

Euripides V Study Guide

Euripides V by Euripides

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Plot Summary

Euripides V is a collection of three Greek tragedies by Euripides. *Electra* tells the story of Electra and her brother Orestes revenging their father's death by killing his murderers: their mother Clytemnestra and her new husband Aegisthus. *The Phoenician Women* tells the story of Oedipus's sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, who battle over control of Thebes, killing each other. *The Bacchae* details Dionysus's revenge on the city of Thebes for refusing to worship him as a god.

In *Electra*, after Agamemnon, Electra and Orestes' father, returned victorious from Troy, his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus murdered him. Now, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus rule the land. Electra has been given to a kindly, but poor, farmer as a wife, and Orestes is exiled. Orestes returns, and with the help of Agamemnon's old servant, finds Aegisthus alone with a few servants, ready to make a sacrifice of a bull. Orestes, while butchering the animal, takes the knife and plunges it into Aegisthus.

Meanwhile, Electra sends word to her mother that she's ill after bearing a son, and Clytemnestra comes to Electra's house. Electra condemns Clytemnestra for her behavior and lures her into the house, where Orestes is waiting to kill her. After the murders, Electra is exiled to live in a foreign land with a new husband, while Orestes must stand trial for his actions in Athens, where he will be narrowly acquitted.

In *The Phoenician Women*, Oedipus's family is cursed because he unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, Jocasta. Oedipus has gouged his eyes out and is kept locked in the castle. Because of Oedipus's sins, his sons have been cursed to kill each other. To avoid conflict, they agree to each rule the kingdom of Thebes every other year and live in exile the other years. However, Eteocles will not give up the kingdom at the end of his first year of rule. Polyneices comes with an army to take the kingdom back by force. After Polyneices' army is routed, the brothers decide to settle the dispute in a one-on-one battle, and they kill each other, fulfilling the curse.

In *The Bacchae*, the god Dionysus comes to his home city of Thebes in disguise as a man to revenge himself on the people for refusing to worship him. He drives the women of the city insane and sends them out on the mountainside. The ruler of Thebes, Pentheus, tries to arrest Dionysus and imprison him, so Dionysus calls down earthquakes and lightning to destroy the palace. Pentheus still does not believe in Dionysus.

Dionysus takes over Pentheus's mind and makes him dress in women's clothing, humiliating him. Then, Dionysus leads Pentheus out to the mountainside to see the women. Believing they are hunting a mountain lion, the women, led by Pentheus's mother Agave, tear Pentheus limb from limb. She is horrified when she comes to her senses and realizes that she's killed her son. Dionysus sends Agave and her sisters into exile and turns the founder of Thebes into a serpent, completing his revenge on the city for disbelieving in him.



Electra, pages 9-23

Electra, pages 9-23 Summary

The scene is a farm cottage. The farmer tells of King Agamemnon, who was victorious against Troy. When he returned to Argos, his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, killed him. Now Aegisthus and Clytemnestra rule. Aegisthus wanted to kill Agamemnon's son Orestes, but Agamemnon's servant saved the boy. Aegisthus feared Agamemnon's daughter Electra would marry a noble man and bear a son, who would revenge Agamemnon, so he wanted to kill her. Clytemnestra would not let him kill her daughter, so Aegisthus put a price on Orestes' head and married Electra to the poor farmer. Their marriage has not been consummated.

Electra enters, carrying a water jar on her head. The farmer chastises her for performing servile tasks, telling her that there's no need for her to degrade herself. Electra thanks the farmer for all his kindness; she wishes to work and keep house for the kind man. The farmer and Electra exit, and Orestes and his friend Pylades enter. Orestes compliments Pylades on being such a good friend and recounts again how Aegisthus wronged him and killed his father. Orestes has returned in secret to Argos to get revenge by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. He is hiding out in the country so he won't be recognized, and so he can find his sister. Orestes and Pylades see what seems to be a servant girl coming and hide. Electra sings about her grief and her unhappy life, recounting the death of her father. A chorus of Argive peasant women enters. They address Electra and tell her about an upcoming feast day for the goddess Hera. Electra refuses to take part because of her sorrow and her poverty. Electra disdains the gods for not helping her father, her outcast brother or herself, confined to poverty, while her mother thrives.

Electra notices the hiding strangers. She does not recognize her brother, but tells the women to flee. Orestes tells Electra not to fear him but to listen. She is too weak to escape him. Orestes (pretending to be just a messenger) says that her brother is alive and living in exile as a wanderer. Electra tells Orestes about her situation and grieves for her brother's absence. Orestes says the farmer must be repaid for his kindness, and Electra agrees, saying that he will be repaid if Orestes returns home. Electra explains the Aegisthus arranged the marriage, hoping Electra's sons would not be powerful enough to seek revenge.

Orestes asks what he should do if he returns, and Electra says the time is right for his return. She makes it clear that Orestes should kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and that she's willing to help. Electra would not recognize her brother if she saw him since she was so young when they parted, but their father's old servant would recognize him. Orestes asks whether Agamemnon was properly buried, and Electra answers that he was thrown on the dirt. Orestes is devastated at this news and asks to know everything that has happened, so he can tell Orestes. Electra tells again how she is kept in poverty and lives in a coarse hut. She must make her own clothes from wool, carry water and



miss all the holy day festivities. Meanwhile, Electra's mother lives in luxury as the ruler of the land, and the Trojan girls that Agamemnon brought back with him are Clytemnestra's servants. The palace is still stained with Agamemnon's blood, and no one honors his tomb. Aegisthus mocks both Agamemnon and Orestes. Electra begs the stranger to tell Orestes to come home to seek revenge.

Electra, pages 9-23 Analysis

Euripides' plays, according to the theater of ancient Greece, are not divided into acts or official scenes. Much of the action takes place off screen and is narrated by the characters. The setting remains the same and the characters enter and leave to create new, informal scenes. The chorus represents the feelings of the populace, who watch and comment on the actions of the high-profile main characters. All of the main characters are from the highest ranks of society, and even the honorable farmer, who plays an important role as Electra's husband, is only known as "farmer."

The opening pages of *Electra* set up the history of Agamemnon's death and the conflict of the story. Electra and Orestes have been wronged, and they seek revenge. The rightness or wrongness of this vengeance will be the central issue of the play. It is right for them to revenge the death of their father, but killing their mother is a serious and taboo act.

The crimes of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus go beyond plotting and carrying out the killing of Agamemnon, a hero. Aegisthus tried to kill Orestes by forcing him into exile as a young boy and putting a price on his head; Aegisthus condemned Electra to live in poverty. Their mother is complicit in these crimes, and, perhaps worse, she is an unfaithful woman, perhaps the most damnable of crimes next to murder in the Greek era of the time of this play.

Aegisthus and Clytemnestra's crime in killing Agamemnon lead to a watershed of crimes. They have committed murder, and they fear revenge. Thus, murder becomes a cycle. The killer must either kill their victim's supporters and family or be eventually killed themselves. This, then, makes the killer a new victim and the revenge taker a murderer, starting a new cycle of death. This cycle of revenge is a common theme of Greek tragedy.

Orestes disguises himself as a stranger to find out the situation and Electra's feelings before he reveals himself. Electra's comment that Agamemnon's old servant would recognize Orestes foreshadows the revelation of Orestes' identity. The fact that even Electra cannot recognize her brother also foreshadows the future, when Orestes passes unnoticed among his enemies later in the play.



Electra, pages 23-42

Electra, pages 23-42 Summary

The farmer enters, asking who the strangers are. He says that it's improper for Electra to speak with strange men, and Electra chides him for mistrusting her. She tells her husband that the two men are messengers from Orestes, that he is alive, and that the messengers have come to find out about Electra's plight. The farmer invites the strangers to their home. Orestes comments on the farmer's goodness and says that good character cannot be judged by riches, poverty or courage. Orestes accepts the farmer's invitation and goes inside. The chorus is happy, thinking Electra's luck has begun to change. Electra, though, chides her husband for inviting strangers into their impoverished household. She tells the farmer to find her father's old servant and ask him to bring food for the guests.

Agamemnon's servant enters and asks for Electra. She comes out of the cottage, and the man gives her a lamb, flowers, cheese and wine for the guests. Orestes and Pylades come out, and the old man greets them. Orestes asks who the old man is, and Electra explains that he's her father's trusted servant, who saved Orestes from death. The old man begins staring at Orestes strangely, and Orestes asks whether the man recognizes him. The old man is walking around him, examining Orestes and finally tells Electra to pray and then look at the "stranger." It is her brother. There is a scar above his eye that identifies him. Electra is at first reluctant, but finally, she is convinced and welcomes her long-lost brother.

Orestes cuts short the joyous reunion and asks the old man whether he has any friends left in Argos, and how he can kill Aegisthus. The man says that his friends are gone. He must kill Aegisthus but not within the city. He saw Aegisthus in a nearby meadow preparing to offer a slaughtered bull to the goddess Nymphs. He only had some servants with him. The old man says that the servants will not recognize Orestes and that if Aegisthus is killed, they will turn their allegiance to the victor. The old man recommends that Orestes walk past the site so that Aegisthus will invite him to join in the feast. Then, once Orestes is close, he can choose his moment to kill Aegisthus and take his revenge.

Orestes wonders how to take his revenge on his mother, and Electra has a plan. She enlists the old man's help, asking him to take a message to her mother that she is ill in bed after birthing a son. Her mother will come to see her, and, once Clytemnestra is lured to the house, they will kill her. The old man agrees, and also agrees to escort Orestes to Aegisthus's location. Electra urges Orestes to kill Aegisthus and says that she will kill herself if Orestes dies. Orestes, the old man and Pylades leave, and Electra goes into the house. The chorus sings the story of a golden-haired lamb that Pan stole and brought to Argos, where Atreus sacrificed it to the gods. His brother, Thyestes, seduced Atreus's wife and stole the lamb, showing his booty to all. Zeus, in response, stops rain from falling on African Ammon.



Electra, pages 23-42 Analysis

Throughout the first part of the play, the audience knows that Orestes is Electra's brother, but none of the other characters know. This creates dramatic irony that is fulfilled when the old man recognizes Orestes. The moment is foreshadowed by Electra's comments that the old man might be able to recognize her brother and also by the old man's suspicions that Orestes has returned and visited his father's tomb.

One of the issues addressed in this play is wealth and poverty. The farmer is a poor man, but he is honest. Orestes comments that neither wealth nor poverty is a good way to judge character, and the farmer comments that while gold is good to have, all that's really needed is a full table. However, Electra is shamed by living in poverty while her mother lives in wealth, and this situation embitters her. Whenever she tells her story, she comments on living in rags and working like a servant.

In this section, the plans are put into place to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The old man has an idea how Orestes can corner Aegisthus, and Electra comes up with the plan to lure her mother to her death. Electra's desire to kill her mother is strong, and she is the principal mover in Clytemnestra's death. In this way, Electra is taking on a role similar to her mother, as the instigator behind the scenes in a murder.

Electra is adamant that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus must die. She pumps up her brother and her father's former servant to their tasks before they go on their way. Although Orestes is set on revenge, Electra is an important motivator, impressing on everyone the wrongdoing by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and the necessity for revenge. Her promise that she will kill herself if Orestes is unsuccessful puts more pressure on Orestes to kill Aegisthus. It also creates additional tension and suspense for the audience.

The tale that the chorus tells at the end of this section is the myth of an unfaithful wife. Thyestes' story is parallel to Aegisthus's story. Both have stolen wealth and riches through an affair with another man's wife. Zeus punishes the land with a drought for Thyestes' wrongdoing, and by extension, the story condemns Aegisthus for his crimes.



Electra, pages 42-66

Electra, pages 42-66 Summary

The chorus hears something happening in the distance and calls to Electra. She hears noise, but can't make out what's happening. A messenger comes and announces Orestes' success. Aegisthus is dead. At first, Electra is unwilling to believe the messenger, but then she realizes that she's talking to her brother's servant. Electra asks him to tell her the details of what happened:

Orestes and his party found Aegisthus walking in the meadow. Aegisthus greets the strangers and asks who they are. Orestes says they are Thessalians on a journey to make a sacrifice to Zeus. Aegisthus begs the travelers to join him for a feast and welcomes them, offering them water to wash. Orestes says they've washed at the river but accepts the invitation to join the feast. Aegisthus's guards start preparing for the feast. Aegisthus throws barley on the altar and begs the Nymphs to guard him and destroy his enemies. Meanwhile, Orestes quietly prays for Aegisthus's defeat and death. They kill the bull, and Aegisthus asks Orestes to show off the highly-reputed Thessalian skill at butchering bulls. Orestes takes the Dorian blade and skins the bull with great dexterity. Aegisthus takes the bull's innards to predict the future, and he sees bad portents in the bull's guts. Aegisthus says that he's afraid that he has an enemy. Orestes scorns the ability of an exile to harm the king and asks for a Phthian knife to butcher the bull. He cuts up the animal, and while Aegisthus is bending down over the meat, he thrusts the knife into him. The servants draw their weapons, but Orestes explains that he is not an enemy of the land but Orestes come to revenge his father. The servants join him, praising his victory.

Once the messenger's story is completed, the chorus begins to celebrate. Electra joins in. Orestes, Pylades, and the servants come with the body of Aegisthus. Electra praises him for his success and praises Pylades for his faithful friendship. Orestes offers Electra the corpse to do with what she pleases. Electra wishes to express her hatred to the corpse, and Orestes encourages her. Electra accuses the corpse of making her and her brother fatherless, killing the innocent and courageous Agamemnon and sleeping with his wife. She says that he imagined Clytemnestra would be faithful to him, but that he was a fool to trust an already faithless wife. He knew, she says, that their marriage was godless and filled with evil. He married above him, and so everyone knew him only as Clytemnestra's husband, not as a true king. She condemns all men who are second to their wives and men who confuse money with power. She says that Aegisthus was also unfaithful, attractive to women, but a worthless coward underneath his pretty face. No one can elude justice, and now justice has caught up with him.

The chorus agrees that justice has been served to the criminal, and Electra asks the women to hide the body, so Clytemnestra will not see it. Orestes tells her that he's having second thoughts about killing their mother. Electra urges him to kill her, reminding him that she killed their father. Electra reminds him that oracles told him to kill



her in revenge, but Orestes fears being tried for matricide. Electra tells him not to be a coward and says that they must repay their mother in kind. The chorus greets Clytemnestra as queen, and she descends from her carriage with the help of her slaves. Electra says that in her current state, she's equivalent to a slave. Clytemnestra defends her actions, saying that Agamemnon killed her daughter, Iphigenia, in sacrifice for the success of the Trojan war. Then, when Agamemnon returned, he brought another girl to share their bed. Men are never blamed for infidelity like women are, she says. She only revenged Iphigenia's death, as was just.

The chorus objects to Clytemnestra's justice, saying that a wife must be obedient. Electra says that Clytemnestra is beautiful but empty. When Agamemnon left, Clytemnestra primped and beautified herself, a sure sign of her unfaithfulness. Clytemnestra was joyous at every victory for Troy and sad at victories for Agamemnon, since she didn't want her husband to return. She could have been virtuous but chose evil. Then, Electra accuses Clytemnestra of compounding her evil by ostracizing her son and condemning her daughter to a life of poverty. She took her husband's wealth and power, when she could have left with her lover and given her children the kingdom. Electra promises to kill her mother in revenge.

Clytemnestra admits that she is unhappy with her own behavior. Electra tells her to bring Orestes back from exile, but Clytemnestra is afraid he will kill her. Electra says she needs someone to do the appropriate sacrifice required after birth and that she has no midwife to help her. Clytemnestra agrees to help and goes inside the house at Electra's invitation. Off stage, Clytemnestra shouts out for mercy and then in pain. Orestes and Electra come out covered in blood. The corpses of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are visible. The brother and sister bemoan their awful deed, although they have their revenge. The chorus calls the matricide impious and reminds Electra that she goaded her brother to the deed when he was unwilling.

The Dioscuri, Castor and Polydeuces, twin sons of Zeus and Leda and brothers to Clytemnestra, appear in the heavens. Castor speaks for both of them, saying that the matricide is not just. The oracles who instructed Orestes were liars. They instruct Orestes to give Electra to Pylades as a bride and to leave Argos. He will be tried for matricide in Athens, they say. The votes will be evenly split between guilty and innocent, and so he will be acquitted. Then, he will found a city. The men of Argos will bury Aegisthus, and Menelaus and Helen will bury Clytemnestra. The Helen of Troy was merely an illusion, and chaste Helen is back with her husband Menelaus. Orestes and Electra mourn their parting, but the Dioscuri say Electra's punishment is mild, merely exile from her homeland with a good husband and home. They tell Orestes to take courage. The brother and sister make tearful farewells to each other and their home.

Electra, pages 42-66 Analysis

The beginning of this section shows Electra waiting in anticipation to hear of Orestes' success or failure. Her distress and her desire to follow through on suicide creates drama and tension for the audience, although the audience likely knows, or at least



suspects, that Orestes will be successful. Electra's unwillingness to believe the messenger shows how extreme her anxiety is. She cannot believe her ears, that such long-anticipated vengeance has been achieved.

Much of the action takes place off stage, and the death of Aegisthus is told by the messenger instead of witnessed by the audience. Because the audience already knows that Orestes is successful, the drama comes from learning how Aegisthus is killed, not whether he is killed.

Because the audience knows much that Aegisthus does not know—who Orestes is and that Orestes will soon kill him—the scene is filled with dramatic irony. The bull guts foretelling disaster for Aegisthus increase the dramatic irony, as does Orestes' knife play. It is likely that Orestes claims to be a Thessalian because he knows of their reputation for butchering bulls and anticipates that Aegisthus will provide him with a butchering knife.

The death of Aegisthus, a murderer of Orestes and Electra's father, is met with complete enthusiasm, but the death of Clytemnestra is a different story. Orestes immediately begins having second thoughts about committing matricide after killing Aegisthus. Which takes precedence, revenge for a wrongful death or respect for a mother? Which is more important in the hierarchy of values?

The end of the tale reveals the author's (and likely the society's) point of view. Revenge for a murder, an eye for an eye, is acceptable to all, but when it involves matricide, a line is drawn. Electra is corrupt for pushing her brother to kill their mother, and she is exiled. Orestes also must flee to exile, to be tried in another country. However, their punishment is softened by the circumstances of Clytemnestra's guilt.

Clytemnestra, however, pleads for forgiveness or understanding from her daughter. Her husband sacrificed her daughter Iphigenia for success against Troy and brought a girl to share their bed. As a woman, she is judged differently from men, and this is verified by the chorus and Electra, who echo that a woman should obey her husband.

Throughout the story, Electra has argued for women's subservience to their husbands, but Electra has never been mistreated by a man. Like her mother, she is strong willed and an instigator of actions behind the scenes. Her mother plots and prods her lover into killing her husband. Electra plots and prods her brother into killing their mother. The mother and daughter's stories are parallel.

The appearance of the Dioscuri at the end of the play provides the final word on the action. These sons of Zeus represent the gods' opinions and foretell the future. Electra and Orestes are guilty, although they were acting for the cause of justice. Ultimately, matricide must be punished, although circumstances command some mercy.



The Phoenician Women, pages 73-98

The Phoenician Women, pages 73-98 Summary

The scene is in front of the palace at Thebes. Jocasta was wife of Laius, the king of Thebes. Oracles told Laius not to father a child, or that child would kill him, but he and Jocasta had a baby boy, who they abandoned at birth but who did not die. The child, Oedipus, met Laius by accident on the road. Neither knew the other, and Oedipus killed Laius. Meanwhile, the Sphinx was tormenting Thebes. Oedipus solved the Sphinx's riddle and rid the land of the monster. As reward, Oedipus was made king of Thebes and married Jocasta, not realizing she was his mother.

Oedipus and Jocasta had four children: Ismene, Antigone, Polyneices, and Eteocles. When Oedipus learned the truth about his background, he gouged out his own eyes. His sons locked him in the palace in shame, where he cursed his sons for his imprisonment, saying that they would kill each other. Polyneices and Eteocles, fearing their father's curse, decided to each rule the kingdom on alternate years. Eteocles took the first year, but would not give up the throne when it came Polyneices's turn. Polyneices, who has been living in Argos and married a woman there, comes with an army to take back the kingdom. Jocasta has called a truce to try to make peace between her sons.

Antigone and the pedagogue, a teacher, enter. Antigone wants to see the Argive army. Antigone is afraid the city is unsafe, but Pedagogue reassures her. The pedagogue points out various soldiers. Antigone hopes that the gods defeat the attackers. The pedagogue also hopes so but says that, unfortunately, Thebes is in the wrong. Antigone fears that the Theban girls will become slaves in Mycenae if Thebes is defeated. A chorus of Phoenician women enters, expressing fear of the encroaching army.

Polyneices enters. He's afraid that he's walking into a trap, but he trusts his mother. He asks the chorus where they are from, and they tell him they're Phoenician, captives in Thebes, waiting to be sent to Loxias' oracle. Polyneices explains who he is, and the chorus falls on its knees in supplication to him. Jocasta comes and joyfully welcomes her son, bemoaning his exile and his wedding to a stranger. Polyneices says that he still loves his home country, but he feared his brother might kill him when he entered Thebes. He only came because of his mother, and now he sees her in mourning. Jocasta says it is all the gods' punishment for her and Oedipus' sins and asks him about his exile. Polyneices says, as a stranger in a strange land, he cannot speak his thoughts or correct the folly of others. All exiles have are hopes. Before his marriage, he sometimes did not have enough food, and his friends deserted him in his poverty.

Polyneices explains that Adrastus, his father-in-law, was told by Apollo to marry his daughters to a boar and a lion. One night, Polyneices and another exile, Tydeus, came to Adrastus's house and fought over a pallet like animals. Adrastus saw them and realized the meaning of the prophecy. Each married one of his daughters. Adrastus



promised both exiles to win back their homelands, and they raised an army to conquer Thebes.

Eteocles enters. He's reluctant to negotiate with his brother, but Jocasta begs him to listen. Polyneices makes his case that he willingly left the land after making a fair deal with his brother so that they would not fight and fulfill their father's curse. He's come for justice, and he will attack with his army if he must. The chorus agrees that Polyneices is in the right, but Eteocles says that no sane man gives up the power of the throne. He offers to let Polyneices live in Thebes, but not as its king. Jocasta begs Eteocles not to be so ambitious and to embrace equality. She asks him to share his rule with his brother, for the sake of justice. Otherwise, he will only find trouble in his lust for power. All his wealth really belongs to the gods, and through his lust for tyranny, Eteocles is bringing ruin on the city. Then, Jocasta chides Polyneices for bringing an army on his home city to wreak destruction. Whichever side loses, Polyneices will suffer, since he is tied to both Argos and Thebes.

Eteocles will not change his mind, and the brothers threaten each other. Polyneices also will not budge. Eteocles orders Polyneices to leave, accusing him of treason. Polyneices accuses his brother of injustice. Eteocles denies Polyneices a visit with Oedipus or Ismene and Antigone. Polyneices and Eteocles promise to kill each other, and Polyneices departs, promising war. The chorus recalls the origin of Thebes and calls upon the gods to defend the land.

The Phoenician Women, pages 73-98 Analysis

The Phoenician Women recounts the whole history of the kingdom of Thebes; it begins with the story of Thebes' most famous citizen, Oedipus. Oedipus's story is one of fate. His very birth is against the gods, and he is doomed to a horrific punishment—killing his father and marrying his mother. This results in another fated occurrence—he curses his sons to kill each other. The story of The Phoenician Women is the story of the fulfillment of this curse and prophecy. The history of Oedipus's life sets up a similar tale of continued punishment in Oedipus' family line.

The author uses Antigone and the pedagogue to describe what the audience cannot see, the vast army of Argos waiting to attack the city. The details of the soldiers, their identities and their dress that the pedagogue relates to Antigone build a picture of the horrific attacking army for the audience. Later, when the messenger relates the battle that ensues, each of the soldiers that the pedagogue describes will be revisited, and the audience will learn of the battles at each of Thebes' seven gates.

The chorus of Phoenician women are horrified at the attacking army. They express all the fears of the people of Thebes, and especially the women who face potential slavery in Argos if Thebes falls. The chorus also refers to the history of Thebes throughout the play, and this history contains the seeds of the tragedy that has befallen the land. The founder of Thebes, Cadmus, was a Phoenician, and so the Phoenician women are tied to the history of Thebes.



The central conflict of the story is between Polyneices, who has been driven to an unjust act because of the injustices wreaked on him by his brother, and his brother Eteocles, who is driven by ambition. Jocasta stands between the two brothers as the voice of reason, calling on each to give up his destructive ways. The chorus clearly supports Polyneices, recognizing the justice of his claim. The pedagogue also recognizes that Polyneices is in the right, and Eteocles is cast as the true villain, who robbed Polyneices of his rightful place in Thebes and brought war on the city.

Although Eteocles and Polyneices know that their father's curse has doomed them to mutual destruction, neither can give up his claim. Eteocles craves power above all else and will not be seen as a coward, giving in to a foreign army. Polyneices wants his rightful claim to the throne of Thebes, and he is bitter at his years of exile, when he went without food or friends or comfort. Polyneices seeks revenge against his brother as much as he seeks his rightful place in his homeland.



The Phoenician Women, pages 98-113

The Phoenician Women, pages 98-113 Summary

Eteocles tells Creon, Jocasta's brother, that there can be no peace with Polyneices, and Creon says that Polyneices is set on conquest. Thebes has captured a prisoner from Argive, and the army will soon surround the city. Eteocles boasts that he can defeat the attackers. Eteocles considers ambushing the Argive army at night, but Creon objects that it's dangerous. Creon says that seven captains will lead assaults on the seven gates of Thebes. Creon recommends choosing seven courageous and intelligent captains, each with a lieutenant and the best troops, to defend the gates. Eteocles agrees, hoping that he will fight and kill Polyneices. If he's killed, Eteocles asks Creon to see to Antigone's planned wedding to Creon's son Haemon, and to care for Jocasta. He also asks Creon to talk to the prophet Teiresias to find out what they must do to win. Finally, he decrees that Polyneices can never be buried in Thebes, and anyone who tries to bury him must be killed.

Eteocles leaves, and the chorus bemoans Ares, the god of war and his love for blood and death. The chorus laments Oedipus' life and the Sphinx that caused Oedipus to rule Thebes. The blind prophet Teiresias enters, led by his daughter and Menoeceus, Creon's son. Creon asks Teiresias what Thebes can do to ensure victory over the attacking Argive army. At first, Teiresias will not say. Then, he explains that Thebes has been unwell ever since Laius fathered Oedipus. He predicts that the cursed brothers will kill each other and that many will die. Thebes is headed for destruction. No one of Oedipus's family should live in Thebes, but this is impossible. There is one other way to save the city, but Teiresias hesitates to name it and tries to leave.

Creon stops Teiresias from leaving and begs him to explain what action could save Thebes. Teiresias warns Creon that he'll be sorry he asked, but Creon wants to know anyway. Teiresias asks Menoeceus to leave, but Creon says that Menoeceus should stay. Teiresias explains that Creon must kill Menoeceus to save Thebes. Creon, horrified, asks Teiresias why Menoeceus must die for the city, and Teiresias explains that Ares seeks revenge against Cadmus, founder of Thebes, for killing the dragon that Ares had fathered. Ares requires a sacrifice of one of the Sown Men, who were created by Cadmus from the teeth of the dragon. Creon and his sons are the only surviving descendants, and Menoeceus is the only one who is not wedded or betrothed.

Creon refuses to kill his own son, even though Creon would die for his country. Creon tells Menoeceus to flee Thebes before anyone learns of the prophecy. Creon says the gods will be his guide. Menoeceus thanks his father and says that he will visit Jocasta before he leaves. Creon leaves, and Menoeceus reveals that he has lied to his father. Menoeceus cannot flee in cowardice and plans to sacrifice himself. He leaves, heading for the site where the dragon once lived. The chorus sings of the dragon, which killed Cadmus's companions and of the bloody god Ares, who has wrought so much suffering. They praise Menoeceus for his courage.



The Phoenician Women, pages 98-113 Analysis

When Eteocles and Creon consult about the upcoming battle, Creon is clearly the superior strategist. Eteocles' ideas are risky, while Creon anticipates that the place of strength is to defend the city's seven entrances from within its walls. Since the Argives have a larger force, a fight outside the city will be in the Argives' favor.

Eteocles gives Creon the rule of the city if he should die in battle. His bitterness against his brother extends even beyond death, since Eteocles arranges that Polyneices should not be properly buried in Thebes, thus rendering Polyneices the ultimate exile and a sign of great disrespect. This is Eteocles' last act in the play, and it will be the last echo of tragedy that haunts Oedipus' bloodline and the city of Thebes. By refusing his brother's burial, Eteocles is unwittingly dooming his sister, Antigone, who will deny this order.

Eteocles also asks Creon to consult Teiresias, the prophet. Since all life in Greek theater is governed by the gods, Teiresias can give the Thebians the answers to their problems. When Teiresias gives Creon the solution, though, Creon does not want to hear it. Creon is willing to let his city be destroyed instead of yielding to the will of the gods and killing his son. Menoecus, though, becomes the hero of the story, sacrificing himself willingly for the city. He serves as an example of how a citizen should act and as a literary foil to Eteocles and Polyneices. Menoecus puts the good of his city before his own good, even to the point of giving his life, in contrast to Eteocles and Polyneices, who bring war to further their own ends.

The fate of Thebes is directly tied to its beginnings, which enraged Ares. Teiresias seems to make clear what has been hinted at by references from the chorus and Jocasta—that Cadmus's founding of Thebes made an enemy of Ares, resulting in all the tragedy of the city. Cadmus killed Ares' offspring, and Ares requires revenge. Otherwise, all Thebes will suffer. By selfless sacrifice, Menoecus will end the cycle of tragedy.



The Phoenician Women, pages 114-140

The Phoenician Women, pages 114-140 Summary

An armed messenger calls for Jocasta. Eteocles and Polyneices are still alive, and the city gates have held. The messenger tells the story of the battle so far: Creon's son sacrifices himself to Ares. Eteocles sends seven contingents of men to the gates, and the Argive army attacks. The leaders attack the gates. The Thebians fight off the attackers. Periclymenus drops stones from the wall, cracking Parthenopaeus's skull. At the next gate, Tydeus is attacking with spears, but the Thebians fight him off. Eteocles then sees Capaneus trying to climb the next gate on a ladder, and he gets nearly to the top before Zeus strikes him down with lightning. Adrastus retreats, seeing that the gods are against him, and the Thebians push forward, bringing ruin on the attacking forces.

Jocasta is happy to hear of the victory, but she notes that the messenger is unwilling to continue the story. She makes the messenger speak, and he tells her that Eteocles has decreed that he and Polyneices should fight a battle to the death to decide who will rule Thebes. The two are now preparing for battle. Jocasta calls Antigone. The two women go off to stop the brothers from killing each other. The chorus is anxious about the upcoming battle and sorry for the women.

Creon enters, crying over his son's death. He is looking for Jocasta, but he finds that she and Antigone have gone to stop Eteocles and Polyneices from battling. A messenger enters; Eteocles, Polyneices and Jocasta are all dead. Polyneices prays to Hera for victory, and Eteocles prays to Pallas. The fight begins, and the two men attack each other with spears, but their shields protect them. Eteocles slips on a stone, and his leg is exposed. Polyneices attacks him, hitting his leg. In the attack, Polyneices' arm is exposed, and Eteocles hits his brother's shoulder, breaking his spear. Eteocles throws a rock, breaking Polyneices' spear, too. The two brothers pull their swords and fight. Eteocles breaks away from his brother and thrusts his sword in Polyneices' stomach. Polyneices, still alive, deals a fatal blow to his brother. Oedipus' curse is fulfilled. Jocasta and Antigone approach, and Jocasta sees that she's too late to save her sons. Polyneices, with his last breath, begs to be buried in Thebes. Jocasta takes one of the brothers' swords and kills herself. The armies begin to argue about who is the victor, and there is a final battle. The Argive army is chased off.

Antigone returns in grief with the bodies. Oedipus comes out of the castle and hears of the deaths of his wife and sons. Creon says that they must put aside their mourning and begin burying the dead. With Eteocles dead, Creon takes on leadership of Thebes. He tells Oedipus that he must leave the land, for fear of further vengeance from the gods. Oedipus says that exile will mean his death, since he is a blind, old man, but Creon cannot allow him to stay. Creon also decrees that Polyneices cannot be buried in Thebes, under penalty of death. He tells Antigone that she will marry Haemon the next day. Antigone rebels against Creon. She insists that she will bury her brother in defiance of the law. Creon tells her that her decision will mean death, but Antigone doesn't care.



Creon orders Antigone taken into the house. She pleads to wash her brother's body or bandage his wounds, but Creon denies those requests, too. Antigone stays with her brother's corpse, refusing to marry Creon's son. She says that if he forces her into marriage, she will kill her betrothed. Antigone finally says that she will go into exile with her father. Oedipus objects to Antigone joining him in his fate, but she insists. He says goodbye to his dead wife and children. Oedipus says that he will head for Colonus, and Antigone takes his hand to lead him. Bemoaning their fates, they leave the land forever.

The Phoenician Women, pages 114-140 Analysis

Since battle and action scenes were not enacted on the stage in the Greek theater, the messenger narrates the events for the audience and for Jocasta. The battle is retold in detail, bringing back all the characters that Antigone and the pedagogue talk about in the beginning of the play. Although the modern reader is probably not familiar with the Argive soldiers, the seven men who attacked Thebes under Polyneices would have been well known to many Greek viewers, and detailing the attacks adds action and excitement to the play, if even off stage.

Because of Creon's son's death, the gods are with the Thebians, and at every gate the Thebians fight back the attacking Argives. The turning point of the battle is when Capaneus tries to climb over the wall, resisting all attackers. He is not driven back by the defenders; instead, he is defeated by the god Zeus. Though the Argives have more men, they lose morale and retreat, seeing that the gods are against them. The will of man is meaningless in the face of the will of gods. Much as Oedipus and his sons cannot escape their fates, the Argives cannot escape their fated defeat.

The battle between Polyneices and Eteocles fulfills the two brothers' fated demise. As Jocasta points out earlier in the play, each brother is wrong to some extent. Eteocles is overcome with the desire for power and steals the throne that is rightfully shared with his brother. Polyneices, however, should not bring an army against his homeland, even though he has been wronged by his brother. Both are in the wrong, and both are punished by death in battle with each other.

Jocasta kills herself, and her death, too, is a kind of justice. Jocasta has sinned against the gods by marrying her son and bearing his children. Because her children are abominations, they are destroyed, and Jocasta is destroyed with them. She could not make them listen to reason, and she suffers for their obstinacy.

The end of the play recounts Antigone's fate. She is engaged to marry Creon's son, but after the destruction of her family, Antigone cannot go forward with her wedding. She believes that Creon, in upholding Eteocles' ruling against Polyneices, is doing evil. She takes exile with her father instead of a marriage to Creon's son. Antigone believes that Creon is unjust, and like her brother Polyneices, she chooses to sacrifice herself instead of submitting to injustice.



The Bacchae, pages 155-179

The Bacchae, pages 155-179 Summary

The setting is the palace at Thebes. The smoking tomb of Dionysus's mother, Semele, is visible. Dionysus enters, disguised as a man. Dionysus has traveled throughout Asia gathering followers and returns to Thebes to punish Semele's sisters, who have been gossiping that Dionysus is not truly the son of Zeus. Dionysus has turned all the women in Thebes mad in revenge for the lies.

Thebes is now ruled by Cadmus' grandson Pentheus, who does not honor Dionysus as a god. Dionysus means to make Thebes worship him. Dionysus leaves and the chorus of Asian Bacchae, followers of Dionysus, enters. They sing of serving their god, Dionysus. They sing about Semele's death and Dionysus's birth. Zeus saved his son, as Semele died in childbirth from lightning, and then Zeus hid Dionysus from Hera. They praise Thebes and Dionysus.

The blind prophet Teiresias enters, dressed as a Bacchae. He calls for Cadmus, who is also dressed as a worshiper of Dionysus. The two have made a pact to dress as Bacchae and honor Dionysus. Cadmus and Teiresias are the only Thebians to honor Dionysus and call the other men blind. Young Pentheus enters and says he's heard the women have gone into the mountains, dancing in honor of Dionysus, drinking wine and having sex. Pentheus has caught some of the women and imprisoned them. He is hunting the others, including his mother, Agave. Pentheus has heard of a stranger from Lydia, a trickster claiming that Dionysus is a god; Pentheus threatens to cut off the trickster's head. Pentheus believes Dionysus died in infancy from the same lightning that killed Semele. Pentheus sees Cadmus and Teiresias and chides them for dressing like bacchantes. He orders them to take off their costume, saying Teiresias wants to make money from being a prophet for yet another god. Only Teiresias's age prevents him from throwing the blind prophet in jail. Coryphaeus, the leader of the Bacchae, scolds Pentheus for his behavior in dishonoring Cadmus, and Teiresias calls Pentheus a fool.

Teiresias says that one day Dionysus may be very powerful and that mankind's two highest blessings are the earth, which gives grain, and wine, given by Dionysus. He retells the story of Zeus saving Dionysus and hiding him from Hera. Teiresias continues saying that worshipers of Dionysus have the gift of prophecy, and that Dionysus has the power to strike armies full of fear. He advises Pentheus to stop his prideful behavior and honor Dionysus. Cadmus agrees with Teiresias. Cadmus begs Pentheus not to invite the gods' wrath. Pentheus refuses to worship Dionysus and orders his attendants to destroy the prophet's home and arrest the stranger. He plans to put the man to death by stoning. The attendants leave, and Teiresias calls Pentheus a fool again. He leaves with Cadmus to pray for Pentheus, and Pentheus goes to the palace. The chorus sings in admonition of Pentheus, predicting disaster, and praises Dionysus.



Pentheus returns, and the attendants come in with Dionysus. They report that the women captured earlier have escaped back to the mountains. Their chains broke magically, and the women ran off. Pentheus orders the men to untie Dionysus, and Pentheus looks him over and asks who he is. Dionysus says he comes from Lydia and worships Dionysus, son of Zeus. He met Dionysus in person, he says, but refuses to tell Pentheus the details of his religion, calling Pentheus a non-believer. Pentheus asks what form Dionysus took, and Dionysus evades answering, calling Pentheus a fool. He says the word of Dionysus has spread throughout foreign lands and that most Dionysian rites are held at night. Pentheus calls it lechery, and Dionysus calls him a blasphemer. Finally Pentheus imprisons Dionysus, who says the god will set him free. Dionysus says the god with him, watching Pentheus' blasphemy. Pentheus orders the guards to chain Dionysus. Then, he orders the chorus to be made into slaves. Pentheus leaves, and Dionysus says that the god will seek his revenge. The guards lead him out. The chorus bemoans that Thebes now rejects the god and his worshipers and condemn Pentheus. They call to Zeus and Dionysus for salvation.

The Bacchae, pages 155-179 Analysis

The tomb of Semele is central to the setting of the play, and it still smokes from the lightning strike that killed Semele, Dionysus's mother. The lightning strike was Hera's revenge on Semele for sleeping with Zeus. The tomb serves as a reminder of Dionysus' origin, and also of the origin of Thebes' disbelief in the god. While Dionysus was saved at birth by Zeus, Semele's sisters have started the rumor that Semele made up a lie about sleeping with Zeus to cover up her illicit pregnancy.

The central character of *The Bacchae* is the god Dionysus, and, as a god, he has absolute power to punish Thebes for not believing in him and worshiping him. However, first he will test the people of Thebes to see their reactions to his miracles. Dionysus could appear to the people of Thebes as a god, exhibiting his power without question, but instead he chooses to disguise himself as a man. Since Dionysus is disguised as a man, Pentheus can still continue to deny the god's existence and insult the god.

The prophet Teiresias celebrates Dionysus. As a prophet, Teiresias represents the will of the gods, and, although he is often disbelieved, Teiresias is always accurate in his prophecies and advice. Teiresias calls on everyone to honor Dionysus, which is Pentheus's only hope of saving the city. Cadmus joins Teiresias, but apparently his supplication is too late, since in the end, he is also punished by Dionysus.

From Pentheus's first entrance, the ruler shows himself to be defiant and prideful. He makes snide comments about the god Dionysus, clearly doubting his existence, and he scorns the worship of Dionysus as immoral. Dionysus is the god of wine, but Pentheus accuses the followers of Dionysus of promiscuity, as well as dance and drinking. By casting the celebration of Dionysus as immoral, Pentheus scorns Dionysus as a false god. Pentheus extends his condemnation of Dionysus to a condemnation of Teiresias, accusing him of being a false prophet in search of money instead of truth. However, Pentheus is truly the false one, who values his own welfare and power above the truth.



When Pentheus speaks with Dionysus, he retains his arrogant attitude. Although the women that Pentheus has caught magically escape their chains and run off into the mountains, Pentheus refuses to see the signs that Dionysus is real. Although Dionysus, in disguise as a man, shows no fear of the king and argues cleverly, Pentheus persists in believing that Dionysus is a false god. Pentheus seems single-minded and blind to reality, as if he does not want to believe that his cousin, a peer, could have achieved more power than he has.



The Bacchae, pages 179-200

The Bacchae, pages 179-200 Summary

The land shakes with thunder and lightning, and the chorus is terrified. Dionysus calls to them from the palace, and they call back to him. He orders an earthquake on the land, and the palace begins to fall. Dionysus calls down lightning and sets the palace on fire. Coryphaeus welcomes Dionysus and Coryphaeus asks how he escaped. Instead of Dionysus, there was a bull in the stable that was to be Dionysus' prison. When the palace shook with Dionysus' earthquakes and was set fire by Dionysus' lightning, Pentheus rushed around shouting for water, but they could not stop the blaze. Pentheus, fearing Dionysus's escape, thought he killed him, but it was just a phantom created by the god. The palace is in ruins, and Dionysus is free. Pentheus enters, horrified at Dionysus's escape. He asks how Dionysus got out of the palace, and Dionysus answers that he told Pentheus the god would free him. Pentheus mocks the wine that Dionysus gave mankind, and says he will capture and punish the god.

A herdsman from Mount Cithaeron enters and tells Pentheus that the crazed women in the mountain are performing miracles. The herdsman is afraid of Pentheus, but Pentheus tells him to speak his mind and that he will not punish the messenger for speaking the truth. Around dawn, three groups of women led by Autonoë, Ino, and Agave, lie sleeping. Then, Agave hears the cows and jumps up, waking the other women. One woman strikes a rock with her stick, creating a spring of fresh water, and another strikes the ground to create a spring of wine. The women scratch the earth to bring up milk and create honey. The herders gather watching the women. A city man comes up and suggests finding Agave to bring her back to Pentheus. The herders agree and plan to ambush Agave. Then, the Bacchae begin calling to Dionysus and running in celebration. Agave runs past where the herdsman is hiding, and he tries to capture her. She calls the women and animals to attack the men, and the herders run off. The women tear apart all the cattle, and destroy all the nearby homes, stealing all the people's belongings and children.

The villagers pursue the women, but their spears cannot hurt the followers of Dionysus. The women's wands wound the men, and they retreat. The Bacchae return to their resting place. The messenger says that a great god must be with the women and that Dionysus must truly be a god. Coryphaeus calls Dionysus the greatest god, but Pentheus calls for his armies to attack the Bacchae. Dionysus warns Pentheus that he faces certain defeat and offers to lead the women back to Thebes. Pentheus says it is a trap and that Dionysus is conspiring with the women. Dionysus repeats that he serves god. Pentheus, ignoring him, goes to gather his forces, but Dionysus calls to him, asking if Pentheus wants to see the women. Pentheus admits that he does, and Dionysus offers to lead him there. He says that Pentheus must dress as a woman to avoid being killed by the celebrants.



Pentheus is reluctant and ashamed at the thought of wearing women's clothes, and Dionysus explains that he will give Pentheus a costume, like the Bacchae. Pentheus is afraid of being seen wearing women's clothes, and Dionysus agrees to lead him through deserted streets. Pentheus says he'll think about it and exits. Dionysus promises to make Pentheus crazy, make him a laughingstock, and kill him, and he follows Pentheus into the palace. The chorus sings that prideful men are punished by the gods.

Dionysus enters and calls to Pentheus, who comes out dressed as a woman. He is under the influence of the god. Pentheus is seeing double, and Dionysus appears as a bull to him. Dionysus says that Pentheus sees a god. Pentheus asks if he looks like one of the women, and Dionysus says that he does. One of Pentheus's curls comes loose, and Dionysus fixes it. They examine Pentheus's costume, and Dionysus instructs Pentheus to hold the wand in his right hand. Pentheus wonders if he could lift the whole mountain, and Dionysus says yes, that Pentheus now sees things clearly. They reject the plan of lifting the mountain as too destructive, and Pentheus fantasizes about seeing the reveling women. Dionysus says that Pentheus will suffer for all Thebes. He will lead Pentheus into the mountain, and his mother will bring him back in her arms. His mother will detect him as a spy, and the godless man will die. The chorus praises humility for mortals and calls to Dionysus.

The Bacchae, pages 179-200 Analysis

As a god, Dionysus can use the forces of nature to do his bidding. He sends down thunder, lightning and earthquakes to destroy Pentheus's palace. In retelling the events inside the palace to the chorus, Dionysus portrays Pentheus as idiotic, rushing around futilely trying to evade Dionysus' wrath. Typically, events that occur off stage are retold by a messenger, but Dionysus retells this scene. No human messenger would be able to relate the reality of what occurred, including the mock figure Dionysus creates of himself. As narrator, Dionysus also colors his tale, emphasizing Pentheus' ridiculousness.

While Dionysus' followers are impressed with the god's miracles, Pentheus is not. The stranger, Dionysus in disguise, has escaped from under Pentheus' nose, just as the women he captured miraculously broke free of their chains. His palace has been destroyed, but Pentheus does not offer any explanations for these supernatural events. Instead, he doggedly persists in believing Dionysus is a false god. Pentheus's pride will not let him accept that he is wrong. The herdsman's tale of the miracles wrought by the mad women on the mountainside adds more proof of Dionysus's existence. Still, Pentheus believes that it must be a trick.

The violent behavior of the women, as told by the herdsman, also foreshadows Dionysus' wrath and Pentheus' death. Although Dionysus is a god of wine and reveling, his wrath is violent, cruel and bloody. The herdsman's tale accentuates the bloodiness of the women's violence by contrasting their destruction of the herds of cattle and the villagers' homes with the earlier scene of beautiful women reveling in the countryside



and calling forth water, milk, honey and wine from the rocks and soil. The scene is voyeuristic, tantalizing the audience with sensuous imagery.

Dionysus finally decides that he's given Pentheus enough proof of his existence and that Pentheus must be punished as a non-believer. The last straw is Pentheus deciding to take up arms against the women on the mountainside, fighting a war against the god. Dionysus shows no mercy after this turning point. He lures Pentheus to doom by offering to show him the mad women. Pentheus is drawn by the offer, showing his lecherous desires to see the women. Although he accuses the god of encouraging lechery, Pentheus is the lecherous one. Still, he is wary.

Pentheus' refusal is not a setback to the god Dionysus, who can use his supernatural powers to shape events to his desires. Dionysus invades Pentheus' mind, taking his sanity like he's taken the women's sanity. This shows both his power and cruelty. Dionysus insults Pentheus as well as injuring him, dressing him up in women's clothing and causing him to act effeminately, gushing about how he looks. Although Dionysus is entirely responsible for the episode, Pentheus is the one who is shamed by it. Although this scene contains humor, it is bitter, black humor.

As Dionysus and Pentheus leave, Dionysus foretells Pentheus' death to the audience, creating expectations of the scenes that will follow. The chorus' song praises humility, the cure for Pentheus' sin of hubris. Before gods, human beings are nothing, as Dionysus shows by manipulating Pentheus and the women. Pride will only result in destruction.



The Bacchae, pages 200-220

The Bacchae, pages 200-220 Summary

A messenger enters from Cithaeron, moaning the collapse of the palace. Coryphaeus asks the messenger for his news, and the messenger says that Pentheus is dead. Coryphaeus praises Dionysus. The messenger criticizes her for rejoicing in the leader's death, and Coryphaeus counters that she is not Greek and follows her god. She asks how Pentheus died, and the messenger tells the story: The messenger, Pentheus, and Dionysus go up to the mountain, and the messenger sees the women singing and decorating their wands. Pentheus cannot see the women and wants to climb a fir tree to see better. Dionysus bends the tree down to the earth and places Pentheus on the top branch, and lifts the tree back up. The women see Pentheus in the tree, and Dionysus vanishes. The god's voice calls out to the women to take revenge on Pentheus, and the women throw stones and javelins at Pentheus from a rock opposite the tree. They cannot reach him, though, and they try to fell the fir tree using oak branches. This does not work, so the women circle the tree and tear it down with their hands.

Pentheus falls, and his mother attacks him. He takes off his wig so she'll recognize him, but she is crazed and does not listen. She pulls his arm off while Ino scratches his skin off. The rest of the women fall on him, tearing him to pieces. His body is scattered around the forest, and his mother impales his head on her wand and heads back to the city. Agave and the women enter, covered in blood with Pentheus' head. Agave presents the wand with Pentheus' head on it to the chorus, saying that it's the head of a mountain lion they hunted. Agave fell on the prey first, followed by Cadmus' daughters. The chorus praises Agave, and Agave says that Pentheus will praise her, too. She is proud of her deed. Agave displays the head to all of Thebes. She wonders where Cadmus and Pentheus are.

Cadmus enters with Pentheus' dismembered body, which he and Teiresias recovered from the mad women. Agave boasts of her hunting skill and shows Cadmus her trophy. Cadmus is overcome with grief but says that Dionysus' punishment is just. Agave wonders why Cadmus is so upset and hopes her son will be happier. Cadmus says that she will suffer when she realizes what she's done and hopes that she will always remain mad. Cadmus asks Agave to lift her eyes to the heavens, and she says it seems clearer. Cadmus asks whose head she holds, and she says it is a lion. He tells her to look at it, and she does. Suddenly, she sees the truth. Agave asks who killed him and why she carries the head, and Cadmus says that Agave and her sisters killed her son on the mountain.

Cadmus explains that Pentheus blasphemed the god, and that the women were mad. Agave recognizes the truth and says Dionysus has brought their ruin. Cadmus shows Agave her son's body, telling her that Pentheus blasphemed Dionysus and reaped punishment. Agave is filled with grief, feeling unworthy even to touch her murdered son. She grieves for each part of his dismembered corpse and pieces him together.



Coryphaeus calls on others to learn from the tragedy and worship Dionysus. Dionysus appears above and says that Thebes has been punished for blasphemy. He reveals the future, that the people of Thebes will be driven from the land and become slaves. Pentheus has received proper justice. Agave and her sisters will be exiled for the murder. Cadmus and his wife will be turned into serpents and lead an army of foreigners to destroy many cities, finally ruining Apollo's shrine. Ares will save them, however, and bring them to Olympus. Cadmus objects that the punishment is too cruel, but Dionysus refuses to change his mind. Cadmus and Agave bemoan their fate, and Agave says goodbye to her home. They say goodbye to each other, and Cadmus leaves. Agave goes to join her sisters and leave Thebes forever.

The Bacchae, pages 200-220 Analysis

Pentheus's doom is revealed in this section, and the messenger delivers gory details of his dismemberment. His horrifying death creates fear in the audience but also excitement, much like the bloody deaths of modern horror films. Pentheus is not the only one punished by his death, though. The punishment is even more horrific to Agave. Her son is dead, but Agave must live with the deed she committed while out of her mind under Dionysus' influence.

Agave is out of her mind when she kills Pentheus. She is completely under the influence of Dionysus. However, in the end of the play, Dionysus sends her and her sisters into exile as murderers. Much like Oedipus, who commits his crime unknowingly, there is no forgiveness for Agave's horrible actions, even though she was unaware while committing them. Dionysus, though responsible, cannot be blamed because of his stature as a god. Ultimately, Agave is responsible because she began the blasphemous rumors that Dionysus was not a true god.

When Agave arrives with her son's head, the scene is horrifying and pitiful. Agave is the only character who does not realize what she has done. Cadmus cannot contain his revulsion at the dreadfulness of the situation. The audience is as shocked and revolted as Cadmus. Much as the women's bloody violence is contrasted with descriptions of their tantalizing revelry earlier in the play, the horror of Pentheus's bloody corpse is contrasted here with Agave's happy, unknowing behavior as she asks for her son and brags of her kill.

The section of the play where Agave mourns over the body of Pentheus is only partially preserved, and some of the lines are created by the translator to provide transitions between the fragments. However, the horror and sorrow of the piteous scene is retained. Agave's madness is replaced by insurmountable grief, as she attempts to reconstruct her son's bloody corpse.

Dionysus finally reveals himself in his godly form at the end of the play and metes out punishment on the characters, revealing the future to the characters and the audience. No one escapes his wrath, as if the characters have passed a point of no return. It is too late to ask forgiveness of the god or to worship him. His mother was insulted. He was

blasphemed. His miracles were ignored. Now, even Cadmus, who early in the play tries to honor Dionysus, is punished cruelly.



Characters

Electra (from Electra)

Electra is Orestes' sister and the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. After Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus killed Agamemnon, Aegisthus feared that Electra might have a child who would seek revenge on him. Aegisthus thus gave Electra to an impoverished farmer as his wife so that Electra could not have a wealthy, powerful son who might kill Aegisthus in revenge. Electra bemoans her lot in life, although she is always good to the farmer and works around his house. She wants to revenge her father Agamemnon's death, the exile of her brother Orestes, and her own plight by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

When Orestes returns from exile to seek revenge, Electra is more than ready to join him. In fact, she encourages him with all her heart to kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Electra is single-minded and staunch in her purpose. She has grown to hate Clytemnestra, who not only killed Agamemnon, but who lives in luxury as queen while Electra lives in poverty. Electra herself plans the murder of Clytemnestra, luring her mother to the countryside.

After Orestes kills Aegisthus, he balks at killing Clytemnestra, his mother. Electra, though, cannot forgive Clytemnestra. She will not listen to any of Clytemnestra's apologies or reasons for killing Agamemnon, siding completely with her father and citing Clytemnestra's mistreatment of her children. Electra pushes the murder of her mother through, and afterward she is exiled from the land for her matricide, although she will have a husband and a home, since her motive was just in the eyes of the gods.

Orestes (from Electra)

Orestes is Electra's brother and the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. After Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus killed Agamemnon, Aegisthus tried to kill the child Orestes. As Agamemnon's son, Orestes has the power and the obligation to revenge his father's death, so he is a threat to Aegisthus. Agamemnon's servant saves Orestes, and the boy fled into exile. Now, Orestes has returned to take revenge on Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, fulfilling Aegisthus's fears.

Orestes is a cautious person, and he uses deceit to reach Aegisthus. Even with his sister, Orestes pretends to be a messenger to feel out whether Electra is willing to conspire with him to seek revenge, and he only reveals himself when Agamemnon's servant recognizes him. Orestes works with his sister to come up with a plan to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. When he initially returns, he is set on revenge. After he kills Aegisthus, though, Orestes has second thoughts about killing his mother. Killing his stepfather is righteous revenge, but killing his own mother is an appalling thought. Electra tells Orestes that they must have revenge, and reluctantly, Orestes agrees.



After Orestes kills his mother, he is horrified at his own actions. Before the killing, he is torn between the desire for revenge and the duty to honor his mother. After the killing, with revenge satisfied, Orestes must pay a cost for disregarding a child's obligations to his mother. The Dioscuri decree that Orestes must live in exile and go to Athens to be tried for matricide, but they also say that they do not blame Orestes for revenging his father. They foretell that the court at Athens will acquit Orestes by a narrow margin.

Antigone (from The Phoenician Women)

Antigone is the daughter of Jocasta and Oedipus and the sister of Eteocles and Polyneices. Antigone loves her brother Polyneices and misses him. When Polyneices comes to Thebes with a foreign army to win back his rightful place as co-ruler of Thebes, Antigone goes up on the roof of the palace to see the armies and to spot her brother Polyneices.

Antigone goes with her mother to stop Polyneices and Eteocles from fighting each other, but she arrives too late. Antigone hears that her brother Polyneices' last wish is to be buried in Thebes, and she brings her brothers' and her mother's bodies back to the city. However, when Antigone arrives, she learns that Creon has condemned Oedipus to exile from the city and decreed that no one shall bury Polyneices under penalty of death.

Overcome with grief, Antigone is convinced that Creon's ruling is unjust. She argues that Polyneices' body should be buried, so that he is not punished in death as he was punished in life, but Creon is firm in his support of Eteocles' last wishes. Even in death, the brothers' conflict survives in the conflict between Antigone and Creon. Antigone says that she will bury her brother even if she dies for it, and she says that she would kill Creon's son if she were forced to marry him. Finally, Antigone decides to accompany her father into exile.

Polyneices (from The Phoenician Women)

Polyneices is Eteocles' brother. After their father Oedipus learned he had married his mother and killed his father, Polyneices and Eteocles took over the rule of Thebes. They imprisoned their father, who had gouged his eyes out, in the palace. Oedipus cursed his sons to die by each other's swords.

Polyneices and Eteocles made a pact to take turns, year by year, ruling Thebes to avoid conflict with each other, and Eteocles took the first turn. Meanwhile, Polyneices went into exile. However, when the year was up, Eteocles would not give up the throne. Polyneices was banished into exile permanently.

Polyneices suffers in friendless poverty, sometimes lacking enough to eat, and he grew to bitterly resent his brother Eteocles. He eventually married a woman from Argive, and her father helped him raise an army to take back his rightful place in Thebes. Almost everyone agrees that Polyneices has been wronged and that his cause is just. However,



Polyneices is also condemned for bringing an army against his homeland. Polyneices values and misses Thebes, and his last wish is to be buried in Thebes. However, his brother's last command is that Polyneices may not be buried in Thebes, under penalty of death.

Eteocles (from The Phoenician Women)

Eteocles is Polyneices' brother. After their father Oedipus learned he had married his mother and killed his father, Polyneices and Eteocles took over the rule of Thebes. They imprisoned their father, who had gouged his eyes out, in the palace. Oedipus cursed his sons to die by each other's swords.

Polyneices and Eteocles made a pact to take turns, year by year, ruling Thebes to avoid conflict with each other, and Eteocles took the first turn while his brother went into exile. However, when the year was up, Eteocles would not give up the throne. Eteocles is power-hungry and ambitious, valuing his position as ruler of Thebes above all else. He is bitter and resentful toward his brother for bringing an army to Thebes, and he will not even allow Polyneices to be buried in Thebes.

Eteocles offers to let Polyneices live in Thebes without power, but he will not budge in his decision to hold the throne himself. Eteocles is more concerned with power than with the safety of his city, but he also sees it as cowardice to back down from the throne in order to avoid conflict. Eteocles decides to settle the battle once and for all by fighting his brother to the death, and he and Polyneices fulfill their father's curse by killing each other in battle over the throne.

Jocasta (from The Phoenician Women)

Jocasta is the wife of Oedipus, and the mother of Antigone, Polyneices, and Eteocles. She used to be married to Laius, who was given a prophecy that if he bore a son, his son would kill him. Laius and Jocasta had a son, who they left on a mountain to die because of the prophecy. The son was saved, though, and grew up with foster parents to be Oedipus. Oedipus met Laius on the road by accident, argued with him and killed him, fulfilling the prophecy. Then, Oedipus saved the city of Thebes from the Sphinx and was given Jocasta's hand in marriage, not realizing she was his mother. When he found out what had happened, Oedipus gouged out his own eyes and now lives imprisoned in the palace.

Jocasta is filled with sorrow at her sons' behavior. She becomes the voice of reason in the play, declaring a truce between the Argive army and the Thebian army so that her sons can talk through their differences. She scolds both of her sons, telling Eteocles that he should not lust after power and telling Polyneices that he should not bring an army to attack his homeland. However, neither son listens to her, and Jocasta is filled with sorrow. When she finds out that her sons plan to fight each other to the death, she tries to stop them, but she arrives too late. When Jocasta finds that her sons have died, she kills herself.



Dionysus a.k.a. Bromius, Evius, Bacchus (from The Bacchae)

Dionysus is the son of the god Zeus and a human woman, Semele. The goddess Hera, enraged at Zeus's infidelity, struck Semele dead with lightning during childbirth, but Zeus saved Dionysus at the last minute. Dionysus is the god of wine and dance. Dionysus is incensed when rumors begin in Thebes that Semele was not impregnated by Zeus but made up the story to cover up her faithlessness. According to the rumors, Semele was killed, not by Hera, but by Zeus for blasphemy. The people of Thebes have stopped worshipping Dionysus, believing him a false god.

Dionysus comes to Thebes in disguise along with his followers. He plans to make Thebes suffer for its blasphemies against him, and he turns all the women mad, sending them out to revel on the mountainside. Then, he destroys Pentheus' palace and puts Pentheus under a spell, causing him to dress as a woman and go out to the mountain. There, Dionysus makes the mad women and, led by Pentheus's mother Agave, tear Pentheus to pieces.

Dionysus takes unmerciful revenge on all of Thebes. Even though Agave and her sisters only murder Pentheus under Dionysus's influence, the god sends them into exile for the murder. Even though Cadmus, founder of Thebes, tries to honor Dionysus, the god turns him and his wife into serpents and sends them off to lead foreign armies against Greek cities. Dionysus shows no clemency, using his power for complete vengeance against the unbelievers.

Pentheus (from The Bacchae)

Pentheus is the ruler of Thebes and the grandson of its founder, Cadmus. Pentheus mocks the existence of Dionysus, believing him a false god. When the women of Thebes are driven mad by Dionysus, Pentheus does not believe they are under divine power. He orders them rounded up and imprisoned. When Dionysus comes to Thebes in disguise as a stranger and priest of Dionysus, Pentheus orders Dionysus imprisoned, also. Although Dionysus miraculously escapes his bonds, and the palace is mysteriously destroyed by earthquake and lightning, Pentheus still refuses to believe.

Pentheus's sin is hubris. He believes himself to be above the gods. Even though evidence of Dionysus' divinity is repeatedly presented to Pentheus, he refuses to believe. Pentheus is the ultimate sinner in the blasphemous town of Thebes so suffers the ultimate punishment. Dionysus condemns Pentheus to the height of dishonor as well as death.

Pentheus ultimately has no weapon that he can use against Dionysus the god. All his human attempts at power, his guards and chains and palace, are worthless because the god can simply alter reality at will. Pentheus cannot even control his own mind, which Dionysus takes over completely, forcing Pentheus to dress as a woman and humiliate



himself, effeminately primping in a scene that is both pitiful and humorous. However, there is no humor in Pentheus' fate. He is condemned to die by his own mother's hand, torn limb from limb into pieces spread out over the mountainside.

Farmer, a Mycenaean (from Electra)

The unnamed Mycenaean farmer is Electra's husband, but he has not consummated their marriage because he respects Electra's position. He asks Electra not to work, but she insists on giving the farmer a nice house. Orestes promises to repay the kindly farmer for treating Electra so well.

Pylades (from Electra)

Pylades, a native of Phocis and friend to Orestes in exile, accompanies Orestes back to Argos to avenge his father's death. Pylades does not speak any lines during the play. In the end of the play, the Dioscuri decree that Electra must marry Pylades and be banished from Argos for killing her mother.

Chorus of Argive Peasant Women (from Electra)

The chorus of local women shows the popular opinion on the events that are unfolding. They support Electra, believing that she's been wronged, and condemn Clytemnestra.

Old Man (from Electra)

The old man is a former servant of Electra's father, Agamemnon. When Orestes was young, the old man saved Orestes from Agamemnon's murderer and usurper, Aegisthus. The old man is the only one who recognizes Orestes when he returns to Argos, pretending to be a stranger.

Messenger (from Electra)

The messenger is a servant of Orestes. He reports to Electra and the audience the events surrounding Orestes' murder of Aegisthus in revenge of Agamemnon.

Clytemnestra (from Electra)

Clytemnestra is Electra and Orestes' mother. She was Agamemnon's wife and is Helen of Troy's sister. While Agamemnon was away at war with Troy, Clytemnestra had an affair with Aegisthus, and when Agamemnon returned, Clytemnestra and her lover murdered him. Now, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus rule Argos. When Clytemnestra is lured to Electra's home, she defends her actions by saying that Agamemnon deserved



death for sacrificing one of Clytemnestra's daughters for victory at Troy and also for bringing another woman home with him. Electra refuses to accept Clytemnestra's arguments, pointing out that Clytemnestra has doomed her children to poverty and exile while she lives in luxury. Electra and her brother Orestes kill their mother. Although they are wreaking revenge, Electra is punished by banishment to another land, and Orestes must face trial in Athens.

Dioscuri: Castor and Polydeuces (from Electra)

The Dioscuri are sons of Zeus and brothers to Clytemnestra. They have ascended as gods. In the end of the play, the Dioscuri come to tell Electra and Orestes their fates. Although Electra and Orestes have revenged their father, they also must be punished for killing their mother. The Dioscuri decree that Electra must marry a foreigner and be exiled to another land, while Orestes must go to Athens to be tried and narrowly acquitted of matricide.

Agamemnon (from Electra)

Agamemnon was Electra and Orestes' father and Clytemnestra's husband. After he returned victorious from Troy, Clytemnestra and her lover murdered him.

Aegisthus (from Electra)

Aegisthus is Clytemnestra's lover and accomplice in murdering Agamemnon. He rules Argos with Clytemnestra, and he tried to kill Orestes when he was young, driving Orestes into exile. Fearing revenge from Electra's potential offspring, he married her to an impoverished farmer. Orestes comes back to Argos and kills Aegisthus to revenge his father.

Chorus of Phonician Women (from The Phoenician Women)

The chorus of Phoenician women are stranded in Thebes during the war with Polyneices. They come from the same land as the founder of Thebes, Cadmus.

Oedipus (from The Phoenician Women)

Oedipus is Polyneices and Eteocles' father. He was the child of Laius, and before he was born, there was a prophecy that Oedipus would kill his father. Laius and his wife, Jocasta, abandoned their child on a mountain to die, but Oedipus was taken in by another family in a neighboring land. Oedipus unknowingly killed his father and then married his mother, fulfilling the prophecy. When Oedipus found out who he really was,



he gouged out his eyes. His sons have kept him locked up in the palace, and Oedipus cursed them to kill each other for his imprisonment.

When Oedipus' curse is fulfilled by his sons' deaths, Oedipus is horrified and grief-stricken. Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, sends Oedipus into exile, afraid the gods will punish Thebes for housing Oedipus. Oedipus says that exile will mean his death, since he is old and blind.

Creon (from The Phoenician Women)

Creon is Jocasta's brother and a confidant of Eteocles. He wisely advises Eteocles on the best strategy against the attacking Argive army. Eteocles trusts Creon to become the ruler of Thebes in case of his death, and he instructs Creon to ensure Antigone's marriage to Creon's son and to disallow Polyneices from burial in Thebes. After Eteocles' death, Creon banishes Oedipus from Thebes and decrees that no one will bury Polyneices. Antigone is horrified at this order and accompanies her father Oedipus into exile, refusing to marry Creon's son.

Teiresias (from The Phoenician Women and The Bacchae)

Teiresias is a blind prophet. In *The Phoenician Women*, he tells Creon that the only way to save Thebes is to sacrifice his son Menoecus to appease the war god Ares, who is still angry at Thebes because the city's founder, Cadmus, killed Ares' offspring, a dragon. In *The Bacchae*, he dresses as a bacchant in order to celebrate Dionysus and try to escape the god's wrath. He advises Pentheus to worship Dionysus as a god.

Menoecus (from The Phoenician Women)

Menoecus is the son of Creon and one of only three pure-blooded descendants of the original occupants of Thebes, "Sown Men," created from the teeth of a dragon slain by Cadmus. Because he is the last Sown Man who is not spoken for in marriage, Menoecus is the only person who can save Thebes from the wrath of the war god Ares, who is angered by the death of the dragon, whom he sired. To save Thebes, Menoecus kills himself as a sacrifice to appease Ares.

The Pedagogue (from The Phoenician Women)

The pedagogue is a teacher who takes Antigone up to the rooftop to show her the approaching Argive army.



Messengers (from The Phoenician Women)

The first messenger tells Jocasta of the battle between the Thebian and Argive armies and informs her that Polyneices and Eteocles plan to fight to the death. The second messenger tells Creon about the fight between Polyneices and Eteocles and the deaths of the brothers and their mother Jocasta.

Chorus of Asian Bacchae (from The Bacchae)

The chorus comprises of followers of Dionysus from his travels in Asia. They sing the praises of Dionysus throughout the play.

Coryphaeus (from The Bacchae)

Coryphaeus is the leader of the Asian Bacchae and a devoted follower of Dionysus. She is the main speaker for the chorus.

Cadmus (from The Bacchae)

Cadmus is Pentheus's father and the founder of Thebes. In the beginning of the play, Cadmus joins with Teiresias in dressing as bacchantes to honor Dionysus as a god. However, Cadmus's grandson, Pentheus, will not follow Cadmus' urgings and pay tribute to Dionysus. Cadmus finds his grandson's body after Pentheus is killed by the women of Thebes, while they are under the influence of Dionysus. Despite Cadmus' attempts to honor the god, Dionysus condemns Cadmus and his wife to become serpents and lead foreign armies around Greece, attacking the cities.

Agave (from The Bacchae)

Agave is Pentheus' mother and Cadmus' daughter. She is driven mad by Dionysus and roams the mountainside, reveling and performing miraculous feats under the influences of the deity. When Pentheus comes to the mountain to spy on the women, Agave spots him. Under Dionysus' influence, Agave leads the attack of women, who tear her son to pieces. After Pentheus' death, Agave is still insane and believes she killed a mountain lion. She brings his head back to Thebes on her wand, proud of her kill. When she finally comes out of her deluded state, she is horrified at what she's done. Despite the fact that Dionysus inspired her to murder, he punishes her by banishment from Thebes.

Ino and Autonoë (from The Bacchae)

Ino and Autonoë are Agave's sisters and Pentheus' aunts. They are among the women driven mad by Dionysus and participate in the murder of their nephew, Pentheus.



Messengers, a Herdsman and Pentheus's Servant (from The Bacc

A herdsman acts as a messenger to tell Pentheus of the miraculous acts of the mad women on the mountainside. Pentheus' servant acts as a messenger to tell the story of Pentheus' death at the hands of his mother and aunts.



Objects/Places

Argos (from Electra)

Argos is the land that Agamemnon once ruled, which is now ruled by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover Aegisthus, who murdered Agamemnon on his victorious return from Troy.

The Farmer's Cottage (from Electra)

The action of Electra takes place outside the farmer's cottage where Electra now lives.

The Butchering Knife (from Electra)

Aegisthus is butchering a bull to sacrifice to the gods when Orestes kills him, and Orestes uses the butchering knife to kill Aegisthus.

The Bull's Intestines (from Electra)

Aegisthus looks at the bull's guts to see a prediction of the future, and he sees his own doom moments before Orestes kills him.

Thebes (from The Phoenician Women)

Thebes is the land once ruled by Oedipus, now ruled by his son Eteocles. Eteocles has seized the power that he should have shared with his brother Polyneices, who has been exiled. Polyneices has married a woman from Argos and has come to Thebes with the Argive army to reclaim his rightful place.

The Seven Gates of Thebes (from The Phoenician Women)

The city of Thebes has seven gates, and Eteocles creates seven units of soldiers to defend each of the seven gates.

Sown Men (from The Phoenician Women)

The Sown Men were created by Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, by planting the teeth of a dragon he defeated, which was the son of Ares. In retribution for killing the dragon,



Ares demands from Thebes the sacrifice of a pure-blooded descendant of the Sown Men.

Semele's Tomb (from The Bacchae)

Semele's Tomb is prominent on the set of The Bacchae as a reminder of Dionysus's mother, Semele, who was killed by Hera while giving birth to Zeus' child Dionysus.

Cithaeron (from The Bacchae)

Dionysus makes the women of Thebes mad to repay them for refusing to worship him, and he sends them to the mountain Cithaeron. At the end of the play, the women murder Pentheus at Cithaeron.

Wands/Thyrsus (from The Bacchae)

The followers of Dionysus carry fennel stalks decorated with ivy called thyrsus. The mad women of Thebes use these flimsy wands as weapons, with the power of Dionysus.



Themes

Justice

Throughout Euripides' tragedies, characters seek justice. The ultimate judges of right and wrong are the gods. In *Electra*, Electra and her brother Orestes seek to kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra as revenge for their father Agamemnon. To them, this is justice. To Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's death is justice for the death of her daughter, Iphigenia. Both Electra and Clytemnestra plead that they are taking one life in repayment for another, and that it is just. The issues, however, are far from clear-cut. Clytemnestra's motives are questionable, and the chorus condemns her for not following her husband. For Electra, in seeking revenge, she kills her own mother. Matricide, whatever the motive, is a crime. Though she seeks justice, her actions are not just, and she must suffer exile.

In *The Phoenician Women*, Polyneices is in a similar position to Electra. Like Electra, he has been wronged and sent from his proper place into poverty. Like Electra, he is bitter at a member of his family for sending him away. Polyneices, too, seeks what he feels is justice. However, bringing an army to attack his homeland is a crime in the same way that matricide is a crime. Although each character does the only thing he or she can to find justice, they both must be punished for their methods, and for Polyneices, that means death.

In contrast, in *The Bacchae*, the person who has been wronged is the god Dionysus. He, too, comes back to seek vengeance or justice, for his wrong. His victims, too, are his family, since Agave, Ino and Autonoe are his aunts, Semele's sisters. Pentheus, then, is his cousin. Dionysus mercilessly destroys all his human family and his homeland in revenge for being wronged. His crimes are similar to that of Electra and Polyneices, but even more severe. Yet, Dionysus is not punished, since he is a god. Being a god gives him the right to mete out justice or vengeance, without retribution, while Dionysus himself exiles Agave and her sisters for the "murder" he incited them to commit. Gods, indeed, are above the law that all humans must submit to.

A Woman's Place

Electra, a woman, is the prime character of the play named for her. As a woman, she has a strong sense of a woman's proper place in Greek society. Although she is born to much higher tasks, she insists on making her impoverished husband's house a pleasant place and working at all the household tasks of women. She is, though far above her husband in station, subservient to him.

At the same time, Clytemnestra is condemned from all sides for being not subservient and womanly. The chorus disregards Clytemnestra's desire to revenge her daughter's death, saying that her allegiance to Agamemnon as her husband should outweigh any



other desires. Electra even scorns Aegisthus for seeking to gain power from his wife and being known as "the queen's husband" instead of the king. Clytemnestra, as a woman who takes power for herself, is condemned.

In *The Phoenician Women*, Jocasta is powerless, despite her high stature. She is the voice of reason, but unlike Electra, she cannot sway the men around her. Her daughter, Antigone, takes on a stronger role, standing up to the powerful Creon. Instead of merely pleading with him, like her mother might, Antigone rejects Creon as unjust. However, this is not her place, as a woman. Antigone must go into exile to remain true to what she believes is justice. This is how Polyneices describes exile for a man: the inability to speak one's mind and the necessity to bow before foolish masters. Antigone, as a woman, suffers the same condition if she stays, as a woman of stature, in her home beneath Creon's rule. She would be unable to speak her mind and would need to bow before Creon's unjust laws. Her position at home is much like Polyneices' position in exile.

Hubris

In *The Bacchae*, hubris is the fatal flaw of Pentheus. In speaking to Dionysus, Pentheus speaks of his power and position. However, Pentheus does not have real power. Dionysus is a god, infinitely more powerful, and Pentheus lacks the humility to realize how much more awesomely powerful a god is than a human king. As a result of his hubris, Pentheus suffers the humiliation of being paraded about in women's clothing and the horror of being torn to bloody pieces by his mother and aunt. Hubris, it seems, is the ultimate crime.

In *The Phoenician Women*, Eteocles also puts himself above his place by sending away his brother. Eteocles, like Pentheus, is drunk with his own power and refuses to see that there is a good greater than himself. Eteocles is putting himself above what is right and above his city, tantamount to putting himself above a god. His mother lectures him on the value of humility, pointing out that all mankind's wealth actually belongs to the gods, but Eteocles does not listen. Eteocles, too, suffers death for his power-grasping ways, bringing the city perilously close to destruction. Only an act of humility, the self-sacrificing death of Menoeceus, saves Thebes.

In *Electra*, Clytemnestra is also guilty of hubris, not against a god, but against her husband. She puts herself above her natural place in grasping for a man's power. She complains that men and women are judged differently, and she is right. The play presents a natural order where women must follow their husbands, and where women's infidelity is worse than men's infidelity. Agamemnon is allowed to sacrifice his daughter, and Orestes is allowed to revenge his father. Clytemnestra, however, cannot revenge her daughter or aspire to her husband's power. She must be punished by death.



Style

Point of View

As dramas, the plays of Euripides do not have a narrator. However, they do have the Greek chorus, which typically represents the point of view of the common people in the play and also may represent an authorial viewpoint. The chorus provides commentary and judgment on the action. In *Electra*, the chorus supports Electra and condemns her mother Clytemnestra. In *The Phoenician Women*, the chorus is the Phoenician women, who are stranded in Thebes during the attack by Polyneices and his army. The women are torn because they do not want Thebes to fall, but they also honor Polyneices and believe he has been wronged by his brother. In *The Bacchae*, the chorus comprises followers of Dionysus. They follow Dionysus in everything and honor him as a god, rejoicing even in the king's death, since it is the god's will.

The gods themselves provide the final word on what is right and wrong throughout the plays, and in two plays, gods appear at the end to foretell what will happen to the characters. The gods provide justice and punishment. In *Electra*, the Dioscuri send Electra to exile for justified matricide and Orestes to trial in Athens, where they foretell he will be narrowly acquitted. Although the two children must be punished, the gods do not condemn or blame them for their actions. In *The Bacchae*, the god Dionysus is personally involved in the conflict. He repays unbelievers with horrific fates, sending Agave and her sisters into exile with the knowledge that they have torn apart Pentheus and turning Cadmus and his wife into serpents, who will wreak havoc on Greece.

Although the gods themselves do not appear in *The Phoenician Women*, the gods take a part in the action. Ares must be satisfied by the sacrifice of a Sown Man for Thebes to be victorious, and Zeus himself provides the turning-point in the siege on the city by sending one of the soldiers reeling off the wall with a lightning bolt. Once the gods have their say, the men no longer fight. The gods ultimately stand with Thebes, even though Polyneices has been wronged by his brother.

Setting

Electra is set in the countryside around Argos, while both *The Bacchae* and *The Phoenician Women* are set in the turbulent city of Thebes. In *Electra*, the setting is lowly, a farmhouse where she must walk to the stream to get water. This setting accentuates the poverty to which she has been subjected by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The rural setting also allows the plot to move forward. Electra's brother can return to the land unnoticed in the countryside, and the brother and sister can catch their victims away from the protection of the city. The countryside setting also allows a chorus of country peasant women, who give the peasants' point of view.



The setting for *The Phoenician Women* is Thebes during the rule of Eteocles. Thebes has been through a troubled past, and this play is set at the last throes of that trouble. The rule of Oedipus and the horror of the Sphinx are both in the past, and the struggle between Eteocles and Polyneices represents the last throes of anguish for the city. Thebes is a powerful city, and the setting is before the palace, the seat of power. Although much of the action surrounds the city's seven gates, the center of focus is the palace, which represents the power for which Polyneices and Eteocles fight.

The setting of *The Bacchae* is also Thebes, in the more distant past. Its founder, Cadmus, is still alive, and the city is ruled by his grandson. The setting also includes the palace, but more prominent is the tomb of Semele, Dionysus' mother. Although no action takes place at the tomb, the tomb serves as a constant reminder of the source of conflict. Semele has been wronged by the rumors, which say that Dionysus is no god and that Semele had a child out of wedlock. The tomb still smokes, a reminder of the power of the gods, since the smoke is from Hera's lightning strike, which killed Semele in childbirth.

Language and Meaning

The dialogue of Euripides' plays is written in unrhymed verse, providing a rhythm to the spoken word. The plays contain two types of dialogue. Characters either give monologues to the audience or other characters, or the characters engage in exchanges of short, spoken lines. Monologues may provide background information or retell events that occur off-stage, or monologues serve as lectures, such as Jocasta's lectures to her sons. The chorus' interludes within each play are songs, accompanied by dancing on stage. The songs of the chorus often retell the stories and events related by the characters, adding praise or lament as commentary on the action.

The plays are also full of references to past events, common stories and the gods. These references may be difficult to interpret for the modern reader, although they would be familiar to a Greek audience. In *The Phoenician Women*, there are many references to the founding of the city of Thebes, the fight between Cadmus and the dragon, and also the Sphinx that Oedipus defeated to become king. The chorus and Teiresias both tell the tale of Cadmus, the dragon, and the Sown Men, but the story may seem obscure to a reader who is not familiar with the tale. Even in *The Bacchae*, where the story is never explained, Coryphaeus refers to "Cadmus who sowed the dragon teeth."

Similarly, gods and places may be referred to by multiple names, with which the original Greek audiences would be familiar. The city of Thebes is often referred to as Cadmus' town and or other names hearkening back to the city's founder. The god Dionysus is known as Bacchus, Bromius or Evius. The modern reader needs to be aware of the varying names for gods and places.

Structure

Euripedes' plays are not broken up into acts or scenes. Instead, all the action takes place in one setting, and the characters enter and leave the stage to create different "scenes." The action is divided by interludes by the chorus. These interludes are songs and dances that retell the action, give history and provide commentary on the action through praise, condemnation or lamentation.

Because much of the action takes place off stage, messengers play an important role in the play. A messenger retells the fight scenes in *The Phoenician Women*, and a messenger describes Pentheus' death in *The Bacchae*. A messenger details Orestes' murder of Aegisthus in *Electra*. Antigone, Dionysus or Orestes could tell these tales, but they are reserved for unnamed messengers, either peasants or servants. This allows the off-stage scenes to be retold from the neutral point of view of an observer. These scenes are often the bloodiest and most intense scenes of the play, and must be retold with skill to build the scene for the audience. Antigone and the pedagogue's discussion of the attacking army serves a similar function, creating for the audience a scene that is off stage and building tension for the upcoming battle.

The plays end with a final judgment on the action. In *The Bacchae* and *Electra*, gods descend from the heavens to give verdicts on the characters' actions and foretell future events. However, in *The Phoenician Women*, Creon as king, instead of a god, metes out punishment to the survivors, perhaps indicating that injustice remains at the end of the play. Antigone and Oedipus lament over their sorrows and predict their deaths in exile from their homeland.



Quotes

"In times like these, when wishes soar but power fails, / I contemplate the steady comfort found in gold: / gold you can spend on guests; gold you can pay the doctor / when you get sick. But a small crumb of gold will buy / our daily bread, and when a man has eaten that, / you cannot really tell the rich and poor apart." —Farmer, *Electra*, lines 426-431, page 27

"I call to you again and say Aegisthus dies! / And if Orestes in his struggle falls to death / I too am dead, let them no longer say I live, / for I will stab my belly with a two-edged sword." —Electra, *Electra*, lines 689-692, page 40

"This game of death is bitter, and sweet." —Orestes, *Electra*, line 987, page 51

"A wife should give way to her husband in all things / if her mind is sound; if she refuses to see this truth / she cannot enter fully counted to my thought." —Chorus, *Electra*, lines 1052-1054, page 54

"Now any woman who works on her beauty when her man / is gone from home indicts herself as being a whore." —Electra, *Electra*, lines 1072-1073, page 55

"Behold! I wrap her close in the robe, / the one I loved and could not love." —Electra, *Electra*, lines 1230-1231, page 61

"The word of truth is single in its nature; / and a just cause needs no interpreting. / It carries its own case. But the unjust argument / since it is sick, needs clever medicine." —Polyneices, *The Phoenician Women*, lines 469-472, page 89

"Sufficiency's enough for men of sense. / Men do not really own their private goods; / we simply care for things which are the gods', / and when they will, they take them back again." —Jocasta, *The Phoenician Women*, lines 553-556, page 92

"I've said my say, and now I go to give / my city no mean gift. I'll cure this ailing land. / If every man would take what good he can / and give it to his city's common good, / cities would suffer less, be happy from now on." —Menoceus, *The Phoenician Women*, lines 1012-1017, page 112

"Creon: Is it not right to do what is commanded?
Antigone: Not when wrong deeds are wickedly laid down." —The Phoenician Women, lines 1648-1649, page 133

"Dionysus: The darkness is well suited to devotion.
Pentheus: Better suited to lechery and seducing women.
Dionysus: You can find debauchery by daylight too.
Pentheus: You shall regret these clever answers.



Dionysus: And you, / your stupid blasphemies." —The Bacchae, lines 486-490, page 175

"Pentheus, you do not hear, or else you disregard / my words of warning. You have done me wrong, / and yet, in spite of that, I warn you once / again: do not take arms against a god." —Dionysus, The Bacchae, lines 786-789, page 188

Cadmus: And whose head do you hold in your hands?

Agave (averting her eyes): A lion's head—or so the hunters told me.

Cadmus: Look directly at it. Just a quick glance.

Agave: What is it? What am I holding in my hands?

Cadmus: Look more closely still. Study it carefully.

Agave: No! O gods, I see the greatest grief there is." —The Bacchae, lines 1276-1282, page 212

Topics for Discussion

Compare Electra's murder of her mother with Polyneices bringing an army to fight Thebes. Are their actions justified?

Evaluate Clytemnestra's justifications of the murder of Agamemnon. Is she judged too harshly by the peasants and by her son and daughters?

Are Dionysus' punishments of the people of Thebes too harsh? He exiles Agave for murder. Is this punishment justified, even though he incited Agave to murder?

Eteocles is considered in the wrong by the chorus and by his mother Jocasta. Evaluate his reasons for not sharing the throne with his brother Polyneices. Are they justified?

Why does Polyneices bring an army against his beloved Thebes, instead of accepting his brother's proposition to live in Thebes, though not as its ruler?

Who is more responsible for Clytemnestra's death, Electra or Orestes?

In *The Bacchae*, why is Pentheus unable to recognize that Dionysus is a god, even when he hears about and witnesses miraculous occurrences?

Compare Electra to her mother Clytemnestra.