

Important background information for reading Sophocles', *Electra*

Sophocles' *Electra* is based on the material contained in Homer's *Odyssey* that relates the story of Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War. In the *Odyssey*, Homer recounts the events that took place before the Trojan War and the events that followed. The following information is organized according by the name of the character and her/his significance to the overall plot.

- **Electra:** Sophocles adapted the traditional myth of Electra which had been passed down from the poets. In the *Iliad*, Homer refers to Electra by the name, Laodice, when Agamemnon tries to lure Achilles back to the battle by promising him his choice of one of his three daughters. Aeschylus, the tragedian who preceded Sophocles, wrote a play about Electra but confined his portrayal to what had been the traditional story, that Electra had remained loyal to both of her parents, bringing offerings to her father's grave at the behest of her mother. In Sophocles' *Electra*, Sophocles splits the characteristics of abiding loyalty and resolute insistence on honoring the dead between two characters, Electra, and another sister, Chrysothemis. Chrysothemis remains loyal to both parents while it is Electra who refuses to forget her father and as a result, becomes the enemy of both Clytemnestra and her new husband, Aegisthus.
- **Agamemnon:** In the *Odyssey*, the journey to Troy from Greece encountered multiple delays. The fleet of Greek ships led by Agamemnon was stalled at Aulis, (the port town of Aulis was located on the east coast of Greece, north of Athens and east of Thebes and was protected by the island of Euboea). The fleet waited for favorable winds to sail to Troy but the dead calm of the seas prevented the fleet from sailing. According to the myth, the soothsayer, Calchas, divined that favorable winds would arrive if the goddess, Artemis, was appeased. There are competing accounts as to why Artemis was angry with the Greeks. Two versions of the myth implicate Agamemnon as the cause of the goddess' wrath. One version claims that Agamemnon had insulted the goddess when he compared himself with the goddess on account of his alleged skill as a hunter; another version claimed that Agamemnon had failed to honor the goddess with the best of that year's harvest to commemorate the birth of his daughter, Iphigenia. Shirking his promise, Agamemnon failed to offer Artemis the finest produce of that year's crops and angered Artemis. In turn, Artemis kept the fleet from sailing by ensuring that the sea was dead calm.
- **Calchas**, the soothsayer, tells Agamemnon that the only way to gain a favorable wind is for Agamemnon to appease Artemis. Agamemnon decides he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon lures Iphigenia to the altar by tricking her into thinking she will marry Achilles. This deception is done without Clytemnestra's knowledge. As Iphigenia approaches the altar expecting to be married, she is slaughtered on the altar by Calchas. NOTE: According to the myth, just before Iphigenia is murdered, Artemis intervenes and saves Iphigenia by replacing her

with a deer and Iphigenia is spirited off to Tauris, (Tauris is a peninsula on the Black Sea, also known as the Crimean Peninsula), where she is made a priestess of Artemis. This background information on Agamemnon is important in order to appreciate Clytemnestra's rage at Agamemnon, who returns from the Trojan War with a Trojan princess on his arm, Cassandra, the daughter of Priam and Hecuba.

- **Apollo:** The god, Apollo, casts his influence on the play but is specifically mentioned only briefly in the opening lines of the play. Orestes tells his teacher, the Paedagogus, what he learned when he went to consult the oracle at Delphi, a religious site located in central Greece that had been the chief shrine to Apollo. Apollo was son of Leto and Zeus and his sister was the goddess, Artemis. Apollo was depicted in statues and on vases in which his beauty and his intimidating stature distinguish him. Painters and sculptors frequently depicted the god by calling attention to his good looks and his long, dark, curly hair. Apollo was known as a lover of beauty as well as a fierce warrior. He and his sister Artemis took vengeance on Niobe's children to avenge their mother's punishment at the hands of Hera, who was jealous on account of Zeus' affair with Leto.
- In the *Electra*, **Apollo** is cast as the god of divine vengeance. When Orestes goes to the shrine of Delphi to consult the oracle, he famously asks, "How I might avenge my father on his murderers?" (Jebb translation, 11¹), the oracle replies, "Alone and by stealth, without aid of arms or numbers, I should snatch the righteous vengeance of my hand." (Jebb translation, 12²) This idea of vengeance that is sanctioned by the gods is the central theme of *Electra*, a theme which challenged the law of Sophocles' time which disallowed "self-help," a term applied to the custom of punishing murderers by the kin of the victims.
- **Orestes:** Orestes was the only son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. After Agamemnon was murdered, Electra secretly brings Orestes to Strophius, their uncle, who lived in Phocis. The theme of Orestes' eventual return and retribution for his father's murder takes up much of the first part of the play. Midway through Sophocles' *Electra*, Orestes disguises himself as a traveler and brings the (false) news that Orestes is dead to Clytemnestra. This is part of the deception that allows Orestes to enter the palace and proceed to murder Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. In the various mythic traditions of ancient Greece, Orestes is sometimes depicted as haunted by the ghost of his mother or by the Erinyes, the goddesses who observe laws sacred only to them and which even Zeus must accept. The Erinyes are usually depicted as three goddesses with snakes for hair, winged, and holding whips or torches in their hands used to punish those who commit offenses against them. Their sphere covered crimes committed against the family, particularly homicides committed against family members.

¹ Richard Claverhouse Jebb, *Sophocles: Plays*. This volume is a commentary and translation by the Cambridge classicist, R. C. Jebb, (1841-1905).

² Richard Claverhouse Jebb, *Sophocles: Plays*. This volume is a commentary and translation by the Cambridge classicist, R. C. Jebb, (1841-1905).

