

Outline of Aeschylus: CHOEPHORAE: THE LIBATION BEARERS
PART 2 of the ORESTEIA

The scene is set by a tombstone (or stele) on the stage - the tomb of Agamemnon outside the city of Mycenae where his widow Clytemnestra rules with her new husband Aegisthus.

Prologue: Enter in traveller's costume Orestes, son of Agamemnon with his foster-brother Pylades from Phocis. Orestes prays at the tomb, addressing himself to the gods of the Underworld, then cuts a lock of his hair as an offering to the spirit of his dead father.

Electra enters with the Choros of slavewomen dressed in black mourning. Orestes recognises her but decides to overhear the women's speech from hiding.

1st. Stasimon: (stasimon = Choros song). the Choros bewail their unhappy lot as ill-treated slaves of the palace. They seem Eastern from their passionate mourning; they could be Trojan slaves but it is not certain. They have been sent to the tomb by Clytemnestra who has had a bad dream.

the Choros testify to the evil effect that Agamemnon's death has had on Argos. They weep for him.

1st Episode: Electra treats the Choros as equal in asking their advice on the appropriate prayer. She too hates her mother and loves her dead father. They advise her to pray for friends and an avenger to come. She then prays to her father, mentioning Orestes.

2nd. Stasimon: the Choros sing a hymn, calling on Agamemnon - as Electra finds Orestes' offerings. She recognises the hair as like her own so concludes it must be from Orestes - but he could have sent it. But when she finds his footprint, also like hers, Orestes emerges, speaking to reassure her about prayer. She does not recognise him and fears a trap. He shows her where he had cut off the hair and also a piece of of her own weaving she had made him in the past.

Electra, overjoyed, addresses him as her only loved one - she hates her mother, and her father and sister are both dead (she does not blame Agamemnon for her sister).

Orestes prays to Zeus, promising him sacrifices if he helps them; but this sort of deal does not seem religious.

The Choros strike a conspiratorial note, warning of careless talk.

Orestes explains that the Delphic Oracle, through his priestess, has told him he must avenge his father's murder or suffer terrible consequences of disease, madness, terror, expulsion from human society and religious worship. Orestes also wants his throne back and calls Aegisthus contemptuously a woman.

The Great Kommos begins. (Kommos = a lyrical section in a Greek tragedy which contains no action nor new information but where some extended lament is shared by the Choros and main character(s). It is written in a shorter line, not in the metre of the dialogue, and was probably accompanied by music - flutes.)

This is a conjuration scene: in it, Orestes, Electra and the Choros are given equal lines in which they call on the spirit of Justice, on Agamemnon's ghost to

rouse the dead to help take the revenge. They pray as suppliants, lamenting for Agamemnon, pounding on the tomb with their hands to rouse him, growing more and more vehement, imagining the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, evokes also the Furies, the primitive spirits of revenge. Orestes wonders where to turn. Electra dwells on her mother's cruelty to her father's body and to herself. the Choros evoke the idea of political overthrow of the usurpers.

They end by telling Agamemnon that if he is avenged his tomb will be properly honoured in the future. They wish the family line to continue.

2nd Episode: Orestes asks and is told why the grave gifts have been sent by Clytemnestra at this particular time. When he hears the dream of Clytemnestra he interprets it: the serpent son is himself and the dream means he will achieve the revenge. The dream must have come from the gods they have been praying to, proving that they are on Orestes' side.

Orestes gives instructions; Electra is to go back to the palace while he and Pylades gain entrance there also as travellers, Phocian natives. Once inside the Palace he imagines himself killing Aegisthus on sight. the Choros are also told to be secret. With a final prayer to his father Orestes goes off with Pylades.

3rd Stasimon: "Many are the terrors bred of earth and sky but none more formidable than man's pride and woman's passion." This opening is like the famous Second Stasimon from Sophocles' Antigone but it goes on like many other choros songs citing mythological examples of suffering which serve to universalise the particular occasion of distress. The last instance is the famous female versus male atrocity of Lemnos where wives banded together in a plot to murder their husbands. The Choros think Orestes is going to get rid of the pollution brought by the Furies on the house of Atreus.

3rd. Episode. Orestes knocks at the Palace gate 3 times and is answered by the porter-slave. He is not let in at once but has to explain that he has news, and wants to talk to someone in authority - a woman perhaps, but then he changes his mind and prefers to see Agamemnon. Clytemnestra comes out and offers the strangers hospitality, including, ironically, a bath. Orestes explains that Strophius of Phocis (Pylades' father) had passed on to him some news: let Orestes' parents know that Orestes is dead and cremated. Clytemnestra expresses pain at the news, taking it as part of the curse on the house, but she is cheered by the thought that now Aegisthus and she are safe so she welcomes the messengers. They enter the palace.

4th. Stasimon. In a short suspense-inducing song the Choros work up our sense of expectation about the impending deaths.

4th. Episode. The old nurse, a slave called Cilissa (= a woman of Cilicia) comes out of the palace in tears, having been sent to fetch Aegisthus to the palace to hear the good news. She comments bitterly on Clytemnestra's insincere grief. The nurse mourns Orestes, expatiating on his usual baby behaviour (wetting himself, getting her up at night, dirtying nappies.) Knowing her errand, the Choros get her to alter her message; to tell Aegisthus to come without his bodyguards; they also hint that the news about Orestes is not true.

5th Stasimon: mainly prayers for Orestes' success to Zeus and the gods of the house. Orestes is referred to as Perseus out to slay the Gorgon; he is to hate Clytemnestra and not love her and kill her without letting her looks work on him.

5th Episode: Aegisthus enters at speed; too eager to wait for the news from the messenger, he asks the Choros if Orestes is really dead. They refer him to the strangers.

6th Stasimon: Another prayer to Zeus covers the passage of time before Aegisthus is killed.

A death-cry (of Aegisthus) is heard from inside the house. The Choros wonder if Orestes has succeeded.

6th Episode: A slave of Aegisthus comes on shouting that Aegisthus is dead, trying to get help to save Clytemnestra who, as he sees it, is also threatened. No-one responds, but Clytemnestra, coming out of the women's quarters, learns what has happened, realises the meaning and calls for an axe. Orestes and Pylades come out with the body of Aegisthus and swords dripping with blood. Clytemnestra's sorrow at Aegisthus' death rouses Orestes' jealous rage further but when Clytemnestra appeals to him not to kill his mother, showing the breast which nursed him, Orestes in indecision asks Pylades what he should do. Pylades, whose name suggests the league that ran Delphi, speaks here for the only time and speaks for Apollo, insisting that Orestes obey the god and kill Clytemnestra. This decides Orestes even though Clytemnestra still pleads, and excuses herself for what she has done. Orestes shows jealousy of Aegisthus again. She says that if Orestes kills her he will be accursed and realises what her dream meant; he is the snake in her bosom. He drags her inside and kills her.

7th Stasimon: The Choros briefly reflect that this is the best thing that could happen to the family; maybe saying this shows that they now feel doubt of this. Then they sing a song of triumph - comparing the punishment taken on Troy for the rape of Helen with this punishment for Agamemnon's death.

The Choros hold Hermes, Zeus, and Zeus' daughter, Justice as responsible jointly for this revenge. They look forward to a clean house of Atreus in future.

7th Episode: Orestes comes out with the two dead bodies, and the garment/net that Agamemnon was entangled in, as exhibits (as in a court of justice) to the people, to justify his killings. He says his mother hated her children and inveighs against her. His mind is under pressure and beginning to go but he defends himself against the charge of matricide. The Choros expresses support for him.

Then Orestes sees, in hallucination, the Furies of his mother, who begin to hound him. He cannot remain, but has to rush away.

Final Choros and Exit: The Choros go off singing of the past history of the house of Atreus. Where will it end? The end is a question.