

Oresteia: the libation bearers



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Orestes Orestes is the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon and the brother of Electra. The protagonist of *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes spends the course of the play preparing to avenge his father's murder. At the end of the play, he carries out this vengeance by killing Aegisthos and Clytemnestra. Orestes is intelligent and determined, just like his mother. He is well spoken and quick to do whatever is necessary to do justice to his father's memory, even though he knows that he will have to face the consequences. Pylades A companion to Orestes, Pylades is present for much of the play although he does not speak a word until the climax of the action. He is a representative of and the mouthpiece for Apollo. His only lines come at the moment when Orestes hesitates to kill Clytemnestra. Pylades reminds him of his duties to Apollo, saying that one should rather make enemies of all men than anger the gods. After saying these words, Pylades becomes silent once more.

Electra Orestes' older sister, Electra cared for him as a child and loves him dearly. Since her father Agamemnon's death, she has been treated like a slave in the palace, and tells Orestes also that Clytemnestra is about to marry her off in order to break her bond with the house. Like most Greek woman, Electra was totally under the power of her father until she was married, at which point she joined her husband's household and was no longer considered part of her original family. Electra is fiercely devoted to her father's memory. She loathes her mother and is quick to transfer all of her love to Orestes when he reappears. After going into the palace in silence at Orestes' command, she does not reappear again in the play.

Chorus Every Greek tragedy had a chorus, although each one was made up of a different body of people. In *The Libation Bearers*, the chorus is made up of slave women from the palace. They represent the common interests and ideals of

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society and frequently comment on the action in highly lyrical odes. The chorus of this play differs from those of other famous tragedies in that it influences the course of events by telling characters what to do. From the beginning of the play, when it tells Electra how and for what she should pray to the gods and her father's ghost, the chorus shows itself to be willing to intervene in the action in order to bring about the desired results. Their most significant act comes when they tell Orestes' nurse, Cilissa, to alter Clytannestra's message to Aigisthos. Whereas the queen had told Aigisthos to come with his bodyguards, the chorus commands that Cilissa instruct him to come alone. By doing this, they ensure Orestes's victory. They are certain that Orestes is the agent of justice and they will do anything in their power to help him.

ClytannestraThe powerful wife of Agamemnon and mother of Orestes, Clytannestra is arguably the tragic hero of *The Libation Bearers*. She is the sister of Helen of Troy, and cousin to Penelope (Odysseus' wife). Although she does not spend much time on stage in *The Libation Bearers*, her character has already been fully developed in the preceding play, the *Agamemnon*, and thus her influences are felt and understood. She is a fiercely protective mother, and went to the lengths of killing Agamemnon in order to avenge the murder of their daughter Iphigineia. She is extremely intelligent and persuasive, although her arguments are of no avail against Orestes when it matters most. Although her lover Aigisthos is ostensibly now king of Argos after Agamemnon's murder, it is Clytannestra who really runs the show. She is not afraid to do a man's job in a man's world.

CilissaThe rather simple nurse of Orestes, Cilissa plays a small but crucial role in *The Libation Bearers*. She appears only once, just after Orestes has told Clytannestra that he is a stranger from Delphi who comes bearing news of

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Orestes's death. She fulfills two major functions in the drama. First, she tells us that she raised Orestes from birth, soothing him through his infant nights and breastfeeding him when he was hungry. She thus negates Clytemnestra's claim to motherhood of Orestes. Second, it is she who Clytemnestra orders to tell Aigisthos to come meet the strangers with his bodyguard. After the chorus intervenes, she alters the message so that Aigisthos goes alone to meet Orestes. Cilissa is loyal to Orestes and Agamemnon, and resents Clytemnestra's treacheries. Without her, Orestes might not have succeeded in his plan. Aigisthos

The son of Thyestes, Aigisthos is a weak character in Aeschylus's version of the myth. In other versions of this story, Aigisthos, not Clytemnestra, concocts the plan to kill Agamemnon and then carries out the deed. In the Oresteia, however, Aigisthos is a rather minor character and is overshadowed by Clytemnestra, who takes him as her lover but who clearly wears the pants in the relationship. Aigisthos has his own reasons for hating Agamemnon, as it was Agamemnon's father Atreus who betrayed Aigisthos's father and killed his two brothers.

Apollo

The Greek god of light, civilization and learning, Apollo does not appear directly in The Libation Bearers, although his influence is strongly felt. He is represented by his proxy, Pylades. It is Apollo who sends an oracle to Orestes that orders him to avenge Agamemnon's murder, threatening gruesome punishments if he should refuse. Apollo's designs are at first in line with the ancient order of the Furies, as he commands Orestes to shed blood for blood. However, Apollo has also promised that Orestes will not have to pay for his crimes, in direct contrast to the cycle of vengeance. In the Eumenides, Apollo will advocate in favor of Orestes against Clytemnestra and the Furies.

Hermes

The Greek god of messages,

transitions, travelers, and hidden meanings, Hermes is invoked several times throughout *The Libation Bearers*. In the first lines of the play, Orestes prays to Hermes to guide him in his quest, asking that he conduct Agamemnon's spirit from the underworld in order to stand by him as he confronts the murderers. The chorus also calls on Hermes when they pray for Orestes's victory, asking him to keep certain things hidden and bring other things to light. In effect, they ask Hermes to make sure that Clytemnestra and Aegisthos do not recognize the truth before it is too late. Furies The ancient spirits of vengeance, the Furies ensure that no blood crime goes unpunished. They inflict horrible diseases and torment upon those who thwart their laws. Towards the beginning of the play, Orestes tells us how Apollo warned that the Furies would come after him if he failed to avenge Agamemnon's death. Although Orestes obeys and carries out their commands, the Furies do not favor him because of it, but rather come after him at the end of the play after he has committed matricide. The Furies do not play favorites and do not care if their laws tear society apart. In the *Eumenides*, Athena will negotiate a truce wherein the Furies cede the rights to judge crimes of murder to the law courts of Athens. By doing so, she harnesses and weakens their power. Agamemnon Orestes and Electra's father, murdered prior to the beginning of the play by Clytemnestra, his wife. He is a central figure in the play due to the fact that all of the acts of vengeance committed in the play stem directly from his sacrificial murder of his daughter, Iphigeneia. Iphigeneia Sister to Orestes and Electra, murdered by her father Agamemnon at Artemis's request during the Trojan War. Clytemnestra avenges her death by killing Agamemnon, continuing and setting in greater motion the cycle of

blood violence. ONORESTEIA: THE LIBATION BEARERS SPECIFICALLY FOR
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