

Video 7.6: Libation Bearers (6:59)

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is the first of a sequence of three plays that survives in entirety from antiquity. As I mentioned earlier when we talked about tragedy, tragedies came across in antiquity in groups of three. You would go and watch a trilogy being performed and there'd be plays in the beginning and end of that in different genres. But the tragedy itself came in three parts. And from antiquity the pieces that survive – only one of them has all three parts in place, and this is the *Oresteia* all together. We're reading two of the 3 parts of this play, the first and last. And I wanted to give you a sense of what happens in the middle, the *Libation Bearers*. And if any of you want to read it on your own, please do.

At the certain of the story, Orestes takes action. He moves into this place that leaves him in the sad state that he's in at the beginning of the last play of the trilogy, as we'll see when we turn there. In the *Libation Bearers*, the second installment, we have this new generation, then, of Orestes and Electra, that are gonna be infected by this miasma. We talked about this floating around, nasty kind of curse, that is stuck inside this family, and what is gonna happen to it. At each turn people engaged in the action try to make the curse go away. Remember Clytemnestra thought that by doing away with her husband justice was now done and the end was here and we had finally done right by the world, but things get a little bit ugly. Now she's gonna face retribution from her own son, Orestes. We see here a beautiful depiction on a piece of ancient pottery with Orestes and Electra on either side of a Pillar, there, representing the tomb of their father, and Orestes' friend Pylades next to him. The three of them are engaged in the action that winds up in Clytemnestra's death.

The play is sparse and spare in its action, just as all these ancient tragedies are. Orestes returns to Argos. He's been away. He and Electra get together then and decide to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes and Electra conduct what's basically a séance. They hang out at the grave of their dead father, and they pour over libations and they pray to earthly powers, the large forces that are percolating under the earth, including the earth itself. These powers are something that in the long scheme of understanding of where the Greek world comes from, as we know from reading Hesiod, these are powers that were defeated by Zeus and buried underground. When Zeus has got these nasty things in control underneath there, yes, they're definitely controlled under Zeus' binding. And yet when humans need extra help, when they're in terrible situations that they can't solve themselves, they appeal to these buried chthonic powers to try to gain purchase on their situation up here that they otherwise couldn't get by appealing to the gods of the daytime.

So, in desperate situations as Orestes and Electra are in, appeals to the earthly powers is what starts to call people's attention. They then pray to Agamemnon's shade and different kinds of early divinities that we saw mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony*. And they want permission to go ahead and carry out these murders. They basically get it. They're authorized to go do this. And it sends them then off into the terrible set of actions. Orestes and his friend Pylades disguise themselves as foreigners. They then kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. But not before Orestes and Clytemnestra have a long drawn out face-to-face. Clytemnestra is good at verbal tests of will. We saw her do that in the *Agamemnon*. She does that with her son. He is about to kill her and telling her why it's okay that he's about to kill her. She, on the other hand, is arguing back, saying, my goodness, of course it's not okay for you to kill me. And they have this long drawn out test of face-to-face argument and battle.

Orestes then drags her behind the door. As we know things happen back there. He kills her, we spring the door open, see that she's dead. Orestes at that point reappears, and he's happy,

at this stage at the end of the Libation Bearers, that everything's finally over –that he's exacted revenge for his father's murder and that everything is finally okay. But, we would probably by now surmise: that's not the case.

Up pop a new breed of nasty divinities, these things called the Furies. These Furies are going to play a critical part in the next part of the story. They start to swoop around, and now that Orestes has blood guilt on his hands, they're going to come after him. We'll see them hovering around in the background. They are agents of justice in this older order of things based on blood. Remember the Furies themselves – we saw a mention of them in Hesiod's *Theogony*. There's a connection there with the severed genitals of the Sky. Remember after Cronos cuts off the genitals, he tosses them into the sea and from there Aphrodite grows up. According to Hesiod's story also nasty things come out, including these Furies. They're born from the drips of blood off of the severed genitals of the Sky. This background, tied to the blood and to the awful internal family crimes, really helps specify what they're all about in the story and the role that they're playing inside of the Oresteia. They're like blood-scenting hounds. They're just going to pursue a criminal as long as they smell blood guilt on that person's hands, and they'll pursue that criminal relentlessly. There are no exceptions to the rules that they obey. There's no room for persuasion. The punishment is fixed, and it's absolutely not something that someone could talk themselves out of in some kind of longer story. Aeschylus is going to turn from this older order of justice, based on revenge, blood guilt, the Furies as enforcers. He's going to turn from that to a new idea of justice that's going to turn this old one on its head. And we're going to see that in this next installment of the trilogy – the Eumenides of Aeschylus.