The Libation Bearers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AESCHYLUS

Born in Eleusis, Greece, Aeschylus grew up in the Golden Age of Athens, and fought in the Battle of Marathon against invading Persian forces in 490 BCE. He began writing plays even before this, in the year 500 BCE, and by 484 he had won first prize at the Dionysia, the most important festival of tragic plays in Greece and a huge honor for a Greek dramatist. Eventually writing over 90 plays (of which only seven have survived), he went on to win first prize in the Dionysia twelve more times. The *Oresteia* trilogy was some of his latest and best work, and his influence over Greek drama was so great that in Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (written in 405 BCE), the comic playwright named Aeschylus the greatest poet that the world had ever seen.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events that take place in the *Oresteia* would have been well known to the plays' original audience. According to Greek mythology, the Trojan War began as a result of Paris, the Trojan prince, stealing Helen, who was married to the Greek king Menelaus. Menelaus' brother Agamemnon led a fleet of troops to Troy to avenge Paris' insult, and the following siege lasted ten years. The events of the *Oresteia* then begin the moment the war ends with a Greek victory. Aeschylus himself, however, lived and wrote nearly a millennium after the Trojan War supposedly occurred—during the Golden Age of Athenian democracy. This was a time when Athens dominated the Ancient Greek world, preaching their values of republicanism and enlightenment. Aeschylus himself played a role in establishing Athenian hegemony, taking part in the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, when Athens vanquished invading Persian forces. This sense of Athenian dominance and power is evident in Aeschylus's works, all of which argue for reason over revenge, order over chaos, and democracy over tyranny.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Greek tragedies were usually written as trilogies, meaning that Aeschylus also wrote *Agamemnon*, a prequel to *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*, the sequel. All three plays center on the tragic House of Atreus and the consequences of Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War, and together they make up a group called the *Oresteia*. The two other great Greek tragedians of Aeschylus's time are Sophocles and Euripides. Sophocles' tragic trilogy is made up of the three Theban Plays: *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. These works contain elements of Greek tragedy similar to those within the *Oresteia*, such as a forewarning Chorus, an emphasis on the divine power of fate, and a series of heroic but flawed main characters. Euripides' tragedies, too, display similar qualities, with an added emphasis on the plights of female figures within these stories. He is known for tragedies such as *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*. Also relevant to the narrative of the *Oresteia* is Euripides' play *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which recounts the actions of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra before the Trojan War, and *Electra*, which portrays a different version of the events within *The Libation Bearers*, focusing much more heavily on Electra than Orestes. The event of the Trojan War—the backdrop to the *Oresteia*—are most famously related in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, epic poems that formed a foundation for the majority of Classical Greek literature and drama. Some modern takes on the story of the *Oresteia* are Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies*—an adaptation of the Orestes story from an existentialist philosophical perspective—and *Electra*, Eugene O'Neill's retelling of the *Oresteia* set in Civil War America.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Libation Bearers*
- **When Written:** 458 BCE
- **Where Written:** Athens
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Tragedy
- **Setting:** Argos, Greece
- **Climax:** Orestes kills his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, thus avenging his father Agamemnon

EXTRA CREDIT

A foundational text. The plays of Aeschylus are the earliest full works of Greek tragedy that we possess. They were also incredibly innovative for their day, because they included two actors interacting on stage at once (along with the Chorus), and because they expanded the use of props and scenery.

A founding father in more ways than one. Of Aeschylus's two sons, both went on to be tragic poets (as did his nephew), and one even won first prize at the Dionysia, the festival of tragic plays that the *Oresteia* won in 458 BCE.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Libation Bearers begins at the **burial mound** of Agamemnon (the king of Argos and the leader of the Greeks during the

Trojan War), who died in the play's prequel—*Agamemnon*—at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Orestes, Agamemnon's and Clytemnestra's son, has returned in secret from exile with his companion Pylades. He cuts a **lock of his hair** to honor his father and reveals his intention to avenge Agamemnon's death.

Hearing others approaching, the men hide behind the tomb. As they do, Orestes' sister, Electra, enters. A Chorus of slave women, bringing offerings to Agamemnon's tomb from Clytemnestra, attends her. Electra mourns her father and curses her mother. As she prays for her brother, and for vengeance, Electra notices Orestes' hair and compares it to her own. She then follows his **footprints** and the two joyfully reunite. Orestes reveals to the Chorus and to Electra that the god Apollo has sent him to Argos to avenge Agamemnon's death. The siblings and the slave women pray to the gods for vengeance, and reiterate their loyalty to the deceased Agamemnon.

Before leaving the grave, Orestes asks the Chorus why Clytemnestra sent offerings to her hated husband's tomb. The Chorus explains that the queen had a terrible dream in which she gave birth to a **serpent** that then killed her. Orestes wonders if he himself is the serpent. He then relates his plan: he and Pylades will disguise themselves as guests, and when inside the palace, they will murder both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

The Chorus meditates on the bravery of men, and the treachery of women. They mention examples of wicked women before turning in particular to Clytemnestra, asserting that the gods detest creatures such as her and that Justice and Fate will soon punish her.

Now disguised, Orestes and Pylades wait at the gates of the palace. When they finally enter, Clytemnestra meets them. Orestes lies, telling her that her son is dead. Clytemnestra briefly (and falsely) laments before resolving to find Aegisthus. The Chorus reemerges, praying to the gods to guide Orestes. As they do, Orestes' old nurse, Cilissa, enters, lamenting the prince's supposed death and looking for Aegisthus. The Chorus urges her to tell him of Orestes' demise in order to put him at ease. Although confused, Cilissa agrees to do as they ask.

As the Chorus prays again, Aegisthus enters, wondering if Orestes is really dead, and resolving to question the mysterious travelers himself. He exits, and then the Chorus hears a scream coming from inside the palace—Orestes has murdered Aegisthus. A wounded servant rushes in to warn Clytemnestra, who emerges and calls for an **axe** to defend herself. Orestes, however, is too quick for her, and despite the fact that his mother both pleads and threatens (warning that she will put a "curse" on him if he kills her), he drags her within the palace and murders her on top of Aegisthus' body.

A manic Orestes winds the corpses in the **shroud** in which they had trapped Agamemnon to murder him. Orestes incoherently laments his father's death and his own guilt, stating that he must now exile himself from Argos. As the Chorus tries to reassure him, Orestes sees the Furies—vengeful goddesses who mean to punish him for Clytemnestra's death. Terrified, he runs offstage, as the Chorus wonders whether the endless cycle of vengeance will ever come to a close.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Orestes – The son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes is the crown prince of Argos, but has been banished from his homeland for many years, ever since his mother killed his father with the help of her lover, Aegisthus. Although a noble, pious man (and even gentle and loving in his interactions with his sister Electra), Orestes is obsessed with the idea of vengeance. Enraged by Clytemnestra' murder of Agamemnon, he is determined to kill both her and Aegisthus in order to avenge his father's death.

Electra – The daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and sister to Orestes, Electra has spent the years of her brother's exile alone and powerless. Like her sibling, she is incensed by Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon and her affair with Aegisthus—yet because Electra is a woman, she has been able to take revenge until Orestes' return. Similarly to Orestes, Electra is pious and loyal, visiting her father's **tomb** and lamenting for her lost brother. When it comes to her mother, however, she is unforgiving and merciless.

The Chorus – As is traditional for the tragic Greek chorus, this character is comprised of a group of actors who interact with the main characters and also comment on the events of the play. In this case the Chorus is made up of a group of slave women who accompany Electra to Agamemnon's **tomb** with gifts and offerings. While choruses sometimes warn characters against their intended actions (as is the case in *Oedipus Rex*, another Greek tragedy), the Chorus seems convinced that Electra and Orestes are in the right in their vengeful crusade against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Clytemnestra – The queen of Argos, widow of Agamemnon, and mother to Orestes and Electra, Clytemnestra is a dominant female character who has only increased in power since she murdered her husband. She rules over her palace—including her lover Aegisthus and her daughter Electra—with a dominant will, behaving in ways that the Greeks would have considered deeply transgressive and unfeminine. She does, however, show cracks in her façade, such as when she sends libations to **Agamemnon's tomb** after having a nightmare, or when she mourns the (falsely reported) death of Orestes—although it is difficult to tell the genuineness of either of these gestures.

Aegisthus – Clytemnestra's lover, and her accomplice in

murdering Agamemnon, Aegisthus hates the house of Atreus, which was responsible for his own family's ruin. He rejoices when he learns (falsely) that Orestes is dead, but remains deeply suspicious about whether or not this report is true. Aegisthus also is shamefully unmasculine, allowing Clytemnestra to dominate and rule him at every turn. He is also impious, neglecting the basic Greek laws of hospitality when the disguised Orestes shows up at his door as a guest.

Agamemnon – The king of Argos, husband of Clytemnestra, and father of Orestes, Electra, and Iphigenia. Agamemnon was murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus's play preceding *The Libation Bearers*. Agamemnon was the leader of the Greeks during the Trojan War, and the brother of Menelaus, who started the war to retrieve his wife Helen. Agamemnon was doomed from the war's start, however, both because he was a member of the cursed House of Atreus and because he slaughtered his own daughter, Iphigenia, in exchange for safe passage to Troy. This act caused Clytemnestra to avenge her daughter's death, murdering Agamemnon when he returned home, victorious, from Troy.

Apollo – The god of the sun, prophecy, and reason, Apollo is not a character within *The Libation Bearers* (although he does make an appearance in *The Eumenides*), but Orestes and Pylades often make reference to him. He is Orestes' patron, and has sent Orestes back to Argos expressly to avenge Agamemnon by killing Clytemnestra. Apollo's blessing makes Orestes believe that his matricide (killing of his mother) is not just divinely sanctioned, but inevitable.

Hermes – Although commonly known as the god of luck, Hermes is also the guide who brings souls down to the Underworld. Prayed to by both Orestes,/span> and Electra, he is, in this context, a symbol both of divine power and of death. The siblings' appeal to him emphasizes their obsession with their dead father, and their need to avenge him.

Zeus – The Chorus, Electra, and Orestes constantly invoke the king of the gods, Zeus, in their speeches and prayers. All the actions of the play, we as the audienceare to understand, take place only because Zeus allows and wills them to. The characters think of Zeus as incredibly present in their everyday lives, and believe that he is always watching over them and ultimately controlling their actions.

The Furies – Although they only make a brief appearance in *The Libation Bearers* (and are only ever seen by Orestes), the Furies will become vital players within the play's sequel, *The Eumenides*. Goddesses of vengeance and punishment, the Furies function as a kind of physical manifestations of Orestes' sin of matricide against his mother Clytemnestra. Although Orestes is assured by Apollo that his murder of Clytemnestra is just and right, Orestes still has his mother's blood on his hands. The Furies arrive to remind the audience of the reality of this terrible crime, and to punish Orestes for his actions.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Iphigenia – The daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to the gods in exchange for safe passage to Troy. Iphigenia's murder incites Clytemnestra to avenge her by killing Agamemnon.

Atreus – Agamemnon's father, and the patriarch of the cursed "House of Atreus." Atreus brought down the curse of the gods when he punished his brother (who had stolen Atreus's wife and, briefly, his kingdom) by killing his brother's children, cooking them, and feeding them to him.

Cilissa – The former nurse of Orestes, she grieves when she learns (incorrectly) of his death, her lamentations contrasting with Clytemnestra's muted and possibly insincere response. She is an example within the play of true motherly devotion, in juxtaposition with the masculine, merciless Clytemnestra.

Pylades – Orestes' traveling companion, Pylades is silent for much of the play. When he does speak, however, he urges Orestes to carry out his mission and kill Clytemnestra, despite the hero's doubts.

Servant of Aegisthus – The servant exists solely to inform Clytemnestra of Aegisthus' death at the hands of Orestes. He thus fulfills the classic Greek tragic messenger role, in which characters report violent actions to the audience, rather than the audience witnessing the violence onstage.

Porter – A servant who allows Orestes and Pylades to enter the palace of Argos after they're forced by Aegisthus to wait outside its gates.

Bodyguards of Aegisthus – Attendants whose presence speaks to Aegisthus' paranoid, violent nature.

Orestes' attendants – Slaves who travel with Orestes and Pylades.

THEMES

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

REVENGE

As is also true of its "prequel" *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* centers on a series of acts of revenge. Having returned home from exile, Orestes (along with his sister Electra) is determined to murder his mother Clytemnestra (and her lover Aegisthus) for her role in the murder of his father Agamemnon—a murder that was itself an act of vengeance for Agamemnon's sacrifice of his and Clytemnestra's oldest daughter, Iphigenia, in order to gain

favorable winds to sail to and make war upon Troy. Of course, the Trojan War itself took its roots in revenge as well—it began when a Trojan prince (Paris) "stole" a Greek princess (Helen of Troy, wife of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus), and Agamemnon and Menelaus sailed with an army to avenge this slight. This convoluted explanation already illustrates the complexity and inevitability of revenge within the world of the play (and Greek mythology in general). Revenge is a force unto itself, able to control the characters' actions and to create a sense of inexorable momentum as the play moves towards its bloody climax.

The Libation Bearers illustrates the power of revenge by showing over and over how each of the characters' arcs is motivated by a desperate need for, or fear of, retaliation. Orestes and Electra are the characters most obviously driven by revenge, seeking to make their mother suffer the same fate that she enacted upon their father. Aegisthus, too, remains motivated by revenge; having killed Agamemnon in part because Agamemnon's father (Atreus) once tortured and humiliated his own father (Thyestes), Aegisthus now hopes to kill Orestes as well in order to destroy the Atrean line—and to make sure that Orestes will never return to enact vengeance against him, Aegisthus. Clytemnestra, perhaps the most obviously vengeful character within *Agamemnon*, now has a far more complicated relationship with revenge. When she is eventually threatened with death by an enraged Orestes, she attempts to convince her son that their familial bond is more important than his thirst for her blood—an argument that did not sway her from killing Agamemnon, and ultimately proves unsuccessful here as well.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the complex, double-edged nature of revenge comes at the end of the play. Throughout the plot, Orestes has been urged on by the god Apollo to kill his mother in order to restore honor to his father. That Apollo is the god of foresight has essentially convinced Orestes that murdering Clytemnestra (and thus taking revenge) is inevitable and divinely ordained. After taking his revenge, however, Orestes is confronted by the Furies, goddesses who take vengeance upon children who have dishonored their parents. Despite Orestes's revenge having been sanctioned by a god, he is now going to be punished for it by different gods. The cycle of vengeance, Aeschylus seems to imply, is at once morally necessary and morally abhorrent, making it both inevitable and self-destructive, with far-reaching consequences for all involved.

GENDER ROLES

The question of gender roles is pivotal to one of the most troubling issues of *The Libation Bearers*: should Orestes and Electra be loyal to their dead father, or their living mother? For the siblings (and for Ancient Greek audiences of the day), the question was not a difficult one. As the male head of the household, Agamemnon should clearly command his children's allegiance. Further, the sense that Clytemnestra deserves her fate is heightened in the play by the multiple ways in which she displays masculine traits—behavior that the Greeks would have considered deeply inappropriate and reprehensible. Not only did Clytemnestra kill her husband, Agamemnon, and take a new lover, Aegisthus, but she now dominates the household and runs the country of Argos—assuming a role that women never held in Ancient Greek society. In fact, when she hears that there is trouble in the house, Clytemnestra even calls for a "**man-axe**," vividly illustrating her unfeminine attitude. Aegisthus, then, becomes a weak and effeminate figure, completely dominated by a woman and devoid of any qualities that define an honorable Greek man.

The difference between Orestes and Electra, too, illustrates the overriding part that gender roles play in determining characters' behavior. While her brother has been exiled, the vengeful Electra has been forced to live under the command of her mother and Aegisthus, despising them both yet unable to take action against them. It takes the arrival of a man—Orestes—to bring about the plan of action that will eventually lead to the deaths of both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Despite Electra's hatred of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, she exhibits proper feminine behavior (unlike Clytemnestra), waiting for her brother to lead the way. Meanwhile, despite his love for his sister, Orestes develops a deep contempt for women—born from his mother's betrayal of his father. Orestes believes women to be wily and destructive, and vows never to be caught in a female trap as Agamemnon was.

The role of the Chorus further expands upon the interplay of gender roles within *The Libation Bearers*. On one hand, the Chorus is made up entirely of women, meaning that female voices help tell the story to the audience, and move the narrative along. On the other hand, the Chorus seems largely to agree with Orestes, believing women to be scheming and immoral, and praising Orestes for the actions he takes against his mother. Yet at the end of the play, another force—the Furies—comes in to complicate the idea of gender roles in the play. Strong, female goddesses of vengeance, the Furies arrive to punish Orestes for his killing of his mother—proof that the overriding assumption of the play (that Orestes owes his allegiance to Agamemnon and not to Clytemnestra) is not as simple as it seems. While Orestes must take revenge for his wronged father, he also owes allegiance to his mother for the simple fact that she is his mother, regardless of what she's done.

FATE, THE GODS, AND PIETY

Although no gods appear within *The Libation Bearers*, Aeschylus makes clear that ideas of piety

and the power of the gods are in the forefront of his characters' minds. As the play opens, Orestes visits the **burial mound** of his father Agamemnon and offers a **lock of his hair** to his father's spirit and to the gods, especially to Hermes, who guides the dead to the underworld. As the play moves forward, we witness Electra taking offerings to Agamemnon's grave as well, a clear symbol of her devotion and piety. In contrast, we are told, the siblings' mother Clytemnestra (who killed Agamemnon with the help of her lover Aegisthus) shows such piety only when she is troubled with nightmares about her crime.

The theme of the power of the gods, and their control over human destiny, expands as we (along with Electra and the Chorus) learn that Orestes has returned to his home country at the command of the god Apollo, who has ordered him to kill the faithless Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Since Apollo is the god of prophecy, he is closely associated with the idea of fate. Orestes assumes, as do Electra and the Chorus, that if Apollo sanctions this action, then it is inevitable—that is, Apollo's will and fate are essentially one and the same.

As the play progresses, we see lack of piety exemplified in the character of Aegisthus. Although he should welcome the disguised Orestes as a guest (hospitality was one of the most important values of the Ancient Greek world), he instead forces the traveller to knock three times at his gate before being allowed to enter. Then, after being told that Orestes is dead, he does not even pretend to mourn—yet another sign of his impiety and lack of respect for essential Greek values.

Throughout *The Libation Bearers*, the Chorus makes certain that we, the audience, understand that the gods are watching (and to a large extent controlling) the actions that we are seeing onstage. Multiple times they remind us of the gods' power and omnipresence, and the Chorus's displays of piety are echoed by Orestes and Electra, who often praise or pray to Hermes, Zeus, Apollo, or even Mother Earth as they plot against their mother Clytemnestra, whose impiety led her to kill their father.

The play attempts to make clear that those who revere and respect the gods (Orestes, Electra, and the Chorus) will triumph, while those who go against the gods' edicts (Clytemnestra and Aegisthus) will be punished. Yet during the last moments of the play, this issue grows more complicated: in killing his mother, Orestes has himself committed an impious act. Even though he acted in accordance to the wishes of Apollo—thus essentially believing his actions to be inevitable—he is now going to be punished by a different set of gods—the Furies—for raising his hand against Clytemnestra. This suggests the ways that humans can be doomed by fate, an issue that Aeschylus will explore more fully in the play's sequel, *The Eumenides*.

FAMILIAL BONDS

In The *Libation Bearers*, Aeschylus makes a clear distinction between familial bonds that are wholesome and healthy, and those that have become twisted and deadly. Essentially the only example of the former is the relationship between Orestes and Electra. From the play's first moments, the playwright takes care to emphasize how alike the two are: they visit their father Agamemnon's **burial mound** at the same time, they both pray to the god Hermes, they have the same hair color/texture, and they even have matching **footprints**. Clearly, these two are halves of the same whole, bound together not only by their deep love for one another, but also by the trauma that their mother Clytemnestra inflicted upon them when she killed their father. The bond and allegiance that the siblings feel for their dead father is equally powerful. Both revere him and passionately wish to avenge him, displaying the importance of the connection between fathers and their children.

In contrast, the bond between the siblings and their mother has become perverted and poisonous. They blame her wholly for their father's death, and she, meanwhile, seems to show little care or affection for them, essentially ignoring her daughter and displaying suspiciously muted signs of grief when she hears (falsely) of her son's death. This lack of loyalty towards her family is seemingly characteristic of Clytemnestra, who killed her husband without hesitation or mercy after he came home from war, utterly violating the bonds between husband and wife. Yet as Orestes threatens her with death, Clytemnestra attempts to use the power of familial bonds in her favor, telling Orestes that there will be terrible consequences if he kills his own mother. Orestes, however, insists that her desecration of her marriage vows, and of her relationships with her children, renders him immune to such consequences (a belief that will be called into question at the end of the play).

At the same time, however, it is important to remember that Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus were both motivated by a different, competing set of familial ties when they murdered Agamemnon. Clytemnestra, for her part, killed her husband in order to avenge their daughter Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed in order to sail to the Trojan War. Aegisthus, meanwhile, was retaliating for the wrongs that Agamemnon's father Atreus committed against his own father, Thyestes. Small reminders of these grudges — all centered around the idea of family — remind the audience of how complex, powerful, and deadly familial bonds can become.

The end of the play, too, emphasizes the sometimes-contradictory nature of familial bonds. As the play comes to a close, Orestes has killed his mother, thus proving his allegiance to his father. Yet he now will be punished by the Furies for violating the bond between mother and son—proof of the twisted and complex loyalties that exist within the family unit. It takes an entire other play, *The Eumenides*, for Aeschylus to fully

untangle this intricate web of allegiance.

VIOLENCE, DEATH, AND THE DEAD

All of the characters within *The Libation Bearers* speak a language of violence and death. Whether male or female, they all express sentiments that are incredibly bloody, from Orestes and Electra plotting their mother's murder, to the Chorus wishing for "the fresh-drawn blood of Justice," to Aegisthus contemplating Orestes's (falsely reported) death, to Clytemnestra calling for a "**man-axe**" to defend her house. Within this world, in which fathers kill children, wives kill husbands, and sons kill mothers, violence is an omnipresent and inescapable force, one that can strike at any time and come from any source.

Considering the constant threat of violence, it is unsurprising that the characters constantly think about and discuss death and the dead. This overriding theme is made obvious from the first moments of the play, when Orestes and Electra visit **the burial mound** of Agamemnon, a potent symbol of the power that their dead father has on his living descendants. This reverence for and obsession with the dead is characteristic of Ancient Greek culture. The Greeks had specific, set ways in which the living had to show their respect for the dead, and to violate those customs was a grave sin. In fact, Clytemnestra's lack of reverence for her dead husband (despite the fact that she herself plotted his death) is held up as proof of her sinfulness. To Orestes, Electra, and the Chorus, their allegiance to the dead Agamemnon is in fact more powerful than their ties to their mother—proof of the incredible amount of sway that the dead still have on the living.

At the same time, it is vital to remember the background of violence and death that all the characters share. At this point in Ancient Greek mythology, the Trojan War—a bloody, prolonged conflict that took a decade to end—is still fresh in the characters' minds. Also important to remember are the bloody deeds that these characters' ancestors enacted upon each other: Agamemnon's father Atreus exiled his brother (Aegisthus' father Thyestes) and then later tricked him into eating two of his three sons (Aegisthus, the third child, escaping unscathed). Ancient Greek audiences would have been familiar with these stories, and would have understood the bloody, violent background that underlies the play.

Of course, the theme of violence, death, and the dead is also closely linked to the theme of revenge. While the Chorus and the characters often equate revenge with justice, the continual references to violence and death serve to remind us of the real and ongoing consequences that vengeance can have. The characters of *The Libation Bearers* are so caught up in their endless cycle of vengeance as a means of exacting justice that they do not seem to realize that their lives have become saturated in blood and death. In fact, only in this play's sequel, *The Eumenides*, will this destructive cycle end, and will constant violence become a thing of the past.

SYMBOLS

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

AGAMEMNON'S BURIAL MOUND AND SHROUD

Although no longer a living character within the play, the ghost of Agamemnon haunts every moment of *The Libation Bearers*. Once a dominant, powerful king—the leader of the Greeks during the Trojan War—Agamemnon was doomed from the moment he set off to Troy, having slaughtered his own daughter, Iphigenia, in exchange for favorable winds from the gods. This action then incited murderous rage within his wife, Clytemnestra. Despite Agamemnon's terrible sin, however, his surviving children—Orestes and Electra—believe that their allegiance to their dead father far outweighs their loyalty to their living (but murderous) mother, and over the course of the play, they both (along with the Chorus) lament his death and express a desperate desire to avenge him.

The spectral presence of Agamemnon within the text is physicalized by two vital symbols: his burial mound and his shroud. The play opens with the two siblings separately visiting the mound and mourning for their father, proof of his power over them even long after his demise. The two often reference the mound, using it as a reminder of their father's power, and of the deep dishonor that their mother showed him (the mound is far less grand of a tomb than a king would normally inhabit in death). Later in the play, the robes in which Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon—his burial shroud, as it were—also make an appearance, as Orestes uses them to wrap the corpses of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus before weeping over the robes, visual evidence of how much more he values these memorials of his dead father than the body of the mother he just killed.

Within the play, Agamemnon and his various remnants symbolize two powerful forces: the power of fathers, and the power of death. Because of the extreme sexism (and even misogyny) within Greek society, Agamemnon's role in his children's lives is assumed to be much more valuable than that of Clytemnestra. It makes sense, then, that given the choice between allegiance to their father and their mother, Orestes and Electra would choose the former. Further, the Greeks believed strongly in honoring and remembering the dead. Despite his demise, Agamemnon still dominates his children's thoughts, lives, and actions, proof of how present the Greeks considered the dead in their everyday lives.

THE HAIR AND FOOTPRINTS OF ORESTES AND ELECTRA

One of the few healthy relationships in the play is the connection between Orestes and Electra, siblings who desperately love each other and who have mourned for each other while apart. This bond takes on a visual element early in the play, when Electra finds Orestes' hair and footprints at **Agamemnon's burial mound**, and realizes that they both match her own. Both the hair and the footprints emblemize the sense that Orestes and Electra are two halves of one person, and make clear how closely the two are linked. The strength of this bond will become even more apparent as the siblings conspire to kill their mother. They are completely in sync about their motives, their actions, and their need for vengeance.

SERPENTS AND SNAKES

Serpents and snakes are complex and double-edged symbols within *The Libation Bearers*. Early in the play, we learn that Clytemnestra has had a dream that she gave birth to a snake only to have it maul her. Orestes explains to us that the snake represents him, and that he will need to use deception and violence against his mother in order to avenge his father's murder. Clytemnestra confirms this reading, realizing (moments from her death), that her dream foretold Orestes' return. Later in the play, however, both Orestes and the Chorus refer to the treacherous Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as serpents, thus turning a symbol that was once seemingly positive into a negative one. Orestes' connection with snakes and serpents, therefore, is more slippery than originally thought—he has taken on serpent-like qualities (such as deception, disguise, and betrayal) in order to carry out a divinely sanctioned act, but perhaps has also sinned gravely in the process.

CLYTEMNESTRA'S MAN-AXE

Upon being informed that her palace is under attack and her lover Aegisthus has been killed, Clytemnestra immediately calls for her "man-axe" in order to defend herself. Within the patriarchal world of the Greek tragedy, Clytemnestra's willingness to take up arms is evidence of her lack of femininity, and her overbearing dominance. It was this same "unfeminine" desire for power and willingness to commit violence that led Clytemnestra to conspire to kill Agamemnon. The man-axe thus represents Clytemnestra's "man-killing" qualities: those which allow her to avenge her daughter and seize power over Argos, but which also condemn her in the eyes of the Greeks and lead to her ultimate downfall.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *The Libation Bearers* published in 1966.

Lines 1-585 Quotes

❝ Dear god, let me avenge my father's murder—fight beside me now with all your might!

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

As Orestes prays at the tomb of his father, he prays to the god Hermes to help him murder his mother Clytemnestra in order to avenge his father Agamemnon—a shocking plea to modern readers. To Orestes, however, vengeance is holy work. He believes that in killing his mother, he will be carrying out a divinely sanctioned act.

Indeed, rather than seeing murder as immoral, Orestes instead sees inaction as immoral. He believes that as long as his mother lives, his father's spirit cannot rest, and that he is in fact forsaking his duty as a son for as long as he does not carry out his goal of matricide. Thus in the Greek world, Orestes can be both pious and murderous. His allegiance lies not with his living mother, but with his dead father, proof of how much influence the ghosts of the dead exert over the lives of the living within this work.

❝ The proud dead stir under the earth,
They rage against the ones who took their lives…

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

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

As the Chorus of libation-bearing women enters, along with Electra, they recall the terrifying events of the night before, remembering how a mysterious voice warned them that the dead were coming to avenge themselves upon the living. In Greek drama, dreams and prophecies often prove true, as is most definitely the case in this moment.

The quote also explains why the queen, Clytemnestra, has sent them out to tend to the grave of her husband (whom she loathed and murdered). Although Clytemnestra may put on a show of piety, this is clearly because fear rather than actual reverence. She is worried about what the voice in the night might prophecy, rather than actually regretful about murdering her husband.

We also can understand from this quote the influence of the dead within this narrative. Rather than being considered gone and at peace, the dead are a constant presence for all the characters on the stage. Although they may no longer be alive, their power has not waned; through Orestes' matricide, the spirit of Agamemnon is essentially avenging himself from beyond the grave.

> What to say when I pour the cup of sorrow?
> What kindness, what prayer can touch my father?
> Shall I say I bring him love for love, a woman's
> love for her husband? My mother, love from her?
> I've no taste for that, no words to say
> as I run the honeyed oil on father's tomb.

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

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86-91

Explanation and Analysis

As Electra worships at the tomb of her father along with the libation-bearing slaves, she struggles to find words to express her sorrow. Unlike the hypocritical Clytemnestra, Electra is pious and dutiful. Although her father is dead and gone, she is still loyal to him, and feels conflicted about bringing meaningless offerings from her mother.

This passage also illustrates the complex gender politics at work within *The Libation Bearers*. Although a woman, Electra identifies far more strongly with her father than with her mother, and believes that her allegiance lies firmly with him. She scorns the queen for having betrayed "a woman's love for her husband," and believes that Clytemnestra has failed in her duties as both a wife and a mother.

Lastly, Electra's near-obsession with her father helps readers to understand how present he still is for her, despite his death. To Electra, her father is still a powerful force within her life, and she will do whatever it takes to ensure that his memory is honored and his death avenged.

> For our enemies I say,
> raise up your avenger, into the light, my father—
> kill the killers in return, with justice!
> So in the midst of prayers for good I place
> this curse for them.

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

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 147-151

Explanation and Analysis

After being unable to pray for peace for her father's spirit, Electra instead, at the prompting of the chorus, begs the gods for vengeance. Her prayer highlights the close bond within *The Libation Bearers*between piety and vengeance. Although most of Electra's words involve "prayers for good" for herself and her brother, she also includes curses for Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. This mixture of good wishes and bad is not contradictory to Electra or the Chorus—they believe that both vengeance and reverence can exist within a truly pious and reverent person, because part of the holy law is vengeance.

It is also significant that Electra prays not to the gods, but to her father. To this abandoned daughter, Agamemnon has become like a god; although he is buried, she still considers him powerful enough to avenge his own murder, through the actions of his descendants.

In the midst of this deeply vengeful prayer, it is important to note that Electra has made no attempts to kill her mother herself. This lack of action is illustrative of the role of women within this type of Greek drama. Although Electra may hope for her mother's death, as a pious and proper Greek woman, she would never carry out the deed herself (in contrast to

the murderous and bloody Clytemnestra, who overstepped the bounds of her gender in taking action against her husband).

Your pain is mine.
If I laugh at yours, I only laugh at mine.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Electra

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 223-224

Explanation and Analysis

After hiding behind his father's burial mound, Orestes reveals himself to his sister Electra, and the two tearfully reunite. While Electra is incredulous, Orestes reassures her that he has returned. Beyond the joy of siblings at seeing each other for the first time in years, this quote demonstrates the extent to which Orestes and Electra are presented as two halves of the same whole. Their love goes beyond that of ordinary siblings; they feel each others' emotions, and are matched both physically and mentally.

The harmony and strength of Orestes' and Electra's bond stands in contrast with the un-motherly and un-wifely behavior of Clytemnestra. While she has desecrated every familial bond in which she participates, the queen's children have managed to keep their relationship pure and ideal. They illustrate the way that family members should treat each other, providing an example for Greek audiences of proper familial love.

You light to my eyes, four loves in one!
I have to call you father, it is fate;
and I turn to you the love I gave my mother—
I despise her, she deserves it, yes,
and the love I gave my sister, sacrificed
on the cruel sword, I turn to you.

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

Related Themes:

Page Number: 240-245

Explanation and Analysis

After being reunited, Electra and Orestes vow to be loyal to each other, in clear contrast to their treacherous mother. Here Electra tells Orestes that she loves him more than other sisters do their brothers, because he must also serve the roles of father, mother, and sister for her. She is referring to the murder of her father Agamemnon, the sacrifice of her sister Iphigenia (who was murdered by Agamemnon's "cruel sword," presenting a seeming conflict of interest for Electra), and the imminent death of her mother Clytemnestra.

Once again Aeschylus makes clear that the ties between Electra and Orestes can never be broken. They are wholly committed to each other, exemplifying the purity and strength of true familial bonds. As Electra promises her love for her brother, we also witness traditional Greek gender roles at work. Considered weaker because of her gender, Electra places herself under her brother's protection, giving him not just the love of a sibling, but also the respect of a daughter for her parents.

Apollo will never fail me, no,
his tremendous power, his oracle charges me
to see this trial through.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Apollo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 273-275

Explanation and Analysis

As Orestes resolves to kill his mother and begins to plan the murder, he prays to Apollo, his patron god, to aid him in this bloody act. Orestes has previously been ordered by Apollo's oracle to avenge his father, so his faith in the god makes sense. His belief that his vengeance has been approved by divine command, meanwhile, demonstrates the close link that the Greeks believed to exist between vengeance and piety. Far from being condemned by the gods, murder and vengeance are indeed encouraged, under the right circumstances.

That Orestes has specifically prayed to Apollo is also significant. The god of prophecy, Apollo can see the future, and predict it through his oracles. Orestes therefore believes that this murder is not simply divinely sanctioned, but actually destined to be. Although he wishes to murder his mother, he also believes that he has no choice in the

matter—it is his fate to do so, as ordered by the god of prophecy.

Justice turns the wheel.
'Word for word, curse for curse
be born now,' Justice thunders,
hungry for retribution.
'stroke for bloody stroke be paid.
The one who acts must suffer.'

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 315-320

Explanation and Analysis

After Electra and Orestes have resolved to murder their mother, the Chorus approvingly comments upon their actions. Although this quote speaks of "Justice," it could just as easily refer to vengeance—proof of how closely the Greeks related these two concepts. For the characters in the play, the idea of justice is fairly simple—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, "word for word," and "curse for curse." They believe, quite simply, that those who sin must be paid in kind.

It is also important to note how closely aligned the idea of justice is with violent acts. The world in which the characters live is dangerous and bloody. Justice is not measured and restrained, but bloody and murderous. They believe that justice means answering violence with violence, and that only by avenging their father and killing their mother can the siblings "turn the wheel" and right their fortunes.

If the serpent came from the same place as I,
and slept in the bands that swaddled me, and its jaws
spread wide for the breast that nursed me into life
and clots stained the milk, mother's milk,
and she cried in fear and agony—so be it.
As she bred this sign, this violent prodigy
so she dies by violence. I turn serpent,
I kill her. So the vision says.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 530-537

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of Orestes' and Electra's plot to murder their mother, the Chorus of slave women reveals that Clytemnestra had a terrible nightmare the evening before, in which she nursed a serpent that then killed her. Orestes then (correctly) interprets the dream, understanding that the serpent symbolizes himself; having nursed at his mother's breast as an infant, he will now murder her as a man.

Most obviously, this dream once again confirms that prophecies and visions tell the truth within Greek myths and drama. On a deeper level, the dream also reveals the fascinating and tangled web of gender roles and familial bonds within the play. Although his mother nurtured and nursed him, it is still pious for Orestes to kill her, due to her disloyalty to his father. Meanwhile it is Clytemnestra's very womanliness—the fact that she nursed and cared for her baby—that will eventually doom Clytemnestra to death.

Above all else, the dream illustrates the violence that hangs over the house of Atreus at all times. Clytemnestra takes her nightmare seriously because she knows how easily one can be betrayed by one's own kin (just as she betrayed her husband). At all times, she is on the lookout for potential signs of vengeance—but despite her prophetic dream, she cannot escape her fate.

Lines 586-652 Quotes

Oh but a man's high daring spirit,
who can account for that? Or woman's
desperate passion daring past all bounds?
She couples with every form of ruin known to mortals.
Woman, frenzied, driven wild with lust,
twists the dark, warm harness
of wedded love—tortures man and beast!

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 579-585

Explanation and Analysis

Electra and Orestes leave to carry out the beginning of their vengeance plot; the Chorus, meanwhile, stays behind, taking on their traditional role of commenting on the action

(rather than taking part in it). Taking a broader view of the events, they marvel at the differences between a man and a woman. Men, they say, carry out deeds of "daring," while women carry out those of "desperate passion." They then go on to condemn women's passion and lust, accusing women of torturing all those around them with their malicious desires.

This passage clearly illustrates the dark and disturbing view that the ancient Greeks had of womanhood. Although women like Electra are pious, obedient, and pure, women like Clytemnestra—who acted on her desires and seized power for herself—are considered forces of evil and destruction. Although the Chorus never names Clytemnestra, they are clearly referring to her, emphasizing what a negative example the character of Clytemnestra is meant to be for audiences—however justified her actions might seem to be to modern readers.

Lines 653-718 Quotes

Slave, the slave!—
where is he? Hear me pounding the gates?
Is there a man inside the house?
For the third time, come out of the halls!
If Aegisthus has them welcome friendly guests.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Pylades, Aegisthus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 633-637

Explanation and Analysis

In order to enter the palace of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra (and eventually kill them both), Orestes poses as a traveler and knocks on the gates. Aegisthus ignores the guest at his doors, however, causing Orestes to become increasingly enraged.

The Ancient Greeks firmly believed that hospitality to strangers and guests was one of the most important virtues that a person could display. That Aegisthus does not come out to greet a guest is proof of his unfitness to rule a kingdom, and—even more basically—his failings as a person.

When someone does finally come to greet Orestes, it is not Aegisthus, but Clytemnestra. This act is yet another disgrace for the royal couple. Clytemnestra, a woman, is clearly in charge, and has taken her husband's place as head of the house. Both gender roles and rules of hospitality have been upended, and as a result Clytemnestra and Aegisthus' rule is able to be presented as monstrous and perverse in yet another fundamental way.

Lines 719-1065 Quotes

Oh god,
the life is hard. The old griefs, the memories
mixing, cups of pain, so much pain in the halls of
the house of Atreus...

Related Characters: Cilissa (speaker), Orestes, Atreus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 728-731

Explanation and Analysis

As part of their deception, Electra and Orestes pretend that Orestes has died, devastating their old nurse, Cilissa. As she grieves, she looks back on all the woes of the house of Atreus, reminding us of the many sorrows that this royal house has faced.

In Greek drama, a character's fate is often determined simply by which family they belong to. In the case of Atreus' descendants, they are destined to lives of pain, suffering, and loss. Their familial bonds, and nothing else, have doomed them. Although she has not taken part in these dramas, Cilissa has witnessed most of them during her long life, letting audiences and readers know that even though we are not members of the house of Atreus, we can still grieve for the terrible troubles that have befallen them.

The butcher comes. Wipe out death with death.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Aegisthus, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 823

Explanation and Analysis

As the murderous plan of Orestes and Electra begins to work, Aegisthus enters, believing Orestes to be dead and exulting in that fact. The Chorus calls him a "butcher," proof of their contempt for him, before urging Orestes to "[w]ipe out death with death."

This quote displays the difference in opinion that the Chorus has of Aegisthus versus Orestes. They think of

Aegisthus as nothing more than a butcher, even though in killing Agamemnon, he was in fact avenging the deaths of his own brothers at the hands of Agamemnon's father. Meanwhile the Chorus reveres Orestes, despite the fact that he too means to kill out of revenge. To them, Orestes' act will be holy and purifying, whereas Aegisthus' was a desecration.

The difference between the two men is one of piety. Orestes' act is commanded by the gods; he is carrying out their orders. Aegisthus, meanwhile, helped to murder Agamemnon for selfish reasons, and since then has not acted as a pious or proper Greek or king.

Ah, a riddle. I do well at riddles.
By cunning we die, precisely as we killed.
Hand me the man-axe, someone, hurry!

Related Characters: Clytemnestra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 874-876

Explanation and Analysis

The first part of his plan complete, Orestes kills Aegisthus, half-avenging his father's death. With the halls of her palace in tumult, Clytemnestra emerges and calls for her "man-axe." To the Greeks, Clytemnestra's desire for a weapon would have been a massive violation of her role as a woman. An emasculating and dangerous presence, she is calling for a weapon that does not belong to her gender, proof (to the Greeks) of her evil and ambition.

Despite all her negative qualities, it is also important to note that Clytemnestra is a deeply intelligent and perceptive character. She knows almost instantly what is happening, and reacts to her fate with calculation and resolve. To the last, she is a violent and active character, exemplifying everything that a woman should not be within the Greek tradition.

Clytemnestra: Wait, my son—no respect for this, my child?
The breast you held, drowsing away the hours,
soft gums tugging the milk that made you grow?
Orestes: What will I do, Pylades?—I dread to kill my mother!
Pylades: What of the future? What of the Prophet God Apollo,
the Delphic voice, the faith and oaths we swear?
Make all mankind your enemy, not the gods.

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

Related Themes:

Page Number: 883-889

Explanation and Analysis

With his plan nearing completion, Orestes is about to kill his mother; he pauses, however, swayed by her pleas, before being urged on by his slave, Pylades. After building the momentum of the entire play towards this moment of vengeance and matricide, it is deeply significant that Aeschylus creates a moment of hesitation for the character of Orestes. While Orestes, the Chorus, and Electra have all explained how vengeance is holy and divinely sanctioned, the actual act of killing his mother is still dreadful to Orestes. It takes the urging of a previously silent character, Pylades, to persuade him to carry through the deed.

The way that Pylades convinces Orestes to commit matricide is also important: he reminds his master that Apollo has commanded him to kill his mother, and that he must not disobey the god. He goes on, telling Orestes to "[m]ake all mankind your enemy, not the gods," foreshadowing Orestes' troubles and strife in the next play, *The Eumenides*.

Clytemnestra: Watch out—the hounds of a mother's curse will hunt you down.
Orestes: But how to escape a father's if I fail?

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

Related Themes:

Page Number: 911-912

Explanation and Analysis

As Orestes stands over Clytmenestra, ready to strike, she continues to attempt to persuade him to spare her. These two lines encapsulate their argument: Clytemnestra vows

vengeance on him if he kills her, while Orestes worries that if he does not, he will have betrayed his father.

These lines also illustrate the terrible situation in which Orestes has found himself: to avenge one crime, he must commit another. It also demonstrates the conflict between different types of familial bonds (in this case mother/son v. father/son), and shows how these bonds are ultimately ruled by gender. Whatever terrible punishments Clytemnestra threatens for Orestes, he will always remain loyal to his father. Because Clytemnestra is a woman, she will never have as strong a hold over her son as her dead husband.

> But she who plotted this horror against her husband,
> she carried his children, growing in her womb
> and she—I loved her once
> and now I loathe, I have to loathe—what is she?
> Some moray eel, some viper born to rot her mate
> with a single touch, no fang to strike him
> just the wrong, the reckless fury in her heart!

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Agamemnon, Clytemnestra

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 983-989

Explanation and Analysis

Having killed his mother, Orestes stands over her, also holding the robes that she used to trap and kill his father years ago. He grows increasingly hysterical, horrified both by what he has done and by the extent of his mother's crimes.

This passage displays Orestes' conflicted emotions about his mother, as well as his frantic emotional state after killing her. Although the play may seem to be on the side of vengeance, it does not flinch from showing murder's terrible after effects.

Orestes' deep hatred of women is significant here as well. He describes his mother as an "eel" or a "viper," recalling how she killed his father with nothing more than "the reckless fury in her heart." In his muddled mental state, Orestes grows increasingly upset and disgusted by women, his loathing based in his simultaneous hatred for his mother, and his guilt over her death.

> Live with such a woman, marry her? Sooner
> the gods destroy me—die without an heir!

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Clytemnestra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 999-1000

Explanation and Analysis

After his matricide, Orestes begins to spiral out of control. He transitions from hating his mother to hating all women, believing them all to be treacherous, false, and murderous. Indeed, he comes to loathe women so much that he even wishes to "die without an heir"—a terrible wish for any Greek man, let alone one in a royal line who is supposed to rule his country.

Orestes' woman-hatred here demonstrates what happens when traditional gender roles go awry. Emasculating and ambitious, Clytemnestra has made her son fear all women, even those without her murderous temperament. In taking his father's life, she may also have ruined his, and destroyed any chance of heirs for the house of Atreus in the future.

> I embrace you...you,
> My victory, are my guilt, my curse, and still—

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1012-1013

Explanation and Analysis

With his mother dead, Orestes looks at his father's burial shroud and begins to mourn. Although he knows that he may pay for his mother's murder, he resolves that the deed was worth the cost, in order to avenge Agamemnon. Still, his attitude is conflicted. He calls the robe both "my victory" and "my guilt," indicating that even though he believes his matricide to be moral, he still feels guilt for what he has done.

In reading this quote, it is useful to look back to the beginning of the play, when Electra tries to mourn but is unable to at her father's tomb. In contrast to Electra's stoic and sparse phrases, Orestes here is tortured and nearly hysterical. Since Clytemnestra is dead, her children can at

last mourn her husband. Their destiny has been fulfilled, and they have taken their revenge. As such, they can finally mourn—although the consequences for this act may still be severe.

> Aye, trouble is now,
> and trouble still to come.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1016-1017

Explanation and Analysis

As Orestes mourns his father, the Chorus warns that his struggles are not over. This is a fascinating change in tone for the Chorus: throughout the narrative, they have encouraged Orestes, egging him on and attempting to hasten his matricide. Here, however, they seem far more apprehensive, explaining to Orestes that he will face more trials in the future.

This change in attitude of the Chorus illustrates the double-edged nature of revenge. On one hand, Orestes has fulfilled his destiny; a giant weight off his shoulders. On the other hand, by doing so, Orestes has brought a new series of troubles on himself and his family, despite the fact that he was ordered to do so by the gods. Although exacting vengeance may in fact have been the correct course of action, the Chorus makes both Orestes and the audience understand that doing so may have brought about a terrible cost.

> Where will it end?
> Where will it sink to sleep and rest,
> this murderous hate,
> This Fury?

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), The Furies, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1075-1077

Explanation and Analysis

As the play comes to an end, Orestes descends into madness and is chased offstage by the Furies, vengeful spirits determined to punish him for killing his mother. While he flees, the Chorus reflects back on the cycle of violence that *The Libation Bearers* has continued. Although at first the Chorus supported Orestes' mission of vengeance, now they seem to have changed their tune. They see "murderous hate" as a never-ending pattern, and wonder only when it will end.

The quote also serves as an excellent set-up for *The Libation Bearers*' sequel, *The Eumenides*. While the first play extends the cycle of violence, the second play puts a stop to it once and for all, essentially answering the question that the Chorus here plaintively asks.

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 1-585

The play opens at Agamemnon's **burial mound** in Argos, before which stand Orestes (Agamemnon's son) and his faithful companion Pylades. Orestes, who has been exiled from Argos for many years, prays to Hermes, the god of the dead, to give him strength. He cuts two **locks of his hair** and lays them on the grave, honoring Inachos (the god of a local river in Argos) and his dead father, begging forgiveness for his absence at his father's funeral.

From the play's opening moments, Aeschylus makes clear that Agamemnon's death (which was detailed in Agamemnon, Aeschylus's previous play in the Oresteia trilogy) still dominates the minds of his characters, and influences their actions. Orestes, meanwhile, immediately establishes his identity as a pious, faithful son who honors both the gods and his father.

As Orestes prays, Electra enters with the Chorus, a group of slave women who attend her. They are dressed in mourning, and bring offerings to the **grave**. Orestes, observing them, notices his sister and prays to the gods to let him avenge Agamemnon's murder. He hides along with Pylades, anxious to know why the women are approaching the grave.

Electra, too, shows herself to be a pious woman still traumatized by her father's death. Orestes introduces to the play the subject of vengeance, a force that will drive nearly every plot point within the piece.

The Chorus describes their rituals of mourning—scratching their cheeks with their own fingernails, beating their breasts, and crying out with grief—and recounts how a seer in the house had a nightmare last night, warning them that the dead are calling out for revenge. They relate how the impious Clytemnestra has sent them to the tomb, fearful of the dead's vengeance, but they call her offerings "empty gifts." The Chorus laments the fall of the house of Atreus, and warns how Justice will inevitably exact its penalty. They then describe the earth as teeming with blood, and curse their lives as slaves, connecting their own plight with that of Electra, who silently and secretly mourns for the betrayed Agamemnon.

Violent mourning, for the Ancient Greeks, was a form of showing respect not only to the dead, but also to the gods. In contrast to the piety of both Electra and the Chorus, Clytemnestra does not mourn for her dead husband—even the libations she sends to the tombs are "empty" and meaningless. Perhaps surprisingly, this pious Chorus is also bloodthirsty—a clear demonstration of the complex way in which the Greeks viewed vengeance. Although they understood that it was an endless and violent cycle, they still believed that it was often necessary and honorable.

Electra praises the Chorus, thanking them for accompanying her to Agamemnon's **grave**. She begins to lament her father's death, adding that she cannot bring him love from Clytemnestra as she pours sacred oil over his tomb. She then tries a more traditional prayer for the dead, but cannot finish it either. Last, she wonders whether she should simply remain "silent, dishonoured" just as her father was when he died. She compares herself to a slave, and asks the Chorus for advice, reminding them that whether free or enslaved, all humans are subject to Destiny.

Because Electra is a "proper" Ancient Greek woman, she is essentially powerless to change her circumstances. Unlike her brother Orestes, she cannot leave her home, nor can she take up arms against her hated mother and stepfather. The Chorus, also made up of women, relates to Electra's feelings of stasis and suffocation. These qualities contrast with the unfeminine Clytemnestra—who is a murderer, but also a woman with agency and power.

The leader of the Chorus tells Electra that she should say a prayer for "those who love you…[and] hate Aegisthus." Electra laments that she is entirely alone except for the Chorus, but the leader urges her to remember Orestes. She goes on to instruct Electra to pray that either a "god or man" punish "the murderers" (Aegisthus and Clytemnestra). Electra wonders how she can pray for vengeance and "keep my conscience clear," but the leader asserts that it is her duty to do so in order to pay back her enemies.

Here Aeschylus introduces a crucial question within his play: How can characters seek out bloody vengeance while still remaining moral and pious? The Chorus, however, asserts that morality/piety and vengeance actually go hand in hand, and that it is the duty of moral people to punish evildoers. Note that even here, although the Chorus tells Electra to pray for vengeance, they don't tell her to carry it out herself—as a woman, that is not her role.

Electra kneels at the **grave** and prays to Hermes, begging him to ask the dead and Mother Earth to hear her plea. She asks the spirit of Agamemnon to pity both her and Orestes, whom she feels her mother Clytemnestra has sold in exchange for her murderous lover Aegisthus. She describes her near enslavement and Orestes' exile, asking that Orestes be returned home, and that she remain purer than her mother is. For her enemies, she asks for vengeance and justice.

In her prayer, Electra again shows the very real influence that both the gods and the dead have on the lives of the living in her culture. She also directly compares herself to Clytemnestra, a juxtaposition that will remain present in the audience member's minds throughout the rest of the play.

Electra then calls upon the Chorus to add their prayers to hers. The group of women laments the death of Agamemnon, and begs the gods of the dead for the appearance of an avenger to free the house from the corruption of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Since the Chorus represents the general atmosphere of the play's setting, it is clear that the entire kingdom of Argos hates the tyrannical Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Having finished her prayer, Electra spots Orestes' **locks of hair** on the ground. She notes that the hair is identical to her own, and she and the Chorus wonder whether it signifies the presence of Orestes. Electra believes that Orestes sent the lock to honor Agamemnon, and the Chorus adds that he will "never set foot on native ground again." At this, Electra is overcome by grief. She praises her brother as "the dearest man I know," and curses her impious mother, who would never cut her hair for Agamemnon. Simultaneously fearful and hopeful, she prays to the gods to help her understand the mystery.

Having been oppressed for years by a mother and stepfather she hates, Electra can hardly believe that her brother may in fact be in Argos once more. The matching locks of hair, meanwhile, make it clear how bonded the siblings are (despite the long time that they've spent apart). They are, in essence, two halves of the same person, one male and one female.

Within moments, Electra spots Orestes' **footprints** in the dirt (as well as Pylades'). Comparing the tracks to her own feet, she notes that they are perfectly matched. As she follows the tracks towards Orestes, he emerges and walks towards her until the two meet. Orestes tells her to pray for success in the future—unable to believe that it is actually her brother, Electra asks what the gods have ever given her. Orestes tells his sister that the gods have returned him to her, but she continues to struggle with disbelief and mistrust, asking him why he laughs at her pain. Orestes responds that their pain is one and the same, and matches **the lock of hair** to both his head and hers. He then shows her his clothing, which she herself wove. At this, Electra falls to her knees and sobs. Orestes lifts her up and the two embrace.

The footprints that Electra finds add to the sense of her connection with Orestes. The moment in which she actual sees him, yet cannot believe her eyes, only underscores how traumatized she is from years of living, lonely and afraid, under the command of her mother. Even in this heightened emotional moment, it is crucial to note that both Orestes and Electra remain pious, crediting the gods with bringing them back together. Amidst this tragic drama about a violent family, this moment of reunion displays the only healthy emotional connection within the play.

As the Chorus rejoices, Orestes warns his sister not to give herself to joy, since his arrival has put them in grave danger. Electra explains that Orestes is not only her brother, but now he must also replace her father (dead at Clytemnestra's hands), her mother (a betrayer), and her sister (Iphigenia, dead at Agamemnon's hands). Electra prays to Zeus, the king of the gods, for safety and success.

Once more, Aeschylus emphasizes to the audience how isolated Electra has been, and how important her bond with Orestes is. Her prayer to Zeus reminds us of the power of the gods, and of their ability to change the course of human events. The characters essentially assume that they are the pawns of the gods and fate, and so prayer is just as important as action.

The Chorus, too, prays to Zeus, comparing the dead Agamemnon to an eagle killed by a treacherous **snake**. They once again compare their enslaved state to that of Electra, and praise Agamemnon for his generosity and protectiveness. They describe the house (family) as "ruined," and ask Zeus to restore it to "greatness."

In Greek tragedy, families are often cursed with terrible misfortune due to the sins of their ancestors. This is undoubtedly true of Orestes' and Electra's family—the house of Atreus—which has been "ruined" by bloodshed for several generations, starting with Agamemnon's father Atreus, who murdered his brother's children and tricked him into eating them.

The Chorus leader warns Orestes and Electra to be wary of Aegisthus' and Clytemnestra's spies. Orestes responds that he is under the protection of Apollo, and that the god's oracle has ordered him to hunt down Agamemnon's killers. He relates what the oracle has told him: that if the dead go without vengeance, they infect the land itself, causing disease and famine. Orestes goes on to describe the Furies, goddesses of vengeance who attack men who deal unjustly with their kin. Should he not avenge Agamemnon, Orestes warns, he will be shunned by all and die alone and unloved. On top of the god's command, Orestes adds his own reasons for wanting vengeance: his grief, and his desire to regain his homeland.

This is the first time that Orestes mentions a crucial plot point: that he has been ordered by the god Apollo to kill his mother in order to avenge Agamemnon. He also mentions the Furies, figures who will become important later in the play and who will play a huge part in its sequel, The Eumenides. *Aeschylus also takes this opportunity to distinguish between the pious and the personal. Orestes must kill Clytemnestra because it is the god's command, but he also wishes to kill her because of what she has done to his father, his sister, and himself.*

Orestes, Electra, and the Chorus gather to pray at the **grave**. The Chorus invokes the Fates and Zeus, praying that they exact justice. Orestes prays to his father and to his ancestors. The Chorus Leader observes that the rage of the dead inflames the hearts of the living, while Electra begs her father to end her and Orestes' pain. Both the Leader and Orestes praise Agamemnon, and the siblings wish that their father had died an honorable, warrior's death at Troy. The Chorus prophecies the end of Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' reign, and then all three begin to beg the gods for violent, bloody vengeance. They curse Clytemnestra for impiety and brutality, and Orestes swears that he will make her pay for dishonoring and mutilating his father. Electra incites him further, telling him of her own grief and servitude.

This passage of prayer reminds us that the gods are closely linked with fate, another omnipresent force in the lives of the ancient Greeks. It also emphasizes the power of the dead over the living, as the Leader of the Chorus describes how the dead are able to influence our decisions from beyond the grave. Agamemnon died shamefully and ignobly—deceived in his own home, and at the hands of a woman—yet another reason that his children feel they must avenge him. It is telling that in his death, Agamemnon is made into a saintly figure, when in life he was a warlord who killed his own daughter in order to begin a war of revenge, and who brought back a concubine (essentially a sex slave) when he returned home to his wife. Yet he was a powerful man and victorious in battle, so he is glorified.

The Chorus leaves Electra and Orestes at the **grave**. Orestes prays for the power "to rule our house" while Electra begs for Aegisthus' death, and her own freedom. The siblings promise their father's spirit offerings, prayers, and honor. Growing more incensed, the two remember the plot that doomed Agamemnon, in which Clytemnestra used a net to trap the king while he was in a bath. The leader of the Chorus reemerges, joining with Orestes and Electra and rejoicing in their bravery.

The siblings' prayers again remind us that they believe their future acts of vengeance to be divinely sanctioned. Their recollection of Agamemnon's death, meanwhile, illuminates how present the murder still is for them, and how much it galvanizes each and every one of their actions.

Before leaving, Orestes wonders why Clytemnestra sent libations to Agamemnon's **tomb**, considering her impiety and her hatred of her dead husband. The leader of the Chorus explains that Clytemnestra was shaken by a bad dream in which she gave birth to a **serpent**, which then bit off her nipple as she breastfed it. Clytemnestra has sent offerings to the tomb in an effort to ease her guilt and her terror.

The bad dream that Clytemnestra has is a sign that her death is destined to be—it is under divine, not human control. We also learn here that Clytemnestra is aware both of the power of the dead and the force of vengeance, and that she fears for her life.

Orestes wonders if he himself is the **serpent**, and if this dream has in fact predicted Clytemnestra's death at his hands. The leader of the Chorus encourages him to share his plan with them. He replies that it is simple: Electra and the Chorus will return to the house, while he and Pylades will disguise themselves as travellers from Delphi (the shrine of Apollo) and ask for shelter. He predicts that the impious Aegisthus and Clytemnestra may not be hospitable (another mark of their sinful nature), but resolves to find his way into the palace no matter what. Once inside, he will confront Aegisthus and kill him. Orestes urges Electra to be watchful once she is inside, and orders the Chorus to keep his secret. Last, he prays to his dead father, asking Agamemnon to guide his sword. Then he, Pylades, and Electra exit.

Orestes' speculation about himself being the serpent creates a curiously double-edged symbol. On one hand, snakes usually emblemize treachery and entrapment, while Orestes himself has been portrayed as a noble, pious character. This tension reveals the multi-faceted nature of vengeance, which may sometimes be well deserved, but which is always bloody and brutal. Orestes' decision to disguise himself as a traveler from Delphi, meanwhile, reminds us of his fealty to Apollo, and emphasizes the fact that his murder attempt will be divinely sanctioned by the god of prophecy and truth.

LINES 586-652

Alone onstage, the Chorus states that of all the world's marvels, the most mysterious and unaccountable are "a man's high daring spirit" and a "woman's desperate passion." They deplore women who are "driven wild by lust," and tell stories of various women who destroyed men with their feminine wiles. The Chorus turns to Clytemnestra in particular, remembering how she overcame Agamemnon despite his "warlord's power," and they assert that the gods detest such women. They then predict that Justice and Fate—in the form of Orestes—will soon punish Clytemnestra, and that he will at last wipe clean the "stain of blood" from the house of Atreus.

As is always the case in Greek tragedy, the Chorus serves to help us better understand the worldview of the play. In this passage, they pay specific attention to wicked, impious, and unfeminine women, making sure that we understand the unforgivable nature of Clytemnestra's crimes. Not only did she kill her husband, but she usurped power that rightfully belonged to a man—a terrible crime, to the Ancient Greeks. It is intriguing, too, that the Chorus believes that Orestes' bloody vengeance will in fact "cleanse" his house.

LINES 653-718

Orestes and Pylades (both now disguised) reenter. As Orestes predicted, Aegisthus makes the two knock three times at his gates before being allowed in (a grave insult to a guest). At last a Porter enters to let them in, and Orestes asserts that he has vital news to tell the lord and lady of the house.

Aegisthus' lack of hospitality, while it might seem trivial to modern readers, is a grave sin. The Greeks considered the guest/host relationship to be sacred, and had specific laws codifying the way that one behaved towards guests.

Clytemnestra enters, attended by Electra, and offers Pylades and Orestes a place to stay for the night, adding, "the eyes of Justice look on all we do." Orestes tells her that he comes from Delphi, but that he has heard from a stranger that Clytemnestra's son (Orestes himself) has died. Clytemnestra responds with (apparent) grief, saying that the news has "destroy[ed]" her. She blames the curse of the house of Atreus, and Orestes apologizes for bringing her such terrible news. Clytemnestra asserts that she still welcomes him as a guest, and orders Electra to escort Orestes and his servants to their rooms, before resolving to tell Aegisthus the news. All exit.

The fact that it is Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus, who greets Orestes already speaks to the corrupt nature of the household. In Ancient Greek culture, it was the job of the man of the house to greet guests, not the woman. Clytemnestra mentions "the eyes of Justice" as if to explain why she is being hospitable, but she also betrays her own guilt and fears with this phrase—she knows her bloody deed has not escaped the attention of the gods. Clytemnestra's rather limited response to the news of Orestes' death also displays her lack of motherly feeling. Compare her brief show of grief to the violent mourning rituals of Electra and the Chorus for Agamemnon—who has been dead much longer.

LINES 719-1065

The Chorus reassembles and wonders when they will be able to help Orestes. They pray to Mother Earth and to Hermes to guide him, before noticing Cilissa, Orestes' nurse when he was a child, in tears. She recounts how Clytemnestra is looking for Aegisthus so that he can go speak to (the disguised) Orestes, and then relates her own suspicion that Clytemnestra is secretly happy about Orestes' death. Engulfed in grief, Cilissa says that of all the pain she's experienced in her life, this news is the worst, and she remembers how she reared Orestes from infancy. She tells the Chorus about the love that she gave the child, and the difficulty of caring for an infant. It is her task now to fetch Aegisthus, whom she calls "the ruination of the house."

Cilissa exists in direct contrast to Clytemnestra, portraying an example of true motherly love. While Orestes' own mother barely mourns the news of his death, his nurse is heartbroken, not even wishing to live without Orestes in the world. Her genuine, deep emotion makes Clytemnestra's short show of grief look insufficient and false, and her report of Clytemnestra's secret joy only adds to that sense.

Cilissa then reveals that Clytemnestra has told Aegisthus to bring his bodyguards with him when he talks to Orestes, but the leader of the Chorus orders her to lie, and to tell Aegisthus to come alone. Confused, Cilissa asks why the Chorus is acting so pleased about the news of Orestes' death, but they refuse to reveal the plan to her. Despite her consternation, Cilissa resolves to do what she's told, and prays to the gods for guidance.

Clytemnestra's direction that Aegisthus bring his body guards shows how paranoid and mistrustful she is at every turn. The Chorus's command to Cilissa to lie to Aegisthus, meanwhile, constitutes one of the few moments in the play when the Chorus members actually intervene and participate in the action.

Alone onstage again, the Chorus prays to Zeus, begging him to grant Orestes good fortune, and asserting that they are on the side of justice. Calling Orestes an orphan, they remind Zeus of how much he loved Agamemnon, and they beg him to end the cycle of bloodshed and vengeance that has overtaken the House of Atreus. They next pray to Apollo, praying that he provide light for Orestes' dark path, and then to Hermes, begging him to help Orestes as well. They then address the absent Orestes, reminding him to be loyal to his father (rather than his mother), and to "go through with the murder." As they finish their prayers, the "butcher" Aegisthus enters. They pray that Orestes will "[w]ipe out death with death."

As the play approaches its climax, the Chorus invokes multiple symbols of power—Agamemnon, Apollo, Hermes, and Zeus—in order to emphasize the stakes of the situation, and the danger that Orestes faces. Their prayer also reminds us that human actions are ultimately controlled by the gods, and that the success of Orestes' endeavor has in fact already been determined by divine will. The sentiment of "wipe out death with death" is an expression of vengeance that sits at the core of the play's morality.

Aegisthus, having heard that Orestes is dead, worries that this terrible news may destabilize his kingdom even further than it already is. He also wonders whether the story is true, or whether it's merely "woman's panic." For confirmation, he turns to the leader of the Chorus, who urges him to get the news directly from Orestes himself. Aegisthus wonders whether the strangers actually saw Orestes die or whether they're only reporting hearsay. He last expresses paranoia that Orestes is out to "catch" him, and then exits.

Aegisthus' worry about his unstable kingdom shows that the realm has essentially been in turmoil since Agamemnon's death—more proof that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are tyrannical and incompetent rulers. Like Clytemnestra, Aegisthus also exhibits (justifiable) paranoia, proof that he too understands the omnipresent and unstoppable nature of vengeance.

With Aegisthus gone, the Chorus prays to Zeus once more, begging the god for Orestes' success. They compare him to a "young god" and hope for him to win his father's throne. As a scream emanates from the palace, they devolve into confusion, wondering who has prevailed.

As is always the case in Greek tragedy, the murder takes place offstage during another Chorus-dominated passage. The prayer itself again emphasizes the divine power of Zeus.

To answer their question, out rushes a wounded servant of Aegisthus, incoherently lamenting his master's death. He attempts to open the door to the women's quarters to warn Clytemnestra, but failing at that, he calls out her name until she emerges. As the Chorus ominously warns that Clytemnestra's doom is next, the queen orders the servant to bring her a **"man-axe"** in order to defend herself. He dashes out.

The role that the servant plays here is a traditional one—deaths in Greek tragedies always occur offstage, and then are described in great detail by characters who have witnessed them. Clytemnestra's desire for a "man-axe" to defend herself illustrates her "masculine" nature—the ferocity and ambition that allowed her to avenge her daughter and seize power, but also lead to her downfall here.

The doors of the palace open to reveal Orestes and Pylades with the body of Aegisthus. Giving Clytemnestra no time to mourn, Orestes drags his mother towards her lover's body. She begins to beg for her life, reminding Orestes that she nursed him as a baby. Momentarily softening, Orestes asks Pylades what to do. His comrade reminds him that Apollo has ordered Clytemnestra's death.

The reveal of Aegisthus' body is highly theatrical, and is another common characteristic of Greek tragedy. This scene is also the only instance in which Pylades speaks. That he uses his one line to remind Orestes of Apollo's command only increases the power and weight of his words.

Turning back to Clytemnestra, Orestes tells her that he will kill her on top of Aegisthus' body. She continues to beg, telling him that she will bring down a mother's curse on his head if he kills her. She adds that she killed Agamemnon because she was destined to. Orestes responds with scorn, telling her that it is her destiny to die and that she does not deserve his love or loyalty. She continues to plead, reminding him of Agamemnon's failings and threatening him once again with curses. Orestes, however, remains resolute, refuting all of her arguments. At last Clytemnestra realizes that Orestes is the **serpent** she dreamt of—at this, Orestes drags her into the palace, shutting the doors behind him.

Slippery and wily to the end, Clytemnestra uses every rhetorical device at her disposal—from begging to threatening—to try to save her own life. Her pleas and arguments, however, hold little sway over Orestes. Just as Clytemnestra defiled the bond between husband and wife, so now Orestes will violate the connection between mother and child. Clytemnestra's realization that Orestes is the serpent reminds both her and us of the power of fate—she essentially predicted her own death, and yet was powerless to stop it.

Alone, the Chorus wonders at this mixture of mourning with justice and vengeance. They sing of Orestes' triumph, and of the cleansing of Agamemnon's house. Although Orestes' purpose was one of vengeance and deception, they remind the audience that he acted with the blessing of the gods, and that his cause was righteous. They then go on to praise Apollo for his purity and justice, and imagine the "proud house" of Atreus in the future. Last they turn to time, anticipating a future of prosperity and peace, free of Aegisthus' and Clytemnestra's corruption.

The Chorus reminds us that although Orestes' act seems bloody, it has in fact (supposedly) "cleansed" the household of Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' sins. Even though Orestes has acted as a destructive and deceptive "serpent," he has done so in order to fulfill the commands of the gods. The optimism that the Chorus then displays is particularly striking, considering the caution and pessimism they display throughout much of the play.

Orestes and Pylades reemerge, standing over the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes remembers how the two killed his father, adding that it is appropriate that they die together. He then displays the same **robes** that Clytemnestra used to entangle Agamemnon before murdering him, and recounts the plot that killed his father. He unfolds the robes so that the gods can see Clytemnestra's sin. Orestes says he cares little about Aegisthus' death. Orestes remembers briefly how he loved his mother, but then, remembering her betrayal of Agamemnon, he explains that his love has turned to loathing. He calls her an eel and a **serpent**, and curses the robes that he holds. Deploring the evil of women, Orestes asserts that he would rather "die without an heir" than ever marry a faithless creature like his mother.

Orestes takes this moment to introduce a powerful symbol: the robes in which Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon. This burial shroud is a double-edged emblem, representing both the proud king of Argos, but also the shameful way in which he died. In addition to this emotionally charged prop, the audience also witnesses Orestes' tortured emotions about what he has just done. The complexity of what he is feeling becomes even more clear after he calls his mother a serpent—the very animal that he believed represented himself. Last, his rant against women proves how deeply his mother's treachery has traumatized him.

The Chorus ominously states that although Clytemnestra is dead, Orestes' suffering has only just begun.

In contrast to their previous jubilation, the Chorus now becomes ominous—a sign of bad things to come.

Still obsessed with the **shroud**, Orestes looks at his father's dried blood before burying his face in the robes and weeping. He hails the robe as a remnant of his father, conflating his "victory" with "guilt." The Chorus, meanwhile, adds that Orestes' trouble is not yet over.

Overcome with emotion, Orestes continually comes back to the idea of his father, reminding himself that he has committed this terrible act in Agamemnon's name. Orestes' act was seemingly inevitable, but that doesn't mean it's unpunishable.

In a frenzy, Orestes describes his manic state of mind, and his terror. He states that he killed Clytemnestra because Apollo ordered him to, and because she killed Agamemnon—his actions, in short, were just. As Orestes speaks, Pylades gives him an olive branch and sacred robes so that he may return to Delphi (the holy shrine of Apollo) as a refugee. He must do so, he explains, in order to escape the mother's blood that he has shed.

Orestes becomes increasingly panicked in this passage, as if beginning to understand the weight and the consequences of his own actions. Most striking of all is the revelation that he must become an exile once again, wandering until he reaches the shrine of Apollo. Orestes may have returned to his homeland briefly, but he will not be allowed to remain.

Orestes begs the land of Argos to remember why these actions came to pass, but adds that he must leave as an exile because of the murder that he's committed. The Chorus, meanwhile, tries to reassure him that he's done the right thing, asserting that he's freed Argos from "two **serpents**."

Orestes loves his land, and yet must leave it to atone for what he's done. The Chorus' reassurance, meanwhile, is a complex one, since they once again use the symbol of "serpents"—previously positive—in a negative way.

As the Chorus speaks, Orestes suddenly screams in terror. He sees what the audience and Chorus do not: horrific women with snakes for hair who have begun to pursue him. These are the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance, who have come to punish him for Clytemnestra's death. Confused, the leader of the Chorus tries to calm Orestes, but is unsuccessful. Orestes calls the Furies "the hounds of mother's hate," and he becomes manic once more, crying out for the god Apollo. The leader of the Chorus urges him to seek out the god's purifying touch. Orestes, horrified, rushes out in order to escape, and Pylades follows him.

The consequences of Orestes' actions are now revealed: the Furies, whom he believed would hound him for not avenging his father, have now arrived to punish him for killing his mother. This is the tragic and unsolvable dilemma that sits at the heart of The Libation Bearers*: although Orestes has done exactly what the gods commanded, he has also committed a terrible sin—matricide—and will be punished for it by* other *gods. His piety and obedience to Apollo seem to matter little in the face of the unstoppable, unending wrath of the Furies.*

The leader of the Chorus bids farewell to Orestes, praying that Apollo will guide and protect him. The Chorus as a whole observes that the curse of the house of Atreus has struck again. They wonder when the cycle of vengeance will ever end, and the play ends with their question.

The play ends on a somber note, as both audience and Chorus realize that the cycle of vengeance has not been broken with Orestes' act, but still continues, ruining the lives of another generation of the House of Atreus.

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