

# ELECTRA

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## Electra by Sophocles

### Story

Sophocles' *Electra* (410 B.C.E.) works the ancient legend of the return of Agamemnon from Troy. The story, which was favored already in the *Iliad*, was dealt with powerfully by all three of the fifth century tragedians; most starkly by Sophocles, for whom revenge killing is its own justification.

As the play opens, it has been many years since the death of Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra and her spouse are long settled as rulers of Mycenae. Orestes has long ago been sent to Phocis, for security sake, while Electra has remained at home, in virtual servitude to the regal family. Orestes, by this time a grown man, arrives at the palace with his old friend Pylades; the two of them have hatched a plot by which they can justify entrance to the royal portals. (Their story is that they are returning the urn with the ashes of Orestes, who has died.)

Meanwhile, in dialogue between Electra (and her timid sister, Chrysothemis) and the chorus, we learn that Electra has never relented in her bitterness toward her mother, or her hatred for her stepfather. This mindset has brought her into continual conflict with her sister, and made her long for the return of her brother—even just for news of him. When an old messenger arrives from Phocis, to announce the death of Orestes, Electra is in despair, although her mother is relieved. Chrysothemis however speaks to her sister at just this time—not yet knowing of her brother's return-- telling her some offerings and a lock of hair have been seen at Agamemnon's tomb, and giving that as evidence that Orestes must have returned. Once again Electra rejects this theory, and sets her mind to the necessity of killing her parents by herself. The play is destined, in short order, to bring devastated Electra together with revenge plotting Orestes.

Just as Orestes and Pylades arrive at the palace, the two parties at first fail to recognize one another. A moment later, however, the spark of recognition is lit, and an emotional brother-sister encounter ensues. The siblings' plan goes into action at once. Orestes and Pylades make their ways into the palace, while Electra stays outside on guard. Orestes kills his mother, then hides her corpse under a sheet; this he presents to Aegisthus, on his return home, with the explanation that it is the corpse of Orestes he is about to see. Upon lifting the veil, Aegisthus discovers Orestes, waiting to take the adulterer off stage for murder, at the very hearth where Agamemnon was killed by Clytemnestra.

For Aeschylus, in *The Libation Bearers*, the manly determination of Orestes, to avenge his father, is not only undisputed but incorporated in the inevitable scheme of divine justice. For Sophocles, the emphasis is less on Orestes, who remains essentially an ingenu type, but on Electra, and on the ups and downs of her needs for vengeance. We enter the mindset of Electra through seeing her in conflict with her timid and self-interested sister, who would prefer not to make trouble in the dangerous household, a risk Electra gladly takes.

### Characters

**Orestes** is the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and stepson of Aegisthus, who (along with Orestes' mother) has for a long time been ruler of Mycenae. Having been sent away from home as a youth, shortly after the patricide, Orestes returns at the end of this play, and plans with his sister to murder his mother and Aegisthus.

**Electra**, the sister of Orestes, has been planning for decades to take revenge on her mother. She has given up on seeing Orestes alive, or on changing the timid mind of Chrysothemis who is afraid to join in a murder plot. She is the true mastermind of the revenge plot in Mycenae.

**Aegisthus** is to Clytemnestra, after the murder of Agamemnon. He is the particular object of hatred of the children of Clytemnestra.

### **Themes**

**Hatred.** Sophocles rarely goes into such individual depth as he does in characterizing Electra and her hatred. We come to know this anxious, beset, hag-ridden young woman, whose nights are still broken by her fury toward her mother. Her desire for vengeance powers her hatred.

**Justice versus vengeance.** While the children of Clytemnestra thirst for vengeance on her, for the killing of their father, it is ultimately a sense of unfulfilled justice which drives them. Electra is especially maddened by exposure to her step father Aegisthus, who has no right to be in charge of her household.