

Aigisthos: insight on a fool



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The *Oresteia* by Aeschylus is a trilogy of tragedies expressing the strength women possess, but, on the flip side, it also expresses the cowardice of some men—one man in particular. This man's name was Aigisthos. Aigisthos is only present in the first and second plays of the trilogy, and he barely shows up for the majority of each tragedy. Despite this, Aigisthos' seemingly minor role, has a clandestinely powerful contribution in the shaming and demise of Agamemnon. With his cunning trickery, his power-hungry cowardice, and his dimwitted blunder, Aigisthos does more than simply avenge his father. He induces his own annihilation. Aigisthos, a man defending his honor as many men do during this time, goes about his scheme in an unexpected way. Like the serpent from Genesis, Aigisthos cunningly deceives the woman and the household without raising a weapon—unless his lustful thinking and sharp mind are categorized in the archives as artillery.

During this era, the men were superior, so, in relation, men were allowed to have many wives, concubines, and mistresses without raising reproof. In correlation to this, it was humiliating for men to have their wives stolen from them. Klytemestra is mentioned twice as “ Agamemnon's queen,” thus proving her position as the one and crucial wife of Agamemnon (Agamemnon In 25, 83). Aigisthos lustfully weasels his way into Klytemestra's bed in Agamemnon's absence, however, and in doing so he is not only taking over the household, but is also disgracing Agamemnon's family name. Along the same path, Aigisthos is never mentioned to have loved Klytemestra, though Klytemestra, herself, acknowledges her love for Aigisthos numerous times. She says, “ Aigisthos makes the fire shine on my hearth, my good friend, now as always, who shall be for us the shield of our defiance...”

(Agamemnon In 1402-1404) Orestes also, while conversing with Klytemestra after murdering Aigisthos states, “ While [Aigisthos] was alive you thought him better than my father.... You love him, and hate the man you should have loved” thus noticing himself how she truly loved Aigisthos (The Libation Bearers In 896-898). Aigisthos, in contrast, rarely ever refers to the woman, and when he does do so, he quickly speaks about his own intentions. The chorus plainly states Aigisthos’ relationship with Klytemestra by saying, “... you... waited the war out, shaming the master’s bed with lust” (Agamemnon In 1590-1591). Strictly speaking, the chorus refrains from expressing the word “ love” when referring to Aigisthos’ relationship with Klytemestra.

Though Aigisthos was a cunning trickster, he was also a dastardly tyrant, hiding behind his woman, his guards, and his words. Aigisthos is not present for the majority of the first play in the trilogy; he is not even mentioned until Cassandra speaks of him in riddles as a “ Strengthless lion rolling in his master’s bed” (Agamemnon In 1190), and he finally turns up with bodyguards after Agamemnon’s death to praise himself for the murder. Clearly, Aigisthos is a tyrant without the bravery tyrants stereotypically display. He is never present without this guards, and he proudly claims the rights to the murder of Agamemnon. Aigisthos’ words are sharp and threatening when he is speaking with the chorus after Agamemnon’s death, but he still must have his “ henchmen” on hand when a battle is about to break out. He first admonishes the chorus of elders by saying that they “ are old men” and “ shall learn how hard it is at [their] age, to be taught how to behave...” (Agamemnon In 1584). He then ignores the questions of why it was Klytemestra that killed Agamemnon instead of Aigisthos (the man), and

finally answers it by passively plotting his own plans. "...The deception was the woman's part... still with [Agamemnon's] money I shall endeavor to control the citizens" (Agamemnon In 1601-1603). With this statement, Aigisthos is not only desperately trying to prove that he is the mastermind, but he is also expressing his true intentions that have absolutely nothing to do with avenging his father. The only one to calm Aigisthos and keep the brawl from commencing is Klytemestra. Aigisthos seeks cover behind her like a child shyly crouching behind his mother's skirts. When he is threatening the chorus near the end of Agamemnon, the chorus states, " Crow and strut, brave cockerel by your hen; you have no threats to fear" (Agamemnon In 1638). This indicates Aigisthos' cowardice and requirement for Klytemestra's presence. It also proves Klytemestra's power over his own.

Aigisthos can speak and appear as a tyrant with his many armed guards and flying tongue, but, despite all this, the chorus sees him for what he truly is: an oppressive weakling. Aigisthos may simply be cunning and dastardly, but to add to his hated character, he is also a blundering buffoon. With a weakened sense of fear after Agamemnon's death, Aigisthos seems to allow his pride to take over. He threatens the chorus of elders in Agamemnon, as stated earlier, and later on, in The Libation Bearers, he is looked at as a despised man by the slaves of the household. Though the chorus of slaves does not say it directly, the slaves do tell Electra to wish those that hate Aigisthos good tidings, and Electra responds by adding the Chorus to this group (The Libation Bearers In 103). Oppressing the citizens and slaves of the house he conquered shows how Aigisthos did not think about outside threats to his reign. Along with the hatred searing from the household and

town, Aigisthos appears to ignore the most important foreshadowing in the second play: Klytemestra's dream followed by the sudden appearance of a strange man claiming Orestes' death.

Aigisthos is not present in *The Libation Bearers* very often, but, in bringing him to the same level as Klytemestra, it is evident that he did not put two and two together. Klytemestra dreams about giving birth to a snake and being struck down by that very creature. She knows this serpent must be Orestes, for she would not have sent libations to Agamemnon's tomb if she had no fear of her son coming to avenge his father (*The Libation Bearers* In 510-535). Yet, despite this, Klytemestra and Aigisthos both seem indifferent to the stranger bringing the news of Orestes' death the very morning after Klytemestra has this dream. They do not take the proper precautions (Aigisthos does not bring his guards when consulting with the stranger), and they both are struck down because of this. Aigisthos is also foolishly prideful about his leadership in the household. The mention of "speaking man to man" is a reoccurring theme in *The Libation Bearers*, happening four different times in the text. Orestes starts this idea by first speaking to the chorus about it (*The Libation Bearers* In 555), then by calling at the house, begging to speak to the man of the house instead of the woman so he can get right to the point (In 651-653). Next, the Nurse relays to the chorus what Klytemestra said about needing Aigisthos to speak to the stranger directly (In 795). And, finally, taking the idea from Klytemestra, Aigisthos steps up, relaying his intentions in speaking with the stranger so the man "...won't steal away [Aigisthos'] clear-sighted mind" (In 844). Ironically, Orestes takes more than Aigisthos' mind. He takes his life.

Aigisthos may seem like a minor character with little significance in *The Oresteia*, but he plays a major role in the murder of Agamemnon and the demise of his own soul. He is a trickster that fools the household and his mistress, a coward according to many, and a fool in his actions—all attributes leading to his own destruction. Aigisthos is no more than a stereotypical antagonist, but, as with many villains like himself, he utterly fails.