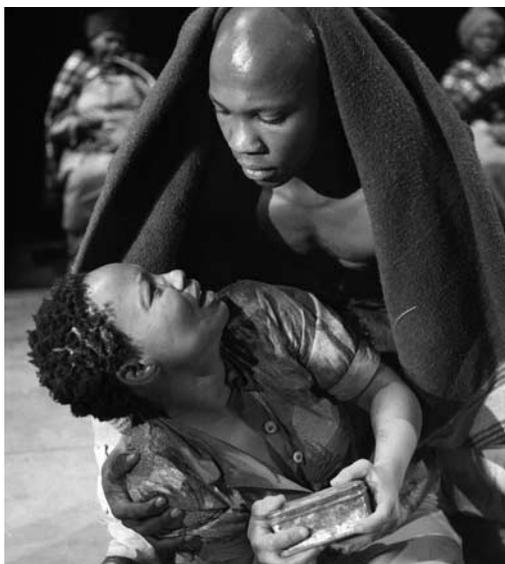


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List of characters

Non-speaking parts are marked with an asterisk.

TUTOR	<i>servant of the royal family of Argos</i>
ORESTES	<i>son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra</i>
PYLADES*	<i>relative, ally, and travel companion of Orestes</i>
ELECTRA	<i>elder sister of Orestes</i>
CHORUS	<i>townswomen of Mycenae</i>
CHRYSOTHEMIS	<i>younger sister of Electra</i>
CLYTAEMNESTRA	<i>queen of Argos, wife of Agamemnon</i>
ATTENDANTS*	<i>in the service of Clytaemnestra and Orestes</i>
AEGISTHUS	<i>cousin of Agamemnon, lover of Clytaemnestra</i>



Elektra and Orestes in the recognition scene from Molara, an adaptation of the Orestes myth by Yael Farber related to the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa. Scene from the production at the Barbican Centre, London, 2008.

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PROLOGUE (1–118)

There were no programmes handed out at the original performances of Greek tragedies. Instead the background of the play was provided in the opening lines of the prologue. Here the Tutor provides the essential information, identifying his addressee, the setting, and the main elements of the plot.

Setting the scene

The Tutor leads Orestes and Pylades into the *orchēstra* (see Fig. B on page 114). In the original production they would have come in from the entrance (*parodos*) that represented the far distance.

1 Son of Agamemnon Orestes, like other sons of famous Greek heroes of the Trojan War (Odysseus' son Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey* and Achilles' son Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), is to a great extent defined by his parentage, as emphasised by the postponement of his name until line 6.

4 ancient Argos ... the plain The Tutor is referring to the land of Argos, within which are located the cities of Argos and Mycenae (9). Mycenae, site of the palace of Agamemnon, gave its name to the Bronze Age Mycenaean civilisation, and is six miles north of Argos. By the fifth century BC Argos had become an important military power, whereas the site of Mycenae had been abandoned.

5 daughter of Inachus Io, daughter of the river god Inachus and priestess of the temple of Hera (see 8), was seduced by Zeus, then transformed into a cow when Hera detected the affair. The bovine Io was driven into a frenzy by a stinging gadfly sent by Hera. After wandering all over the earth, she eventually found relief and returned to Argos. The allusion to the plain of Argos reminds us of Io's sufferings that occurred there.

6 Lycean market-place Located in the city of Argos and bordered by a temple of Apollo. Lycean was an epithet applied to Apollo, which Sophocles here derives from the Greek for wolf (*lukos*). The title with which a god was addressed was selected from a range of titles belonging to him, chosen according to the capacity in which he was being invoked. One of Apollo's functions was to protect flocks; here his description as 'wolf-slaying' (7) strikes an ominous note.

10 house of Pelops This refers to both the palace at Mycenae and its inhabitants, the descendants of Pelops. For the genealogy of the royal house at Mycenae, see *Genealogical table*, page vii. For the story of its violent past, including Agamemnon's murder, see *Background to the story*, page v.

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TUTOR Son of Agamemnon, who commanded at Troy,
Now you can see at first hand
What you have always been yearning for.
This is ancient Argos, which you've longed to see, the plain
Of the daughter of Inachus, who was stung by the gadfly; 5
That, Orestes, is the Lycean market-place, named after
The wolf-slaying god; here to the left
Is the famous temple of Hera; from where we are now
You can say you're looking at Mycenae, rich in gold,
And this is the house of Pelops, rich in destruction. 10

Agamemnon's children (12–14)

The Tutor makes a first reference to Electra, the eldest of Orestes' three living sisters. Orestes was an infant when Agamemnon left for Troy. Troy fell in the tenth year of the war and, according to tradition, Orestes returned to avenge Agamemnon in the eighth year after his murder. Thus the Orestes on stage is probably a man in his prime (14, 154), aged 19 or so. Electra is likely to be in her mid to late 20s, given that she was old enough to look after Orestes as an infant and rescue him in the aftermath of Agamemnon's death (1124, 1141). Chrysothemis is younger than Electra but older than Orestes; like Electra she is past her teenage years (952–3), the traditional age of marriage for women. Iphianassa – mentioned once (153) – may be taken as being younger than Chrysothemis since the latter is mentioned first. Iphigeneia was said to have been of marriageable age when she was sacrificed by Agamemnon (see *Background to the story*, page vi); this would make her the eldest of the siblings (but Iphigeneia, who is not mentioned in Homer, is usually considered a later replacement in the mythical tradition for Iphianassa).

- Why do you think the Tutor spends so much time introducing particular places in the first half of his speech, and what symbolic meanings might these convey?

15 avenger of your father's murder The duty of the son to avenge his father defines Orestes and provides the motivation for the entire plot of the play.

16 my dear friend Pylades The Greek *xenos*, here translated as 'friend', refers to a guest–host relationship that was an important component of social interaction between aristocrats in archaic Greece. For Pylades' identity, see *Background to the story*, page vi.

The Pythian oracle (32–8)

People travelled from all over the Greek-speaking world to consult the famous oracle of Phoebus Apollo at Delphi. The god foretold the future through his priestess, known as the Pythia. She responded to visitors' questions while in a trance; her inarticulate cries were interpreted and recorded by an official interpreter, who composed them into poetry.

The oracle's responses were notoriously ambiguous, and the oracle given to Orestes (36–7) is no exception. Its wording could represent either an order (Apollo said that he should do *x*) or a statement (Apollo said that he would do *x*). The term 'hand of justice' could justify the killing or simply be describing an act of vengeance. Orestes asks *how* to get revenge (33–4), not whether he should do so.

- What is the significance of the first line (36)?
- Do Apollo's words sound to you like a clear command?

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Here, at the scene of your father's murder,
 Your own sister handed you to me;
 I took you, kept you safe,
 And raised you to grow up with the strength
 To be the avenger of your father's murder. 15
 So now, Orestes, and you too, my dear friend Pylades,
 Our plans must be laid – and fast.
 Already the bright rays of the sun
 Stir clear morning bird-calls
 And the dark starry night is gone. 20
 Before someone comes out of the house,
 Put together a plan.
 This is no time to hesitate. It's time to act!

ORESTES Dear servant, how clearly
 You show your loyalty to me. 25
 Just as a thoroughbred, even an old one,
 Does not lose heart in times of danger,
 But pricks up its ears, just so
 You spur me on and are among the first to follow.
 Well then, I will tell you what I have decided. Listen carefully 30
 And, if I miss the mark, correct me.
 When I went to the Pythian oracle
 To find out how I could
 Take vengeance for my father on his murderers,
 Phoebus gave me the following prophecy: 35
 'Without protection of shields or army, through trickery and
 stealth,
 You are to accomplish killings with the hand of justice.'
 That was the oracle I heard.
 Then go into the house when the time is right,
 And find out what is going on, 40
 So that you can report to us with certainty.
 They won't recognise you, at your age, after all this time;
 With your white hair they won't even suspect you.

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45 Phanoteus of Phocis Phanoteus was the brother of Pylades' grandfather Crisus and lived near Delphi. Phanoteus and Crisus were bitter rivals; here Phanoteus is represented as supporting Aegisthus' rival claim to the throne of Argos (see *Background to the story*, page vi) while Crisus, his son Strophius and his grandson Pylades remain loyal to Agamemnon and Orestes. The Greek word translated as 'ally' is *doruxenos* and literally means 'spear-friend': a friend who has pledged to bring military aid in time of need (see 16n).

46 swear to it Orestes is quick to instruct the Tutor to lie on oath, a serious offence potentially open to punishment by Zeus, guardian of oaths. In contrast to Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles presents an Orestes who is supremely confident, and who believes that the end justifies the means. There is no doubt in Orestes' mind that the oracle gives him unqualified approval for his plan of revenge and that he is on a divine mission (68–9).

48 Pythian Games These took place at Delphi every four years, and rivalled the Olympic Games in scale. One of the most prestigious events was the chariot race that took place in the valley of Crisa below the sanctuary of Apollo.

Burial customs (50–1)

Greeks made offerings to the dead (321, 405–6, 431–3, 447–52, 906) that included libations (water, wine, oil, milk or honey poured onto the ground). They also placed wreaths, locks of their hair or other mementos on the tombs of their loved ones as gifts to the dead. The lock that Orestes places on Agamemnon's tomb will later prove significant (see 892–925).

52 the bronze urn Homeric heroes who died away from home were usually cremated; their ashes were then placed in an urn to be returned home for burial.

Words and deeds (57–8)

The Greeks were fond of antithesis; their liking for juxtaposed pairs of opposites is reflected in their sentence structure. Here ('in word ... in fact') we have one of the most frequent antitheses (see also 311–12, 354–5, 1042, 1283–7, 1360–1, 1373–4, 1499–1500), contrasting words (*logoi*) and actions (*erga*). Orestes' plot will largely depend on a series of false stories (*logoi*) for its success.

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Say this: that you are a foreigner come from
 Phanoteus of Phocis – he is their greatest ally. 45
 Tell them – and swear to it –
 That Orestes is dead, killed in an accident.
 Say he fell from a speeding chariot at the Pythian Games.
 Make that your story.
 Meanwhile, we will first crown the tomb of my father 50
 With libations and shining locks of hair, as the god
 commanded;
 Then we'll come back, carrying the bronze urn, which
 As you know lies hidden in the bushes,
 And deceive them with our story by bringing them
 Welcome news – that my body has already been 55
 Consumed by flames and reduced to ashes.
 For how can it hurt me to die in word
 If in fact I am safe and winning glory for myself?

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Self-interest (59–60)

Orestes' comment raises a debate current at the time when Sophocles wrote this play, when Athens was fighting a long war against Sparta and her allies (the Peloponnesian War, 431–404 BC). Some Athenian politicians, such as Cleon, argued that policy should be decided on the basis of self-interest rather than on moral principle. Orestes is taking a similar stance, blurring the normal distinction between what is right and what is advantageous. His radical approach is similar to that of sophists or professional teachers of rhetoric like Protagoras (late fifth century), who famously claimed that he could make the worse argument seem the better; Orestes' similarly bold claim (59–60) influences our view of his character and of the play's moral issues.

74 the time is right Orestes' speech, like that of the Tutor before him, closes with an appeal to timeliness (see 'Time', page 92), an indication to the audience that a new development is imminent.

81 Loxias Loxias is a title for Apollo, god of prophecy (see 6n). The Tutor's words may suggest that Apollo's prophecy included instructions beyond what Orestes has divulged.

The opening scene (1–84)

- Why do you think Orestes invents a false story (44–9)? What particular details does he choose to include?
- Orestes ends his speech with a prayer for success (66–71). What does he invoke, and why?
- What are your first impressions of the Tutor and Orestes? What is their relationship, and does it change over the course of the scene? Who is in charge?
- How would you stage the interrupted departure of the Tutor, Orestes and Pylades, and the entrance of Electra? At what point should Electra emerge from the palace?

Lyric

From Electra's very first cry of misery (76), her words are expressed in song or lyric poetry (centred in this text). Greek plays consisted of a combination of spoken and sung verse. Not only the Chorus but also the actors sang at certain points (see *Parodos*, page 14). Often, as here, the actors' songs took the form of a soliloquy, but sometimes dialogue also was sung. Lyric poetry was accompanied by music and arranged in rhythms very different from the iambic metre used to represent ordinary spoken dialogue. It often conveyed intensity of emotion. Electra's song is both a lament and a prayer.

- Explore different ways to convey the musical element to Electra's words.

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To my way of thinking, there's nothing wrong
 With a tale that brings advantage. 60
 I know of many men –
 Wise ones, too – who were falsely reported dead,
 Only to return home to even greater honour.
 I am confident that, through this story, I too
 Shall blaze forth alive, like a star upon my enemies. 65
 So now, my fatherland and gods of this place,
 Welcome me with good fortune on this journey of mine –
 You too, my ancestral home; for I come with justice
 To purify you, sped on my way by the gods.
 Don't send me away from this land dishonoured; 70
 But let me be master of my wealth and restore my house.
 I've said what I have to say. As for you, old man,
 Go and see to your part.
 The two of us will be on our way, for the time is right,
 And in men's affairs timing is everything. 75

ELECTRA Oh, oh! How I suffer!

TUTOR Listen, child, I thought I heard one of the servants
 Moaning softly behind that door.

ORESTES Is it poor Electra?
 Shall we stay and listen to her weeping? 80

TUTOR No, let's attempt nothing till we've followed Loxias'
 orders –
 Let us begin there,
 By pouring libations to your father:
 That's what will bring us victory and success in our enterprise.

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85 O sacred light Electra comes out of the house, the usual place for women in ancient Greece (see 323n), and addresses the sun, air and (indirectly) earth as witnesses of her troubles. It is not unusual to invoke the elements as witnesses since they are omnipresent deities. In Electra's case the appeal emphasises her isolation.

90 all-night vigils Electra's unending grief and association with the night contrast with the characterisation of the male characters, their focus on the dawning of a new day (18–20) and concern with the critical moment for action (23, 74–5).

Mourning

In ancient Greece (as in many cultures today) it was the duty of female relatives of the deceased to express their grief in ritualised mourning. This included outbursts of grief (76), funereal songs (87), beating of the breasts, self-laceration (88) and other practices such as tearing the hair. Electra's mourning is unusually prolonged – it has been nearly eight years since her father's death.

94–5 bloody Ares / Who welcomed Ares was the god of war. Agamemnon did not die in battle at Troy, but was killed by his wife and her lover Aegisthus on his return home to Mycenae (see '**Agamemnon's murder**', page 18, and *Background to the story*, page v). Electra uses the Greek word *xenizein* (literally 'to welcome or offer hospitality to a guest') ironically (95). In Aeschylus' earlier play *Agamemnon*, Clytaemnestra kills her husband in the bath after giving him a hero's welcome.

106 Like the nightingale Electra is referring to the myth of Procne (see also 143–5, 1068), wife of Tereus. Tereus raped Procne's sister, Philomela, then attempted to cover up his crime by cutting out her tongue; but Philomela conveyed her story to Procne by weaving it into a tapestry. Procne then killed her own son Itys and served him up to her husband Tereus as a punishment. When Tereus chased the women, he was turned into a hoopoe; Philomela was transformed into a swallow and Procne into a nightingale.

- Explore the points of intersection between Electra's situation and the myth of Procne.

108 for all to hear Electra's lament is motivated by her desire to shame Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus as well as her wish to honour the memory of Agamemnon (see '**Friends and enemies**', page 28).