

Agamemnon begins with a Watchman on duty on the roof of the palace at Argos, waiting for a signal announcing the fall of Troy to the Greek armies. A beacon flashes, and he joyfully runs to tell the news to Queen Clytemnestra. When he is gone, the Chorus, made up of the old men of Argos, enters and tells the story of how the Trojan Prince Paris stole Helen, the wife of the Greek king Menelaus, leading to ten years of war between Greece and Troy. Then the Chorus recalls how Clytemnestra's husband Agamemnon (Menelaus' brother) sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to the god Artemis to obtain a favorable wind for the Greek fleet. The Queen appears, and the Chorus asks her why she has ordered sacrifices of thanksgiving. She tells them that a system of beacons has brought word that Troy fell the previous night. The Chorus give thanks to the gods, but wonder if her news is true; a Herald appears and confirms the tidings, describing the army's sufferings at Troy and giving thanks for a safe homecoming. Clytemnestra sends him back to Agamemnon, to tell her husband to come swiftly, but before he departs, the Chorus asks him for news of Menelaus. The Herald replies that a terrible storm seized the Greek fleet on the way home, leaving Menelaus and many others missing.

Featured on Sparknotes

[Video SparkNotes: Homer's The Odyssey summary](#)

Video SparkNotes: Homer's The Odyssey summary

Check out Homer's The Odyssey Video SparkNote: Quick and easy Odyssey synopsis, analysis, and discussion of major characters and themes in the epic poem.

[Powered By](#)

The Chorus sings of the terrible destructive power of Helen's beauty. Agamemnon enters, riding in his chariot with Cassandra, a Trojan Princess whom he has taken as his slave and concubine. Clytemnestra welcomes him, professing her love, and orders a carpet of purple robes spread in front of him as he enters the palace. Agamemnon acts coldly toward her, and says that to walk on the carpet would be an act of *hubris*, or dangerous pride; she badgers him into walking on the robes, however, and he enters the palace.

The Chorus expresses a sense of foreboding, and Clytemnestra comes outside to order Cassandra inside. The Trojan Princess is silent, and the Queen leaves her in frustration. Then Cassandra begins to speak, uttering incoherent prophecies about a curse on the house of Agamemnon. She tells the Chorus that they will see their king dead, says that she will die as well, and then predicts that an avenger will come. After these bold predictions, she seems resigned to her fate, and enters the house. The Chorus' fears grow, and they hear Agamemnon cry out in pain from inside. As they debate what to do, the doors open, and Clytemnestra appears, standing over the corpses of her husband and Cassandra. She declares that she has killed him to avenge Iphigenia, and then is joined by her lover Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin, whose brothers were cooked and served to Aegisthus' father by Agamemnon's father. They take over the government, and the Chorus declares that Clytemnestra's son Orestes will return from exile to avenge his father.

Summary

A Watchman, atop the roof of the palace in the Greek city of Argos, complains that he has spent so much time in this perch that he knows the night sky by heart. He is waiting for a beacon that will signal the fall of Troy, which has been besieged for ten years by a Greek army led by Agamemnon, the king of Argos. Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, governs Argos in her husband's absence, and, while the Watchman says that she has "male strength of heart," (11) the absence of the king makes him fearful. "I sing," he declares, "only to weep again the pity of this house / no longer, as once, administered in the grand way" (16-18).

The beacon flares, signaling Troy's fall, and the Watchman leaps up and cries out with joy at the news, and rushes inside to tell the Queen. The Chorus, an assembly of Argos' oldest and wisest male citizens, comes onstage and discusses the history of the Trojan War. They recount how Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus, the king of Sparta, gathered a huge fleet and army to recapture Helen, Menelaus' wife, who was stolen by Paris, a Prince of Troy; and they discuss how the Greeks and Trojans have spent ten years wearing themselves out in battle. Meanwhile, the old men of Argos (the men too old to fight) are growing weaker and weaker in their old age.



Clytemnestra joins them, and the Chorus demands to know why she has ordered sacrifices to all the gods and celebrations throughout the city. Before she answers, they recall the terrible story of how the Greek fleet, on its way to Troy, was trapped in Aulis by unfavorable winds, and how Agamemnon learned that the winds were sent by Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. In order to appease her and sail on to Troy, Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia; the Chorus describes in detail her pitiful cries for mercy as her father's men cut her throat.

Commentary

The strength of the minor characters in *Agamemnon* distinguishes this play from a number of Aeschylus' other works. The Watchman, whose speech opens the play, is particularly noteworthy. His complaints about his tiresome duty and his worries over the state of the city--together with his obvious, sincere joy at the news of his king's victory--make him a realistic, multifaceted, human character. His combination of anticipation and foreboding, meanwhile, establishes the mood of the play; the King's return is an occasion for celebration, and yet a sense of fear looms over Argos, a premonition of terrible events waiting to happen.

The events in *Agamemnon* are only a small part of a much larger story, as the Chorus makes clear in its lengthy speech. Two women who do not appear in the play have a profound effect upon the events in Argos: Helen, Menelaus' wife, and Iphigenia. Helen's eloping with Paris catalyzes the entire Trojan conflict and its aftermath; throughout the play, the Chorus comments on how much suffering has occurred "for one woman's promiscuous sake" (62). Meanwhile, the sacrifice of Iphigenia is a cloud over the marriage of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon and ultimately leads to his murder.

The description of Iphigenia's murder undermines the audience's sympathy for Agamemnon. The killing offends our sense of proportion. While it is true that Artemis demanded her death

if the fleet was to sail to Troy, did Agamemnon really have to kill his daughter to win a war to recover a single woman? Aeschylus paints a pathetic portrait of Iphigenia's violated innocence: "her supplications and her cries of father / were nothing, nor the child's lamentation / to kings passioned for battle . . . Pouring then to the ground her saffron mantle / she struck the sacrificers with / the eyes' arrows of pity . . ." (228-30; 239-41) Thus, even before Clytemnestra speaks, Aeschylus provides a reason for her to hate her husband.

•