

Felix Weingartner

Orestes

A trilogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

### Part I. Agamemnon

Fire signals from the mountains announce to the watchman of the royal castle of Argos the end of the Trojan War and the fall of Troy, and at the same time announce to Klytaimnestra the homecoming of her husband, the victorious King Agamemnon, from the ten-year war. On the one hand, in order to be able to marry her lover Aigisthos, and on the other hand, out of revenge for the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigeneia by Agamemnon ten years earlier, Klytaimnestra has decided to kill him. While she herself is trying to deceive the people about her intentions with solemn sacrifices, she asks Aigisthos to hire secretly armed mercenaries to be able to enforce the newly won rule over Argos by force, after the deed is done.

Announced by a messenger, Agamemnon moves into his father's castle, with the seer Cassandra at his side, the daughter of the Trojan king Priam, whom his army gave him as a prize for victory. After begging his wife, who greeted him with feigned joy, for kind treatment of this prisoner, he enters his house while Cassandra foresees Agamemnon's and her own imminent death and prophesies that Agamemnon's son, Orestes, will avenge these murders. But she finds no faith until the king's death cries are heard.

At the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra, who was murdered with him, Klytaimnestra announces to the shuddering people that she has committed the murder to atone for the death of her daughter Iphigeneia. The outrage that erupts among the people is suppressed by Aegisthus and his mercenaries.

### Part II. The Sacrifice

A few years later: Orestes was taken out of the country by his mother Klytaimnestra to be educated in the kingdom of Phocis, while he was still a boy. Having grown up, he now returns to his homeland of Argos with his friend Pylades to avenge his father's murder. Disguised as wanderers, they both visit Agamemnon's tomb, where Orestes renews his oath of revenge.

He recognizes his sister Elektra at the head of a procession of maids approaching the tomb and hides to eavesdrop on her plan. Klytaimnestra, terrified by bad dreams, has sent her daughter (whom she keeps in the house like a servant) with the maids to Agamemnon's grave to propitiate the murdered man's shadow. After wild lamentations against her wicked mother, Elektra begs the gods at her father's grave for her brother Orestes to come home as avenger and rescuer. Orestes steps forward and reveals himself. The sister and the maids greet him jubilantly. He reveals his plan, but orders Elektra and the maids to remain silent. He hands over Elektra to the faithful Pylades, so that he can bring her to his homeland of Phokis.

A new terrible dream has shaken Klytaimnestra's heart. It seemed to her that she had borne a dragon that she nursed with her own blood. While she is telling this dream, half mad with fright, to Kilissa (Orestes' wet nurse), there is a knock at the door of the castle courtyard. Kilissa pushes Klytaimnestra back into her chamber and opens it. Orestes, still dressed as a wanderer, enters and gains Kilissa's trust, so that he manages to lure Aigisthos to whom he now reports that Orestes has died in Phokis.

When Aegisthus, who can only with difficulty hide his joy behind feigned sadness, wants to deliver the news to the queen, he is killed by Orestes. He reveals himself to the approaching Klytaimnestra and the servants who are rushing towards him. With short, harsh words he explains to Klytaimnestra, who is speechless and stiff with shock, that he has come to avenge his father and that she must atone for her crime with death. After

Klytaimnestra has tried in vain to change his mind, she calls the vengeful spirits on his head in wild desperation and flees into the house, where Orestes follows her. As the thunderstorm approaches, the rushing maids invoke the Moira, the sacred fate that may finally bring peace to the much-tried royal family.

At the corpses of Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos, Orestes, deeply moved, declares that his father's murder has been atoned for. But then he is overcome by horror at what he has done. The air fills with horrible female figures threateningly raising their hands towards Orestes. It is the Erinyes (Furies), the avengers of every bloodguilt that Klytaimnestra has summoned. Orestes cannot stay any longer, he sets off to the temple of Apollo at Delphi to make amends there. Pursued by the Erinyes, he rushes out onto the road.

### **Part III. The Erinyes (Furies)**

Apollo, who protects Orestes, has put the Erinyes who are pursuing him, to sleep. The seer of the temple at Delphi now instructs Orestes to descend into Hades (the underworld) where he will find the path to atonement. After Orestes has obeyed the spell, Klytaimnestra's spirit appears, who in mocking words accuses the still sleeping Erinyes of their negligence and incites them to pursue the culprit again. The Erinyes awake and in a wild rage recognize Apollo's ruse. Tracks in the sand soon reveal Orestes' path and they follow him down to Hades.

When Orestes arrives at the Meadow of Asphodelos, the dwelling place of the shadows, he invokes the spirit of Agamemnon, announces his deed and begs him to show him the way of salvation from the Erinyes. As the voices of the pursuers come ever closer, Orestes pleads even more urgently, but the ghost disappears with a dull wail. Then Orestes draws his sword to atone for the murder of his mother and commit suicide as the last scion of the cursed Tantalid family. The soft call of a female voice commands him to stop: Cassandra, who once promised to hover around him as a shadow to protect and save him, appears to him. The Erinyes must give way before her, and it is possible for her to save him, because he raised his sword against his mother, not with selfish impulse, but out of ancient custom. In the blissful realms of Elysium she has broken an olive branch for him, which she hands to him. She herself will lead him to Athens, where he is to submit to the judgment of the goddess Pallas Athene. Nobody can harm him as long as he holds the branch in his hand.

Guided by Cassandra's spirit, Orestes reaches a free hilltop near Athens, where he sits at an altar dedicated to the goddess. He suggests to the Erinyes, who are still pursuing him and shying away from the branch in his hand, that they invoke Athena herself as judge. Athena appears and summons twelve of the worthiest citizens to pass judgment free from love and hate. The outcome: Six votes for, six against Orestes. Athena now casts her vote in favour of Orestes and declares him to be blameless. She threatens the Erinyes with annihilation if they continue to pursue him.

Enraged by the verdict, the Erinyes hurl the most terrible curse on city and country, but Orestes offers to appease the savages. As the new king of Argos, he offers Athena and her city an alliance and proposes giving the Erinyes a new task as guardians of this alliance. Athena takes the branch from Orestes' hand and plants it in the ground, where a mighty olive tree soon grows, sacred to Athena and the Erinyes as a sign of the new covenant. The Erinyes declare themselves defeated and while the crowd pouring homage to Athena, they transform the curse into the richest blessing. Athena now announces the marriage of Pylades and Elektra to the now expiated Orestes, ordering him to hurry to the beach of the Scythians to rescue his believed to be dead sister Iphigenia. Until old age he will rule his people with blessings, the people jubilantly greet the goddess and her new allies.