Electra

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOPHOCLES

Sophocles was born to a wealthy family in the small rural community of Hippeios Colonus, Attica, a region in Greece located on the Attic peninsula near the Aegean Sea. Sophocles's father, Sophilus, was a successful armor manufacturer, and Sophocles lived a rather privileged life near the capital city of Athens. Not much is known of Sophocles's early life, but around the year 470 BCE, he began to compete in the Dionysia, a large yearly festival held in Athens to honor Dionysus, the god of wine and theater. The festival culminated with the staging of several plays, and winners were selected in the categories of tragedy and comedy by a panel of judges. Sophocles first entered the competition at the Dionysia in 470 BCE, and in 468, he won first place, beating out Aeschylus, another Greek playwright and the father of tragedy. Throughout his career, Sophocles competed in 30 festivals, and he was awarded first place 24 times and never placed below second. Sophocles won more competitive festivals than any of his contemporaries, including both Aeschylus and Euripides, another prominent ancient Greek tragedian. Sophocles is credited with writing over 120 plays, although only seven of those plays have survived antiquity, including *Electra*, which was written near the end of his career, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Philoctetes*. Sophocles's extreme popularity at the Dionysia lead to many elected positions within Greek society and government, and in the year 480 BCE, he was chosen to lead the paean, a poem of thanks and celebration, after the Greek defeat of the Persians during the Battle of Salamis. In 443, Sophocles was appointed the treasurer of Athena, and in 413, he was elected as an official magistrate to help deal with the crushing defeat suffered by the Greeks in Sicily during the Peloponnesian War. Despite these official positions, however, Sophocles continued to write, and his contribution to Western thought and culture is invaluable. As a playwright, Sophocles is credited with adding a third character to scenes and decreasing reliance on the chorus, and he was also the first to employ skenographia, or scene paining, to enrich the staging of his plays. Sophocles is known for his complex character development and conflicts, and he won his final first place at the Dionysia in 405 BCE, at the age of 91 or 92. He died that same year, although reports as to the cause of his death are conflicted. Some reports claim he choked on a grape, while others claim he died of exhaustion attempting to recite *Antigone* and still other say that he died of happiness after his final win at the Dionysia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sophocles refers to the Trojan War numerous times in *Electra*, as Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis and allow Greek ships to set sail for Troy. According to Greek myth, the Trojan War was fought between the Greeks and the Trojans, whose capital city, Troy, was in the region known as Asia Minor. The conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans began when Eris, the goddess of discord, gave a golden apple to the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, and told them it was for the "fairest" among them. Zeus made Paris, the Prince of Troy, judge the three goddesses, and Paris declared Aphrodite the most beautiful and gifted her the apple. As a reward, Aphrodite made Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world and the wife of Menelaus (the King of Sparta and Agamemnon's brother), fall in love with Paris. Helen then left Menelaus and ran to Troy with Paris, sparking the Trojan War, which lasted a period of ten years. The Trojan War claimed the lives of many Greek heroes, including Ajax, who is portrayed in Sophocles's tragic play *Ajax*, as well as Paris and his brother, Prince Hector, who was killed by Achilles. Ancient Greeks of Sophocles's time maintained that the Trojan War was an actual historical event that took place around the 12th century BCE, but the war is widely accepted by present-day scholars as myth. The ancient city of Troy, however, did exist and was located near present-day Hissarlik, Turkey.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Electra falls under the category of ancient Greek literature, which can be further divided into three separate time periods. The Archaic period, which lasted until the end of the 6th century BCE, focuses mainly on ancient Greek myth and includes such works as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony*. The Classical period, in which Sophocles lived and wrote, lasted through the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, and it laid the foundation for modern Western thought and culture in the areas of politics, art, science, and philosophy. Literature of the Classical era also focuses on ancient Greek myth, but writers shifted from poetry to drama with works such as Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, *Medea* by Euripides, and Aristophanes's *The Clouds*. The final period, the Hellenistic period, lasted until the emergence of the Roman Empire around 31 BCE. The Hellenistic period saw the birth of New Comedy, which abandoned ancient Greek myth to focus on everyday life and people, although little work from this period has survived antiquity, save for a few fragmented plays. The surviving works of the Hellenistic period include the nearly complete *Dyskolos* (whose title translates to *The Grouch*), written by Menander in 316 BCE. In the year it was written, *Dyskolos* won first place at the festival Lenaian, a competition similar to the festival

Dionysia in which Sophocles competed.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Electra*
- **When Written:** Unknown, although it is thought to have been written near the end of Sophocles's career.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **When Published:** Unknown, although it is thought to have been published around 410 BCE.
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Greek tragedy
- **Setting:** Mycenae
- **Climax:** When Orestes enters the palace at Mycenae and kills his mother, Clytemnestra.
- **Antagonist:** Clytemnestra and Aegisthus

EXTRA CREDIT

Father vs. Son. When Sophocles was in his early nineties, his son Iophon brought a lawsuit against him in which he claimed Sophocles was demented. Iophon insisted that his father's property should be turned over to him. However, it's said that Sophocles convinced the court that he was of sound mind by reciting his play *Oedipus at Colonus* from memory.

It came to me in a dream. After a golden crown was stolen from the Acropolis of Athens, Sophocles reportedly claimed that Heracles, the Greek god of strength and heroes, appeared to him in a dream and told him where to find the stolen crown.

PLOT SUMMARY

As Orestes, Pylades, and an old slave arrive before the palace of Mycenae, the old slave points to the city and tells the story of how Orestes left it long ago. Orestes's father, Agamemnon, was murdered years ago, and Orestes's sister, Electra, gave the infant Orestes to the old slave. The old slave cared for Orestes as if he were his own son and raised him to seek revenge for his father's death. Now, the old slave says, it's finally time for Orestes to take action. Orestes has a plan: before traveling to Mycenae, he visited the Delphic oracle, who spoke the words of Apollo. "*By lone deceit and stealthy craft / Must blood be shed and victory won*," the oracle said. The old slave will go to the palace, Orestes says, because the old slave's age will make him unrecognizable, and tell the people there that Orestes has been killed in a chariot accident during the Pythian Games. The slave will also take along a **bronze urn** and claim it holds Orestes's cremated remains. Suddenly, the sound of a woman weeping comes from inside the palace. The old slave wonders if it is Electra and suggests they stop and listen, but Orestes insists that their first stop has to be Agamemnon's grave.

As Orestes heads for Agamemnon's grave with Pylades and the old slave, Electra comes out of the palace. She has been grieving night and day since her mother, Clytemnestra, and her mother's husband, Aegisthus, murdered her father. Electra says that she is like the **nightingale and that she will never stop weeping with sorrow.** She prays to the gods that "the dread Furies" will punish Agamemnon's murderers and that her brother, Orestes, will return. As Electra mourns, a chorus of Mycenean women arrive to comfort her. They ask what good it will do keep mourning, since doing so won't bring Agamemnon back to life, but Electra insists that doing so is necessary because it's a child's duty to remember a deceased parent. Plus, Electra is forced to live with her father's killers, and they abuse her and treat her like a slave. As Electra mourns, her sister, Chrysothemis approaches and urges her to give up her useless anger. Chrysothemis despises Clytemnestra and Aegisthus too, but angering them with public lamentations for Agamemnon does more harm than good. She tells Electra that Aegisthus is planning to bury Electra alive in a cave if she doesn't stop her public cries, but Electra is unmoved, saying that she'll do anything to honor her father's memory.

According to Chrysothemis, Clytemnestra had a dream in which Agamemnon was alive. He struck the hearth with his staff and a large tree branch grew that covered all of Mycenae. Clytemnestra was scared by the dream and ordered Chrysothemis to bring libations to Agamemnon's grave, but Electra says that doing so would be wrong. She tells her sister to bury the offerings, far away from their father's grave. As Chrysothemis goes to bury the offerings, the chorus implies that it must have been "Justice" that sent the nightmare to Clytemnestra. Suddenly, Clytemnestra approaches on her way to give offerings to the gods and scolds Electra for her misbehavior. She knows Electra hates her because she killed Agamemnon, but Clytemnestra cares very little. Agamemnon had sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess Artemis, and when Clytemnestra killed him to avenge her daughter, she was on what she calls "the side of Justice."

Electra claims that Agamemnon killed a stag in Artemis's "sacred grove" and boasted unwisely, and so he had to sacrifice Iphigenia to appease the goddess. Besides, Electra says, Clytemnestra didn't kill Agamemnon just to avenge Iphigenia; she did it because of her lust for Aegisthus and her desire to rule Mycenae without Agamemnon. According to Electra, it doesn't matter if justice was on Clytemnestra's side, because there cannot be a "more shameful" act than murder. Clytemnestra offers a prayer to Apollo that evil will strike her enemies and that she may be able to continue living in luxury with her children who do not hate her. Suddenly, the old slave arrives, claiming to be a messenger from Phocis. He claims that Orestes has been killed in a tragic chariot accident. Electra is devastated, exclaiming that if Orestes is dead, she might as well

be dead too.

As Clytemnestra invites the old slave inside, she tells him that nothing can make a mother hate her own child. Electra remains outside the palace, wailing, and Chrysothemis excitedly runs back to her. She has been to Agamemnon's grave and there are fresh libations there. Orestes must be back, she says. However, Electra tells her sister that Orestes is dead, and whoever put fresh offerings on Agamemnon's grave must have done so in memory of Orestes. They have no friends and Orestes isn't coming back, Electra says, so they must kill Aegisthus themselves. Chrysothemis accuses Electra of going mad, saying that Electra is a woman, not a man, and she couldn't possibly kill Aegisthus. Electra maintains that giving up is impossible, but Chrysothemis feels that they have no chance of winning.

As Chrysothemis goes back into the palace, Orestes approaches with Pylades, holding the bronze urn, and asks Electra where Aegisthus's house is. Electra asks him if he carries the urn containing Orestes's remains, and he confirms he is. Electra speaks mournfully to the urn, cradling it, but Orestes surprises her by saying that she shouldn't be sad; Orestes isn't actually in the urn. He reveals that he is alive by showing Electra a ring bearing Agamemnon's seal, and they embrace. She begins to rejoice but he tells her it is not yet time to celebrate. The old slave comes out of the palace and reports that Clytemnestra is alone. It is time. They all go into the palace, leaving the chorus outside.

Electra soon comes back outside. She says that she is looking out for Aegisthus to arrive so that he does not catch them by surprise. "My son, my son! Have mercy on your mother!" Clytemnestra cries from inside the palace, and Electra yells back, urging Orestes to strike Clytemnestra again. Orestes, Pylades, and the old slave exit the palace with blood on their hands, and Orestes tells Electra that "all is well" inside the palace. The chorus sees Aegisthus approaching in the distance, and they urge the men to go back inside before they are discovered. "*I* can look after everything here," Electra says, and the men slip quietly into the palace.

As Aegisthus approaches, he immediately tells Electra that he has heard of Orestes's death and asks where the messengers who brought the news are. Electra tells him that they're inside with Clytemnestra and that they've "won their way to her heart." Aegisthus orders the palace doors opened so that all the people of Mycenae may see the remains of Orestes. As the palace doors open, Orestes exits carrying the body of Clytemnestra covered by a shroud, and as Aegisthus begins to remove the shroud to examine the body, he tells Electra to go find Clytemnestra. "No need to look," Electra says. "She's here already." Aegisthus begins to scream, realizing that he's trapped. Orestes reveals his identity as Agamemnon's son and orders Aegisthus into the palace. Aegisthus begs Orestes for a word of defense, but Electra cuts him off, telling Orestes to kill Aegisthus right away and leave his body for "the dogs and birds." Orestes leads Aegisthus into the castle, to the exact place where Aegisthus killed Agamemnon many years before. Electra stays outside with the chorus, who celebrate the end of Electra's long suffering.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Electra – Electra is the play's protagonist, and she is the sister of Orestes, Iphigenia, and Chrysothemis as well as the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. When Electra is first introduced, she is "bitterly" lamenting her father's death, and she refuses to stop even though it has been 20 years since his murder. Electra claims that her grief will never end, and she compares herself to the **nightingale**, a reference to Procne, the consummate figure of mourning in Greek mythology, who was transformed into a nightingale after murdering her son. When Orestes was an infant, Electra gave him to the old slave to raise far away, and when the play begins, the chance that Orestes might return and avenge Agamemnon's death is Electra's only source of hope. Electra's grief is unaffected by time, sympathy, or threats, through which Sophocles argues that genuine grief cannot be restricted or confined by periods of socially acceptable mourning. The character of Electra also serves to highlight the sexist nature of ancient Greek society. Electra is repeatedly told throughout the play that she should not anger Aegisthus, because she is a woman and is therefore weak and incapable of defeating a man. Ancient audiences would have expected Electra to behave much like Aeschylus's representation of Electra does in *The Libation Bearers*. However, instead of playing a small roll in which she quietly disappears before the killing begins, Sophocles's representation of Electra dominates the stage for most of the play and continually acts in unexpected and forbidden ways. Electra mourns excessively and inappropriately, defies Aegisthus, disrespects her mother, and most importantly, she believes herself capable of revenge. At the end of the play, when Orestes kills both Clytemnestra and, presumably, Aegisthus, Electra takes an active role in their deaths and even encourages Orestes to throw Aegisthus's corpse to the dogs and vultures. Electra is ultimately free after the deaths of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, and since she is free from the sexist expectations of society as well, Sophocles argues through Electra that women do not necessarily have to conform to society's expectations.

Orestes – Orestes is Electra's brother and Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's son. As a small child, Orestes is handed over to the old slave by Electra to save his life. As Aegisthus had murdered Agamemnon on Clytemnestra's behalf, it was assumed that Orestes would grow up to avenge his father, and Electra feared that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus would kill Orestes before he had the chance to grow into a man. Raised by the old slave to avenge his father's murder, Orestes returns

to Mycenae to exact his revenge. Before Orestes returns, however, he visits the Delphic oracle and asks her how his revenge should be exacted. The oracle tells Orestes that his vengeance will be successful if done "*by lone deceit and stealthy craft*," and he appropriately concocts an elaborate plan in which he fakes his own death and claims that his "charred remains" are in a **bronze urn**. Orestes takes the words of the Delphic oracle as the actual words of the god Apollo, and he carries his deceitful plan out to the end, killing Clytemnestra and, presumably, Aegisthus as well. Orestes puts his honor and duty to Apollo over his duty to his mother, and when he leaves Electra to mourn early in the play and instead follows Apollo's instruction to place libations on Agamemnon's grave, he again places the gods above his duty to family. While Orestes is not punished during the play for committing matricide, ancient audiences would have been familiar with Aeschylus's version of Orestes's story, in which Orestes is driven mad by the Furies as revenge for killing his mother. So while Orestes doesn't (at least initially) pay for his crime, Sophocles nevertheless implies that Orestes acted unethically in the murder of his mother and that he should have placed the honor of his family above the orders of the gods and his own desire for revenge.

Clytemnestra – Clytemnestra is Electra, Orestes, Iphigenia, and Chrysothemis's mother, the wife of Aegisthus, and the former wife of Agamemnon. After Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis to aid the Greeks during the Trojan War, Clytemnestra began an affair with Aegisthus. When Agamemnon returned home from the war after ten years, Aegisthus killed Agamemnon on Clytemnestra's behalf, supposedly as revenge for Iphigenia's murder; however, Electra claims that the murder really allowed her mother to continue her relationship with Aegisthus and retain control of Mycenae. When the play begins 20 year's after Agamemnon's death, Clytemnestra does not deny having murdered him, and she seems to enjoy abusing and imprisoning Electra for keeping his memory alive through her constant, and often public, lamentations. Clytemnestra is completely unapologetic about Agamemnon's murder, and she only sends libations to his grave after she has a disturbing dream in which Agamemnon came back to life and struck his staff on the hearth, which made a large tree grow over the whole of Mycenae. Clytemnestra's dream reflects her guilt and fear that Orestes will return to exact revenge for the murder of Agamemnon and reclaim his rightful role as king, and she only sends offerings to Agamemnon's grave to curry favor with the gods and protect her from Orestes's vengeance. Clytemnestra is a selfish and hypocritical woman who demands her children respect her, then prays to the gods that "evil rebound on [her] foes," who also happen to be her children. Clytemnestra is easily duped by the old slave when he arrives disguised as a messenger bearing (false) news of Orestes's death, and while she displays maternal grief for a moment, she mostly relieved and pleased to hear of her son's death. With Orestes gone, Clytemnestra no longer has to worry that he will return and kill her to avenge Agamemnon's murder. Of course, Orestes's isn't dead, and he sneaks into the palace and kills Clytemnestra during the climax of the play. Clytemnestra ultimately serves to illustrate the shortsightedness of the "blood for blood" system of justice in Greek culture, as it invariably leads only to more killing.

Aegisthus – Aegisthus is Clytemnestra's second husband and the king of Mycenae in *Electra*. After Agamemnon sacrificed his and Clytemnestra's daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis, Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon as revenge on Clytemnestra's behalf. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus were already having an affair while Agamemnon was away fighting the Trojan War, and Electra implies that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed Agamemnon not to avenge Iphigenia but rather so they could continue their affair and rule Mycenae. Aegisthus only appears during the closing scene of *Electra*, but his antagonistic presence is felt throughout much of the play. Not only is Aegisthus responsible for Agamemnon's death, but according to Greek myth, he also killed Atreus, Agamemnon's father, to secure the kingdom of Mycenae for his own father, who was also Atreus's twin brother. In this way, Aegisthus is deeply connected to the curse of Pelops, which is referenced several times throughout the play and extends down to Pelops's descendants, including his sons Atreus and Thyestes, Aegisthus's father. Aegisthus's presence is also felt through his control of Electra and her sister Chyrysothemis. Aegisthus fears revenge for the murder of Agamemnon, and because of this, he forbids Electra and Chyrsothemis to marry and have children, as they might one day give birth to sons who may grow up to avenge Agamemnon's murder. The character of Aegisthus underscores the senseless and cyclical nature of the "blood for blood" system of justice within Greek culture, as well as the oppression of women within ancient Greek society. As a man, Aegisthus presumes to control the women around him, and all but Electra accept this oppression. Like Clytemnestra, Aegisthus is presumably killed by Orestes at the close of the play, as Orestes leads him to the exact spot in which Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon years before. Aegisthus's murder emphasizes the never-ending nature of "blood for blood" justice, as there will always be someone to kill.

Chrysothemis – Chrysothemis is Electra and Orestes's sister and the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. Chrysothemis represents the oppression of women in ancient Greek society within the play. Unlike Electra, Chrysothemis is accepting of Aegisthus's assumed role as her "lord and master," and she considers it her duty to submit to his authority. She claims to hate both her mother and Aegisthus for their murder of Agamemnon, but she doesn't see the point in "posing a threat without any power to harm." Like broader Greek society, Chrysothemis believes that women are weak, especially in the face of power like that of Aegisthus, so she feels that it's better not to try and challenge him. When Electra tells Chrysothemis

of her plan to murder Aegisthus, Chrysothemis accuses Electra of being "mad" because she is a woman, not a man, and so she doesn't have the power to kill Aegisthus and exact revenge for their father's death. Of course, it turns out that Electra *is* capable of revenge, and she is not powerless in the face of men like Aegisthus either. Though Chrysothemis remains hesitant throughout the play and never agrees with Electra's plan, she does have her own small moment of rebellion when she throws away the libations that Clytemnestra had ordered Chrysothemis to place on Agamemnon's grave.

The Chorus – The chorus is a group of Mycenean women. The chorus serves mainly to console Electra and advance and enrich the plot, but they also highlight the sexist nature of ancient Greek society and provide evidence that grief and mourning do not end simply because others say they should. The chorus is sympathetic to Electra's plight, but they repeatedly encourage her to stop mourning. It won't bring Agamemnon back, they say, and it "offers no release from suffering's chains." Electra's grief, however, is uniquely her own, and it doesn't respond to the chorus's reasoning. The chorus also implores Electra to stop publicly mourning because in doing so, she knowingly angers Aegisthus, and they think that Electra should not "fight with the strong." In this way, the chorus upholds their society's sexist belief that Electra must be weak because she is woman. Electra, of course, proves them wrong, and the chorus celebrates her newfound freedom at the end of the play.

Agamemnon – Agamemnon is Clytemnestra's first husband and father to Electra, Orestes, Iphigenia, and Chrysothemis. According to Greek myth, after Agamemnon offended the goddess Artemis and she stalled the winds, halting the fleet of Greek warriors headed to fight in the Trojan War, Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to placate Artemis and resume the fleet's progress. Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia began a cycle of revenge killings that leads to Orestes's murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, in *Electra*. Like all the killing in *Electra*, Agamemnon's murder of Iphigenia was senseless and cruel, and Sophocles implies that his choice to kill his own daughter can't be justified, even in the name of the gods.

Iphigenia – Iphigenia is Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's daughter and sister to Electra, Orestes, and Chrysothemis. According to Greek mythology, Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis to appease the goddess after offending her. As punishment for Agamemnon's offense (he shot a stag from Artemis's "sacred grove"), Artemis stalled the winds, which halted the Greek ships headed to Troy to fight the Trojan War. After Agamemnon returned from the war, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murdered him as revenge for Iphigenia's death, and in *Electra*, Electra and Orestes in turn seek revenge against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus for the murder of Agamemnon. Through the chain of events sparked by the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Sophocles underscores the shortsightedness of the Greek "blood for blood" system of justice, which only leads to a never-ending cycle of revenge and death.

Atreus – Atreus was Agamemnon's father and the former king of Mycenae. The "palace of Atreus" and the "royal house of Atreus" are mentioned several times in *Electra*. These terms refer to both Atreus's reign as king of Mycenae and the House of Atreus, which began with Tantalus, Pelops's father and the king of Phrygia, a kingdom in Anatolia, near present-day Turkey. According to myth, Atreus and his twin brother, Thyestes, were exiled by Pelops after killing their half-brother and took harbor in Mycenae. They ruled there in the king's absence, and when he was killed at war, their reign became permanent. The brothers quarreled over who should be the king, and Thyestes's son, Aegisthus, murdered Atreus to ensure that his own father would be king. Thyestes ruled over Mycenae for a while, but he was eventually overthrown by Agamemnon and Menelaus.

The Delphic Oracle – The high priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi serves as the most important oracle in Greek mythology. The Delphic oracle is said to speak the words of Apollo, and she speaks only in rhyme and riddle. According to myth, questions presented to her must be phrased very carefully, because otherwise her prophecies are easily misinterpreted. In *Electra*, Orestes asks the Delphic oracle *how* he should exact revenge for his father's death, not *if* he should exact revenge, and he takes the oracle's prophecy as a direct order from Apollo himself to kill Clytemnestra for Agamemnon's murder. Sophocles implies that matricide is never justified, not even in the name of revenge, and Orestes's possible misinterpretation of the oracle's prophecy supports that argument.

Old Slave – The unnamed old slave is Orestes's tutor, and the man to whom Electra gave infant Orestes after Agamemnon was murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Electra had feared that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus would kill Orestes as a baby because he would probably grow up to avenge his father's death, and the old slave indeed raises Orestes to avenge Agamemnon. Throughout much of *Electra*, the old slave urges Orestes and the others to stop talking and instead act, which reflects Sophocles's central argument that words are often deceptive and that actions, usually, are more indicative of truth.

Pelops – Pelops was Atreus's father and Agamemnon's grandfather. Pelops was cursed by Myrtilus before Pelops killed Myrtilus by throwing him from a chariot into the sea. This curse is referenced several times in *Electra*, both directly through Aegisthus's mention of Pelops and indirectly through Orestes's deceitful story of his own death in a chariot accident during the Pythian Games. Sophocles implies that this curse is responsible for much of the strife within the royal house of Atreus, including Aegisthus's murder of Atreus, Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the cycle of revenge that follows.

Myrtilus – Myrtilus was the charioteer of the king of Pisa, who, in a chariot race against Pelops, was bribed by Pelops to sabotage the king's chariot. According to some versions of the myth, once Pelops won the race, he also won the king's daughter's hand in marriage, and when Myrtilus asked for a night with the princess in exchange for helping Pelops win the race, Pelops killed Myrtilus by throwing him from his chariot into the sea. Before Myrtilus fell into the sea, he cursed Pelops and all his descendants, and Sophocles refers to this curse several times in *Electra*.

Menelaus – Menelaus is Agamemnon's brother. Clytemnestra claims that Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia to help Menelaus, which is a direct reference to Menelaus's wife, Helen, and the Trojan War. In Greek mythology, Helen left Menelaus and ran off with Paris, the prince of Troy, and the Trojan War was, at least in part, fought to get her back. Since Agamemnon had angered the goddess Artemis, who then stalled the winds, the Greeks were not able to set sail for Troy until Agamemnon placated the goddess by offering Iphigenia as a sacrifice. Clytemnestra implies that Agamemnon killed their daughter to aid his brother's war, which both Clytemnestra and Sophocles argue is immoral and unjustified.

Artemis – Artemis is the Greek goddess of the wilderness and the hunt. According to Electra, Agamemnon incurred the wrath of Artemis when he shot a stag from her "sacred grove" and "accidentally let fall some boastful words." As punishment for his actions, Artemis stalled the winds, and the Greek warriors were unable to set sail for the Trojan War. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease Artemis, after which she changed the winds and allowed the ships to sail. Both Electra and Clytemnestra also invoke Artemis as the goddess of virginity and unwed women.

Nemesis – Nemesis is the Greek goddess of retribution. According to myth, Nemesis punishes those who display hubris, and Clytemnestra implies that Orestes's death at the Pythian Games (which turns out to have been a lie) is one of Nemesis's acts of retribution. In this way, both Clytemnestra and Sophocles imply that Orestes's desire to kill his own mother is a display of excessive pride that itself requires punishment, and that Orestes should instead honor and respect his mother instead of plotting her death.

Pylades – Pylades is Orestes's close friend. Pylades accompanies Orestes to Mycenae with the old slave and, at the end of the play, he helps kill Clytemnestra and perhaps Aegisthus as well. Pylades personifies loyalty in *Electra*, but he never speaks a word throughout the play. Pylades's silence reinforces Sophocles's central argument that words are often deceptive; Pylades's loyalty is demonstrated solely through actions.

The Furies – The Furies are the female deities of vengeance in Greek mythology. Electra prays to the "dread Furies" to "punish" Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon, and they represent revenge throughout the play. According to myth, Orestes was driven mad by the Furies after he murdered Clytemnestra, but Sophocles does not include that part of the story in *Electra*.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Apollo – Apollo is the Greek god of truth and prophecy who speaks through the Delphic oracle.

Zeus – Zeus is the Greek god of the sky and thunder and the king of the Olympian gods. Several characters in *Electra* pray to Zeus at some point or another during the play.

TERMS

Pythian Games – The Pythian games were one of the four Panhellenic Games, or sports festivals, held in Greece during ancient times. The Pythian Games were held in Delphi every four years, two years after the Olympic Games, and they honored the god **Apollo**. Sophocles twice mentions the Pythian Games in *Electra*, and most importantly, the **old slave** tells **Clytemnestra** that **Orestes** was killed in a chariot race during the festival. The Pythian Games began during the sixth century BCE and occurred during Sophocles's time. While the festival is a reference to the contemporary culture of Sophocles's era (rather than the much earlier time period of Electra's story), the inclusion of it in *Electra* allows Sophocles to draw a parallel between Orestes's false death in a chariot race and the death of **Myrtilus**, the charioteer of the king of Pisa, who was killed in a chariot race against **Pelops**, the father of **Atreus** and grandfather of **Agamemnon**. Before Myrtilus died, he cursed Pelops and all his descendants, and this curse is responsible for the plight of Agamemnon and his children as well.

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.

GRIEF, MOURNING, AND MORALITY

At the center of Sophocles's tragic play *Electra* is the grief and mourning of Electra, the play's protagonist and title character. Electra's deep anguish is the result of her father Agamemnon's murder at the hands of her mother, Clytemnestra, and her mother's husband, Aegisthus. Public mourning was expected of women in ancient Greece, as it was thought to keep the memory of the dead alive

and promote catharsis; however, mourning during ancient times was also highly structured and involved a strict timeline. Commemoration of the dead was often performed at yearly festivals, but the type of raw grief and prolonged public mourning displayed by Electra typically did not occur beyond the first anniversary of death. At the time of the play, it has been over 20 years since Agamemnon's death, yet Electra continues to mourn her father and lament her miserable life. Electra's grief consumes her, and she grows increasingly obsessed with avenging her father's murder, even if that means killing her own mother. Through the portrayal of Electra's profound grief, Sophocles contends that grief is a raw and overwhelming human emotion that cannot (and should not) be confined to a predetermined period of socially acceptable mourning, while simultaneously arguing that grief can blind one to what is right.

Electra's entire life, and much of the play, is dedicated to her grief and mourning. In this way, Sophocles implies that grief is not a neat and tidy emotion but is often devasting and constant, and it therefore cannot be restricted to official mourning periods. Electra claims the sun is a frequent witness to her grief, as the "beating" of her "bleeding breast" is often "marked" by the lifting of "the mists of the dark." In other words, Electra grieves each and every day—her emotions do not subside over time, as is often suggested to be the case. As sure as the sun comes up, Electra is racked with grief and sorrow. Regardless of any changes in external circumstances, Electra's grief is unrelenting: "But I shall never / End my dirges and bitter laments," she claims. "I'll never find any relief from my sorrows / My dirges cannot be reckoned." Electra maintains that nothing can end her suffering. No amount of passing time will lessen her pain, and no amount of sympathy can comfort her. Thus, Electra's grief cannot possibly be structured or constricted to a specific period of mourning.

Throughout the play, Electra's family and the chorus each try to convince her to stop her public lamentations, but she refuses. Electra's grief cannot be contained, and it does not end just because others say it should. When the chorus arrives to offer Electra sympathy, they remind her that her "dirges and prayers" will not bring Agamemnon back. Her grief "offers no release from suffering's chains," the chorus says, "So why, why court such senseless anguish?" Electra's answer is simple. "None but a fool forgets their / Parents grievously gone to the underworld," she says. In other words, mourning her father is Electra's duty, and so she will never stop. This suggests that the nature of loss and grief is a lifelong struggle, particularly when grieving for a parent. Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, warns her that if she doesn't stop her public lamentations, Aegisthus will bury Electra alive in a faraway cave to "chant [her] miseries there." Still, Electra can't be swayed. "I'll fall if I must," she says, "for my father's sake." Her resolve suggests that grieving individuals cannot be suppressed by threats, and that no amount of punishment or abuse can stop genuine mourning.

As the play progresses and Electra's grief consumes her further, she begins to lose sight of her morals and show signs of madness, which implies that prolonged periods of profound grief, though natural and understandable, can sometimes lead one to do things they otherwise would view as wrong or unethical. While Electra maintains early on that *nothing* can alleviate her sorrow, she eagerly awaits her brother Orestes's return to Mycenae so that he might kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and avenge their father's murder. Electra knows that to disrespect her mother in such a way is wrong and she says as much, but her grief clouds her judgement, and she therefore believes that their deaths will ease her pain. When Orestes finally returns to kill Clytemnestra, Electra stands outside and cheers him on. "Strike her a second blow, if you have the strength!" she yells. Not only does Electra want her mother dead, she wants her to suffer greatly. Electra is almost excited at the sounds of her mother suffering, which suggests that Electra's grief is beginning to drive her mad.

During the third scene, as Electra hurls insults at her mother, the chorus says, "She looks to me / No longer concerned whether she's in the right," and this indeed seems to be Sophocles's overarching argument. Electra's grief effectively upsets her moral compass, and she moves from claiming that only a fool would forget a deceased parent to conspiring to kill her own mother. While Sophocles seems to argue that Electra should be left to mourn on her own terms, he also implies that grief, when it becomes overwhelming, can be very dangerous.

JUSTICE AND REVENGE

Sophocles's tragic play *Electra* examines revenge and the ancient Greek "blood for blood" system of justice. Both Electra and her brother, Orestes, swear to avenge the murder of their father, Agamemnon, even though he was killed by their mother, Clytemnestra, and her husband, Aegisthus. According to myth, to appease the goddess Artemis and set sail for Troy, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia. This prompted a chain of events that led to several deaths. After Agamemnon returned home from the war, he was killed by his wife and Aegisthus as revenge for Iphigenia's sacrifice. In *Electra*, Orestes kills both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus to avenge his father's death, and Sophocles implies that Orestes, too, could be justly killed to avenge the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Through *Electra*, Sophocles debates the wisdom of such cycles of revenge and questions if they are truly just. While he never offers definitive answers to such questions, Sophocles ultimately argues that, regardless of whether it is ethical, revenge as a form of justice is not particularly wise and only leads to more killing.

Revenge is passed on through the generations in *Electra*, and it is expected from the start that future sons will seek vengeance

for the murder of Agamemnon. In this way, Sophocles implies that the understanding of justice in Greek society is closely associated with revenge. After Agamemnon's murder, Electra sends an infant Orestes to live with an old slave in Phocis. It is assumed that Orestes will grow up to avenge his father's death, and Electra sends him away to save her brother's life. In other words, revenge is so expected in Greek society that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus fear even an infant. Clytemnestra accuses Electra of "bringing [Orestes] up" to be Clytemnestra's "avenger," and while Electra didn't do this specifically (though she claims she would have if she "had the strength"), the old slave takes on this responsibility himself. "I brought you up as my own," the old slave says to Orestes, "to avenge your father's murder." Revenge is so deeply ingrained in Greek culture that the old slave need not be told by Electra to instill vengeance in Orestes; he simply does it without being asked. Furthermore, Aegisthus won't allow Electra or her sister, Chrysothemis, to marry, as they may give birth to sons who would grow up and seek revenge. "Aegisthus isn't foolish enough to allow / A son of yours—or a son of mine—to grow / To manhood and so to ensure his own destruction," says Electra to her sister. Both Electra and Chrysothemis are denied love and motherhood because of Aegisthus's fear of revenge. Revenge killings are so common in Greek society that Aegisthus can't take the slightest chance.

All of the characters who kill for revenge in *Electra* argue that the killing is just. The "blood for blood" system of justice "entitles" them to murder. Orestes asks the Delphic oracle how his revenge should be exacted, and the oracle says: "*Not with the might of shielded host / Shall Justice see her purpose done. / By lone deceit and stealthy craft / Must blood be shed and victory won.*" That is, the only way for Orestes to obtain justice for his father's murder is to kill his murderers. Similarly, Clytemnestra tells Electra that her murder of Agamemnon was likewise just. "Justice determined / His death; I wasn't alone," Clytemnestra says. Agamemnon killed her daughter; therefore, Clytemnestra had the right, perhaps the duty, to kill him. After Clytemnestra has a dream in which Agamemnon is "restored to life," she begins to fear that Orestes is returning to seek revenge, so she orders Chrysothemis to place libations on Agamemnon's grave and pray for her safety. "Justice sent this dire dream," the Chorus says. In short, it would perfectly just for Orestes to return and kill his mother to avenge his father.

Despite the obvious acceptance of revenge as a form of justice in Greek society, Sophocles questions if revenge really is all that just, and points out that it is easily abused and misinterpreted. Electra implies that Clytemnestra only used revenge as an excuse to kill Agamemnon, and that she was really motivated by lust and seduction. Clytemnestra, Electra suggests, really wanted Agamemnon out of the way so she could rule Mycenae with her lover, Aegisthus. By claiming revenge and justice, Clytemnestra was able to do what otherwise would be considered a crime. As far as Electra is concerned, Clytemnestra's claim to justice is on shaky ground. "You say you killed my father," Electra says to her mother. "What admission could be more shameful than that, / Whether or not justice was on your side?" Justice matters very little when revenge involves killing, Electra implies. She seems to think that murder is inexcusable, regardless of what the law says.

Electra claims there is nothing more shameful than murder, yet she doesn't follow her own reasoning. Electra may not be the one to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but she is certainly complicit in their murders, and Sophocles implies that the killing won't stop here. There will always be a death to avenge in the "blood for blood" system of justice. Thus, the play suggests, there is little wisdom in continuing its vicious cycles.

GENDER AND SOCIETY

While the theme of gender in Sophocles's *Electra* may not be particularly apparent to modern readers, it would have been obvious to ancient Greek audiences. Greek theatergoers were very familiar with Aeschylus, another Greek tragedian and Sophocles's contemporary, as well as his treatment of the same myth in his play *The Libation Bearers*. Aeschylus focuses almost entirely on Orestes, Electra's brother, and his desire to seek revenge for his father Agamemnon's murder at the hands of his mother, Clytemnestra, and her husband Aegisthus. By contrast, Sophocles shifts the attention away from Orestes and gives it to Electra. Like her brother, Electra seeks vengeance for their father's murder, but Sophocles pays a fair amount of attention to Electra's grieving and her right to be seen and heard in a public space. Because Electra is a woman, she is expected by Greek society to behave in a very particular way; however, Electra repeatedly refuses to conform to society's expectations. While it is assumed that only Agamemnon's sons and grandsons will exact revenge for his death, Sophocles effectively argues through the character of Electra that women are not necessarily bound by the norms of their society, and that they are equally capable of revenge.

Electra is expected to mourn her father according to cultural norms, obey the men in her life, and accept her limitations as a woman, and these expectations are made abundantly clear throughout the play. Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, respects Electra's right to publicly mourn their father, but she also warns Electra that doing so will anger Aegisthus. "I know full well / That right is on your side," Chrysothemis says to her sister, "but if I want / To be free, our lords and masters must be obeyed." Chrysothemis fears she will be abused as Electra is if she openly defies Aegisthus and she believes that, as a man, he must be obeyed. When Electra tells Chrysothemis her plans to kill Aegisthus, Chrysothemis tries to talk her out of it. "You're not a man, but a woman," she says. "You haven't the strength /

To conquer your foes. […] Who could plot to murder a man as strong / as Aegisthus and then emerge from the fray unscathed?" In Chrysothemis's view, Electra is only a woman and is not capable of exacting revenge, especially on a man.

Despite what society expects, however, Electra won't submit to others' sexist assumptions. She repeatedly behaves in ways that run counter to typical expectations, which upends gender stereotypes and suggests that women aren't weak after all. Electra's opinion of society's expectations of women is clear. "Those stay-at-homes, those spare weights / On earth's floor, those womenfolk!" Electra cries. To submit to society's expectations and retire from the public sphere is out of the question for Electra. She considers a woman's traditional role to be a weight that holds her down, and through her struggle against that weight, Sophocles highlights the inequality of ancient Greece's sexist society. "Be careful, now," Orestes says to Electra. "The spirit of war can still be strong / In women. Your own experience should tell you that." Unlike Greek society, Orestes believes that his sister is capable of revenge, and he warns her to be cautious. Both Orestes and Sophocles suggest that women are not as weak as society assumes and therefore should not be underestimated.

Orestes's warning does not turn out to be unfounded, and unlike Aeschylus's *The Libations Bearers*, in which Electra quietly disappears when the killing begins, Sophocles's Electra instead takes a more active role in the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, which implies that women are capable of much more than they are given credit for. As Orestes enters the palace to kill Clytemnestra, Electra remains outside to keep guard. "Aegisthus / Mustn't surprise us as he walks in," Electra tells the chorus. Theatergoers would have expected Electra to go hide somewhere, but she instead plays a crucial role in her mother's murder. In this way, Sophocles sheds light on how inaccurate stereotypical gender assumptions really are. As Electra hears Orestes killing their mother, she doesn't flinch. In fact, she tells Orestes to "strike her a second blow, if you have the strength!" Here, it is Electra who isn't sure of Orestes's strength and ability, instead of the other way around. When the chorus notices Aegisthus returning home, they urge Orestes to go back into the palace before he is seen: "*I* can look after everything here," Electra says. The attention drawn by the italicized "I" implies that, contrary to what her sexist society thinks, Electra is fully capable of actively participating in such a horrific deed.

When Aegisthus begs Orestes to spare him a word in his defense, Electra interrupts. "No, Orestes, for god's sake," she says. "Don't give him the chance to argue with you." She urges Orestes to kill Aegisthus "at once," and then throw his lifeless body to the dogs and birds to feast on. Despite popular stereotypes of women as weak and demure, Electra is strong and confident, and, Sophocles therefore implies, she is capable of revenge just as men are.

DECEPTION, FALSEHOOD, AND TRUST

Sophocles's tragic play *Electra* is rife with deception and falsehoods. For example, when Orestes goes to the Delphic oracle to ask exactly how he should avenge the murder of his father Agamemnon, the oracle says: "*By lone deceit and stealthy craft / Must blood be shed and victory won.*" From the very beginning, *Electra* is set in motion with the expectation of deceit, and deception indeed gains momentum throughout the play. Orestes plans to gain entrance into his mother Clytemnestra's palace to kill her and her husband, Aegisthus, in order to avenge his father's death, and his plan rests entirely upon his ability to adequately disguise himself and deceive his family. Orestes is not the only character to don a disguise or employ various forms of deception, however, and nothing (and no one) is entirely as it seems in *Electra*. Through the play's portrayal of deception and disguise, Sophocles effectively argues that deceit is so widespread, it is better not to trust at all.

In order to exact his revenge in the way the Delphic oracle ordered, Orestes concocts an elaborate plan in which Clytemnestra is presented with a **bronze urn**, supposedly containing Orestes's ashes. By faking his death, Orestes hopes that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus will be tricked into letting their guard down, thus making it easier to kill them. Orestes also claims that the old slave's age will provide the perfect disguise for him to deliver the false news. "Your age and long absence will make you hard to recognize," Orestes says. "They won't suspect those grey hairs." He tells the old slave to "spin them a yarn" about being a stranger sent from Phocis to bring news of a "fatal accident." Not only does Orestes bank on the old slave's age as a disguise, he further orders him to blatantly lie and falsely claim that Orestes has died in a tragic chariot accident. Orestes deceives Clytemnestra not once, but twice. Everyone is convinced by the old slave's disguise as a stranger from Phocis, including Electra, who was the one to hand off Orestes to the slave as an infant. Even after Orestes reveals himself to Electra, she still has no idea who the old slave is. "How could I fail to know you all that time, / Here but never giving yourself away?" she says once Orestes lets her in on the secret. Despite knowing the truth about Orestes's death, she is still deceived by the old slave's disguise. The fact that so many characters, from Electra herself to her scheming mother Clytemnestra, fall victim to deception suggests that everyone is vulnerable in a society so full of deceit.

It is not only Orestes and the old slave who employ deception to various ends, but other characters as well, which further implies that deceit and falsehoods are everywhere. While Clytemnestra claims she killed Agamemnon to avenge his killing of their daughter Iphigenia, Electra maintains that this isn't entirely true. "I put it to you," Electra says to her mother, "it wasn't justice that drove / You to kill him. No, you were seduced by the evil man / Who is now your partner." In other words,

Electra believes Clytemnestra lied about her reasoning for killing Agamemnon and was really looking for a reason to get rid of her husband and marry her lover. Electra can't believe anything her mother says, Sophocles suggests. Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, is deceptive as well. Even though she secretly despises Clytemnestra and Aegisthus for Agamemnon's murder, she peacefully lives with them and does not resist them in any way. If she "had the strength," Chrysothemis says, she would tell them the truth. "But things are bad. It's wiser to trim my sails," she claims. Actions, Chrysothemis's behavior implies, can be just as false as words, and therefore can't be trusted either. Electra, too, is dishonest, and after Orestes kills Clytemnestra, she helps to lure Aegisthus into the palace by continuing the lie begun by the old slave. "Where are the messengers, then?" Aegisthus asks Electra of the stranger from Phocis. "Indoors with the mistress," Electra tells her stepfather. "They've won their way to her heart." Of course, Electra is just being facetious, and when Aegisthus approaches the palace, he finds Orestes bearing Clytemnestra's dead body, not the cremated remains of Orestes. Aegisthus is deceived multiple times, by both Electra and Orestes, and Sophocles thus argues that would have been wiser for Aegisthus not to trust them at all.

Sophocles explores the consequences of such frequent deception and ultimately argues that falsehoods are not meaningless utterances but serious acts that can have grave results. "What harm does it do me / To say I'm dead?" Orestes asks his friend Pylades and the old slave prior to putting his deceptive plan into action. "None, if the outcome proves / My real salvation and wins me a glorious prize." It's true enough that Orestes is not harmed by his deceit during the play; makes it to the end unscathed, and he seems to kill his mother and stepfather with little trouble. Still, Orestes's plan does not prove to be his "salvation." According to Greek myth, Clytemnestra curses Orestes before he kills her, and he is relentlessly pursued by the Furies, the female deities of vengeance. Orestes wins a "glorious prize" when he regains control of his father's house, but he is unable to enjoy it and is slowly driven mad by the Furies. Deceit indeed does great harm to Orestes, Sophocles thus implies, and so he suggests it would perhaps be better for everyone—even successful liars like Orestes—if society were less deceptive overall.

SYMBOLS

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

THE BRONZE URN

When Orestes concocts an elaborate story to fake his death in order to sneak into the palace in Mycenae and kill his mother, Clytemnestra, he claims his "charred remains" are contained in a bronze urn. The bronze urn thus symbolizes death within Sophocles's *Electra*, but it is also symbolic of Orestes's deceit and the harm it causes others. The old slave goes to the palace and tells Clytemnestra that Orestes has been killed in a chariot accident during the Pythian Games, and Orestes later approaches Electra with the urn. As Orestes is a grown man and Electra has not seen him since he was an infant, she doesn't readily recognize him, and she has no reason to believe that her brother is not actually dead. When Electra believes Orestes to be dead, she mourns him just as fiercely as she does their father, Agamemnon, and this new loss only serves to compound her already crippling grief. She cradles the urn and wails for her lost brother, all the while standing right in front of him. For Electra, Orestes's deceit causes considerable pain. Lying about one's death was viewed as a bad omen during ancient times, and that indeed proves to be the case in *Electra*. Orestes's deceit enables him to kill his mother, and the urn is a prominent symbol in that act as well: he sneaks up on her unaware as she is "dressing the urn." Ironically, Orestes murders his mother as she is preparing the urn to begin officially mourning *him*, which also underscores Sophocles's primary argument that people can be deceitful under any circumstance and it may be wiser not to trust anyone.

THE NIGHTINGALE

Electra compares herself to the nightingale multiple times throughout Sophocles's *Electra*, and the bird is symbolic of Electra's mourning throughout the play. Additionally, the nightingale also symbolizes Electra's ultimate freedom from the limitations of a sexist society. Early in the play, Electra claims that her grief will never cease "like the nightingale," which is a reference to the mythological figure Procne. Procne murdered her own son, Itys, as revenge for the rape of her sister, Philomela, by Procne's husband, Tereus. After murdering her son, Procne was transformed into a nightingale, and she is the quintessential figure of grief within ancient Greek literature. By comparing herself to Procne, Electra describes the severity of her grief and suffering, and makes it clear that it will not end simply because societal norms of grief say that it should. As birds are often associated with freedom, Electra's comparison of herself to the nightingale also demonstrates that her actions during the play are geared not just toward revenge, but toward liberating herself from societal constraints. Throughout the play, Electra is imprisoned, oppressed, and abused simply because she is a woman; however, Electra refuses to conform to society's expectations that she should be weak and incompetent, and by the end of the play she is effectively free from the imprisonment and abuse of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. The chorus even says in the final scene that Electra has been "forced [...] out / Into

freedom." Thus, as the play progresses the nightingale comes to symbolize Electra in new and more positive ways.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Electra and Other Plays* published in 2008.

Lines 1-85 Quotes

To the left the famous temple of Hera. The place
We have reached you may call Mycenae, rich in gold,
And here the palace of Atreus, rich in blood.
From here, some years ago, when your father was murdered,
Your sister Electra handed you into my care.
I carried you off, I saved your life, and then
I brought you up as my own, until you reached
Your prime of manhood, to avenge your father's murder.

Related Characters: Old Slave (speaker), Zeus, Electra, Pelops, Aegisthus, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Atreus, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7-14

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, spoken by the old slave, occurs at the very opening of the play, and it is important because it introduces both the theme of revenge and the curse of the House of Atreus, as well as the strength and capability of Electra. The old slave is reintroducing Orestes to his home, a stronghold within the city of Argos, known as Mycenae. Hera, the wife of Zeus, is the patron saint of Argos, and her temple, the most popular of the ancient world, is aptly located in Argos. The stronghold of Mycenae is a vibrant and important part of ancient Greece, thus it is "rich in gold." The palace of Mycenae, ruled for generations by Orestes's forefathers, suffers from a curse incurred by Atreus's father, Pelops. Generations of suffering and death have plagued Pelops's descendants, and so the palace is "rich in blood."

The old slave refers to Orestes's early life as an infant, when Orestes's mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus, murdered Orestes's father. Electra feared that Orestes would be killed as well, as it was assumed that Orestes would grow up to avenge his father's death. Orestes was entrusted to the care of the old slave to save his life, and the old slave indeed raised Orestes to avenge his father's death. Through this passage, Sophocles implies that revenge, or the "blood for blood" system of justice, is an accepted and popular, form of punishment in ancient Greek society. It is assumed again and again throughout the play that infants and even unborn sons will automatically grow up to avenge those who wronged their ancestors, and while this is certainly the case, Sophocles also implies that women, too, are capable of such revenge. Electra is expected to be weak and dependent because she is a woman, but she repeatedly proves herself strong and capable, starting when she smuggled her infant brother out of Mycenae as the old slave describes here.

Our crafty tale will bring them the glad tidings
That my body has been cremated and now consists
Of nothing but charred remains. What harm does it do me
To say I'm dead? None, if the outcome proves
My real salvation and wins me a glorious prize.
In my opinion, no word can be a bad omen
If it leads to gain. A false report of death
Is a trick I've often seen used by clever philosophers.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), The Furies, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Pylades, Old Slave

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56-63

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Orestes tells the old slave and Pylades his plan to fake his own death and kill his mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge his father's murder. His words here are significant because they reflects Sophocles's overarching theme of deception and his argument that falsehoods can in fact lead to harm. Orestes's plan consists of the old slave telling Clytemnestra that Orestes has been killed in an accident, bringing to her only "charred remains" as proof of Orestes's death. Orestes's plan is based on nothing but falsehoods and deception. The old slave must lie about who he is and about Orestes's death, and then present false remains. In this way, Sophocles implies that falsehoods abound, and so it may be better not to trust at all.

Orestes's question of "what harm" it does him to say he is dead is obviously rhetorical, as Sophocles implies that plenty of harm can come from such deceit. Faking one's death was considered a bad omen and was very taboo in ancient times. Furthermore, ancient theatergoers would have been familiar with the myth of Orestes. According to myth, after Orestes kills his mother, he is relentlessly pursued and driven mad by the Furies, the deities who

represent revenge in Greek mythology. In this way, Sophocles implies that "the outcome" will not necessarily be Orestes's "real salvation," and while he does win "a glorious prize" when he gets back his father's kingdom, he is not able to enjoy it because of the Furies. For audiences of Sophocles's time, this speech would have brought to mind the cyclical nature of revenge (it doesn't end just because Clytemnestra is dead, but rather makes Orestes its next mark), and so it also underscores one of Sophocles general arguments: Orestes's crime is not actually justified, even though it is committed in revenge.

Lines 86-120 Quotes

But I shall never
End my dirges and bitter laments
While I still see the twinkling,
All-radiant stars and the daylight,
Nor cease to keen like the nightingale
Who killed her young, crying my sorrow
To the world here by the royal gateway.

Related Characters: Electra (speaker), Clytemnestra, Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103-109

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Electra is first introduced, and it is important because it reflects Electra's deep mourning and grief related to her father's murder and also introduces the nightingale as a symbol of her grief. Electra's grief consumes her; it has not lessened with time and no amount of sympathy or compassion brings her comfort. Thus, Electra's "dirges and bitter laments" will not stop as long as she sees "twinkling all-radiant stars and the daylight." In other words, Electra's grief will always continue day and night, which implies that mourning a loved one, particularly a parent, is a life-long struggle that cannot be confined to society's accepted periods of mourning.

Since Electra's suffering will only end when the stars and sun cease to rise, she compares herself to the nightingale, which refers to the mythological figure of Procne. Procne killed her own son, Itys, in revenge for the rape of her sister, Philomela, by Procne's husband, Tereus. According to myth, Procne was transformed into a nightingale after killing her son, and she is a popular figure of grief and mourning in Greek literature. Like Procne, Electra's grief is never-ending, and the two are similar both because of the depth of their mourning and because their grief was caused by revenge. This quote also underscores the lengths one can be driven to during prolonged and profound despair. Procne was so affected by her sister's assault that she killed her own son, just as Electra dreams of the death of her own mother. The judgement of both women is impaired by their grief, and it causes them to behave in ways they would otherwise consider unethical.

Lines 121-250 Quotes

CHORUS:
But how, how will dirges and prayers
Help to summon your father back,
Up from the Lake of Death which none escapes?
No, in your limitless grief you are fatally
Parting from reason for pain without remedy.
This sighing offers no release from suffering's chains.
So why, why court such senseless anguish?

ELECTRA:
None but a fool forgets their
Parents grievously gone to the underworld.

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

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137-146

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the chorus is attempting to comfort Electra and bring an end to her suffering, but she cannot be consoled. This passage is significant because it reflects both the personal nature of mourning (especially when a parent is involved) and Electra's hypocrisy in lamenting her father's death and celebrating her mother's. The chorus implies that Electra's suffering and grief are emotions that she can simply turn off at will, and they claim that her mourning is useless since it can't bring Agamemnon back to life. They expect her to stop grieving because doing only adds to her pain, but Sophocles implies that grief doesn't work that way. Electra's grief is raw and consuming, and telling her to stop grieving because it worsens her pain or is difficult for others to watch is unrealistic.

Electra claims here that she can't stop grieving because it is

her duty as a daughter, but she later proves that she is indeed "a fool" by her own definition, because she eventually helps send her own mother "to the underworld." The chorus claims that in Electra's "limitless grief," she is "parting from reason," and this appears to be one of Sophocles's central arguments. As Electra's grief consumes her, she begins to lose sight of her morals. She maintains that a parent must be respected in death, but then she kills her mother without even a hint of mourning or regret. While Clytemnestra arguably doesn't deserve much respect, Sophocles implies through Electra's own words here that matricide is nonetheless "foolish" and pointless.

> The shame of your present wretched state,
> Is all of your own making.
> Your trials are worse than they need to be.
> Your sullen soul keeps breeding wars
> Which cannot be won. Don't fight with the strong.
> How can you come near them?

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Electra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215-220

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as the chorus tries to console Electra, and it is significant because it again highlights the fact that grief cannot be abandoned simply because others say so. This quote also illustrates Sophocles's theme of gender and the sexist assumption that women are weak and ineffectual. To the chorus, and to many others in the play, Electra's persistent and public lamentations are unbecoming a proper Greek woman. Society has established acceptable mourning periods, and Electra's grief has far exceeded this timeframe. Her profound grief makes others uncomfortable, and it angers Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and only makes their abuse of Electra worse. Accordingly, the chorus begs her to stop making her life needlessly difficult. But Electra can't stop and doesn't believe that she should have to, and Sophocles thus implies that true mourning cannot be restricted to social norms and mourning periods.

Meanwhile, the chorus's claim that Electra's "soul" is "breeding wars" that can't be won points directly to Electra's identity as a woman. They draw attention to Electra's soul, not her physical body or strength, and the word "breeding" is full of stereotypically female connotations. The chorus implies that Electra can't win the "war" against Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and avenge her father's death because she is a woman and is therefore weak. By comparison, they say, Aegisthus is "strong," and since Electra can't come near his level of strength, the chorus insists she shouldn't even try. Electra, however, clearly disagrees. She is determined to fight the strong, even if that means she will fall. Electra upsets sexist gender assumptions and stereotypes such as these, and through her character Sophocles argues that women are capable of revenge and even murder, just as men are.

Lines 251-470 Quotes

> Women, all these laments of mine must make
> Me seem so very embittered. I feel ashamed.
> I'm forced to do it, though. You must forgive me.
> A woman of noble birth could not act otherwise.
> When she sees the troubles that haunt her father's house
> Not fading away but growing day and night.

Related Characters: Electra (speaker), Iphigenia , Atreus, Pelops, Aegisthus, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, The Chorus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254-260

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Electra is speaking to the chorus about her profound grief, and her words underscore the theme of gender in *Electra*. Additionally, this quote is evidence that Electra's grief has made her behave in ways that she otherwise considers to be inappropriate or unethical. Electra worries that her grief makes her "seem so very embittered," but Electra *is* bitter, and she has every right to be. Both her sister and her father are dead, and her brother is hiding in exile. Furthermore, she is forced to live with the very people who killed her father, and they treat her like a slave. Still, Electra has enough presence of mind to "feel ashamed" of the hate and malice she harbors for her mother and Aegisthus. As Electra's grief continues, however, this shame leaves her, and she openly and viciously calls for the deaths of both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Her words here bring up the question of whether she really believes that her thirst for vengeance is the most honorable path.

This quote also expands Sophocles's theme of gender roles and their limitations. Electra is unflinching in her support of her father at the expense of her mother, and she frequently ignores aspects of her father's past that might make him

appear guilty. Here, Electra claims she is "forced" as a "woman of noble birth" to honor her father and his house—even, it seems, above her mother or her sister Chrysothemis, who openly opposes Electra's plans. Electra considers it her personal duty to mourn her father, keep his memory alive, and, if possible, restore power in his noble house to his rightful son. In this way, Electra is certainly submissive to Agamemnon, even in death, and she automatically honors him over her mother, which reflects the sexism present in broader Greek society even as Electra subverts that same sexism in other ways.

> Here you are again, holding forth
> At the palace gateway! Electra, what are you doing?
> Haven't you learned by now? Your anger's pointless.
> Don't indulge it for nothing. I must admit
> This situation distresses me too. If only
> I had the strength, I'd show them how I feel.
> But things are bad. It's wiser to trim my sails,
> Not pose as a threat without any power to harm.
> I wish you'd do the same. I know full well
> That right is on your side, but if I want
> To be free, our lords and masters must be obeyed.

Related Characters: Chrysothemis (speaker), Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Agamemnon, Electra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 328-340

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, approaches Electra at the palace gates and encourages her to stop mourning. Chysothemis's words here are one example of deceit within the play, and they also underscore the presence of sexism in ancient Greek society and reflect Sophocles's argument that women are oppressed by such a society. Here, Chrysothemis implies that her absence of grieving isn't because she has abandoned her father, but rather because she fears retaliation from Aegisthus and Clytemnestra if she makes her real feelings known. It seems, then, that Chysothemis routinely hides her true thoughts and opinions, which illustrates Sophocles's central point that deceit is widespread, and that things are often not what they seem to be on the surface.

Chrysothemis hides her feelings not to spare her mother's, but because Chrysothemis doesn't believe she is allowed to have such feelings, or, at least, that she is not allowed to express them. She claims Electra's anger is "pointless" and shouldn't be "indulged" because, as women, they don't have the "strength," or power, to take control over their own lives. Put simply, Chrysothemis behaves the way that Aegisthus, a man, expects her to behave. Denying her true feelings is "distressing" to Chrysothemis, yet she does so because she doesn't believe she has "any power to harm" or challenge Aegisthus. In contrast to Chrysothemis, Electra proves that women do have "power to harm," as Electra becomes an active participant in Clytemnestra and Aegisthus's murders. In this way, Sophocles argues that not all women will conform to society's standards and "obey" their "lords and masters," even though many women (such as Chrysothemis) feel that they must.

> Well, I'll tell you all that I know myself.
> Their plan is this: if you won't stop lamenting,
> They'll send you where you'll never see the sun,
> Buried alive in a cave across the frontier,
> To chant your miseries there. You'd better think
> About it carefully. Don't blame me when you suffer
> Later on. You need to be sensible now.

Related Characters: Chrysothemis (speaker), Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Electra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 378-384

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Chrysothemis informs Electra that Aegisthus will bury her alive if she continues her public lamentations. This passage is significant both because it illustrates that Electra's grief is genuine and can't be contained, and because it again underscores the oppression of women in ancient Greek society. By telling Electra about Aegisthus's plan to bury her, Chrysothemis hopes that her sister will stop her public mourning, but Aegisthus's threats have little effect on Electra's grief. Electra can't stop mourning just because it offends Aegisthus or makes him uncomfortable, which supports Sophocles's central argument that grief and mourning cannot be contained by accepted social norms of mourning.

Furthermore, this quote reflects the fact that Aegisthus obviously believes he has complete control over Electra and, presumably, women in general. Not only does Aegisthus tell Electra what to do and how to mourn, but he believes he has the authority and power to bury her alive in

a cave far from where anyone can hear her or help her. He has enough power over Electra to stop her from seeing the sun, which is to say that his power is absolute. Despite this, Electra won't bend to Aegisthus's threats, even if it means she will be killed, and she doesn't care about what Chrysothemis considers "sensible." In this vein, this quote further underscores Sophocles's argument that not all women conform to gender stereotypes, and that fighting back against men's control is an option.

They say she saw our father beside her again,
Restored to life. He then took hold of the staff
He used to carry and now Aegisthus wields,
And planted it on the hearth. This sprouted up
And grew to a leafy branch which overshadowed
The whole of Mycenae. So much I learned
From someone present when she revealed her dream
To the god of the Sun. That's all I know, except
That our mother's frightened enough to send me out.

Related Characters: Chrysothemis (speaker), Aegisthus, Apollo, Orestes, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Electra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 417-427

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Chrysothemis is telling Electra about a dream that Clytemnestra had. The dream is important because it reflects Clytemnestra's guilt over murdering the father of her children, as well as her fear that Orestes will return and kill her in revenge. In Clytemnestra's dream, Agamemnon, who was the former king of Mycenae, came back to life. The fact that Clytemnestra is dreaming about her former husband in the first place suggests that she, on some level, feels guilt over her actions regarding his death, and the fact that Agamemnon was holding the staff that Aegisthus now holds implies that she also feels guilty about usurping Agamemnon's throne. Agamemnon struck the "hearth," which is symbolic of the home and family, and the "leafy branch" that grows from the hearth is symbolic of Orestes's return home.

The image of the "leafy branch" extending over "the whole of Mycenae" implies that Orestes has an inherent right to rule over Mycenae after his father's death, and so Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have robbed Orestes of this right. Clytemnestra fears the dream is a bad omen or a prophecy of what is to come, so she immediately sends Chrysothemis out to place libations on Agamemnon's grave to curry favor with the gods and protect her from Orestes's vengeance. This quote also illustrates how unquestioningly Clytemnestra's daughters are expected to submit to her authority. Chrysothemis doesn't know about the dream because Clytemnestra shared it with her. On the contrary, Chrysothemis was told about the dream from someone else who overheard Clytemnestra's prayer to Apollo. Clytemnestra didn't even bother to tell Chrysothemis why she wanted libations placed on Agamemnon's grave, which implies she doesn't care enough about her daughter to share her concerns and instead just uses her as she pleases.

Lines 473-515 Quotes

When Pelops in past ages
Won the race with his chariot,
What never-ending sorrow
Struck this land!
When Myrtilus, his helper,
Was drowned beneath the ocean
Tossed headlong from his chariot,
He cursed the race of Pelops
And died in great anguish.
Since that day
This palace has been haunted
By suffering and anguish.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Iphigenia , Electra, Orestes, Agamemnon, Atreus, Myrtilus, Pelops

Related Themes:

Page Number: 504-515

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during the first choral song, and it more fully explains the curse of the House of Atreus and implies that the same curse is responsible for Agamemnon's murder and his children's ongoing pain. Pelops (who was, according to myth, Agamemnon's grandfather) entered a chariot race with the king of Pisa to win the hand of the king's daughter in marriage. Pelops bribed Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, to sabotage the king's chariot and tip the race in Pelops's favor. Myrtilus agreed, and Pelops went on to win the race, but afterward, Pelops's plan began to unravel.

Stories as to when or why Pelops killed Myrtilus are conflicted, but in some versions, Myrtilus attempted to collect payment for his assistance by requesting a night with Pelops's new bride, and in some accounts, Myrtilus even rapes her. In a rage, Pelops threw Myrtilus from his chariot

into the sea, killing him; however, before Myrtilus died, he called down a curse onto Pelops and all his descendants. For generations, the House of Atreus, Agamemnon's royal house for which his father was named, has been steeped in "suffering and anguish." The heartbreaking story of this chain of deaths, and most recently the deaths of Iphigenia and Agamemnon, is evidence that the curse is still active. Sophocles repeatedly draws attention to the curse of the House of Atreus, which, like Orestes and Electra's hatred of Aegisthus, is the result of revenge. Through framing revenge as a kind of curse, Sophocles argues that it leaves nothing but "suffering and anguish" and death in its wake.

Lines 516-822 Quotes

Your constant pretext is simply this: I killed
Your father. Yes, I did. I'm well aware of that
And won't pretend to deny it. Justice determined
His death; I wasn't alone. And you should have taken
The side of Justice, if you'd had any sense.
Listen! This father of yours whom you're always lamenting
Committed the most barbaric crime: he sacrificed
Your sister to the gods. Iphigenia's birth
Never cost him the pains of labour that I went through.
Very well. Now answer this question. Why did he sacrifice her?
To help the Greeks? But they enjoyed no right
To kill a daughter of mine. Or did he kill
My child to help his brother Menelaus?
In that case, didn't he owe me some satisfaction?

Related Characters: Clytemnestra (speaker), Menelaus, Agamemnon, Iphigenia , Electra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 525-538

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Clytemnestra tries to explain to Electra the reason why she murdered Agamemnon. This passage is important because it illustrates the "blood for blood" system of justice within Greek society, and it also underscores how oppressive Greek society is to women. According to Clytemnestra, the murder of Agamemnon was "determined" by "justice." Agamemnon, she says, killed Iphigenia for selfish reasons (to help his brother get back his cheating wife) and that crime cannot be forgiven or excused. Because Agamemnon wrongfully drew blood in killing Iphigenia, Clytemnestra feels completely justified in killing him in return, and in fact claims that she was bound to it by law.

This quote also highlights the oppression of both Clytemnestra and Iphigenia as women in Greek society. Menelaus and his wife Helen, who had run away to Troy with the Trojan prince, have their own children who might have been sacrifed, but instead it was Clytemnestra's child who was taken against her will. Furthermore, Agamemnon chose to sacrifice Iphigenia, his daughter. Presumably, Agamemnon would not have even considered sacrificing a son. Through Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra was effectively denied her rights and agency as a mother. While Clytemnestra can certainly be a difficult character to sympathize with, the violation of her role as a mother and the sacrifice of Iphigenia is a "barbaric crime," which Sophocles implies neither Agamemnon nor the Greeks "enjoyed the right" to perpetrate.

Very well, then, listen. You say you killed my father.
What admission could be more shameful than that,
Whether or not justice was on your side?
I put it to you, it wasn't justice that drove
You to kill him. No, you were seduced by the evil man
Who is now your partner. Ask Artemis, the hunter
Goddess, why she becalmed the fleet at Aulis,
As none of the winds would blow. What was she punishing?
I'll give you the answer. We can't cross-question *her*.
My father, as I've been told, was out on a hunt
In Artemis' sacred grove, when his footfall startled
A dappled stag from its covert. After he'd shot it,
He accidentally let fall some boastful words.
This made the goddess angry, and so she held
The Greek fleet up, to make my father atone
For the stag by sacrificing his daughter.
That's how it occurred. It was the only solution.
The ships couldn't sail back home or across to Troy.
He sacrificed Iphigenia under compulsion;
With great reluctance. It wasn't for Menelaus.

Related Characters: Electra (speaker), Menelaus, Agamemnon, Iphigenia , Artemis, Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 558-576

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Electra explains to Clytemnestra the reason why Agamemnon killed Iphigenia, the way Electra sees it at least. Her words here imply that the Greek "blood for blood"

system of justice isn't entirely ethical. This passage also explores one's duty to the gods verses their duty to family, and Sophocles seems to imply that one should never side against one's family, even in the name of revenge. Electra immediately opens her argument with the contention that murder is (almost) never acceptable, even if justice happens to be on one's side. She believes Clytemnestra to be in the wrong regardless of her reasons, and what's more, Electra is convinced that Clytemnestra had ulterior motives in killing Agamemnon.

However, Electra's version of the events leading up to Iphigenia's sacrifice is rather romanticized. She clearly doesn't want to believe that her father has done any wrong, and her language reflects this. She says that Agamemnon "accidentally" said "boastful" things to Artemis after he shot one of her stags, as if insults to the goddess simply fell from his mouth against his will. Furthermore, he only killed Iphigenia, Electra contends, with "great reluctance" and "under compulsion" of the goddess, who cannot be denied. "We can't cross-question *her*," Electra says to her mother in her father's defense. Sophocles implies that Agamemnon displayed too much hubris and then selfishly sacrificed Iphigenia to appease Artemis and make up for his insults. In this way, Sophocles suggests that "cross-questioning" Artemis is exactly what Agamemnon should have done instead of sacrificing Iphigenia, even though Electra believes the opposite.

CHORUS LEADER [*to* ELECTRA]:
I see she's fuming with anger. She looks to me
No longer concerned whether she's in the right.

CLYTEMNESTRA:
Why should I feel any concern for *her*
When she has hurled these insults against her mother?
She's old enough to know better. Utterly shameless!
Don't you believe she'd stoop to anything?

ELECTRA:
Let me assure you, however it looks to you,
I *am* ashamed of my actions and very aware
Of being untrue to myself. But your hostility
And cruel treatment force this behaviour on me.
Shameful ways are learned by shameful example.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Aegisthus, Agamemnon, Electra, Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 610-621

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears during a heated argument between Clytemnestra and Electra over Agamemnon's murder, and it is significant because it continues to highlight how Electra's grief and her hatred for her mother and Aegisthus make her behave in ways that she otherwise considers unethical or immoral. Here, the chorus points out that Clytemnestra is "fuming with anger" at her daughter's behavior, and that she is "no longer concerned" with being right. Both women, the chorus implies, have become so consumed by their hatred that neither is even bothering to think through the implications of what they're saying. Clytemnestra essentially admits this, telling the chorus that she does not "feel any concern" for Electra, because she's so overcome with anger at her.

Meanwhile, Electra says that she knows full well what she *should* do; however, her grief and subsequent anger at her mother for causing that grief dictates that she must be "untrue to [her]self." She even goes out of her way to "assure" the chorus and Clytemnestra that she is aware and "ashamed" of her actions against her mother, but Clytemnestra has set a "shameful example" through the killing of Agamemnon. Again, Electra's grief makes her go against what she knows to be morally right, which is useful when considering Electra's later involvement in the murder of Clytemnestra. Sophocles ultimately argues that matricide is wrong, regardless of the reason, and Electra appears to know this too, but her profound grief and subsequent anger upends her moral compass. What's more, both women's fury is fueled by a fixation on revenge, and so Sophocles suggests that the toxic cycles of revenge killings are also part of what makes mother and daughter feel trapped inside their conflict.

These visions that came to me last night,
These doubtful dreams, Lycean Lord,
If they boded good, grant them fulfilment;
If evil, let them rebound on my foes.
If any by craft would steal the wealth
That I now enjoy, let it not be.
Vouchsafe me always to live as I am,
With life unharmed, to govern the house
Of Atreus' sons and all this realm.
To dwell in prosperous joy with the friends
I love, who presently share my home.
And with those of my children who bear
No malice against me nor cause me pain.
These prayers, Lycean Apollo, graciously hear
And grant us our humble requests.

Related Characters: Clytemnestra (speaker), Chrysothemis, Atreus, Agamemnon, Apollo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 644-656

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Clytemnestra offers a prayer to the god Apollo after her disturbing dream in which Agamemnon was "restored to life." Her words here highlight the Greek "blood for blood" system of justice and also shed light on Clytemnestra's character and her despicable nature. Clytemnestra begins her prayer by saying that if her dreams "boded good, grant them fulfilment." In other words, Clytemnestra begins by asking Apollo to hear her prayer only if the dream was a bad omen; otherwise, he can disregard everything she is about to say. Clytemnestra isn't praying to honor Apollo or to wish peace and happiness to her friends and family. On the contrary, she offers her prayer in defense against the vengeance she fears is heading her way, which makes her prayer another desperate display of self-interest.

In her prayer, Clytemnestra asks that if her dream is indicative of "evil," it "rebound on her foes." Since Orestes is Clytemnestra's foe and wishes to kill her in revenge for Agamemnon's murder, Clytemnestra knowingly wishes evil onto her own son, and this after she demanded her daughter respect and honor her. She also prays for superficial benefits like wealth and popularity, and instead of praying for her children to come around and stop hating her so vehemently, she wishes only to live among those children who *don't* hate her, or at least don't openly admit it, like Chrysothemis. Clytemnestra even has the gall to ask Apollo to continue blessing her with the opportunity to "govern the house / Of Atreus' sons" after murdering one of Atreus's sons. Clytemnestra's prayer exposes the obvious faults of the "blood for blood" system of justice. Even though she believes she was justified in killing Agamemnon, Clytemnestra must live in perpetual fear that she will become the next victim of vengeance, and so even her prayers become insincere and self-serving.

Lines 871-1057 Quotes

So long as I still had word that our brother Orestes
Was alive and well, I went on hoping that he
Would one day come to avenge his father's murder.
But now that he's gone for good, I'm looking to *you*.
You mustn't flinch. Your sister needs your help
To kill Aegisthus—the man who perpetrated
Our father's murder. No secrets between us now.
Where will inaction get you? What can you still
Look forward to? Only resentment in being deprived
Of your father's heritage. Only the pain of growing
Old without the blessings of love or marriage.
Those joys are nothing more than a forlorn hope.
Aegisthus isn't foolish enough to allow
A son of yours—or a son of mine—to grow
To manhood and so to ensure his own destruction.

Related Characters: Electra (speaker), Agamemnon, Aegisthus, Orestes, Chrysothemis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 951-966

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Electra believes Orestes to be dead, and she tries to convince Chrysothemis to help her kill Aegisthus to avenge the murder of Agamemnon. This passage is important because it further underscores the theme of vengeance within the play, but it also highlights the sexism present in ancient Greek society and Sophocles's assertion that women are capable of revenge as much as men are. Electra sees Orestes's presumed death as a reason for her to step up and act. Chrysothemis's "inaction," or her pretense that she doesn't hate Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, will get them nowhere in obtaining justice for their father's death.

As a woman, Chrysothemis doesn't believe that she has the strength or power to affect any real change, but here Electra implores her to be strong. "You mustn't flinch," Electra says, effectively telling her sister to abandon the female stereotypes of weakness that are so pervasive in

their society. Electra's pleas perfectly outline the sisters' oppression as women: Aegisthus "deprived" them of their life and heritage and even dictates their love lives; they can't get married or have children without his approval. Furthermore, Aegisthus assumes that it is only sons who pose a threat to him, not daughters, but Electra proves this assumption false. Electra refuses to be the weak woman society expects her to be, and here she expresses the broader argument that all women—even hesitant ones like Chrysothemis—have the option of doing the same.

Yes, women, if Electra had any sense at all,
She wouldn't have thrown all caution to the winds
Before giving tongue. What are you trying to do?
Why are you putting on this audacious front
And calling on me to follow? Don't you see?
You're not a man, but a woman. You haven't the strength
To conquer your foes. Their star is rising daily,
While our fortunes are ebbing away to nothing.
Who could plot to murder a man as strong
As Aegisthus and then emerge from the fray unscathed?

Related Characters: Chrysothemis (speaker), Aegisthus, The Chorus, Electra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 993-1002

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Chrysothemis attempts to talk Electra out of her plan to kill Aegisthus on her own, and this quote is significant because it again highlights the sexism that defines ancient Greek society. Chrysothemis first directs her comment to the chorus. Chrysothemis thus implies that the chorus will undoubtedly understand and agree with her argument, as they are women, too, and therefore should know that Electra must be weak and incapable of revenge and murder. Chrysothemis refers to Electra's feelings and desire for revenge as an "audacious front," as if by refusing to conform to society's sexist standards, she is effectively denying who she *really* is—a woman who doesn't have the power to back up her tough talk.

Electra, however, doesn't see herself this way, and she does indeed "plot to murder a man as strong / As Aegisthus and then emerge from the fray unscathed." By refusing to embody the sexist expectations of society, Electra effectively proves that not all women can be forced to conform to such expectations. In this way, Sophocles argues that such sexist expectations are founded on false assumptions, and that women, regardless of popular stereotypes, are capable of revenge and forceful action just the same as men.

Lines 1098-1383 Quotes

ELECTRA:
I swear, yes, I swear, Artemis be my strength,
I'll never stoop to fear my old foes again.
Those stay-at-homes, those spare weights
On earth's floor, those womenfolk!

ORESTES:
Be careful, now. The spirit of war can still be strong
In women. Your own experience should tell you that.

Related Characters: Orestes, Electra (speaker), Artemis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1239-1244

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs between Electra and Orestes immediately after she learns he is still alive. This passage reveals Electra's opinion of the traditional role of women in Greek society and underscores her anger with the oppressive role society has forced upon her. Orestes's presence gives Electra strength and she refuses to live under the constraints of a sexist society any longer. Here, Electra also invokes Artemis, the Greek goddess of unwed women, which is certainly ironic. Instead of looking to Artemis to give her strength to be the ideal image of a woman, she asks Artemis to give her strength to defy society's ideal image of a woman and instead be the woman she wants to be—one who is strong and independent.

Electra says that being a conventional woman also means she must "stoop to fear" her "foes," which again assumes that she is thought to be weak and incapable of facing her enemies head-on. Electra, however, isn't weak, and she boldly faces her enemies throughout the entire play. She claims that the expectation for women to "stay-at-home," or remain within the domestic sphere, is a "spare weight," dragging strong, independent women like Electra down to "earth's floor." Orestes's warning that "the spirit of war" is "strong / In women," too, appears to encapsulate one of Sophocles major points throughout the play. Everyone, except for Electra and Orestes, seems to believe that is only men who have the power to seek vengeance, but Sophocles effectively argues otherwise through the power of Electra

and through her brother's support of her actions.

> O Lord Apollo, graciously hear their prayers
> And mine besides. Many a time I have stood
> In supplication before your holy altar
> And offered there such gifts as I could afford.
> So now, Lycean Apollo, with what I have,
> I pray, beseech and supplicate your godhead.
> Vouchsafe to aid us in this enterprise
> And show to all mankind what recompense
> The gods bestow on sinful wickedness.

Related Characters: Electra (speaker), Clytemnestra, Apollo, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1375-1383

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Electra offers a prayer to Apollo as Orestes goes into the palace to kill Clytemnestra. This quotation continues to highlight the shortsightedness of the Greek "blood for blood" system of justice, but it also paints Electra in a rather unflattering light and again brings her morals into question. Sophocles draws a parallel between Electra's prayer here and Clytemnestra's prayer offered to the same god earlier in the play. Just like Clytemnestra's prayer exposed its speaker's hypocrisy, Electra's prayer makes her look selfish, immoral, and blasphemous, as she invokes a sacred god for sinister reasons. She claims to be a pious woman, having prayed "in supplication" before Apollo many times before, but here she asks Apollo to "vouchsafe," or bestow, his assistance upon her "enterprise," which just happens to be matricide.

In this way, Sophocles implies Electra that is just as immoral and unethical as Clytemnestra is, if not worse. While it is surely taboo and immoral to pray for the death of one's son as Clytemnestra does, to pray for the death of one's mother was considered particularly despicable in ancient Greek society, as it disrespects the sacred role of mothers and creators. Furthermore, Electra implores Apollo to "show to all mankind what recompense / The gods bestow on sinful wickedness," by which Electra means that Apollo should show mankind what punishment is due to murderers. However, what Electra neglects to see, and what Sophocles thus implies, is that planning the murder of her mother, even as revenge for Clytemnestra's own sins, makes Electra herself full of the very "sinful wickedness" that she speaks out against.

Lines 1398-1510 Quotes

> No, Orestes, for god's sake,
> Don't give him the chance to argue with you.
> When a man's been caught and is doomed to die,
> What can he gain by a moment's delay?
> Kill him at once; kill him, and then
> Throw out his corpse for the dogs and birds to bury
> Out of our sight. No other payment
> For all I've suffered could be enough for *me*.

Related Characters: Electra (speaker), Aegisthus, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1483-1490

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of the play when Orestes begins to lead Aegisthus into the palace to murder him, and Aegisthus begs for a word in his defense only to have Electra interrupt him. This passage is significant because it continues to upend popular stereotypes of ancient Greek women and implies that they aren't as weak and restrained as they are expected to be. Ancient audiences were very familiar with Aeschylus's version of the same Greek myth, in which Electra meekly disappears just as the killing begins, and they would have expected her to do the same thing here. Instead, Electra takes an active role in Aegisthus's murder, which would have been unthinkable for a woman to do during ancient times.

As a woman, Electra is expected to be loving and gentle, but she is cold and unforgiving and won't even give Aegisthus a chance to speak. She calls for his immediate death and won't tolerate even "a moment's delay." What's more, Electra not only demands his death; she suggests disposing of his body in the most unspeakable way. Funerary and mourning practices of ancient Greek culture involved elaborate ceremonies, customs, prayers, and pyres, but Electra wants Aegisthus discarded for stray dogs and vultures to feed on and bury. This quote was gruesome stuff by any ancient standard, but for it to be spoken by a woman would have been considered particularly ghastly. Electra doesn't just refuse to conform to society's standards; she proves herself capable, as Sophocles implies *all* women are, of revenge and murder.

> O seed of Atreus, how much you have suffered!
> But now this attack has forced you out
> Into freedom. You've come to the ending.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), The Furies, Aegisthus, Orestes, Agamemnon, Atreus, Electra

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1508-1510

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the very end of the play, after Orestes leads Aegisthus into the palace to kill him in the exact place of Agamemnon's murder, leaving Electra alone with the chorus. This quote is important because it again refers to the curse of the House of Atreus and implies that it is to blame for Electra's suffering. However, the chorus also implies that Electra is free, both from her grief and from the confines of ancient Greece's sexist gender roles. As the "seed of Atreus," and therefore his direct descendant, Electra is still vulnerable to Pelops's curse just as Atreus and Agamemnon were and Orestes is now. The chorus implies that the curse doesn't skip the daughters of Atreus, but Electra's strength has, in a way, freed her from the curse nonetheless, or at least from this one aspect of it.

Furthermore, through her refusal to conform to society's sexist assumptions and expectations, Electra has effectively freed herself from their unfair restrictions as well. This quote is particularly powerful because it is literally "the ending," but it also marks a metaphorical ending for Electra as well. According to Greek myth, Electra goes on to marry and be a mother, and relatively little is known about the rest of her life. Orestes, on the other hand, is driven mad by the Furies. While Sophocles certainly doesn't imply that Electra is innocent in the murder of her mother, according to standard mythology it is only Orestes who pays the price. By hinting at the relative calm her future will hold, Sophocles implies that despite her sins, Electra has paid enough through her suffering and oppression and deserves at least some happiness in her life.

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 1-85

Orestes, Pylades, and an old slave enter and look toward the palace of Mycenae. The old slave points out that this is the place Orestes has always dreamed of returning to, noting that the palace of Atreus is "rich in blood." It was here, many years ago, that Orestes's sister, Electra, gave Orestes over to the old slave's care after the murder of their father, Agamemnon. The old slave recalls how he raised Orestes as if he were his own son and made sure he knew that he would one day have to avenge Agamemnon's death.

Revenge is immediately situated as central to the plot and to Greek society, as the old slave has taken it upon himself to instill revenge into Orestes. This passage also introduces the curse that plagues the house of Atreus, Agamemnon's father and the King of Mycenae, which is a major stronghold in the ancient city of Argos. Sophocles refers to this curse several times throughout the play, and it is represented here by the palace, which is "rich in blood."

The old slave encourages Orestes and his friend Pylades to put their plan into action now that a new day has dawned, saying that the time for talking is over. Orestes agrees, remarking that the old slave is a strong and loyal compatriot. Then, Orestes tells the old slave and Pylades that he recently when to see the Delphic oracle to find out how he ought to get revenge on the people who murdered his father.

Deception and falsehoods abound in Electra, *and so Sophocles often places an emphasis on actions, as words are often untrue. While actions are at times deceptive as well, Sophocles seems to suggest that actions can be trusted far more than mere words. Here, that theme comes up in the old slave insistence that it's time to act rather than talk.*

Orestes explains that the Delphic oracle told him that he would be victorious in revenge through using deceit and trickery. Accordingly, Orestes orders the old slave to enter the palace, because the way his appearance has changed with age will keep the people there from recognizing him. The old slave is to tell those at the palace that he is "a stranger from Phocis" and that Orestes has been killed after falling from a chariot during the Pythian Games.

Orestes interprets the oracle's prophecy as an order to kill Clytemnestra by using deception, and his confidence in his plan suggests that he believes he'll be successful in tricking her. This moment is an early indication that deceit will be everywhere in the play, and that none of its characters—even devious ones like Clytemnestra—will be immune to it.

For now, Orestes says, they will "pour libations" onto Agamemnon's grave, and place lock of hair from Orestes's own head on it. The **bronze urn** that they will claim holds Orestes's ashes is hidden in the bushes nearby. "What harm does it do me / To say I'm dead?" Orestes asks, and then answers his own question by claiming that there's no reason not to lie if doing so leads to "real salvation and [...] a glorious prize."

Orestes's question here is rhetorical; Sophocles is actually implying that great harm can come from deceit, even though Orestes says the opposite. Faking one's own death was incredibly taboo in Greek society and was viewed as a bad omen, so audiences in ancient Greece would have been suspicious of Orestes's confidence here. Additionally, Orestes's plan to leave hair at Agamemnon's grave is an allusion to ancient Greek literature more generally. Locks of hair were a token of mourning during ancient times, and in Aeschylus's The Libation Bearers, *Orestes knows his sister, Electra, from the locks of hair she places on their father's grave.*

Orestes asks the gods to "welcome [him] home" and make his mission successful, claiming that he's doing it in the name of justice. He turns to the old slave and tells him to be on his way to the palace. Suddenly, they hear a cry from within the palace. Noting how miserable the voice sounds, the old slave suggests that the person crying out might be Electra and wonders if they should stay and listen to her. But Orestes refuses, saying that they have to do as Apollo orders and start by visiting Agamemnon's grave.

Because the Delphic oracle is said to speak the words of the god Apollo, Orestes takes the oracle's prophecy as a direct order from the gods. To Orestes, killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is morally right and just, and since revenge was ordered by Apollo, Orestes considers it obligatory as well. Similarly, Electra will later claim that Agamemnon considered Iphigenia's sacrifice "compulsory" as well, which, Electra argues, therefore makes Iphigenia's murder just. This scene begins Sophocles's exploration of the way that revenge, though considered normal and even moral in this context, often leads only to more unnecessary death.

LINES 86-120

Electra exits the palace and begins to cry to the sky and the sun. She notes that her sorrow continues with each new day, and through the night she continues her mourning as well. What's more, she reveals that even her own home is a source of her constant mourning for her deceased father. This is because Electra's own mother, Clytemnestra, and her second husband, Aegisthus, murdered Electra's father, Agamemnon.

According to Greek myth, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis, and Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed Agamemnon to avenge Iphigenia. Many years have passed since Agamemnon's murder, but Electra's grief is still raw, which suggests that mourning the loss of a loved one, particularly a parent, is a life-long struggle.

Electra maintains that she will never stop mourning her father and will instead continue crying like a **nightingale**. Electra calls out to the curse that her father supposedly bore and to the "dread Furies of vengeance." She prays to them to punish her father's murderers and bring her brother, Orestes, back to her. She laments that her grief is too extreme to handle on her own any longer.

The nightingale, which is symbolic of Electra's grief and mourning, is a reference to Procne, a mythological figure who killed her son, Itys, as revenge for the rape of her sister, Philomela, by Procne's husband Tereus. After killing her son, Procne was transformed into a nightingale, and she is often viewed as a primary figure of grief in Greek literature. This passage also reflects Sophocles's overarching theme of gender roles and how they play out in individuals' lives. Here, Electra considers herself too weak to shoulder the burden of her grief because, as a woman, society expects her to be helpless.

LINES 121-250

A chorus of Mycenean women arrive in front of the palace gateway, crying out to Electra with pity. The women ask Electra why she is still weeping over Agamemnon's death. Electra knows the women have come to comfort her, but she refuses to stop mourning and cannot be consoled. She begs the women to leave her alone with her grief.

This moment paints Electra's grief as impossible to resolve; she can't be made to feel better through any amount of sympathy. Electra's deep connection to her father means that she will always mourn him, and her grief continues despite others' belief that she should move on. In this way, Sophocles implies that real grief cannot be confined to socially accepted periods of mourning.

The chorus asks Electra how her all of her mourning can bring Agamemnon back. They claim that her grief doesn't make her feel any better, and they wonder why she insists such useless misery. Electra, however, says that only a "fool" would forget a deceased parent, and so she will continue to mourn like the **nightingale**. Still, the chorus points out, Electra isn't the only one left to mourn Agamemnon. Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, and her brother, Orestes, must mourn too.

Again, Electra's grief does not end simply because others think it should, nor is it affected by how others mourn. Electra's grief is completely subjective, which is why she can't possibly be expected to conform to social norms of acceptable grieving. Additionally, Electra's comment that only a "fool" neglects to mourn a parent is interesting, considering she is later complicit in the murder of her mother. As Electra's grief consumes her, she begins to lose sight of her morals, which underscores Sophocles's argument that grief is so powerful that it can drive one to do things they would usually consider unethical.

Electra explains that her life is miserable. She is not married and has no children, and she badly misses her brother Orestes, whom she is always waiting for. Orestes sends occasional messages and says he wants to come home, but he has not yet returned. The chorus encourages Electra to remain hopeful, because Zeus is watching over everything. They tell Electra to be angry with him instead, and let her fury at her family members go.

After the murder of Agamemnon, Electra gave Orestes, then an infant, to the old slave in Phocis, a city in central Greece. Here, her misery over his long absence again points to the profound effects of revenge. Because revenge is so ingrained in ancient Greek society, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra were worried that Orestes would grow up to avenge his father's death. Electra feared they would kill Orestes to spare their own lives, so she smuggled him out of Argos to Phocis, even though she misses him terribly.

Electra, however, says that her life has lost all meaning; she is treated like a worthless stranger in her own father's house. The chorus cries for Agamemnon and his untimely death. Electra agrees, say that that day was the worst of her life. What did Agamemnon experience, she wonders, when he discovered that he was about to be murdered. Those same murderers, Electra thinks, have harmed her as well. She prays to Zeus to punish the people who have caused all this misery.

Electra later claims that Aegisthus will not allow her to marry, in case she bears a son who might grow up to avenge Agamemnon, and this is likely part of what she's referring to when she discusses life having passed her by. Electra has spent most of her childbearing years a prisoner in Aegisthus's house, but as a woman, Electra is expected to marry and have children. Since she hasn't, she feels like her life is empty and meaningless. This passage also illustrates the power of men over women in ancient Greek society, as Aegisthus assumes such control over Electra and treats her terribly even in her own home.

The chorus, however, tells Electra that she has caused much of her own misery, because she keeps fixating on past hurts that can't be changed. They also warn her not to fight against forces so much stronger than herself. Electra maintains that she doesn't have a choice; she won't be able to stop feeling sad until she has fought against those who wronged her, and what's more, they genuinely deserve to be punished.

The chorus's words indicate that Electra in a powerless state because she is a woman, but she refuses to conform to society's expectations. She is expected to be weak, and the chorus warns her against fighting those who are strong. Electra, however, is strong, and through her actions, Sophocles upends the popular gender stereotype of woman as weaker than men.

The chorus tells Electra again that she'll only get herself into trouble, but she disagrees. She says that the only way to avoid dishonoring her father is to confront "evil" directly and continuing mourning just as forcefully as she's been doing. She won't let Agamemnon's killers get away without "pay[ing] with blood for blood," adding that she's bound by her conscience to bring them justice.

This passage reflects the association between revenge and justice in Greek society. In Electra's opinion, justice for Agamemnon can only be obtained by killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, as they must "pay with blood for blood." Electra implies that not *killing her mother would be the unjust course of action, but Sophocles also subtly points out how shortsighted this view really is. Not only is Electra talking about the murder of her own mother when she's already acknowledged that children should honor their parents, but she also makes herself the next target of revenge by continuing the vicious cycle of killing.*

LINES 251-470

Electra tells the chorus that she feels "ashamed" of her laments, since they must make her seem bitter, but she also insists that she has no choice, especially because she is a woman who comes from a noble family. Electra and her mother, Clytemnestra, are now enemies, and Electra is forced to live with Agamemnon's murderers and watch Aegisthus sit on her father's throne. What's worse, Electra is forced to witness the most infuriating thing of all: Aegisthus sleeping in the same bed Agamemnon once did.

This passage lends insight into Electra's character and her struggle with grief. Here, she admits to feeling "ashamed" of her contempt for her mother, but nonetheless, Electra's grief over the death of her father at her mother's hands appears to have completely overcome her. She considers it her duty, as a daughter and as a woman, to both avenge her father and keep his memory alive through mourning.

Electra claims that Clytemnestra even appears to take pleasure in her despicable behavior. Every month, Clytemnestra dedicates the day she killed Agamemnon to dancing and making sacrifices to the gods. Clytemnestra forbids Electra to grieve and frequently abuses her, saying that she hopes Electra will be eternally tormented for her insistence on continuing to mourn Agamemnon.

This paints Clytemnestra in a particularly unflattering light. Regardless of the murder of Agamemnon, which is certainly awful but somewhat understandable given her society's norms, her treatment of Electra is unconscionable. Clytemnestra sees Electra's grieving as an active choice between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and Electra has obviously chosen her father.

Whenever Clytemnestra hears rumors that Orestes is coming back, she becomes furious and blames Electra for taking Orestes away from her and sending him far from home. For her part, Electra is tired of waiting for Orestes to return, and she's starting to think he might never come. To the chorus, she muses that because everything around her is evil, she might have no choice but to behave evilly herself.

Clytemnestra gets upset whenever she hears Orestes might be coming back because she knows that he will attempt to kill her to avenge Agamemnon's death. Clytemnestra lives in perpetual fear that her own son will come home and murder her, which again reflects how common (and senseless) revenge is in Greek society.

The chorus worries that Aegisthus may be close enough to hear, but Electra says that he isn't home; she wouldn't go outside if he were. The chorus asks Electra if Orestes is really on his way back to Argos. Electra claims that he's said he'll come, but that "he never does what he says." The chorus attempts to reassure Electra and tells her that men might hesitate before doing something difficult. "*I* never hesitated when I saved his life," she says. Suddenly, Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, approaches.

The chorus's fears that Aegisthus will hear and punish Electra again underscores the sexist nature of Greek society. It is assumed by the chorus, a group of Mycenean women, that Aegisthus, a man, has the power to control Electra. Aegisthus does in fact control Electra, as Sophocles frequently mentions that she isn't allowed to publicly mourn outside the palace when Aegisthus is home. However, Electra makes it clear that she doesn't intend to submit to his will forever, marking her as an unusual woman in this context.

Chrysothemis asks Electra what she's doing and reminds her that there's no point in being angry after so long. Chrysothemis confesses that she herself is upset too, but nonetheless thinks it is smarter to keep a low profile and not pretend that she's powerful enough to make any difference. She begs Electra to see reason, because even though Chrysothemis knows that Electra is right, the sisters have no choice but to obey those who are more powerful than themselves. Electra, however, accuses her sister of forgetting Agamemnon and thinking only of Clytemnestra.

Chrysothemis implies, much like the chorus does, that Electra's excessive mourning is pointless, but she also implies that Electra's attempts to fight Aegisthus are pointless too. Women, in Chrysothemis's view, are essentially powerless and ineffectual. Thus, Electra should stop opposing Aegisthus. Electra, of course, cannot submit without a fight, showing that women can actually be tougher than most people in this society believe them to be.

Electra refuses to stop mourning, telling Chrysothemis that irritating Agamemnon's murderers is a way of honoring his memory. Her sister says that she hates Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but Electra claims that Chrysothemis's hatred is just an act. In Electra's opinion, Chrysothemis is helping Agamemnon's murderers, so instead of being called "Agamemnon's daughter," she should be called "Clytemnestra's daughter." Electra says that Chrysothemis has "betrayed" their family, at which point the chorus interrupts, begging both sisters to listen to each other instead of fighting.

Electra implies that Chrysothemis's hatred of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is a lie, and that she only pretends to hate them to appease Electra. Chrysothemis, on the other hand, claims she only pretends not *to hate them to make her life easier and lessen their abuse. Either way, Chrysothemis is deceiving* somebody, *which underscores Sophocles's point that people are often deceitful, for a wide variety of reasons.*

Chrysothemis tells the chorus that Aegisthus is going to make Electra stop grieving soon. She claims that if Electra won't stop publicly mourning, Aegisthus will bury her in a cave far away. Electra welcomes Aegisthus's threat, but Chrysothemis says her sister is insane for not listening to her. Being submissive, Chrysothemis says, makes more sense than foolishly ensuring defeat, but Electra is unmoved. She maintains that she'll accept defeat if that's what she has to do to honor her father's memory.

This scene again reflects Aegisthus's power as a man in Greek society, as he presumes to have enough control over Electra to punish her through such excessive and cruel means. This passage also reiterates Sophocles's argument that mourning can't be confined to accepted social periods. Electra's grief doesn't go away simply because of Aegisthus's threat or Chrysothemis's pleas for her silence.

Electra then asks Chrysothemis where she's going, and to whom she's bringing offerings. Chrysothemis says that she is carrying Clytemnestra's libations for Agamemnon's grave. Electra is shocked and wants to know why her mother is sending libations to her father's grave. Chrysothemis explains that Clytemnestra dreamed that Agamemnon was alive, and that he took his staff (which Aegisthus now holds) and struck the hearth. From the hearth grew a "leafy branch" which covered all of Mycenae.

The "leafy branch" that grows from the hearth represents Orestes's rightful place as the King of Mycenae. When Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon, they effectively usurped his role as king, and Clytemnestra's dream implies that she feels guilt over denying Agamemnon's son the right to rule as his forefathers did. The dream also reflects Clytemnestra's fear for her own safety, as she knows her son will one day return to avenge Agamemnon's murder.

Electra tells Chrysothemis not to deliver the libations as ordered. She tells her sister to instead discard the offerings and hide them deep in the earth where they will be unable to reach Agamemnon's grave. Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon cruelly, Electra reminds Chrysothemis, so there's no way gifts can undo that harm. She tells Chrysothemis to instead offer strands of hair from their heads and pray for Orestes to return. The chorus agrees and encourages Chrysothemis to do as Electra says. Chrysothemis consents, but she begs the chorus not to tell, saying that she would face terrible consequences if her mother found out.

Electra doesn't want Clytemnestra's libations to be placed on Agamemnon's grave because she considers them false offerings. Clytemnestra doesn't respect Agamemnon and doesn't wish to honor him in any way; she is simply making offerings to curry favor with the gods and gain their protection from Orestes's vengeance. Electra says elsewhere that she believes that her mother killed her father only so she would be free to marry Aegisthus and rule over Mycenae, which means that the killing is not justified under the Greek "blood for blood" system of justice.

LINES 473-515

The chorus says that it must have been "Justice" that sent the nightmare about Agamemnon to Clytemnestra. They mention a "fearsome Fury" waiting to attack Agamemnon's murderers, whose union they say is "cursed" because of the sinful way it started. The chorus goes on to say that this land of Argos has been struck with eternal misery ever since Pelops won his chariot race and Myrtilus cursed him.

Here, the chorus conveys a sense of optimism that Clytemnestra's dream foretells justice, and this is reflected in their mention of the Furies, who are symbolic of vengeance in Greek mythology. This passage also more fully explains the curse of the royal house of Atreus, which is mentioned several times throughout the play.

LINES 516-822

Clytemnestra exits the palace and, seeing Electra, she scolds her for being outside and "off the leash." Aegisthus is not home to keep Electra "under control," and when he is gone, Electra embarrasses the family by criticizing them to the public. Electra often says that Clytemnestra is an "oppressive tyrant," but Clytemnestra claims she is only cruel in response to the abuse that Electra herself directs at Clytemnestra. Clytemnestra knows that Electra hates her because she killed Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra doesn't deny that she killed him.

Clytemnestra's comment reflects the sexism present in Greek society. She speaks of Electra as if she is a dog "off the leash" and under the control of a man. Clytemnestra does not even attempt to intervene, nor does she punish Electra herself; rather, Clytemnestra defers this task to Aegisthus, who in turn denies Electra agency over her own existence.

However, Clytemnestra claims that she had to kill Agamemnon because "Justice" dictated it. According to Clytemnestra, Agamemnon committed the terrible crime of sacrificing Electra's sister, Iphigenia, to the gods. She says that he had "no right" to kill a daughter of Clytemnestra's, and while he said it was to help the Greeks, Clytemnestra knows it was actually to help his brother, Menelaus. Menelaus should have offered one of his own children, not hers, Clytemnestra claims.

Like Electra, Clytemnestra claims justice as her primary motivation. According to Greek myth, Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia so that the goddess Artemis would change the winds and the Greek warriors could sail to Troy, but Clytemnestra maintains he did it more to help Menelaus, whose wife, Helen, had fled to Troy. Thus, Clytemnestra claims, Iphigenia's sacrifice was for Menelaus, not the gods or the Greeks, and therefore it was not just and had to be avenged.

Electra claims that Clytemnestra didn't really kill Agamemnon for "justice." Rather, she says her mother committed the crime because she had been seduced by Aegisthus. Furthermore, Electra says, Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia was not for Menelaus but for Artemis, and since the sacrifice was for a goddess, Agamemnon had no choice but to go through with it. Artemis stalled the winds because Agamemnon shot a stag from her "sacred grove" and boasted about it, so the only way he could make it up to Artemis was to offer his own daughter.

While Clytemnestra claims that Agamemnon wasn't truthful in his reasons for killing Iphigenia, Electra claims that Clytemnestra wasn't truthful in her own reasons for killing Agamemnon. Here, the justifications that the two give seem equally untrustworthy; they use almost exactly the same logic, and the audience has reason to disbelieve each of them: perhaps killing the stag wasn't really an accident, and perhaps Clytemnestra really was seduced by Aegisthus. This moment shows how nonsensical and false cycles of revenge can be, and the fact that Electra does not *see this indicates that her intense grief may be clouding her judgment.*


Even if Agamemnon did sacrifice Iphigenia to help Menelaus, that still does not make Clytemnestra in the right, Electra maintains. "What was your justification?" Electra asks her mother. "Blood for blood, I suppose." But Electra doesn't see the sense in this either, as killing Agamemnon made Clytemnestra herself a target. Most of all, the fact that Clytemnestra sleeps with her father's assassin is what is really puzzling to Electra, since it seems like an odd way of avenging a daughter's death. Electra goes on to say that she doesn't care if her mother does think her public mourning is disrespectful or shameful, finally yelling that if people have a problem with her behavior, perhaps they'll think she takes after Clytemnesta.

Electra claims here that there is little wisdom in the Greek "blood for blood" sysytem of justice, as it perpetuates a never-ending chain of killing, yet this realization still doesn't make her give up her plan to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as revenge for Agamemnon's murder. While this makes Electra appear quite hypocritical, it also implies that Electra is driven by her grief to behavior that she knows is unethical.


The chorus says that Electra no longer seems to care whether she's right or wrong, and Clytemnestra claims her daughter is "utterly shameless." Electra, however, is unmoved. She says that she is ashamed of herself, because she's been "untrue" to herself, adding that she learned to behave in a shameful way by following the example of the shameful people around her.

Again, Electra knows that her poor treatment of her mother is wrong, but her grief has blinded her to what is right, as the chorus points out. What's more, Electra claims to have learned her own "shameful ways" from Clytemnestra, again emphasizing how unjust behavior such as revenge only leads to further injustice.


Clytemnestra swears by Artemis that Electra's behavior will eventually catch up to her, but for now, Clytemnestra just wants to make her sacrificial offering. Electra sarcastically tells her to go ahead with the offering. Clytemnestra offers fruit and prayers to Apollo to remedy her fears, and she prays for evil to strike her foes and for the protection of her wealth. She also requests that she may always able to live in luxury with those among her children who do not wish her harm. Suddenly, the old slave enters the palace.

Artemis is the goddess of virginity, and Clytemnestra swears to her here because Electra has behaved in a way that is unbecoming a woman in Greek society, which further reflects the oppression of women. What's more, it's not clear whether Clytemnestra's prayer here is sincere or not, and this uncertainty is further evidence of the play's thematic focus on deceit and its pervasive effects.

The old slave whether the palace belongs to Aegisthus. When the chorus confirms that it does, the old slave tells Clytemnestra that he has been sent from Phocis to inform her that Orestes is dead. "Orestes dead! This is the death of *me*!" Electra cries. Clytemnestra tells the slave to ignore Electra and asks for more details about Orestes's death. The old slave tells Clytemnestra a long and detailed story in which Orestes is killed by a chariot accident during the Pythian Games. The chorus notes that "the royal house of Argos" is "cut down at the roots."

The house of Atreus, after which Agamemnon's father was named, began in Mycenae when Atreus and his twin brother, Thyestes (Aegisthus's father) were exiled by their father for killing their half-brother and found refuge there. They ruled over Mycenae in the king's absence, and when the king was killed at war, their rule became permanent. So when the chorus claims the royal house is "cut down" with the death of Orestes, this isn't exactly true, since Aegisthus, too, is descendant of the same house.

Clytemnestra can't decide if Orestes's death is sad or happy news, since she acknowledges that it's impossible to hate her own child. With Orestes dead, however, she doesn't have to be afraid anymore, and she's free to ignore Electra too. "Nemesis, hear, and avenge my brother!" Electra cries, but Clytemnestra says that Nemesis has done the right thing in this case. The old slave begins to leave, but Clytemnestra insists that he come inside the palace. Electra sarcastically remarks how extreme her mother's grief is, and then bitterly notes that Orestes's death causes her, Electra, even more pain and suffering. Electra wishes aloud to die, thinking that death would be better than the immense pain she's left with.

Nemesis is the Greek goddess of retribution, and Electra calls on her here in her grief; however, Clytemnestra implies that Nemesis already answered in the form of Orestes's death, which Clytemnestra takes as further proof of the justification of Agamemnon's murder. She expresses only a moment of grief over the death of her son before celebrating her good fortune—with Orestes's death, Clytemnestra no longer must fear when he will return and exact revenge for his father's death. Again, Sophocles shows that the fixation on revenge as a primary form of justice leads to absurd outcomes, such as a mother celebrating her own son's death.

LINES 823-870

Electra continues to wail as the chorus wonders where Zeus is and why he isn't intervening. The chorus begs Electra to stop crying, but it does little good; she's convinced that she has nothing more to hope for now that Orestes is dead. The chorus reminds Electra that everyone dies sooner or later, but Electra already knows this all too well. So, she begins to mourn Orestes as well.

This moment is further evidence of Electra's deep grief and mourning, but it also suggests that her pain is upending her moral compass. Electra's words imply that her sadness over Orestes's death is mainly due to the fact that she had hoped he kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, causing the kind of senseless death (of a parent, no less) that Electra has previously said she abhors.

LINES 871-1057

Suddenly, Chrysothemis rushes in with what she calls "quite undignified haste," excited to share happy news with Electra. Chrysothemis claims that Orestes has come back. There are fresh offerings on Agamemnon's grave, she says, of milk, flowers, and "a lock of hair, newly cut off." It must be Orestes, Chrysothemis maintains, but Electra thinks that her sister is being foolish. Electra tells her sister that Orestes is dead, and it is more likely that the libations were put there in memory of Orestes.

Chrysothemis's claim that she ran with "quite undignified haste" is another reflection of their sexist society. To run or hurry in any way is considered unbecoming a proper lady, and when Chrysothemis runs in her excitement, she is acutely aware of this. This passage also alludes to Aeschylus's The Libation Bearers *and the locks of hair that identify the siblings.*

Electra, however, has her own plan to improve their situation. She says that she and Chrysothemis must kill Aegisthus if they are ever to be happy again. With Aegisthus alive, they will be forced to grow old without ever falling in love or getting married, because Aegisthus would never take the risk of letting one of them have a son who might grow up to avenge Agamemnon's death. But if they kill Aegisthus, they will win their freedom and be admired among the people, as they will have restored Agamemnon's house.

Aegisthus's control of Chrysothemis and Electra reflects both the presence of revenge (it is so common that Aegisthus just assumes Electra and Chrysothemis's sons would seek revenge) and the prevailing gender roles of Greek society. As a man, Aegisthus completely controls Electra and Chrysothemis, and he even decides if they marry and have children. As women, Electra and Chrysothemis are given very little agency over their lives, and Electra is determined to regain some of this control, even if she must kill Aegisthus herself to get it. In this way, Sophocles shows that far from being weak, women can actually be very strong—in part because *of their subjugated place in society.*

Chrysothemis tells Electra that because she's a woman, she'll never have enough strength to win this fight. She warns Electra to stop talking such nonsense, because if they are heard, it will only make matters worse. Electra isn't surprised by her sister's reaction and she quickly vows to kill Aegisthus alone, though she asks Chrysothemis if she really believes that Electra is wrong about all this. In reply, Chrysothemis says: "You can be right and do a lot of harm." .

Electra completely upends popular gender stereotypes. Like Chrysothemis, society expects Electra to be weak and ineffectual, but she continually behaves in ways that run counter to these expectations. In this way, Sophocles implies that women are not weak after all and, like men, they are very capable of revenge and murder. Chrysothemis's statement that one can be both "right" and do "harm" also seems to reflect one of Sophocles's central arguments. Even if all this death and killing is just, he implies, it is still very harmful and therefore unwise.

LINES 1058-1097

"Oh, *where* is wisdom?" the chorus asks, going on to suggest that it lives in the sky with the birds, who take good care of their own family members. The women call again to Zeus, telling of the a "plague" that has fallen on Agamemnon's house. The children battle with one another; Electra despises Chrysothemis, and it seems as if peace will never come. Electra now fights alone, "**Nightingale**-like" in her endless mourning.

Sophocles again implies that revenge and killing are immoral, especially within families, as the chorus looks to nature and the birds as an example of familial devotion. Birds love and care for their parents and offspring no matter what, and this aligns with Sophocles general argument that one's family should always be honored.

LINES 1098-1383

Orestes enters with Pylades, carrying the small **bronze urn**. Orestes asks the chorus where he might find the house of Aegisthus. Electra cries out upon seeing him, afraid that he has brought proof of Orestes's death. Orestes confirms that they indeed are there to deliver the urn containing the remains of Clytemnestra's son. Electra begs to hold they urn so that she may weep with it in her arms.

The bronze urn, while generally accepted as a symbol of death, is also symbolic of Orestes's lies and deception. It appears to be one thing on the outside, but it holds something completely different than Orestes claims it does. Here, Orestes deceives even his devoted sister, showing again how lies can turn up in the most unexpected places and trick anyone at any time.

The chorus again reminds Electra that they all must die, so she shouldn't grieve too much. Orestes asks Electra if she is indeed the princess, and she admits that she is, asking why he's looking at her in such a sad way. He expresses regret for how much she has suffered and then asks if the women can keep a secret, and Electra assures him that they can. Orestes tells Electra to put the **urn** down, and then he will tell her, but Electra refuses to let go. She's wrong to cry so much, he says, because Orestes isn't in the urn. "He's alive?" Electra asks. "Yes," Orestes says, "if *I* am alive."

Orestes could have saved Electra much despair and mourning had he simply gone to her like the old slave suggested early in the play. Orestes, however, chose to honor Apollo instead of his sister and so caused her unnecessary pain, which further underscores Sophocles's opinion that one's family should be honored above all else, including the gods and vows for vengeance.

"*You* are Orestes?" Electra exclaims. Orestes shows her a ring bearing Agamemnon's seal, and the two embrace joyfully, promising never to part again. Electra yells to the chorus in delight that Orestes has returned. Orestes begs his sister to keep quiet and be patient, but she can't see why she should, swearing to Artemis that she will never be afraid of her enemies again and referring to "those womenfolk" as "spare weights." Orestes again tells Electra to be careful, noting that she more than anyone should know how strong the "spirit of war" can be in women.

Here, Electra appeals to Artemis because she is the goddess of unmarried women, but Electra's opinion of society's expectations of women is quiet low. She sees her traditional role as a woman as a "weight" that drags her down, and Electra will not submit to such oppression without a fight. Orestes, too, suggests that women are capable of war, which aligns with Sophocles's argument that women should not be underestimated.

Orestes tells Electra that she must continue to act as if he is dead so that Clytemnestra doesn't suspect anything, adding that they can celebrate after their plan succeeds. Electra agrees, saying how miraculous Orestes's return—it's much like Agamemnon himself had been restored to life. Aegisthus is not at home, she tells her brother, and Clytemnestra is in the palace alone. Suddenly, the old slave exits the palace doors and exclaims that they have to be more cautious.

Orestes's plan relies on Electra deceiving Clytemnestra as well, which reinforces Sophocles's argument that words, and at times actions as well, should generally not be trusted. Once Orestes kills Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, both Electra and Orestes will be free from their mother and stepfather's oppression and then, Orestes says, they can celebrate.

The old slave tells Orestes and Electra that their cries of joy are sure to be heard inside the palace, so they had better stop their "endless talking" and come inside. When Electra asks who the old man is, Orestes is surprised she doesn't recognize him, as he is the same man who took Orestes to Phocis at Electra's own direction. Electra is utterly surprised, wondering how she could have failed to recognize him.

The old slave's order for Orestes and Electra to stop their "endless talking" also reflects Sophocles's argument that words are often deceiving and empty. Furthermore, Electra's inability to recognize the old slave implies that even intelligent people can be deceived. Electra has prior knowledge of the old slave and has even met him in the past, yet she is so duped by Orestes's deceitful plan that she has no idea who he is.

The old slave again orders them to stop talking, saying that it's time to take action instead. Clytemnestra is alone in the palace, and it is the perfect time to strike. Orestes, Pylades, and the old slave enter the palace, leaving Electra outside. Electra prays to Apollo for success, then turns and enters the palace.

Like Clytemnestra's previous prayer to Apollo, Electra's prayer is selfish and hateful as well. She prays to Apollo to help in her and Orestes's attempt to kill their own mother in the name of revenge, which Sophocles implies is a poor reason to commit matricide. Electra's prayer makes her actions seem even uglier, because it adds insincerity to immorality.

LINES 1384-1397

"Look at the fire sweeping the bush," the chorus sings, describing how war is descending on the palace. They watch as Orestes paces inside the palace, looking at Agamemnon's throne and gripping his bloody sword. "The game's afoot!" the women cry.

The chorus often has a moment of anticipation prior to the climax in Greek tragedies, and this moment is an example of that convention. Ancient audiences were familiar with the myth of Orestes and Electra, and so they would have known that revenge was forthcoming.

LINES 1398-1510

Electra exits the palace alone and the chorus begs to know what's going on inside. Electra tells the women that Clytemnestra is "dressing the **urn**," and Orestes and the others are nearby. The women wonder why Electra has come outside, to which she replies that she's standing guard so that the arrival of Aegisthus doesn't come as a surprise. Sounds of Clytemnestra's cries come from inside the palace, as she begs Orestes to treat her mercifully. "Strike her a second blow," Electra calls out, "if you have the strength!"

In Aeschylus's The Libation Bearers, Electra disappears during the murder of Clytemnestra, but Sophocles has Electra play a more active role, which supports his central argument that women, too, are capable of revenge and murder. Electra is cold and unforgiving, and even seems excited by the sounds of her mother's screams. This again upsets gender stereotypes, and instead of being tender and nurturing as a stereotypical female character might be, Electra is hateful and bloodthirsty.

The chorus sings that the curse is now taking effect. Then, Orestes and Pylades exit the palace, their hands dripping with blood. "All is well, indoors," Orestes says. "If Apollo prophesized well." The chorus cries out that Aegisthus is approaching in the distance, and they urge Orestes to do just as well in this second round of the battle as he did in the first.

Through Orestes's comment that "all is well if Apollo prophesized well," Sophocles implies that perhaps Apollo didn't prophesize well, or, at least, that Orestes may have misinterpreted his prophecy. In this way, Sophocles again implies that there is no justification for matricide, not even revenge that seems to be sanctioned by the gods.

"*I* can look after everything here," Electra says to Orestes as he rushes into the palace. The chorus tells Electra to speak calmly to Aegisthus so that he won't guess he's about to be attacked. Aegisthus approaches and tells Electra he has heard of Orestes's death. He wants to know immediately where the men from Phocis are, and Electra tells him that they're inside with Clytemnestra. She also tells Aegisthus that the men have brought Orestes's remains. Aegisthus asks if he can see Orestes, and Electra mockingly replies that he certainly can.

Electra's claim that she "can look after" things and the italicized "I" again imply that Electra is just as capable as any man and doesn't need Orestes's help to trap Aegisthus and guide him to his untimely death. Electra's behavior again upends popular stereotypes of female gender roles. She is sarcastic and mocking in her approach to Aegisthus, which again portrays her as hateful and bloodthirsty rather than reserved and demure.

Aegisthus yells that the palace doors should be opened so that everyone can see the remains of Orestes. As the doors open, Orestes exits the palace with Pylades, carrying Clytemnestra's corpse covered with a shroud. Aegisthus says to remove the shroud, adding: "Kinship requires some mourning, even from me." Orestes, however, tells him to remove it himself, since the body underneath actually belongs to Aegisthus. Aegisthus orders Electra to go find Clytemnestra as he lifts the shroud, but Electra says that that won't be necessary, since Clytemnestra is already present.

Clytemnestra's shrouded body is another example of deceit and disguise, as Aegisthus is made to believe that it is Orestes's body under the sheet. Aegisthus's comment that "kinship requires some mourning, even from [him]" reflects Aegisthus's identity as a biological relative of Orestes's, beyond being his stepfather. Aegisthus's father and Orestes's father were brothers, which makes the men first cousins.

Aegisthus cries out that he's been trapped, and asks who the men surrounding him really are. Orestes slyly wonders aloud whether Aegisthus knows he's been talking to a dead man, at which point Aegisthus suddenly understands that this man is Orestes. Aegisthus begs Orestes for mercy, but Electra interrupts, telling Orestes to kill Aegisthus withoug letting him talk any longer. She adds that letting animals destroy his corpse is the only adequate "payment" she can imagine for everything she's been through.

Instead of telling Aegisthus who he is directly, Orestes speaks in a riddle, much like the Delphic oracle, which reflect the deception that Orestes has relied on throughout the play. Even in this final moments of his life, Aegisthus can't be sure that those around him are speaking truthfully. Additionally, Electra's interruption further disrupts popular gender stereotypes. Instead of showing kindness and mercy, as society expects her to do as a woman, Electra encourages Orestes to kill Aegisthus and dispose of his body in the most disrespectful, gruesome way.

Orestes tells Aegisthus to go inside the palace, adding that there's no more time for talking. Orestes orders Aegisthus to the very spot where Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon. Aegisthus wails that because of "the curse of Pelops's house," there's already been so much destruction in the palace that any more seems unnecessary. Orestes, however, answers that Aegisthus must nevertheless be destroyed. Orestes also says that everyone who breaks the law should be similarly punished, since then "Crime would not be so rife."

Aegisthus's reference to "the curse of Pelops's house" refers to the curse of the royal house of Atreus, which began with Pelops, Atreus's father and Agamemnon's grandfather. Through this reference, Sophocles implies that Orestes's impending murder of Aegisthus is further proof of this age-old curse. This passage also draws attention to the never-ending and shortsighted nature of the "blood for blood" system of justice. By killing Aegisthus, Orestes opens himself up for murder via revenge, continuing a cycle which, in theory, can go on indefinitely. "Crime would not be so rife" under such a system precisely because everyone would be dead, which makes Orestes's claim here somewhat ironic.

The chorus cheers that Electra is free at last, despite how much pain she's gone through along the way. Electra turns and enters the palace, and the chorus exits.

As Sophocles's play focuses on Electra's forceful disruption of gender roles, he aptly ends with Electra on stage after most of the others have departed. The chorus claims that Electra is now free of her suffering, presumably because her mother and stepfather are dead, but Sophocles also implies that Electra is free in part because she has chosen to go against the sexist expectations of Greek society, which assume that she is weak and ineffectual simply because she is woman.

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