was married to the Greek king Menelaus. Menelaus' brother Agamemnon led a fleet of troops to Troy to avenge Paris' insult, and the following siege lasted ten years. The play begins the moment the Trojan War ends, but at the time that the play was first performed, the Trojan War was nearly a millennium in the past.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Agamemnon is the first play in a trilogy of tragedies called *The Oresteia*. The trilogy focuses on a chain of revenges that occur in the House of Atreus. When *Agamemnon* was originally performed in 458 BCE, it was performed along with the other two plays, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*. Following the trilogy a fourth play called *Proteus* would have been performed, but the text of *Proteus* has been lost. The most famous account of the Trojan War (the setting for *Agamemnon*) is the *Iliad*, by the epic poet Homer. The other great tragedians of Aeschylus' era (whose works still survive) were Euripides and Sophocles.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Agamemnon*
- **Where Written:** Greece
- **When Published:** c. 458 BCE
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Tragic Drama
- **Setting:** The city of Argos, Greece, outside of the royal house of Atreus
- **Climax:** When Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon
- **Antagonist:** Clytemnestra

EXTRA CREDIT

Ancient Greek Staging. At the time *Agamemnon* was originally staged, it would have been performed in a huge amphitheater. The actors would have worn character masks so that the huge audience could distinguish whom each performer represented. The Chorus would have been comprised of a large number of men, and most of that role's text would have been chanted or sung. In Ancient Greek stagings, violence never occurred onstage, so Agamemnon and Cassandra's bodies would have been revealed after their deaths on a special rolling platform called an *ekkyklema*.

Civil War Adaptation. Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a three-part trilogy based on *The Oresteia*. The first play in the trilogy, *The Homecoming*, is an adaptation of *Agamemnon*, and focuses on the wife of a Civil War general, who exacts revenge on him when he returns from the Civil War.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play is set sometime in the 12th or 13th centuries BCE, and begins in Argos, Greece. A Watchman, stationed on top of the palace, waits for a signal fire indicating that the ten-year Trojan War (between the Greeks and the Trojans) has come to an end. He sees the fire light and rushes out to tell queen Clytemnestra the good news.

The Chorus, a group of elderly men too old to have fought in the war, come out and explain that the Trojan War began out of a feud between Paris, the Trojan prince, and Menelaus, the Greek king. Menelaus is the brother of Agamemnon, who is Clytemnestra's husband and the king of Argos. Paris stole Menelaus' wife Helen, and as a result Menelaus and Agamemnon led a fleet to Troy to avenge the insult. The Chorus also tells us that in order to persuade the goddess Artemis to allow his fleet to pass, Agamemnon sacrificed his and Clytemnestra's daughter, Iphigenia.

Clytemnestra enters and the Chorus asks why fires of sacrifice are being lit around the palace. Clytemnestra tells the Chorus that Troy has fallen, but they remain skeptical, so she explains the system of signal fires that allowed the news to travel so

quickly. The Chorus then thanks the gods and muses on the gods' tendency to punish mortals who are prideful. A Herald enters and confirms that Troy has indeed fallen, and recounts some of the hardships of the war. Clytemnestra chides the Chorus for being skeptical but the Herald admits that not all the news is good – a storm has separated Agamemnon and Menelaus' fleets, and Menelaus is missing.

The Chorus details how Helen incited the fall of Troy. Finally the Chorus welcomes Agamemnon, who enters riding in a chariot with Cassandra, Paris' sister—a prophet of the god Apollo, and Agamemnon's new slave. Clytemnestra meets Agamemnon outside the palace and implores him to enter into the palace walking on a carpet of **purple tapestries**. After his victory in Troy, Agamemnon is reluctant to do anything that may be seen as an act of defiance to the gods (as this might be), but Clytemnestra convinces him to walk on the tapestries, and he does so.

The Chorus suggests an impending sense of dread for what's to come. Clytemnestra tries to force Cassandra to go into the palace, but Cassandra remains silent, and Clytemnestra gives up and leaves her in the chariot. Cassandra, possessed by the god Apollo, begins to cry out, and her thoughts eventually form a prophecy in which she predicts Agamemnon's murder in detail, as well as her own death. She enters into the palace to meet her fate.

All of a sudden, we hear Agamemnon from within the palace screaming that he is being attacked. The Chorus breaks out into chaos, unsure of how to respond. A blood-soaked Clytemnestra appears, and the palace doors open to reveal the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytemnestra explains that she has committed the murders to avenge her daughter Iphigenia's sacrifice. Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover and Agamemnon's cousin, joins Clytemnestra and explains that the revenge is twofold—long ago, Agamemnon's father Atreus had killed and cooked Aegisthus' brothers and fed them to their father, Thyestes. As Aegisthus' soldiers surround the Chorus, the Chorus prays that Agamemnon's son Orestes will return to Argos to set things right.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Agamemnon – The king of Argos, and one of the commanders of the Greek fleet. At the start of the play, he is returning victorious from the Trojan War. Although he is a well-respected leader, he does not have strong resolve and can be convinced to act against his better judgment. Furthermore, not all of the citizens of Argos have supported his Trojan campaign. He is at times boastful and arrogant. Clytemnestra convinces Agamemnon to tread on the **purple tapestries** – an act of defiance to the Gods – and this misstep seals his grizzly fate.

Clytemnestra – The queen of Argos, and its ruler in her husband Agamemnon's absence. She murders Agamemnon to avenge the death of their daughter, Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed during the Trojan War to ensure his fleet's passage into Troy. She also murders Cassandra, Agamemnon's concubine. Clytemnestra is decisive, resolute, and aggressive, and her femininity is often called into question. However, she is able mask her anger in public moments in order to carry out her revenge plot. The nobility of her revenge is complicated by her affair with Aegisthus.

Cassandra – The slave Agamemnon has taken back to Argos as his prize for winning the Trojan War. She is the daughter of Priam, king of Troy. A priestess of Apollo, she has the gift of prophecy, and she predicts the events of the play as well as those to come later in *The Oresteia*.

The Chorus – A group of elderly citizens of Argos. These men were too old to fight in the Trojan War, but they have vast knowledge of the history of the war, as well as Agamemnon's family and ancestors. Throughout the play, they provide a proxy for the audience and provide them with important contextual information.

Aegisthus – Clytemnestra's lover and accomplice, and Agamemnon's cousin. Aegisthus and Agamemnon's fathers were brothers. Agamemnon's father Atreus killed several of Aegisthus' brothers and fed them to their father Thyestes. After Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon, Aegisthus justifies his involvement by saying that the murder of Agamemnon also avenges Atreus's crime against Aegisthus's family.

Menelaus – Does not appear onstage during the play. Agamemnon's brother and King of Sparta. When Paris runs away to Troy with his wife Helen, he and Agamemnon raise a fleet to conquer Troy. During the play, we learn that a storm has separated Menelaus' fleet from Agamemnon's, and that Menelaus' whereabouts are unknown.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Watchman – A guard at the palace who has been stationed to watch for a signal fire from Troy indicating the end of the war.

The Herald – A military messenger who brings the news that Agamemnon's fleet has returned safely.

Iphigenia – Does not appear onstage during the play. The daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. Agamemnon sacrifices her during the Trojan War to win the favor of the goddess Artemis.

Artemis – Does not appear onstage during the play. The goddess, of hunting, animals, virginity, and childbirth. During the Trojan War, she to blocks the path of Agamemnon's fleet until he makes a sacrifice to her. She is the sister of the god Apollo.

Paris – Does not appear onstage during the play. The prince of Troy and Cassandra's brother.

Helen – Does not appear onstage during the play. Helen was married to Menelaus, but ten years prior to the start of the play, Paris abducted Helen and brought her to Troy, inciting the Trojan War. She is Clytemnestra's sister.

Apollo – Does not appear onstage during the play. The god of sun, light, and knowledge, and Artemis' brother. Apollo was in love with Cassandra and made her a prophet, but when she refused to bear his child, he cursed her so that no one would ever believe her prophecies.

Atreus – Does not appear onstage during the play. Agamemnon's father. He murdered his brother Thyestes' children and fed them to him.

Thyestes – Does not appear onstage during the play. Atreus' brother and Aegisthus' father.

Priam – Does not appear onstage during the play. King of Troy and father of Cassandra and Paris.

Orestes – Does not appear onstage during the play. The son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Orestes returns later in the trilogy to avenge his father's murder.

The Furies – Goddesses who pursue and destroy anyone who "prospers in unjust ways." The Furies become more important in the two plays that follow *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and especially *The Eumenides*.

Zeus – The king of the gods and the god of thunder.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

REVENGE

Agamemnon is the first play in *The Oresteia*, Aeschylus' trilogy of tragedies which portray a set of revenges, each leading to the next in a vicious cycle, in the House of Atreus (the family and descendants of Atreus, Agamemnon's father). Revenge is the backbone of *The Oresteia*, and it drives most of the action of *Agamemnon*. The play's gradual build towards Clytemnestra's violent revenge on her husband Agamemnon and the upheaval resulting from that act are the central focus of the play, but simultaneously gods, militaries, and mortals from many generations are also exacting their own vengeances against each other. The play begins as Troy falls and Agamemnon returns home after ten years away at war. The war he is returning from was itself an act of revenge, in which Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus raised an enormous fleet to attack Troy after the Trojan prince Paris stole Menelaus' wife Helen. Agamemnon's homecoming, after the Greek victory at Troy, is celebrated by the citizens of Argos as a revenge well executed. However, the celebration does not last for long.

Shortly after his return, Agamemnon is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra in a multi-layered act of revenge. On the surface, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon to avenge the death of their daughter Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed before the Trojan War to appease the goddess Artemis, who had stopped Agamemnon's fleet from being able to reach Troy. In fact, Artemis demanded this tribute from Agamemnon in particular as a way to get revenge on him for once insulting *her*. Clytemnestra is also upset that Agamemnon has brought Cassandra, a princess and prophet of the god Apollo, from Troy to be his concubine (slave and mistress). Killing her husband is thus also an act of revenge for Agamemnon's infidelity, despite Clytemnestra's own infidelity with Aegisthus. Finally, Agamemnon's death also serves as a kind of multi-generational revenge for Aegisthus (Agamemnon's cousin)—not just against Agamemnon himself, but also against Agamemnon's entire family. Decades earlier, Agamemnon's father Atreus had killed Aegisthus's brothers and then cooked them as food, which he then served to Aegisthus' father Thyestes. Agamemnon's death thus completes that particular cycle of revenge as well.

In Greek drama and mythology, the concept of revenge is often embodied by the Furies. These divine women were said to live beneath the earth and were thought to be responsible for acts of revenge. Throughout *Agamemnon*, the Chorus's growing sense of worry and dread often comes from their belief that the action of the play could invoke the wrath of the Furies—especially after Cassandra prophecies that blood will be spilt in the house of Atreus.

As the play draws to a close, both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus describe the murder as a successful offering to the Furies in order to right Agamemnon's offenses against them—that justice has been served. Yet the fact that the action of the play is preceded and driven by so many interrelated revenges suggests that Clytemnestra's belief can't possibly be correct—revenge always leads to more revenge. In fact, the murder of Agamemnon propels the next set of revenges in *The Oresteia*, and so the cycle of revenge and bloodshed continues.

WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

The historical context and political climate in *Agamemnon* revolves around the Trojan War, which comes to an end in the first moments of the play. Each of the characters is eventually forced to grapple with how the outcome of this colossal war has affected their lives. The Chorus not only provides us with key historical information

about the war, but also offers important emotional perspective that guides the audience's understanding of the war's personal effects. Although the Chorus is sometimes unsure of the central characters' thoughts and feelings, they give us an essential window into the morale of the citizens of Argos – the Greek city of which Agamemnon is king – during and after the war. The Herald, and later Cassandra, also provide information about the sorry state of Troy after it has fallen, drawing attention to the devastation that Agamemnon and his army have left behind. These views on the turmoil in Troy serve as an important comparison to the havoc that ensues in Argos upon Agamemnon's return.

Along with the historical and dramatic context of the war, Aeschylus frames the war's aftermath with two important personal examples of post-war suffering through Clytemnestra and Cassandra's experiences. Cassandra has fallen from Trojan royalty to prisoner of war, and her grief at her new station is apparent from the moment she first cries out to the gods. Although Clytemnestra is married to the leader of the winning army, the war's victory is sour and mournful for her as well. Victory has only been made possible by dreadful sacrifice—in this case the literal sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. The aftermath of Agamemnon's wartime decision to sacrifice his daughter becomes the central narrative of the play, and this narrative demonstrates that the decisions made during wartime have extensive implications that go beyond simple military victory and defeat.

GENDER ROLES

Ancient Greek society's expectations of men and women and the significance of these roles come to the forefront in *Agamemnon*'s central characters. In this society men were expected to be strong, decisive, and honorable, while women were thought to be passive, and were expected to be subservient and silent. The Watchman, the Chorus, and the Herald laud Agamemnon for fulfilling the duties expected of a man and for being a solid and fair leader, yet his actions don't always align with societal expectations for men.

Agamemnon shows signs of weakness before the play has even begun. According to the mythology upon which the play is based, Agamemnon at first decides not to sacrifice his daughter, but is then convinced by a prophet to do so. We see a similar situation unfold when Clytemnestra convinces the supposedly steadfast king to walk on the **purple cloths** when entering the palace, even though Agamemnon senses that the gods will be upset by this action. Agamemnon's indecisiveness is not considered manly, and consequently leads his downfall.

Clytemnestra's femininity is also constantly called into question, but she *uses* those societal expectations to help get her way. Clytemnestra demonstrates an awareness of female gender norms and uses or discards them at will to her own advantage. Nearly every male character in the play criticizes Clytemnestra for exhibiting qualities associated with men, and in the end, these very qualities—decisiveness, aggression, and sense of justice—are in fact what allow her to carry out her revenge plot. At the same time, it is important to note that Clytemnestra is later murdered by her own son Orestes in the next installment of *The Oresteia*, and that her death can be viewed as a punishment for breaking the conventions of femininity in Ancient Greek society.

FATE AND THE GODS

Throughout the play, very little happens that hasn't already been prophesized or predetermined. The Chorus often expresses the idea that ultimately the gods have total control over the fates of the mortals who populate the story. The first major prophecy occurs before the play even begins, when Agamemnon is advised to sacrifice his daughter in order to get the advantage in the Trojan War. This prophecy and Agamemnon's reaction to it create the given circumstances of the play. Afterwards, many characters sense a foreboding unrest in Argos, and this feeling is then illuminated by the most important prophecy in the play: Cassandra's prediction of the murders that will take place.

Agamemnon is concerned with pleasing the gods, and when he is convinced to ignore this instinct, his downfall begins. By giving the goddess Artemis a sacrifice, Agamemnon is able to win the Trojan War. When he returns home, however, Clytemnestra convinces Agamemnon to walk on the **purple cloths**, making him seem unfavorably arrogant to the gods, and thus deserving of their wrath. Cassandra's prophecy also alludes to punishment for an old injustice in the House of Atreus, which Aegisthus later clarifies is Atreus' grisly murder of his nephews. No matter his individual actions, Agamemnon is always fated to pay for his father's misdeeds.

Perhaps the most fascinating type of predetermination or fate in the play relates to those ever-present cycles of revenge. The philosophy behind *Agamemnon* and the rest of *The Oresteia* seems to make the case that once the cycle has begun, one revenge will inevitably cause another—because each revenge involves the necessity of punishing someone who broke some divine law—and yet each act of revenge itself then breaks another divine law. This cause and effect relationship, in some sense, functions as a kind of destiny for all mortals caught up within it, and can only end when some external, *non*-mortal force ends the cycle. Artemis' revenge on Agamemnon and the steps necessary to quell it cause the events of this play, while Clytemnestra's revenge on Agamemnon causes the events of the next play, and so forth. The treatment of these revenges as an inevitability makes the debate of gods (fate) versus free will secondary to the act of revenge itself.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PURPLE TAPESTRIES

When Agamemnon arrives at the palace, Clytemnestra convinces him to enter into the palace as a returning conqueror walking on a luxurious swath of purple tapestries. Agamemnon is aware that walking on these cloths may be unfavorable in the eyes of the gods — that the gods may see his walking on the cloths as a sign of excessive arrogance — yet he does so anyway. The tapestries thus signify Agamemnon's act of *hubris*: an act (however small) of pride or defiance to the gods that eventually leads to downfall.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harvard University Press edition of *Aeschylus Volume 2* published in 1926.

Lines 1-354 Quotes

But I hope
the master of this house may come home soon,
so I can grasp his welcome hand in mine.
As for all the rest, I'm saying nothing.
A great ox stands on my tongue. But this house,
if it could speak, might tell some stories.
I speak to those who know about these things.
For those who don't, there's nothing I remember.

Related Characters: The Watchman (speaker), Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33-39

Explanation and Analysis

As the play begins, the Watchman sets the scene for a complex, multi-generational tragedy. The Watchman waits for his king, Agamemnon, to return from the Trojan War. And yet he feels a deep sense of unease--not so much about Agamemnon but about Agamemnon's home. Greek audiences would have understood that the Watchman is referring to the curse of Agamemnon's family--a curse that began when Agamemnon's father cooked his brother's own children and fed them to his brother. The gods vowed to punish Agamemnon's entire family (the House of Atreus) for the evil act. Now, it seems, the god's punishment has extended to Agamemnon himself--and this is foreshadowed because all the people of Argos know that something is wrong in the royal house.

Then Agamemnon, the older king, spoke up:
"It's harsh not to obey this fate—
but to go through with it is harsh as well,
to kill my child, the glory of my house,
to stain a father's hands before the altar
with streams of virgin's blood.
Which of my options is not evil?
How can I just leave this fleet,
and let my fellow warriors down?
Their passionate demand for sacrifice
to calm the winds lies within their rights—
even the sacrifice of virgin blood.
So be it. All may be well."

But when Agamemnon strapped on
the harsh yoke of necessity,
his spirits changed, and his intentions
became profane, unholy, unsanctified.
He undertook an act beyond all daring.
Troubles come, above all, from delusions
inciting men to rash designs, to evil.
So Agamemnon steeled his heart
to make his own daughter the sacrifice,
an offering for the Achaean fleet...

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Iphigenia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206-229

Explanation and Analysis

In this "flashback," we learn from the Greek Chorus that Agamemnon previously sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to ensure a safe voyage to Troy (where he was headed to start the Trojan War). Agamemnon's intentions were noble at first. The goddess Artemis sent winds to stop the Greek ships from reaching Troy, and the sacrifice of Iphigenia was demanded to appease her--but Agamemnon refused to kill his daughter. Eventually, though, Agamemnon gave into his loyalty to his crew mates, as well as his own selfishness: to ensure that the ships would arrive in Troy (and presumably

achieve great glory, riches, and revenge) he killed his own daughter.

The Chorus characterizes Agamemnon's action as ambiguous but ultimately unholy. Agamemnon may have been looking out for his fellow troops and appeasing a goddess, but in doing so, he sacrificed his loyalty to his own family--the ultimate crime in ancient Greece. Just like his father (the source of the curse on Agamemnon's family), Agamemnon has slaughtered his own family members, adding to the cycle of vengeance and punishment that haunts the House of Atreus. He is, in short, inviting punishment from the gods.

CHORUS
Is this report reliable? Is there proof?
CLYTEMNESTRA
Of course there is. Unless some god deceives me.
CHORUS
Has some vision persuaded you of this,
something in a dream, perhaps?
CLYTEMNESTRA
Not at all.
As if I'd listen to some dozing brain.
CHORUS
Perhaps some unfledged rumour raised your hopes?
CLYTEMNESTRA
Now you're insulting my intelligence,
as if I were a youngster, just a child.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271-276

Explanation and Analysis

Here the Greek Chorus asks Queen Clytemnestra for news of the Trojan War. She replies that the war is won: Agamemnon's troops have finally stormed the city and accomplished their goals.

Strangely, the Greek Chorus seems to question the Queen's authority again and again--how is it possible, the Chorus asks, that she could have such specific news of the war? (In the following passage, Clytemnestra replies that a system of signal fires alerted her to Agamemnon's victory).

The Chorus's behavior is unusual in that it seems to be designed to clarify a potential plot-hole. It's a little implausible that Clytemnestra could know what happened in Troy *before* Agamemnon's return, but her forewarning is crucial to the plot of the play (she's been plotting even before Agamemnon returns). There are even some scholars who have argued that Clytemnestra is lying: she lit the fires herself. Another point to draw from the scene is that Clytemnestra's word is considered automaticallyquestionablebecause she's a woman: inClytemnestra's society, women are treated like second-class citizens (indeed, they're not citizens at all).

Lines 355-782 Quotes

The people's voice, once angered,
can create dissent, ratifying a curse
which now must have its way.
And so, in my anxiety, I wait,
listening for something murky,
something emerging from the gloom.
For gods aren't blind to men who kill.
In time, black agents of revenge,
the Furies, wear down and bring to nothing
the fortunes of a man who prospers
in unjust ways. They wear him out,
reverse his luck, and bring him at last
among the dead. There's no remedy.
To boast too much of one's success
is dangerous—the high mountain peak
is struck by Zeus' lightning bolt.
I'd choose wealth no one could envy.
May I never be the sort of man
who puts whole cities to the sword.
Let me never see myself enslaved,
my life in someone else's power.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Agamemnon, Zeus, The Furies

Related Themes:

Page Number: 455-475

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Chorus spells out the relationship between pride and tragedy in Greek drama. There is no greater sin in ancient Greece than excessive pride, or *hubris*. An overly proud man is practically begging for his comeuppance from the gods--as the Chorus explains (in rather personal terms), prideful men, especially men who've gained their fame and success through violence, will be punished by the gods, or in particular the Furies (whom we'll meet later on).

In short, the Chorus sketches a crude system of justice: climb too high in life, and you'll be "struck down" by Zeus (this is echoed in another famous Greek myth--the story of Icarus). The passage is very important because, as we'll see, Agamemnon is guilty of many sins, not the least of which is his fatal pride, the quality that ultimately ensures his doom at the hands of his wife.

> Some time ago I cried out in triumph,
> rejoicing when that first messenger arrived,
> the fiery herald in the night, who told me
> Troy was captured and was being destroyed.
> Some people criticized me then, saying,
> "How come you're so easily persuaded
> by signal fires Troy's being demolished?
> Isn't that just like a woman's heart,
> to get so jubilant?"

Related Characters: Clytemnestra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 586-593

Explanation and Analysis

Clytemnestra here spells out more distinctions between masculinity and femininity in her society. Although she correctly interprets the signal fires coming from Troy and concludes that Agamemnon has won the Trojan War, her announcement is not welcomed. Rather, people (including the old men who make up the Chorus) question Clytemnestra and suggest that she is jumping to conclusions because she's a woman (and therefore more likely to be flighty in her emotions).

Clytemnestra is a proud, fierce woman, but in her society, her innate talents can only get her so far. Her authority is always being questioned and reinterpreted in light of her gender. It's implied at several points thatClytemnestra plots to kill Agamemnon, not just because of her anger over Iphigenia but because of her desire for power--power that her current station (queen) doesn't provide. Furthermore, what's later considered to be Clytemnestra's great crime (killing her husband) is later inextricably linked to her lack of femininity and submission to gender roles.

> Old violent aggression
> loves to generate new troubles
> among evil men—soon or late,
> when it's fated to be born,
> new violence springs forth,
> a spirit no one can resist or conquer,
> unholy recklessness,
> dark ruin on the home,
> like the destructiveness
> from which it sprang.
> But Righteousness shines out
> from grimy dwellings, honouring
> the man who lives in virtue.
> She turns her eyes away
> from gold-encrusted mansions
> where men's hands are black,
> and moves towards integrity,
> rejecting power and wealth,
> which, though praised, are counterfeit.
> Righteousness leads all things
> to well-deserved fulfillment.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 763-782

Explanation and Analysis

One of the key themes of the play is the idea that evil always causes more evil somewhere down the line. Agamemnon's father's acts of evil and revenge spawn the evil and revenge in this play, as we'll see, and even Helen's abduction from Troy causes the various events of the play (without Helen's abduction, Agamemnon would never have sacrificed his daughter to reach Troy safely, and his wife presumably would never have murdered him). In short, evil and revenge are never ending cycles.

In Greek society at the time, there is a strong code of revenge and "blood for blood." Whenever an evil act is committed, it must be balanced out by another act--which itself causes more acts of vengeance and retribution. The only way to escape from the endless cycle, the Chorus suggests, is to embrace the path of wisdom and morality--foreshadowing the end of the *Oresteia*.

Lines 783-1033 Quotes

Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,
your speech was, like my absence, far too long.
Praise that's due to us should come from others.
Then it's worthwhile. All those things you said—
don't puff me up with such female honours,
or grovel there before me babbling tributes,
like some barbarian. Don't invite envy
to cross my path by strewing it with cloth.
That's how we honour gods, not human beings.
For a mortal man to place his foot like this
on rich embroidery is, in my view,
not without some risk. So I'm telling you
honour me as a man, not as a god.
My fame proclaims itself. It does not need
foot mats made out of such embroideries.
Not even to think of doing something bad
is god's greatest gift. When a man's life ends
in great prosperity, only then can we declare
that he's a happy man. Thus, if I act,
in every circumstance, as I ought to now,
there's nothing I need fear.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 915-930

Explanation and Analysis

In this famous passage,Clytemnestra tries to convince her husband Agamemnon, newly returned from Troy, to walk along a purple tapestry that symbolizes his wealth and power. Agamemnon is highly reluctant to walk along the royal tapestry: he thinks that doing so would be showing off, and would anger the gods excessively. Agamemnon is savvy enough to know that the gods love to punish arrogant, proud people--he's trying to keep his head down to avoid divine retribution.

At the end of his speech, Agamemnon makes an interesting point: we can only measure the happiness of a man's life by waiting to see how his life ends. In other words, a man who is happy and prosperous *now* might not necessarily die that way. Agamemnon's words (an allusion to the Greek legend of Solon, later repeated in the *Histories* by Herodotus) are important because they reinforce the play's themes of punishment and uncertainty. Happiness and contentment are never certain at all--they can always be replaced with misery and pain. Agamemnon here tries to escape divine punishment, but as we'll see, his attempts are all in vain.

For, as we know, boundaries
of vigorous health break down—
disease is always pressing hard
the common wall between them.
So with the fate of men.
It holds to a straight course,
then, all at once, can crash
upon a hidden rock of grief.
But if, as a precaution,
men toss overboard
some part of their rich cargo,
and time their throw just right,
the house, though grieving,
will not completely founder,
nor will its hull be swamped.
And Zeus' bountiful rich gifts
reaped from the furrows every year
hold off the plague of famine.
But once a murdered man's dark blood
has soaked the ground, who then
can bring him back through song?

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Zeus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1001-1021

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Chorus sums up the play's take on fate and human existence. Humans live happy lives--until suddenly, they don't. The gods are always capable of punishing mortals, especially those who disrespect the gods with their pride and arrogance. Even the wealthiest and most powerful man in the world could be struck down by the almighty god, Zeus. The only way to be absolutely *certain* that a person has lived a fulfilling, happy life is to follow that person all the way to death.

The Chorus alludes to the sacrifice Agamemnon has made: he's tossed off his "cargo" (i.e., his daughter) in order to ensure his own survival and return to his native land. Agamemnon's actions are risky: in the end, the Chorus predicts, he may end up being punished--a process that art and poetry can document, but never change.

Lines 1034-1330 Quotes

Up there on that roof there sits a chorus—
it never leaves. They sing in harmony,
but the song is harsh, predicting doom.
Drinking human blood has made them bold—
they dance in celebration through the house.
The family's Furies cannot be dislodged.
Sitting in the home, they chant their song,
the madness that began all this, each in turn
cursing that man who defiled his brother's bed.

Related Characters: Cassandra (speaker), Thyestes, Atreus, The Furies, Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1185-1193

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Trojan slave Cassandra, who's been cursed with the ability to see the future and have no one listen to her, talks about the future of Agamemnon's family (the House of Atreus). Agamemnon's father has done some horrible things--murdering children in his own family and feeding them to his brother, in revenge for his brother stealing his kingdom and wife ("the man who defiled his brother's bed"). The gods, Cassandra predicts, will punish Agamemnon, both for his father's sins and for his own.

Cassandra alludes to a chorus, but this is not the chorus of old men that we've met previously. Rather Cassandra is talking about the Furies, the monstrous goddesses who punish the wicked for their sins. The Furies personify the cycle of "blood for blood" that Cassandra has alluded to: as the cycle goes on, generation after generation, the Furies develop a craving for more blood--a gory metaphor that suggests the way that revenge has a way of perpetuating itself over time.

But we'll not die without the gods' revenge.
Another man will come and will avenge us,
a son who'll kill his mother, then pay back
his father's death, a wanderer in exile,
a man this country's made a stranger.
He'll come back and, like a coping stone,
bring the ruin of his family to a close.
For gods have made a powerful promise—
his father's stretched out corpse will bring him home.

Related Characters: Cassandra (speaker), Orestes, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1279-1287

Explanation and Analysis

Here the Trojan prisoner Cassandra goes quietly to be murdered, knowing that nothing she does can prevent her inevitable death. Cassandra sees a "light at the end of the tunnel," however. Even if she herself will be killed, there will eventually come an end to the cycle of death and "blood for blood" that has cursed the House of Atreus. After Agamemnon and Cassandra's death, Orestes will come to avenge his father's murder by killing Clytemnestra. Somehow, Cassandra claims, Orestes' actions will not set off any further cycles of revenge.

Cassandra's allusions to Orestes would be well-known to Aeschylus's original Greek audiences. What's equally interesting is the way Cassandra accepts her fate--all her *knowledge* of the future isn't enough to save her from murder. Cassandra sees the future, but can't change it; and that's her curse.

Lines 1331-1675 Quotes

To rest unsatisfied amid great wealth
is in the nature of all human beings.
No one can point and order it away
from princely homes by uttering the words
"Dissatisfaction, enter here no more!"
Take Agamemnon. The powers in heaven
permitted him to capture Priam's town,
to return home honoured by the gods.
But now, if he must pay the penalty
for blood which other men before him shed
and die in retribution for the dead
he killed himself, what mortal human being
who hears all this can boast he lives
a life unscarred by fate?

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Priam, Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1331-1343

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Chorus tries to come to terms with the

dictates of free will and fate. In the past, Agamemnon has clearly had the blessings of the gods--he's won a great victory at Troy, for which he's been rewarded with glory and slaves. And yet Cassandra claims that Agamemnon will soon be punished; furthermore, he'll be punished for his father's acts of murder, not just his own. The Chorus concludes that all of life is predetermined by "fate." There's nothing Agamemnon can do to escape his punishment--no amount of caution or modesty can ever make up for his father's brutality or his own past actions.

The Chorus's observations might seem harsh by modern Western standards. It's a cornerstone of our society that people should only be punished for actions that they committed of their own free will. Agamemnon, by contrast, is being punished partly for actions completely beyond his control (his father's murders). Agamemnon is *also* being punished for killing his own daughter--and yet the rules of fate and destiny seem indifferent to a person's individual actions and responsibilities.

Before this moment I said many things
to suit my purposes. I'm not ashamed
to contradict them now. How else could I
act on my hate for such a hateful man,
who feigned his love, how else prepare my nets
of agony so high no one could jump them?
I've brooded on this struggle many years,
the old blood feud. My moment's come at last,
though long delayed. I stand now where I struck,
where I achieved what I set out to do.
I did all this. I won't deny the fact.

Related Characters: Clytemnestra (speaker), Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1373-1380

Explanation and Analysis

Here Clytemnestra dramatically reveals the truth about her actions: she's been plotting for years to kill Agamemnon, who murdered their daughter, Iphigenia.Clytemnestra was sure that she could get away with the murder because Agamemnon was already cursed: the gods were already predisposed to punish the king for his sins.

The passage representsClytemnestra's greatest moment of pride and assertiveness--and her break from the traditional feminine role of the submissive, loyal wife. She's been planning Agamemnon's murder for years now (Iphigenia was murdered at least ten years earlier), and in this speech, she emphasizes the sheer satisfaction of successfully avenging her daughter and killing her husband.Clytemnestra's speech contrasts markedly with the Chorus's talk of fate and destiny.Clytemnestra, quite aside from being dominated by destiny, has used her own free will and intelligence (putting up a cunning act of being a loyal wife) to achieve her goals. But as Cassandra has already told us, evenClytemnestra isn't free from the rules of fate--in due time, she'll be punished for her act of murder and meet the same fate as her husband. Nobody, it seems, can escape the ironclad law of "blood for blood."

CHORUS
O that some Fate would soon come,
free from suffering and quick,
bringing endless sleep,
our last eternal sleep,
now our gracious lord is dead.
For a woman's sake
he suffered much, and now
by a woman's hand he died.

Alas for you, Helen, frantic woman.
On your own, beneath Troy's walls,
you slaughtered many lives,
and more than many.
Now you wear your final garland—
one long remembered for the blood
which will never wash away.
Back then in this house
lived a spirit of strife,
a power that broke our king.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Don't torment yourself like this, invoking
death and fate, or redirect your rage
on Helen, as if she killed those men,
all those Danaan lives, all by herself,
and brought us pain past remedy.

Related Characters: Clytemnestra, The Chorus (speaker), Helen, Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1448-1468

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Chorus andClytemnestra argue over the true source of the tragedy that's fallen on the House of Atreus. The Chorus (made up of old, crotchety men) insists that Helen is to blame for the present disaster: if Helen hadn't been abducted, then there would have been no war, and Agamemnon would still be alive.Clytemnestra angrily disagrees with the Chorus--she points out that Helen herself killed no one; it was the soldiers who fought in the Trojan War who truly set in motion the events of the play we've been reading.

The passage illustrates the structures of blame and scapegoating that are closely tied to the rule of "blood for blood." Whenever there's a big tragedy, somebody (usually a woman) gets stuck with the blame--even if that person isn't totally responsible for the tragedy. In this case, Helen is assigned with the blame for the tragedy of the Trojan War. By the same token, whenever a tragedy occurs, the Furies need to know who to punish.Clytemnestra's explanation of the "cause" of the Trojan War is a lot more convincing than the Chorus's, but the Furies would never be satisfied with such a "diffused" explanation (i.e., the explanation that the Trojan War was the result of many different complex motivations and responsibilities): there can only ever be one scapegoat at a time.

> One disgrace exchanged for yet another,
> the struggle to decide is hard.
> The man who sins is sinned against,
> the killer pays the price.
> Yet while Zeus sits upon his throne
> this decree from god remains—
> the man who acts will suffer.
> Who can then cast from this house
> its self-perpetuating curse?
> This race is wedded to destruction.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Zeus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1560-1569

Explanation and Analysis

As the play draws to a close, we come back to the same idea we've heard from Cassandra,Clytemnestra, and many of the other characters: balance. Every sin must be balanced out with an act of revenge, and every drop of blood spilled must be canceled out with more blood.

The Chorus isn't satisfied with the endless cycle of murder and revenge--it benefits no one, and actually cripples the House of Atreus. The Chorus prays that someone will come along to end the cycle of revenge. As we'll see in the two sequels to *Agamemnon*, Orestes at first continues the cycle of revenge by killing his mother, but then at last brings it to a close, changing the nature of the very Furies themselves.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-354

The play begins with a Watchman, who is stationed on the roof of the palace of Atreus in the Greek city of Argos. The Watchman prays to the gods that his job will soon be done, as he has been stationed there for a full year. The queen of Argos, Clytemnestra, has instructed him to watch for a signal fire from Troy. The signal fire would indicate that her husband Agamemnon's army has taken the city and is victorious in the Trojan War.

The fact that the play begins with a prayer immediately introduces the idea that many of the characters believe that the gods are determining their fates. Knowledge of the Trojan War is assumed for the play's audience, as the war is an important part of Greek mythology and the subject of Homer's famous epic poem the Iliad.

The Watchman feels that Clytemnestra has unsettlingly masculine qualities, and explains that he cannot sleep because of his deep sadness and fear concerning the state and current governing of the House of Atreus.

From the very first time Clytemnestra is mentioned, her femininity is called into question. The Watchman's observation of Clytemnestra's "masculine" qualities is directly followed by his admission of his fears about the royal family, subtly linking the two ideas.

All of a sudden, the signal fire blazes from Troy. The Watchman, in a joyous state, cries out that the Trojan War is over, and he jumps up to inform Clytemnestra. Then his mood changes abruptly as he wishes Agamemnon a safe return, and once again he expresses a vague sense of some mysterious and sinister activities that have occurred in the palace, but he refuses to elaborate on what these may be.

An ancient Greek audience would have understood that the Watchman is referring to a curse on the House of Atreus—a series of violent tragedies that have been occurring (and will continue to occur) in Agamemnon's family for generations. One of the root causes of this curse was Agamemnon's father Atreus, who cooked the children of his brother Thyestes and fed them to him. This is the ultimate heinous act (and so punishable by a multigenerational curse from the gods), but also the ultimate act of revenge, as Thyestes had slept with Atreus's wife and temporarily stolen his kingdom. The Trojan War's end sets the action of the play into motion.

The Watchman exits into the palace to inform the queen that he has seen the signal fire, and the Chorus enters. The Chorus (which speaks all together) is made up of a group of elderly citizens of Argos, men too old to fight in the Trojan War. The members of the Chorus explain that the war is an act of revenge: Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus raised an army from across all the cities of Greece and led it against Troy ten years ago, to get revenge on the Trojan prince Paris for stealing Menelaus' wife, Helen.

This long speech from the Chorus serves as the main source of exposition for the circumstances of the play. In this explanation, it becomes clear that personal revenge is the primary motivation for the entire Trojan War, again demonstrating revenge's role as the catalyst for the action of this play (and others). Here the Chorus also introduces the concept of the Furies, the group of divine beings that inspire and enact revenge.

The Chorus then explains that during the war, the goddess Artemis had sent strong winds to delay Agamemnon's fleet from arriving in Troy. In order to appease Artemis, the army's prophet suggested that Agamemnon sacrifice his and Clytemnestra's daughter Iphigenia, and Agamemnon did so. The Chorus then finishes by reminding us that these events of the past, as well as those to come, have all been predetermined. But, as Clytemnestra enters, they express hope that the coming events will be good ones.

Although the reason for Artemis's anger at Agamemnon is not agreed upon by scholars, what is clear is that Artemis's decision to delay the fleet is meant to punish Agamemnon for some slight against her—blocking the fleet's passage is a form of revenge. In addition, Artemis's involvement in Agamemnon's wartime decision-making further illustrates the control that the divine world has over the mortal world. Finally, the sacrifice of Iphigenia—necessary for Agamemnon to pursue the Greek war of revenge against the Trojans—begins one cycle of revenge that is central to the play.

The Chorus implores Clytemnestra to tell them what has happened, and she gives them the good news that Agamemnon's army has taken Troy. Although overjoyed, the Chorus can barely believe the news. They ask Clytemnestra multiple times if the news is true, leaving her feeling belittled.

The Chorus's lack of belief in the accuracy of Clytemnestra's story serves as an example of how women were regarded in Greek society. Even though she is the queen of Argos, the validity of her words are questioned simply because she's a woman.

Clytemnestra describes to the Chorus the system of signal fires that was used in order relay the news to Argos, and then goes on to report what she has heard about the status of Troy. She explains that while the Trojans are in a chaotic and painful state of mourning, Agamemnon's army is enjoying the spoils of war. She hopes that the Greek army's looting won't make them look unfavorable in the eyes of the gods, and prays for their safe return. She goes on to say that even if the army is able to return without offending the gods, they should take extra care, because disaster could strike at any moment. As she exits, the Chorus thanks her for speaking like a wise man, and it prepares to pray.

Clytemnestra's awareness that the Greeks' victorious looting could anger the gods shows how even in victory there exist seeds of future destruction – just as even those righteously seeking revenge always seem to end up bring the gods' anger down on themselves. This also foreshadows how Agamemnon's own victory will lead to his death. Clytemnestra's concern for new disaster could be a snide allusion to her own murderous plot. Once Clytemnestra has relayed all of the information in a way that satisfies the Chorus, they praise her for speaking like a man, further reinforcing the differing expectations placed upon men and women in this society.

LINES 355-782

The Chorus thanks Zeus for destroying Troy, and comments that Troy's downfall is evidence for the gods intervening in mortals' lives. The Chorus illustrates its point by saying that Zeus destroyed Troy in order to make an example out of the Trojan prince Paris for the overly prideful act of stealing Helen from Menelaus. At the same time, the Chorus expresses concern that the staggering number of deaths suffered by the Greeks during the war is creating unrest in Argos, and that the citizens may resent Agamemnon for engaging in such a long and difficult war. Furthermore, the Chorus worries that the army's violence may be punished by the gods if they are not careful.

The Chorus's speech here is peppered with warnings that excesses of pride and violence may provoke the wrath of the gods. Although they use Paris as an example, we are meant to also draw a comparison to the most recent victor: Agamemnon.We also learn that in the aftermath of such a difficult war, Agamemnon may not be returning to Argos on an entirely sure political footing.

A Herald from the military arrives at the palace. In an emotional speech, he thanks the gods for his safe return home from Troy. He thanks both the gods that supported the Greeks during the war, and gods that did not, and prays that from this point forward, all the gods will look favorably upon the Greeks. He then confirms for the Chorus that Troy has fallen and that Agamemnon is on his way home.

The Herald's long list of thanks continues to reinforce the idea that characters in the play fully submit to the ideas of fate and predetermination. Their lives are essentially decided by the gods, so it is important to keep the gods (who are often petty, jealous, and spiteful) always appeased.

The Chorus, anxious about mounting unrest in Argos, tells the Herald that the army will be welcome back and couldn't be coming at a better time. When the Herald asks if the Chorus was afraid of any particular person in the army's absence, the Chorus admits that it was—but it is reluctant to reveal whom.

The Chorus's unarticulated anxiety refers to the fear of Clytemnestra herself—both the way she has ruled Argos in Agamemnon's absence, and perhaps fear of violence to come.

The Herald reminds the Chorus that even though there were hardships in the past, the Trojan War is now over and should not be dwelled upon. He uses himself as an example, outlining the many struggles he overcame, and boasts of his survival.

The Herald is a character who is blinded by patriotism, and this makes him ignore the fact that the gods may not look favorably upon Agamemnon and the conquest of Troy. The Herald cannot see the "big picture," where the cycle of revenge and violence is never forgotten.

Clytemnestra appears and scolds the Chorus for not believing her about the war's end earlier. She gloats that despite the Chorus's disbelief, she has informed the citizens of Argos of Troy's downfall and they have believed her. She goes on to say that a woman can feel no greater joy than being reunited with her husband. She assures the Chorus and the Herald that she has been a faithful and loving wife, and returns to the palace.

When Clytemnestra enters, she is still offended by the way the Chorus regards her, but eventually puts on a typical "feminine" mask (praising her husband) in order to quietly execute her plan. In addition, the fact that the citizens of Argos have believed Clytemnestra suggests that she has gained their support while Agamemnon has been in Troy.

The Chorus asks what has happened to Menelaus' half of the Greek fleet. The Herald says that a storm hit them on the return journey and that Menelaus and his men are missing. He is not sure of their fate, however, and would rather not ruin the celebratory atmosphere in Argos with unconfirmed bad news. Having finished his report, the Herald leaves the palace.

The Herald is convinced that the reason his part of the fleet survived was some kind of divine intervention—but he also believes that the Greek victory in Troy and Menelaus's misfortune should be kept separate. Regardless, the Herald's stubborn optimism provides a bit of dramatic irony before the tragedy of the play unfolds.

The Chorus considers Helen and the fact that one woman could bring so much destruction and strife. They recount how Helen traveled to Troy by boat, and how Agamemnon's army followed her there, bringing Troy's ultimate destruction.

In the moments before Agamemnon's arrival, the Chorus recounts a story of a person who arrives somewhere, and brings with them violence and destruction. This anecdote provides a mirror for the violence about to unfold in Argos, and reinforces the idea that fate is predetermined, and moves in endless cycles.

The Chorus declares that violent and evil acts breed more of the same kind. They go on to say that righteousness the way to lead a fulfilling life, and that a righteous person must turn away from luxury and the hunger for power.

Once more the Chorus emphasizes the idea that evil acts (like revenge) only engender more evil. This manifesto's placement in the play is significant, as we are about to see Agamemnon make a prideful mistake that allows this cycle to continue.

LINES 783-1033

Agamemnon enters riding a chariot. With him is the prophet Cassandra – a Trojan princess, Paris' sister, and Agamemnon's prize from the war.

Agamemnon's entrance is a grand one, and he has taken a concubine (essentially a sex-slave) from the war—turning a Trojan princess into a slave as the ultimate sign of Troy's defeat. This demonstration of luxury and arrogance immediately follows after the Chorus's warning about this type of behavior.

The Chorus greets Agamemnon with honesty, claiming that not all of the citizens would be so willing to be frank with their king. They tell him that although they were not always entirely supportive of his military methods, particularly the sacrifice of his daughter, they are glad to have him back in Argos. They insinuate that in time, however, he will find out that all is not right at home.

The Chorus's greeting confirms their loyalty to Agamemnon, while also gently warning him against deceit – and deceit is everywhere in Argos, from the unruly and dissatisfied citizens to Agamemnon's own wife Clytemnestra.

Addressing the citizens of Argos, Agamemnon thanks the gods and begrudgingly reminds everyone that a woman caused the war that brought so much violence and destruction. Although he tries to appear grateful to the gods, Agamemnon's account of the destruction of Troy is proud and boastful. He also attempts to allay the fear of political unrest by offering to set up an assembly where he can pinpoint and solve any outstanding issues in Argos.

Here, we get another brief glimpse of ancient Greek society's disdain for women.We are reminded of the Trojan War's persistent presence in Argos, and because of the sense of foreboding cultivated thus far, we begin to feel that Agamemnon may never get the chance to solve these problems the war has created. Furthermore, Agamemnon's attitude does not seem to be in line with the Chorus's description of righteousness.

As Agamemnon begins to descend from the chariot, Clytemnestra stops him and addresses the crowd. She recounts the intense grief, worry, and suicidal thoughts she experienced while waiting for her husband. She explains that because of her depressive behavior, she has sent their son, Orestes, to stay with a friend. Finally, as a way of celebrating her husband's safe return, Clytemnestra asks that Agamemnon enter the palace walking on a carpet of luxurious **purple tapestries**.

Clytemnestra puts on a dramatic act in order to ensure that her revenge plot can be executed. She drops her usual aggressive manner for a sweeter, more fawning tone. If she can convince Agamemnon to walk on the cloths, this act of disrespect to the gods (that is, acting excessively arrogant) will seal his doom—making the gods angry at him and so unwilling to protect him from his wife. Clytemnestra also mentions her son Orestes here. He will return later in Aeschylus's trilogy of plays to end the cycle of revenge.

Agamemnon chides Clytemnestra for speaking too much and refuses to walk on the **tapestries**, telling her that this would be an act of arrogance that the gods would not ignore. However, Clytemnestra continues to goad him, and he finally relents and enters the palace walking on the tapestries. Clytemnestra once again plays the role of loving wife and conveys how happy she is to have her husband back. She prays that Zeus's master plan is fulfilled and follows Agamemnon into the palace.

We already know from the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice that Agamemnon can be convinced to act rashly and against his better judgment. In this moment, we see this same character flaw now set into motion the tragic climax of the play. To the people of Argos, Clytemnestra might seem to be praying for good fortune, but we can interpret that she is in fact invoking the gods to help her with her own plans.

Although the Chorus has just witnessed Agamemnon's safe return, their anxieties have not been quelled, and they can sense the vengeful Furies trying to inspire violence. They know that fate could change on a dime and turn a success into a tragedy. They discuss the finality and suddenness of death and feel that something bad is going to happen, but pray that it won't.

The Chorus has actually just witnessed Agamemnon's ultimate act of hubris – the act of defiance to the gods that brings about his downfall. Yet again, the Chorus, as the proxy to the audience, explains the unshakeable nature of fate, and helps guide the ominous tone of the play as it hurtles towards its climax.

LINES 1034-1330

Clytemnestra comes out of the palace and orders Cassandra to descend from the chariot and go inside, but Cassandra remains silent. At first, Clytemnestra tries to reason with Cassandra, and the Chorus urges her to follow the queen's orders, citing that fate has brought her to this place. However, as Cassandra's silence continues, the Chorus and Clytemnestra wonder whether she is mute, mad, or is in need of an interpreter. Soon Clytemnestra grows angry, gives up, and returns into the palace.

Whether or not Clytemnestra accounted for Cassandra in her initial plans, it is now important to Clytemnestra that Cassandra not cause any trouble for her and her impending revenge plot. Additionally, both Clytemnestra and Cassandra are defying their gender roles – the former by barking orders, and the latter by ignoring them. As the play, and the trilogy at large, continues, both of these women are punished for defying societal gender norms.

The Chorus gathers around Cassandra, and she falls into a trance-like state. Her disparate phrases and thoughts begin to form into a prophecy. As the Chorus observes her, she reveals that she is having a vision of children being cooked and eaten.

Cassandra's vision is referring to the incident in which Agamemnon's father, Atreus, cooked his brother Thyeste's children and fed them to him. On a divine level, this heinous act is the inciting incident of this play's central cycle of revenge, and Agamemnon's downfall.

Next, Cassandra envisions a woman bathing and then murdering a man in the palace, and she senses that the Furies are at work initiating revenge. She then sees herself as Clytemnestra's second victim. Although she seems ecstatic and her words are unclear, Cassandra's prophecy seems to suggest that the cycle of violence and revenge is about to continue.

This is the key prophecy of the play. Here, Cassandra explicitly reveals how the dark history of the House of Atreus, alluded to throughout the play by the Chorus and others, connects to the impending climax. Apart from Clytemnestra's personal revenge on Agamemnon, her plot will also be enacting the punishment of the gods upon the House of Atreus.

The Chorus asks Cassandra how she came to be a prophet, and with a little probing, Cassandra admits that the god Apollo was in love with her. When she refused to have a child with him, he punished her by making it so that she was a prophet, but no one would believe her prophecies.

This act of revenge on Apollo's part is another moment in the play where a woman is punished for defying society's expectation for women. In ancient Greek drama these expectations would cross the boundaries between gods and mortals.

After returning to the image of the man (Agamemnon's uncle Thyestes) eating his own cooked children, Cassandra explicitly declares that Agamemnon will be murdered. The Chorus, however, cannot seem to make the connection between the crimes of Agamemnon's father (Atreus) and Cassandra's prophecy of murder.

Given that the original audience of the play was familiar with the story, the Chorus's inability to understand the prophecy would have created an almost unbearable sense of dramatic irony at this point.

The Chorus asks Cassandra what man would possibly murder the king—they are completely unable to imagine that a woman might be capable of such an act. Frustrated with her inability to communicate the prophecy to the Chorus, Cassandra renounces her position as a prophet.

It is interesting to note that the Chorus' misunderstanding of the prophecy hinges on gender. Because they subscribe to the Greek societal norms of gender, they miss considering Clytemnestra, who has been hiding in plain sight, as the possible murderer.

In a frantic state of trance, Cassandra tears her clothes off and announces that a man will come, murder his mother, and end the violent cycle afflicting the House of Atreus. She exits into the palace, dreading her own grisly fate.

This final piece of the prophecy refers to Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's son Orestes returning to Argos and murdering Clytemnestra, once again avenging violence with more violence. These are the central events of the next play in the trilogy. Here Cassandra shows the total power of fate—she accurately prophesies her own death, but can do nothing to stop it, and so goes willingly to be murdered.

LINES 1331-1675

The Chorus considers Cassandra's prophecy. They conclude that if the prophecy is indeed true, and that if Agamemnon can have the help of the gods to win a military conquest, but still be struck down for a crime his father committed many years prior, then it is just as they thought—life must be predetermined by fate after all.

Once again, the Chorus grapples with the layers of predetermination in the play. At this point the dramatic irony is at its peak, as Aeschylus continues to build up the suspense before the action itself.

All of a sudden, from within the palace, Agamemnon screams twice. The Chorus goes into a state of panic, each member suggesting conflicting ideas for what to do next.

This is one of the only moments in the play where the Chorus breaks up into many distinct members. This gesture is used to create a flurry of tension and discord in the moments leading up to the play's resolution.

The palace doors open, revealing a blood-soaked Clytemnestra standing over the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytemnestra openly confesses to killing Agamemnon and details how she murdered him by stabbing him twice. The Chorus wants Clytemnestra to be banished, but she retorts that their judgment is a double standard—the Chorus did not ask for Agamemnon to be banished when he brutally sacrificed Iphigenia.

From Clytemnestra's perspective, Agamemnon's murder is the ultimate act of retribution for her daughter Iphigenia. Also, the Chorus's desire to exile Clytemnestra once again demonstrates a societal partiality towards men. Agamemnon's murder of his innocent daughter was grudgingly condoned, while Clytemnestra's murder of her guilty husband is condemned.

The Chorus calls Clytemnestra ambitious and arrogant. Unfazed, Clytemnestra interrupts them and goes on to reveal that Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus is her lover. She reflects on the two dead bodies and explains that, unlike her loyal new lover, Agamemnon was unfaithful and abusive. She declares that her husband and his concubine deserved to die.

This moment complicates Clytemnestra's otherwise neat revenge-plot. Clytemnestra wants revenge on her husband for sacrificing their daughter, and also for being unfaithful while at war. However, she admits that she herself has been unfaithful with Aegisthus, making her more difficult to sympathize with.

The Chorus laments that all this violence and suffering was for the sake of woman, and connects this murder to all the destruction that the Chorus blames Helen for inciting. Clytemnestra comes to Helen's defense, saying that Helen did not kill anyone herself. But the Chorus continues to compare Clytemnestra and Helen's unfeminine qualities.

Clytemnestra makes a good point about the Chorus's tendency to blame women. Although they are right in blaming Clytemnestra for Agamemnon's murder, the choice to go to war in Troy was made by Agamemnon himself—not Helen.

Clytemnestra continues to justify her revenge to the Chorus and admits no guilt for the murder. The Chorus cries out in grief for the casualties of the curse on the house and suggests that Clytemnestra is now connected to the curse too. The Chorus continues to wonders how this cycle of violence can possibly end, when one violent act always leads to another.

This discussion of how to end the curse of revenge and violence foreshadows the next play in the trilogy (The Libation Bearers), in which Orestes will plot to kill his mother, but also seek to end the cycle of murder and the curse on the House of Atreus.

Aegisthus enters from the palace with a cadre of soldiers. In a long speech, he expresses joy at Agamemnon's murder, and recounts in detail the incident where Agamemnon's father Atreus cooked Aegisthus' brothers and fed them to Aegisthus' father, Thyestes. The Chorus then accuses Aegisthus of being cowardly and womanly for not fighting in the war, and for allowing Clytemnestra to carry out the revenge instead of doing it himself.

The Chorus has accused Clytemnestra of masculine qualities throughout the play, so it follows that they find her new lover to be feminine, or at least less dominant than Agamemnon. Even though Aegisthus is in a clear position of power at this point, the Chorus still insults him for not living up to its gender standards.

Aegisthus threatens the Chorus with his soldiers, but Clytemnestra stops the moment from escalating into more violence. As Aegisthus and Clytemnestra enter into the palace together, the Chorus holds its ground and prays for Orestes to come to Argos and alleviate the suffering in the House of Atreus.

The play concludes in a moment of political unrest for Argos—turmoil that has been caused by the aftermath of the Trojan War. Although one chapter of revenge has been closed, Clytemnestra's deeds will not go unanswered, and Aeschylus's trilogy of plays continues.

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