

Electra with her brother's help seeks to avenge the murder of her father, by killing his murderers, her mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. But her act of revenge begins to seem more like a crime than a duty.

ELECTRA

By Euripides

Translated by Andrew Wilson

For Juliet

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First performed by Athens of the North, Edinburgh, November 2016

CHARACTERS

AUTOURGOS, a peasant farmer

ELECTRA, princess of Argos, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra

ORESTES, her brother

PYLADES, his lifelong friend

CHORUS of local girls

AN OLD MAN, once Agamemnon's slave

A MESSENGER

CLYTEMNESTRA

CASTOR and POLYDEUCES, the Heavenly Twins

SCENE

In the countryside not far from Argos. Outside the farmer's cottage, where
Electra is living. It is just getting light.

A young man emerges from a farmhouse in the countryside near Argos. He points out to the audience a small stream which flows past his property. The stream connects with a river which flows into the sea which connects his small insignificant plot of land with a great event. So is he himself connected with greater personages.

AUTOURGOS

This stream will join the river Inachus,
Which waters Argos as it's always done.
From here some time ago our king sailed forth;
Agamemnon with his thousand ships to launch
A war with Priam and to sack his city.
He captured Troy and killed its king - and then
Came home and hung the spoils on temple walls
So Argos could admire his feat. But in
The palace... there his luck ran out. The plan
Was Clytemnestra's: but Aegisthus it was,
The lover of the queen, who murdered him.

Now Agamemnon, heir to Tantalus,
Is gone. Aegisthus is our country's king,
With Agamemnon's widow now his wife.
He left his children when he sailed to Troy,
His son Orestes and a daughter too.
Aegisthus planned to kill the boy, but he
Was rescued by a slave, his father's tutor,
Who gave him to Strophius, to raise
In far-off Phocis. She, the girl Electra,
Stayed there in her father's house, until
She blossomed into womanhood; then every
Well-born youth in Greece was after her!
But if she married one, and had a son,
He might grow up and seek revenge, or so
Aegisthus feared. He kept her in his house;
Refused to let her marry anyone.

Not even so could he quite quell his fears.
A secret love with someone upper class
Might yet produce a son to seek revenge.
He would have had her killed, had not his wife
Shown sympathy for once, and saved her life.
There was an excuse for her husband's death;
Her daughter's might just seem a crime too far.
Aegisthus had a new idea: much gold

For anyone who killed Orestes. Who
Would link a death in foreign parts with him?
Electra? Well, he got her married off ...
To me! A man whose poverty annuls
His some-time noble ancestry, that's why.
She's married to a nobody, and so
No need to fear a nobleman who might
Wake up the murder safely put to bed
And raise the question of Aegisthus' guilt.

I am her husband, though the Love Goddess
Can confirm that I've never slept with her.
She's still a virgin. It's not right for me
To violate the daughter of a king.
Orestes, my brother-in-law, in name,
Would feel such dreadful shame if he
Came home and saw his sister trapped into
A match so sad and inappropriate.

I know there's those who'd say I am a fool -
A young girl in my house, not touching her.
Theirs are a dirty mind's imaginings:
I'd rather be a fool than wise their way.

Electra comes out of the cottage; she tries to balance a pitcher on her head peasant-style. She doesn't see her husband. She's not addressing the audience - but venting her feelings to the world at large. She's very much the drama queen - deliberately choosing to look the part of an abused outcast with shaven head and ragged clothes.

ELECTRA

Black night! With only star-shine to relieve
The murky darkness as I leave my house
To fetch some water from the stream, to fill
This bucket which I balance on my head.
Does someone force me to perform this chore?
No, no one does. I've chosen it myself,
To show how vilely Aegisthus treats me,
And mourn in secret for my father's death.
Out here, it's dark, I can vent my feelings.
My hell-hag mother Clytemnestra threw
Me out to earn her husband's gratitude.
They've had more children, who, it seems, make us
Me and my brother, quite... superfluous.

AUTOURGOS [*intercepting her as she begins to move towards the stream*]

My poor Electra, why do you work so hard?

To please me? You weren't born for this at all!
I say you shouldn't, but you pay no heed.

ELECTRA

Thanks for your saintly kindness. What a friend!
You should despise me for my wretchedness.
To find a doctor for one's pain, like you,
Has been a very wondrous piece of luck.
So even if you tell me "Don't!" I shall
Still share your labours as much as I can.
There's work for you a-plenty out of doors;
That's why I like to keep things neat at home
To welcome you when you get in from work.

AUTOURGOS

Away you go then, if you must. The stream
Is very handy for our "palace" here.
As soon as it gets light I'll take the oxen
To the fields and sow the seeds. No one
Puts food upon his table without sweat -
However much he asks the gods for help.

They both leave in opposite directions. As it gets a little lighter, Pylades is revealed, waiting anxiously for someone. Orestes enters cautiously - he's relieved to find Pylades. As a gentleman, he's naturally accompanied by slaves to show his status and deal with his baggage! The slaves remain in the background until Orestes tells them to enter the house some while later.

ORESTES

Pylades! My best friend in all the world.
You took me in - the only one to treat
Me as a friend, when I was up against it,
when I was used ... as I was used ... by him! [*he seems reluctant to revisit his pain, but suddenly shouts out -*]
By Aegisthus, who murdered my father
Who gave me life, and by that hag from hell
My mother! I've come straight here secretly,
There's no one saw me cross to Argive land
From Delphi, where Apollo told me this:
To kill my father's killers! I've come home! [*drawing his sword, and brandishing it dramatically*].

Last night I visited my father's grave.
I wept a while and then cut off a lock
Of hair to offer him. I killed a lamb,
A sacrifice of blood upon his tomb
To show my plans - though not, I trust, to them,

The so-called leaders, tyrants of our land.
I've purposely not stepped inside the city -
I've stayed here, in the frontier zone, with two
Plans in my mind. First, if a border guard
Unmasks me, I can disappear elsewhere.
Or, if I can locate my sister, then - the news
Is she's a married woman now - I shall
Link up with her. She'll be my partner and
My fellow executioner. And, too,
I'll know what's going on within the walls.

Well then. Now Dawn unveils her pallid face,
It's time for us to leave this open ground.
With luck we'll find someone to ask, maybe
A farmhand or a female slave, who'd know
If my dear sister lives around these parts.
Look! There's a slave girl with a water jug
Balanced upon her shaven head! Let's hide
And see if we can find out something new
That could relate to what we plan to do.

*The chorus enter - a group of local young unmarried girls. They are excited and full of life, contrasting with the self-imposed misery of the somewhat older Electra. Their wish to tempt Electra to join them at the Festival of Hera is quite sincere: they take their religion seriously. These - and all sung passages - reproduce the **quantities** of the metre of the Greek with the **natural stress** of English. The intention is that they should be read - or preferably sung - with no more than slight emphasis on the natural English rhythms. I've marked the stresses.*

CHORUS

Agamem'non's dear daugh'ter, my' la'dy Ele'ctra, friend'! [strophe]
Here we are'at your coun'try' cott'age'!
Somebody, someone has **come'**! A man' from the hills' appeared',
From' My'ce'nae! He's left' his sheep':
In' three' days' from today', he says',
He'ra's great' feast's' due' to be held' -
E'vry' Ar'give' girl' will be there',
Sing'ing', danc'ing', all' for the great' godd'ess'!

ELECTRA

No' dressing-up' for me', my friends',
No' fine' neck'laces: they' do not'
Set' my' pul'ses a-ra'cing',
Poor' sad' crea'ture!' Nor' will I join'
Th' Ar'give' girls' for the dan'ces

Stam'ping' feet', nor' spin' in the ring'.
I like to spend **my**' nights', and my days', in mi'sery',
In' tears', tears' for my fa'ther'.
For' proof', look' at my mat'ted hair',
These' poor' clothes' that are stained' with filth'.
Should' a prin'cess be trea'ted so'?
Whose' fa'ther's' Agamem'non'?
How' my' rags' bring' shame' to the king'
Who' once' con'quered the Tro'jans!

CHORUS

She is great', is the godd'ess, so' borrr'ow a dress', please', [*antistrophe*]
Any dress' that you like', from' me'! -
And I've got a golden neck'lace which'll go well' with it!
But' with' wee'ping and tears' like this'
Can' you' rea'lly defeat' your foes',
Do' you' think', ig'no'ring the gods'?
Your' **on'ly**' path' to a vic't'ry
Will' be' due' re'spect' for the gods', not' tears'!

ELECTRA

There' is not a'ny god' in heav'n'
Cares' one' jot' for my desp'rate cries',
Nor' heeds' fa'ther's unfair' death'.
Tra'gic' vic'tim of mur'd'er'!
Tra'gic' son', poor' ex'ile who lives' -
So' far' from' home', wan'd'ring abroad',
A pathetic hired la'bourer, toi'ling all day', though (a)
Prince' sired' **by**' such a fa'ther!
Mean'time' here' in a shack' I live'
Pi'ning', poor' and depressed', alone'
Ba'nished far' from my fa'ther's halls':
This' bleak' place' on the hill'side';
Whilst' my' mo'ther' fro'lics in bed',
Soaked' in' blood', with her lo'ver.

CHORUS LEADER

Your mother's sister Helen was the cause
Of so much pain for family, and Greece

ELECTRA [*Spotting Orestes and Pylades hiding*]

Ahhh!
Girls, our lamentation has to stop, because

Look there! Those strangers lurking near the house,
Behind the altar! Help! They're coming out.
Be Quick! They mean us harm. Go down the path!
And I shall run inside and lock the doors.

ORESTES

Wait! Wait, you foolish girl! Don't be afraid!

ELECTRA [*as she moves to embrace the statue of Apollo outside her house*]

Apollo! Don't let me be killed, I pray.

ORESTES

Not you. I've enemies I'd rather kill.

ELECTRA [*as he moves to embrace her*]

Get off! Don't touch what you've no right to touch.

ORESTES

There's no one I've more right to touch!

ELECTRA

So why stake out my house with sword in hand?

ORESTES

I'll tell you if you wait. You'll understand.

ELECTRA

You're far too strong for me. I'm here, all yours.

ORESTES [*deciding to play safe*]

Your brother! I have news of him for you.

ELECTRA

You darling man! He is alive... not dead?

ORESTES

Alive. I like to spread the good news first.

ELECTRA

The gods bless, and reward you! Welcome words!

ORESTES

I want us both to share the gods' blessing.

ELECTRA

Sad fugitive! Where is his sad life spent?

ORESTES

Drifting from place to place. He has no home.

ELECTRA

He finds enough to live on, day to day?

ORESTES

Yes, but a homeless man is vulnerable.

ELECTRA

What is the message that you've brought from him?

ORESTES

To see if you're alive, and, how you are.

ELECTRA

You'll surely notice first how thin I am.

ORESTES

Stress makes one lose weight. It's not nice to see.

ELECTRA

My hair! Scalped like a nomad from the Steppes!

ORESTES

You hurt! Your brother lost. Your father dead.

ELECTRA [*she weeps*]

O who could ever be more loved than them?

ORESTES

Do you not think your brother loves you too?

ELECTRA

But he's not here. He'd be here if he did.

ORESTES

Why do you live out here, so far from town?

ELECTRA

I'm married, friend. A marriage worse than death.

ORESTES

Your brother' d be distressed. He is from Argos?

ELECTRA [*nods*]

But not who father planned to wed me to.

ORESTES

Tell all, so that your brother can be told.

ELECTRA [*gesturing*]

Here's where I live, a yokel, in the sticks.

ORESTES

Somewhere a farm-boy or a navvy'd live!

ELECTRA [*disliking Orestes' snobbish prejudice; regretting her melodramatic stance*]

He's poor, but decent. Always shows respect.

ORESTES

Decent? Respect? A man like that? I mean!

ELECTRA

He's not yet ... shown the urge to share my bed.

ORESTES

Religious thing? Or just not interested?

ELECTRA [*defensively; she won't let Orestes insult her husband gratuitously*]

He's anxious not to shame my ancestry.

ORESTES

How pleased he must have been to marry you ...

ELECTRA

No. He who gave me to him had no right.

ORESTES

... afraid, though, how Orestes might react!

ELECTRA

Scared yes, but still a man with self-control.

ORESTES [*realising he's jumped to the wrong conclusion about Electra's husband*]

Sorry.

You have a decent man. Let's treat him well.

ELECTRA

Yes, when once the absentee comes home again.

ORESTES

Your mother - how could she let this occur?

ELECTRA

A woman loves her lover, not her child.

ORESTES

Why did Aegisthus take against you so?

ELECTRA

Married to him, my kids would pose no threat ...

ORESTES

... of growing up to take revenge on him?

ELECTRA

He thought! One day he'll pay for all he did.

ORESTES

He knows your marriage wasn't consummated?

ELECTRA

Of course not! No one breathed a word to him.

ORESTES

Are these who listen to our talk all friends?

ELECTRA

Yes. Anything we say is safe with them.

ORESTES

What would Orestes do, suppose he came?

ELECTRA

You need to ask? For shame! It's time to act!

ORESTES

He'll come. To kill his father's killers. How?

ELECTRA

Ruthlessly. Ruthless as they were to him.

ORESTES

Could you be ruthless? Help him kill your mother?

ELECTRA

I'll use the axe she killed my father with.

ORESTES

I'll tell him then. You have no doubts, no qualms?

ELECTRA

My mother's blood! Once it's been shed, I'll die!

ORESTES [*He sighs, realising that Electra is far more determined than he is*]

Er, Yes!

I wish Orestes could have heard your words.

ELECTRA

I would not know him if I saw him, friend.

ORESTES

No wonder. Both were young when torn apart.

ELECTRA

Of all my friends there's only one who'd know...

ORESTES

You mean the man who spirited him away?

ELECTRA

My father's tutor then - an old man now.

ORESTES

Your murdered father - has he got a tomb?

ELECTRA

He got ... what he got. Dumped outside the walls.

ORESTES [*He cries out, but quickly realises he's in danger of giving himself away*]

My god, how brutal. Sometimes strangers' pain
Can lead to feelings that force one to weep.
But tell me so I know what fearful things
To tell Orestes, things he has to hear.
You can't feel pity if you're ignorant:
You have to know. But this is very true:
To overthink a question leads to problems too.

CHORUS LEADER

And I have just the same desire as him.
A country girl, I don't hear much about
The goings-on in town. I'm keen to learn!

ELECTRA

I'll set out, since I can't refuse a friend,
The heavy blows of fate, my own and father's.
And when you've learned my story, please, my friend
Do let Orestes know the family's pain.
My clothes! This old horse-blanket for a dress,
The mud I'm caked in! And look at the shack
I slum it in, denied the royal house!
Working the loom myself to make our clothes,
And fetching water from the stream myself!
No festivals, no dancing, - and no joy!
Embarrassed too, to mix with other wives
As I'm a virgin; I turned down Castor -
Who courted me (before he was a god) -
Despite my royal blood, I was ashamed.

The while my mother sits enthroned, amidst
The luxuries from Troy; around her fawn
The Asian slave girls whom my father took -
In oriental linens held in place with brooches
Made of gold! Meanwhile, congealed and black,
My father's blood stains palace floors; the man
Who murdered him rides in **his** chariot
And, sneering, totes in hands that reek of blood

My father's sceptre, when he led the Greeks.
And Agamemnon's grave gets no respect:
There have been no libations poured, no myrtle
Boughs, no fire, no offered sacrifice.
My mother's husband, all boozed-up, they say,
Our glorious leader, jumps on father's tomb,
And pelts his gravestone, hurling rocks at it.
Then has the gall to taunt us with such words:
"Where is your little boy? where is Orestes?
Good job he's here to keep your tomb from harm!"
Easy to mock a man he dare not face.

My friend, I'm asking you, to tell my tale.
My hands; the words I use; my broken heart;*[accompanied by gestures]*
My hair; and how his father's been abused;
All could have spoken up for me, but it
Was only I could put things into words.

How shameful if his father conquered Troy
And he could not kill one man, one on one:
He's young and comes from so much better stock.

CHORUS LEADER

But I can see someone, your husband, there, *[pointing]*
He's finished work and on his way back home.

AUTOURGOS *[Striding in angrily]*

What the hell?
Who are these foreigners beside my door?
What are they doing here so far from town
Outside my house? Do they want me? It's a
Disgrace. My wife hob-nobbing with these men!

ELECTRA

My darling, don't be cross with me. No need
To worry; you'll soon know the truth. These men
Have come to bring news of Orestes! Yes!

AUTOURGOS

What do they have to say? Is he alive?

ELECTRA

They say he is, and I believe their words.

AUTOURGOS

Knows what his father went through, and you too?

ELECTRA

I hope. But on the run, one has no power.

AUTOURGOS

And why was it Orestes sent them here?

ELECTRA

They've come to check how bad things are with me.

AUTOURGOS

Then most of it they see! The rest you'll tell 'em.

ELECTRA

They're up to date. There's nothing I've left out.

AUTOURGOS

We should have shown them in ages ago!

Come on inside! your news is excellent,

And I shall entertain you, nothing spared.

You men, pick up your stuff and take it in. [*To Orestes' slaves: but they don't take orders from the Autourgos*]

Don't say you won't; you're welcome here as friends [*To Orestes and Pylades, as they seem reluctant to demean themselves by entering his hovel*]

Of one who's dear. Though I'm a poor man, I

Still have the manners of a gentleman.

He leads the way inside. Orestes Pylades and Electra hesitate in the porch.

ORESTES

Ye gods!

Is this the man pretending not to be

Your husband, not to harm Orestes' name?

ELECTRA

He's known to all as poor Electra's man.

ORESTES

You can't tell if a man is good or not.
It's hard. His background's not a guide, because
I've known a first-ranked father's son amount
To nothing, while a pauper has great sons;
A rich man's mind is starved of noble thoughts:
A generous spirit's in a humble man.

What yardstick can one use to judge aright?
Money? That's not a good criterion.
Or lack of it? There is a sad disease
Called poverty which turns a good man bad.
See him in action? But how can you tell
For sure in heat of battle who is good?
All these are random: let's ignore them all.

This guy is no one big in Argos, nor
Does he boast of some ancient family tree,
He's from the hoi polloi, but still the best.
Some people think they know so much;
They're full of wind, believing they can judge
Men by their class and company they keep.

Such chaps provide the backbone of the state,
And family. Those rich and gormless hunks
Provide eye-candy for the market-place.
Nor is a muscle-man much use in war:
There outcome's down to character or guts.

We both - the one who's here and he who's not -
The son of Agamemnon whom we serve -
Feel honoured by your invitation. Thanks!
You servants may proceed into the house. [*The slaves go in*]
For me a willing host who's poor is more
Desirable than one who's merely rich.

This man deserves our gratitude for how
He's welcomed us. Though I'd have rather had
Your brother's invitation to his home
If he'd reclaimed the palace for his own,
"Mission accomplished". But perhaps he'll come.
We know Apollo's prophecies come true,
But those of mankind sadly seldom do.

Orestes and Pylades go into the hut with their slaves; The Autourgos is standing in the doorway to show them in. Electra beckons him to her.

CHORUS LEADER

Much more now than before, Electra, we
Are feeling happiness warming our hearts.
Perhaps your change of fortune's on the way!

ELECTRA [*to her husband*]

You idiot! There's nothing in the house!
They're your superiors. Why invite them in?

AUTOURGOS

So? Why not? If their breeding's genuine
They'll have the class to take both rough and smooth.

ELECTRA

Well. The "rough diamond" now must smooth things out!
Go to the man - dear father's tutor once -
Who's now a shepherd pasturing his flock
Way out of town - he's not allowed in now -
Near where the river Tanaus divides
The Spartan lands from Argos. Tell him straight
About our visitors and say come quick
And bring us something they can have to eat!
He'll be delighted, and give thanks to the gods
Hearing the boy he rescued is alive.
My mother? I won't ask her for a thing,
No handouts from the family home! How mad
The bitch would be to know Orestes lives!

AUTOURGOS

All right, then, if you want me to, I'll tell
The old man what you say. Don't hang about;
Go in and sort things out. There's always lots
A woman finds to improvise a meal!
There's plenty in the house: enough
To entertain them for a day at least.

Electra goes inside.

At times like these I often start to have
Thoughts about money. Yes, it has a use

To give friends presents, or to spend
What's needed if a person becomes ill.
But, really, day to day does money matter?
Rich or poor a meal still makes you fatter!

He goes into his hut.

CHORUS (FIRST STASIMON)

Fa'mous' war'ships! Troy' was your des'tina'tion! [*Strophe 1*]
Who' could have dared' count' the oars' men?
Spee' ding' ships' set Ne' reïds dan' cing
As alongside' swam the flute' -loving
Dol' phin' lea' ping across' the dark' -
Blue' prow's washed' by the sea' -
Spray', safe' -guarding The' tis's son - ~ ~
Pe' lides', light' in the spring' of his feet, ["Achilles" can't fit the metre]
And Agamem' non, to land' fall by ~ ~ ~
Simois' del' ta on Troy's' coast'. ~ ~ ~

From' Eu' boea', Ne' reus's daugh' ters brought arms' [*Antistrophe1*] - - ~ ~ ~
Forged' in He' phaes' tus's work' -shop, ~ ~ ~
New' -made' wea' pons, fa' shioned from pure' gold',
Up to the moun' tains, by Pe' lion,
Sac' red' Os' sa, the heights' where the
Woods' give' shel' ter to Nymphs':
Wherein' dwells' old' Chei' ron, who raised' ~ -
Gree' ce's fi' nest; the Cen' taur who trained' ~ -
Thetis's son' as a war' rior ~ ~ ~
Who'd lend his speed' to th' Atri' dae'. ~ ~ ~

Down' by the har' bour in Nau' plia some' one from Troy' [*Strophe 2*]
Helped' us all' to pic' ture
Scenes' dis' played' on your famed' shield',
Won' drous' cir' cular shield' of yours',
Fear' some devi' ces to ter' rify
Ilium's defen' ders'. ~ ~ ~
On the rim Per' seus was shown', who's just' ~ ~ ~
Se' vered the head' of the Gor' gon, and now he
Totes' it, thanks to his winged' san' dals, in flight' o' ver the o' cean;
With him Her' mes, Zeus' s run' ner, ' ~ ~
Maia' s boy', born' in the coun' try near' here'. - -

And' on the boss' of his glis' tering shield' shone the sun', [*Antistrophe 2*]
Lu' minous' and dazzl' ing,
Winged' steeds' draw' ing his car' riage,

Heav'n's' for' ma' tions were there', the stars',
Plei' ades, Hy' ades - fear' some sight',
Intimidating Hec' tor! [an extra syllable: "terrifying" fits if you prefer]
Whilst on his hel' met of ham' mered gold',
Vic' tims of spells' of the Sphinx' es you can see
In' their ta' lons. The breast' -plate' had the Chimae' ra retrea' ting,
Breathing fire', with claws' unsheathed', when
She' spies' Pe' gasus, Gor' gon's off' spring.

And' on his blood' -spattered spear' -shaft a quar' tet of hor' ses [Epode]
There gal' loped', clouds' of dust' bil' lowing behind. - ^ ^
Tyn' da' reus' daugh' ter! There was a king' - - ^
Of men like this' migh' ty warr' ior:
It was because of your bed' he died'.
Your' debt' shall' be paid' very soon;
Death' shall' come' from the gods' above'.
I'll have the pleasure of seeing your neck'
Se' vered by steel' as your life' -blood spurts' free'.

A very old man (he was Agamemnon's tutor once) is making his way painfully towards the cottage. He's carrying a lamb (live?), cheeses and a skin of wine.

OLD MAN

Where? Where's my little lady, my princess?
Agamemnon's child, the girl I helped to raise?
What a steep climb she has up to her house,
A struggle for an old cripple like me!
No mind! For friends I have to force myself,
Despite my back and poor old aching knees!

Electra comes out of the hut with a slave or two.

My daughter! There you are, I see you now!
Here's something from my flock I've brought for you:
A newborn lamb I've chosen specially,
Some garlands, and some cheeses I've picked out;
A vintage wine that I've been saving up,
Not much, but what a bouquet! You can add [he probably mispronounces the word bouquet]
A drop to weaker stuff - then there's a drink!
Go one of you and take it for the guests. [A slave carries it all inside. The Old Man breaks down with emotion.]
Excuse me, while I wipe my eyes. My poor
Old cloak is getting soaked with all these tears!

ELECTRA

What are these tears of yours about, old fellow?

Reminded of my pain of long ago?
Because my poor Orestes can't be here?
Or do you mourn my father, whom you cradled,
Raised up? No good it brought to you or yours!

OLD MAN

No! Yet I never took it lying down;
Along my way I made a detour to his tomb.
It was deserted, so I sat, had a good cry.
I'd brought that wine-skin for your guests; I poured
Some out, and put myrtle sprigs round the grave.
And then I saw it. Right there on the hearth:
An offering! A sheep, a black-fleeced sheep,
Just freshly sacrificed, its blood still wet!
And locks of hair, fair hair, quite new!
But who on earth, my love, thought I, had dared
Approach the tomb? No Argive would for sure.
Maybe, your brother, coming secretly,
Was shocked to find his father's grave neglected.
Look at the hair, compare it with your own,
See if the colour of it matches yours!
Often when folks do share a father's blood,
Their features too can be the very same!

ELECTRA

You're talking like an old man and a fool.
My brother's brave. There's no way he'd sneak home
So furtively. Aegisthus can't scare him!
And how could locks of hair be "just the same"?
Men's hair gets rough from sport and wrestling,
Women's gets brushed and cared for. What rubbish!
And anyway you find hair "just the same"
In people not related, you old fool! [*she means it teasingly rather than aggressively*]

OLD MAN

The shoe print! Step in it and see if it's
The same size as your foot, my little one!

ELECTRA

The land round here is solid rock; how come
There'd be a footprint? Even if there was,
Still male and female siblings do not have
The same-sized feet. The man's is bigger, always.

OLD MAN

If it's him, if he's come, you'd know him by
Something he's wearing, by the clothes you wove
For him before I smuggled him away.

ELECTRA

You do know that Orestes left when I
Was just a girl? Suppose I'd had the skill, though,
Would he now be wearing baby things
Unless the clothes grew with the boy?
No no.
A passer-by felt sympathy, and made
An offering at the tomb. Maybe it was
One of my guests, who slipped in past the guards.

OLD MAN

These guests, where are they? I'd so love to see
Them and to question them about your brother.

ELECTRA

No problem. Right on cue they're coming out.

Orestes and Pylades come out of the hut.

OLD MAN *[peering at them; to himself]*

They look like gents all right, but looks can lie.
There's plenty seems like gents who ain't no good.
Anyways. *[to Orestes and Pylades]* Good day, my friends, you're welcome here!

ORESTES

Good day to you, old fellow! *[aside to Electra]* Whose is this
Antique relic, Electra? Some neighbour's?

ELECTRA

This is the man, my friend, who raised my father.

ORESTES

You mean the one who got your brother out?

ELECTRA

He saved his life, yes, if he does still live.

ORESTES

What the ...?

He's peering at me like a dodgy coin
Among his change. Checking me out?

ELECTRA

Just pleased to see one of Orestes' friends?

ORESTES

We're close, of course. But why's he walking round me?

ELECTRA

I've no idea. He's got me wondering too.

OLD MAN

My lady! Pray, my daughter, to the gods!

ELECTRA

For what? So many things I need in life!

OLD MAN

A treasure's been uncovered by the god!

ELECTRA

OK. I'm praying. What nonsense is this?

OLD MAN

Look at him, girl, the man you love the best!

ELECTRA

I've looked. You are more senile than I thought!

OLD MAN

Too old to know I'm looking at ... your brother?

ELECTRA

You're going much too far, you ancient fool!

OLD MAN

I'm looking at Orestes, Agamemnon's son.

ELECTRA

You do have some convincing proof, I hope?

OLD MAN

The scar above his eye. He got it when
He fell and cut himself when both of you
Once chased a baby deer around the house.

ELECTRA

You're serious. I can see where he fell.

OLD MAN

Then why not ... give the one you love a hug!

ELECTRA

Nothing to stop me now! Your evidence
Dispels all doubt. [*to Orestes, as they embrace*] You're here at last!
I never thought you'd come

ORESTES

... and nor did I,

ELECTRA

I'd given up all hope ...

ORESTES

... and so had I.

ELECTRA

It's really you?

ORESTES

It's me, your one true friend.
If I pull off the move I've got in mind....
Well. There's no gain from trusting in the gods
Unless they let right triumph over wrong,
And we reclaim the place where we belong.

As brother and sister hug each other, the Chorus dances and sings

CHORAL CELEBRATION (585 - 595)

It has come, it has come, day' that we so longed' for! Yes!
You have shown' us your light', a clear' new dawn!
Our bright' bea'con, hope' for this' ci'ty, you'
Were an out'cast, were ba'nished far' away'
From fa'mily' and home'. [family as 2 syllables]
It's a god', yes, a god' bringing vic'tory to us', [victory as 2 syllables]
El'ec'tra', dear friend!
Lift your hands in the air and lift up your voice!' Say' a prayer!
Pray' the gods' Ores'tes' may find'
Good for'tune' in Ar'gos now' he's' back home!'

ORESTES [*extracting himself from the embrace*]

Enough. I have enjoyed my welcome home,
The hugs. We shall have more, all in good time.
Old man, you've come here at a crucial point.
How best pay back my father's murderer?
Advice. My mother too, his evil wife.
Do I in Argos have some credit left,
Or am I bankrupt - out of friends, and luck?
Who can I join? Should it be done by day
Or after dark? My route, what should I choose?

OLD MAN

You're on your own, my boy, you have no friends.
It would be quite a find indeed - someone
To share the good times and the bad.
You're at rock bottom, seems to me, your friends
Have given up all hope of better times.

It's all now up to you, your strength, your luck,
If you can get your home and country back.

ORESTES

To reach this goal, what do I have to do?

OLD MAN

Thyestes' son: kill him, your mother too.

ORESTES

The prize I came for. How to win it, though?

OLD MAN

Don't even think of getting through the walls.

ORESTES

There's guards and observation posts?

OLD MAN

Of course. He fears you. He's always alert.

ORESTES

OK. What plan do you suggest, old chap?

OLD MAN

Listen to me. I've had a good idea.

ORESTES

Then I'm all ears. Don't keep it to yourself!

OLD MAN

I saw Aegisthus on my way to you.

ORESTES

I see where this is leading! Whereabouts?

OLD MAN

Quite near. The paddock where his horses graze.

ORESTES

What was he up to? This could crack the nut!

OLD MAN

A feast in honour of the nymphs, I thought.

ORESTES

To celebrate a birth, or pregnancy?

OLD MAN

Don't know. He was set up to kill a bull.

ORESTES

How many men with him? Or just some slaves?

OLD MAN

No men from Argos. Household staff, that's all.

ORESTES

No one who'd recognise me, I presume?

OLD MAN

They're palace slaves who'd never have seen you.

ORESTES

If I succeed, would they be on my side?

OLD MAN

Of course. Slaves always know what's best for them.

ORESTES

So how can I get close enough to him?

OLD MAN

Go where he'll see you as he kills the bull.

ORESTES

His paddock must be just beside the road.

OLD MAN

He'll see you and invite you to the feast.

ORESTES

God willing, a bad choice of guest!

OLD MAN

Then on you'll have to take things as they come.

ORESTES

Quite so. But where's my mother in all this?

OLD MAN

She's still In Argos. But she'll join the feast.

ORESTES

Why did she not drive out there with her husband?

OLD MAN

Because she feared a public show of hate.

ORESTES

I see. She knows what people think of her.

OLD MAN

Just so. A female criminal is loathed.

ORESTES

How can I kill both her - and him - together?

ELECTRA *[interrupting, and taking over from her brother]*

I shall arrange our mother's death myself.

ORESTES

I'll trust to luck then my part turns out well.

ELECTRA

Let this man help us both fulfill our tasks.

OLD MAN

I will. What thoughts about your mother's death?

ELECTRA

Go, my old friend to Clytemnestra; tell
Her this: I've had a baby; it's a boy.

OLD MAN

The birth; some time ago, or recently?

ELECTRA

Ten days have passed. He's in the family now.

OLD MAN

And how is this connected with her death?

ELECTRA

She'll come hoping I'm weak and cannot cope

OLD MAN

What makes you think she cares for you at all?

ELECTRA

Oh yes.
She'll weep at what a common brat I have!

OLD MAN

Maybe. But aren't we veering off the point?

ELECTRA

No. Once she gets here she's as good as dead.

OLD MAN

She walks right up to your front door, and then ...

ELECTRA

Her death will be a step or two away.

OLD MAN

Once I've seen that, I'll lay me down and die.

ELECTRA

Your first job though's to show Orestes where...

OLD MAN

Aegisthus sacrifices to the gods?

ELECTRA

And then to tell my mother all my news.

OLD MAN

'Twill be as if she heard it from your very lips!

ELECTRA

Orestes, off to work. First blood to you!

ORESTES

I'm ready. Just show me the way, lead on!

OLD MAN

And I can't wait to take you there. Let's go!

But first the three of them must pray for success, to Zeus, Hera and Agamemnon's ghost.

ORESTES

Our father, Zeus, who turn'st our foes to flight
Help us; for we have suffered helplessly.

OLD MAN

Aye, help a clan whose ancestor thou art.

ELECTRA

O Hera, queen, goddess supreme in Argos,
Send us victorious, if our cause is just.

OLD MAN

Aye, queen, help them avenge their father's death.

ORESTES

And thou, below this earth, our murdered father ...

ELECTRA

...Thou, earth, goddess, as I pound thee with my fists...

OLD MAN

Look after them, these children in thy care ...

ORESTES

Rouse all the dead to rally to our cause ...

ELECTRA

Rouse those who helped thee win the war in Troy ...

OLD MAN

And all who hate a bloody murderer!

ORESTES

Hast heard, thou whom our mother foully used?

OLD MAN

He's heard it all, I know. 'Tis time to act!

ELECTRA

Yes, all. *Your* task is clear: become a man!
<No time to doubt what *you* must do, whilst I ...>
Shall go indoors and ... organise *my* part.
And if the news from you is good,
There'll be a celebration here: if not ...
The opposite. We'll know you're dead. That's all.

To the Chorus

You girls, spread out, so you may instantly
Report on how the 'contest' went; meanwhile
With sword in hand, I'll keep a sharp lookout. [*She's threatening suicide*]
For if we lose, I'll give my enemy
No chance to rape or torture me.

Orestes, Pylades, and the Old Man and their slaves leave purposefully; Electra goes into her hut, leaving the Chorus to sing:

CHORUS (SECOND STASIMON)

From the hills' came a lamb', quite a young' one' – as [*Strophe 1*]
An old le'gend infor'ms us',
Sto'ry as old' as the moun'tains'
Myth' oft' told', now' show'ing its age' -
This' lamb's fleece' was spe'cial, gol'den,
And Pan', who' guar'ded the flocks',
Pi'ping sweet' mu'sic, made' her a gift
To Ar'gos'. On a rock' stood a
He'rald', tell'ing the peo'ple', "Come',
Come and look', men of Ar'gos, see'
What' fine' gift' your illustrious king'
Has' just received'! A won'drous',
Ma'gical, mi'racle!"
All danced' and gave' ho'nour to the house' of At'reus.

Then the per'fume of fran'kincense waf'ted 'up' [*Antistrophe 1*]
As the al'tars all o'ver Ar'gos'
Lit' up the town' with their fires' bla'zing;

Then' flutes' breathed' forth' beaut'iful sounds' -
Ins'truments' that work' for the Mu'ses -
As bliss'ful' voi'ces rang out';
Joy' for that' lamb' of gold' that had come [*the lamb confers legitimacy, but not on Atreus, as we expect...*]
To Thy'es'tes! Who'd sec'retly [*an abrupt change of tone to shock and outrage.*]
Se'duced' At'reus's lo'vely' wife!
Like a thief', it was he' who' brought'
To' his' house' the miraculous lamb'.
Gloa'ting, he bragged' to Ar'gos':
"I' have the gol'den lamb'
It's *my*' house holds' this sym'bol of ro'yal king'ship'!"

Then at once', in a flash' [*Strophe 2*]
The' daz'zing' sun' and the brill'iant stars'
Changed' their' cour'ses, or'dered by Zeus'.
The pal'lor of Dawn' reversed':
Hence' the Sun' with his bla'zing heat'
Now' drives' west'wards across' the sky'.
In the north' now the clouds' and rain':
South's' de'serts are dus'ty and dry';
Drought' rules', and' no'thing can grow';
Zeus' no' lon'ger' sends' them his coo'ling showers'.

That's the myth'! Not that I'
Am' my'self' at' all' taken in'.
Some'how' so'lar' cour'ses reverse'?
Sun's or'bit can de'viate'?
Pu'nish' all' in the world' because'
One' man' up'set the gods' above'?
To make sure' Jus'tice was done'?
Such' sto'ries are fright'ening to men',
But' should' bring' les'sons to learn'.
When' you' killed' your' hus'band you had' not learned'!

A CHORUS MEMBER

Quiet! Listen!
Did I imagine it, or did you hear
A distant noise like tremors underground?
It's there again, hark, carried by the breeze.
Electra, quick, come out here now, at once!

ELECTRA

What's up my friends? News that we've won the game?

CHORUS LEADER

I only know I heard a noise like death.

ELECTRA

I heard it too; it sounded far away.

CHORUS LEADER

It was a long way off, but plain to hear.

ELECTRA

From Argos? Or could it have been my friends?

CHORUS LEADER

Who knows? There were too many sounds mixed up.

ELECTRA

This means my death. I shan't wait any more.

She turns to go back inside to kill herself

CHORUS LEADER

Wait! Wait! Until you know what's up for sure!

ELECTRA

No point. We've lost - or someone would have come.

CHORUS LEADER

They will. To kill a king's no easy task!

A messenger, one of Orestes' slaves, rushes in.

MESSENGER

Women of Argos! Victory is ours!

Orestes won! Good news for all his friends.

Aegisthus, Agamemnon's murderer

Lies dead. We all need now to thank the gods.

ELECTRA

Who are you? Why should I trust what you say?

MESSENGER

Surely you know me. I'm your brother's slave!

ELECTRA

My dear, I do know who you are. My worry
Caused me not to recognise your face.
What news? The evil killer of my father's dead?

MESSENGER

He's dead. I tell you twice – is that your wish?

ELECTRA

Justice, you saw, you came! The gods be thanked.
What was the method used? I need to know
Exactly how they killed Thyestes' son.

MESSENGER

We started walking from the cottage here,
And soon we joined a rutted cart track, which
Led us to where Argos' new ruler was.
We found him strolling in a lush garden,
Picking a sprig of myrtle for his hair.
He called to us: "Welcome, my friends! Who are
You, where're you from? And where're you travelling to?"
Orestes answered "We're Thessalians
Olympia bound, to sacrifice to Zeus".
Aegisthus swallowed this and then replied:
"Well then, you all must join me at the feast
And share our meal. I'm just about to kill
A calf in honour of the Nymphs. Tomorrow,
Get up early and go on your way!"
He put his arms round them and showed them in.
"Come on inside. I won't accept the answer no!"

As soon as we were in the house, he said:
"Let someone bring some water for my friends,
So they can stand beside the altar duly cleansed."
Orestes said: "We have already washed,
In the clear water of a running stream.
If visitors can be allowed to share

A sacrifice with locals, we're prepared.
Your majesty, do not turn us away."

That's how they dared to speak, quite brazenly!
His slaves, setting their hands to work, put down
The spears that gave the king security.
Some brought the bowls for blood, while some
Brought baskets; others lit the fire and put
The cooking pots in place. All bustled noisily.
And then your mother's bed-mate took some barley
Grains and threw them on the fire, and said:
"Nymphs of the rocks, once more I sacrifice:
May Clytemnestra, my dear wife, and I
Continue in good fortune as we do
And may bad things come to our enemies."

He meant your brother and yourself. Orestes,
Though, silently prayed the opposite:
To get his home back. Then Aegisthus took
A knife, a straight one honed for sacrifice,
And from the calf he cut a single hair
And tossed it on the fire. His slaves shouldered
The beast for him to cut its throat. He said:
"Thessalians have two outstanding skills
Breaking a horse, and butchering a bull,
Or so they boast. So, choose a knife, my friend,
Show what Thessalians can really do!"

Orestes picked a good sharp Doric knife,
Unpinned his cloak and tossed it off his back,
And then chose Pylades as his assistant,
Pushing back the slaves. He grabbed the calf's
Leg, wrenched it hard, then slit and stripped away
The skin, exposing white meat. All this took
About the time a sprinter'd run two laps.
He bared the flanks; Aegisthus took the sacred
Parts and studied them. The liver had
A missing lobe! The portal vein, gall-bladder
Too, foretold of danger imminent:
Bad news indeed for who'd examined them.
His face was ashen. Then my master asked:
"What's up? You seem distressed." "My friend," he said,
"I fear a plot, some scheme dreamed up abroad;
The son of Agamemnon is to me,
My family too, a deadly enemy."
"How could you fear a man who's on the run?"
Orestes said, "you are this country's king!"

No, no! This Doric knife's no good. Bring us
A cleaver, so that I can break its ribcage.
Then we'll reach the choicest bits and have
A real feast!" Then he began to chop.
He passed the giblets to Aegisthus, who
Then studied them. But as he bowed his head,
Your brother raised himself to his full height,
Then striking from behind, he smashed his spine.
Aegisthus' body twitched this way and that:
He writhed, he gasped and died – an ugly death.

The slaves who'd watched this grabbed their spears at once:
So many against two. But Pylades
Stood by Orestes as they faced the mob,
Both fighting back courageously. He said,
Your brother, "I've not come in enmity,
To hurt this city, nor the palace slaves.
I've taken vengeance for my father's death.
Ill-used Orestes. Do not kill me, please!
Once you were all my father's men." And they,
On hearing this, put down their spears. An old
household retainer realised who he was.
At once they garlanded your brother's head;
They cheered and celebrated. Soon he'll come
Bringing to show you – not the Gorgon's head –
But him you loathe, Aegisthus. Now he's dead
He's paid in blood for all the blood he shed.

And with that, Orestes' servant leaves to rejoin his master. The young girls of the chorus break into a spontaneous dance of celebration – and try to get Electra to join them.

CHORUS

Let's dance', let us jump' for joy', dear' love,
Like' fawns' do', leap' in the air'!
It's' ec'stasy'! We're' wal'king on clouds', rap'tu'rous'!
Your' bro'ther has won' a prize' far' far' grea'ter than a'ny
Crown' for a win' at the Games'
At Olym'pi'a, where Al'pheus's streams' flow.
Chant' the vic't'ry' hymn', sing'ing while' we dance'.

ELECTRA

O daylight! O ye chariot of the sun!
A world of night was all I saw before,
I'm free to look up at the glorious sky:

My father's killer, Aegisthus, is dead!
There must be crowns or garlands tucked away
Inside – my friends, let's bring them out, come on!
I'll crown my brother for his victory.

A couple of girls run off to fetch the garlands.

CHORUS

Go' and get a crown' for his head', then':
Our' job shall be' to go on'
Dan'cing the way' we are', for the Mu'ses' delight'.
Today' now the ru'lers we love' are back' in power'
Our' royal fa'mily's back'!
For right' rule' o'vercomes wrong', and defeats' it.
Voi'ces blend' with flutes', sing'ing, sha'ring joy'!

The girls give Electra the garlands. Orestes and Pylades enter accompanied by slaves carrying the corpse of Aegisthus. They dump it on the ground.

ELECTRA

Triumphant son, whose father triumphed, when
He won the war at Troy, Orestes, you
Must wear this garland in your hair for me.
You've not come home victorious in some
Quite futile running-race, but you have killed
Our enemy Aegisthus, Father's murderer.
And you, his comrade, son whose father was
So well-respected, Pylades, accept
This crown from me. You equally deserve
The prize. And may the two of you receive
The best of fortune now and evermore.

ORESTES

It is the gods, Electra, you should first
Consider architects of our good luck.
Then praise us, as the gods' accomplices.
I planned to kill Aegisthus, and that's what
I've done. To prove I did, beyond all doubt,
Here is his body. Now the choice is yours: [*He has discovered his inner psychopath*]
To throw it out for beasts to rip apart,
Or nail it to a post, a tempting bait
For eager vultures wheeling overhead.
The man who owned you now belongs to you.

ELECTRA [*Their roles have reversed: he now has the bloodlust while she is nervous*]

Something feels not quite right. Let me explain.

ORESTES

What? Tell me! There's no need to be afraid!

ELECTRA

People hate those who violate a corpse.

ORESTES

No one would blame you, nobody at all!

ELECTRA

They do not like us in the town. They'd talk.

ORESTES

You're free to speak your mind. Speak out! Our hate
For him goes on, Electra. There's no truce.

ELECTRA [*addressing the corpse in front of her, and finding her passion again.*]

Well then! I had a lengthy list of crimes
That I rehearsed each day to hurl at you
If once I dared confront you face to face,
And somehow lost my fear. And now I have!
So what beginning, middle and what end
Shall my speech have? It's time to pay you back,
And curse you as I longed to when you lived.

You wrecked our lives. You made us fatherless,
Me and Orestes who'd done you no wrong,
Debauched our mother, killed her husband. He
Commanded all the Greeks, you never went
To Troy. And then you showed yourself a fool
Hoping our mother would prove true to you
Although she'd shamed my father's bed.
When a man through secret lust, seduces
Someone else's wife, and has to marry her,
Surely he's not so stupid as to think
A wife who strayed before won't stray again.
Your life was bad. How bad, you did not know.

You knew full well your marriage was quite wrong,
And so did she, my mother. But, you evil pair,
You each inflamed the other's wickedness.
And everyone in Argos used to say
That "He's her husband," never "She's his wife".

What a disgrace then, when the woman rules
The roost, and not the man; and I detest
It when the sons are known all over town
As "mother's brats" and not their father's boys.
And should he wed into a higher class,
The man's ignored: it's all about the wife.
Worse; you deceived yourself, you fool - you thought
Acquiring wealth would make you somebody.
But wealth is not one's friend for all that long:
It's character that lasts, while money goes.
It's character that stays, and rescues you
When times get hard. Wealth's flowering's brief:
His chums are wicked men and evil deeds.
And when he's wrecked your home he sneaks away.

But you and women? I'm a girl, not married
So I must be careful what I say.
Good looks, a royal background - even so
You constantly indulged in ... anyway
Give me a husband who's not pretty like
A girl! A proper man, whose sons are trained
For war; not just as dance-floor sensations!

Away! You've been found out at last, and paid
The penalty. If there's a criminal
Who thinks that he will keep a step ahead:
Justice can still catch up and overtake
Him though he's near the winning post. Watch out!

CHORUS

His crimes were frightening and he's paid a frightening
Price for them. For Justice has great power.

ELECTRA

Enough. Now you, my slaves, must take this corpse
And hide it so my mother doesn't know.
he's dead before it is her turn to die ...

As slaves hurriedly take the corpse into the cottage, Orestes has seen something in the distance.

ORESTES

Hold on! There's something else to think about.

ELECTRA

An armed patrol from Argos? Tell me no.

ORESTES

No! It's my mother, who gave birth to me. [*Again the roles reverse: when she is strong, he's weak*]

ELECTRA

That's great! she's heading straight into our trap.
What style! Her carriage! Dressed to kill ...

ORESTES

Or to be killed. Is that what we must do?

ELECTRA

Does seeing her bring out the mummy's boy?

ORESTES

Hell. How can I kill the one who gave me life?

ELECTRA

The way she killed our father - just the same.

ORESTES

Your words, Apollo, seem to make no sense.

ELECTRA

Apollo can't be wrong! That does make sense.

ORESTES

Not wrong to kill my mother? I cannot!

ELECTRA

To avenge your father: how can that be wrong?

ORESTES

I'd be a criminal, a murderer!

ELECTRA

Not to avenge you father - that's a sin.

ORESTES

If I killed her I'd have to pay for it.

ELECTRA

Fail to avenge your father: you'll pay too.

ORESTES

It was some devil's orders, not the god's!

ELECTRA

A bogeyman in Delphi? I think not.

ORESTES

I can't believe that's truly what he meant.

ELECTRA

You're being weak. This sounds like cowardice.
You killed Aegisthus! So we'll trap her now
Just as she caught her husband in a trap.

ORESTES

I'm going in. A fearful task awaits.
I'll do the fearful deed. If that's the will
Of god. The ordeal brings just pain, no joy.

Clytemnestra's magnificent royal carriage is seen approaching. She's arrived, intending to intimidate her daughter with the full queenly apparatus. The chorus are duly obsequious - though there's a hidden hint of what's to come .

CHORUS

O my la'dy, the queen' of our Ar'give land',
Tynda'reus's daugh'ter,
And sis'ter to those' young men', the twin sons'
Of 'Zeus', li'ving among' stars' in the hea'vens'
Shi'ning your bea'con to mor'tals at sea',
Gui'ding' sai'lors to safe'ty,
Wel'come, I praise' you as e'qual of gods',
So' great' is your wealth', your prospe'rity.
This' day' you shall have' what we owe' you',
Wel'come', queen', from your ser'vants.

As the carriage comes closer we see that the queen is attended by many beautiful expensively dressed girls. They are her share of her late husband's booty, the finest from Troy. The queen seems reluctant to set foot on the bare earth in front of the cottage.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Step off now, girls. Here, careful, take my hand
And help me down. Watch where I put my foot!
Our temples are awash with Trojan loot;
These girls are my own share, hand-picked in Troy.
I'm pleased they're mine, small compensation, though
For the child I lost to buy that victory.

ELECTRA

I know I'm just a slave of no account
A wretch expelled from the ancestral home,
But won't you let me take your royal hand?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Don't put yourself out: slaves are here for that.

ELECTRA

Why not? Aren't I a captive, refugee,
Excluded from my father's house, a victim,
Like them, a prisoner banished from my home?

CLYTEMNESTRA

And who's to blame for that? Your father's schemes
Against the ones he should have held most dear!
The truth. Once give a woman a bad name,
Her audience is biased evermore.

My problem. It's unfair. First learn the facts.
If she deserves your hatred, then hate her.
But if she doesn't, there's no call to hate.

When Tyndareus gave me to your father,
It wasn't so my children should be killed!
But he, my husband, lured my child away,
With marriage to Achilles as the bait,
He took her from our home to where his ships
Were moored at Aulis. Then he hoisted her
Above the flames and cut her tender throat:
Our daughter's, dear Iphigeneia's throat.
If it had been to stop his city's fate,
Or for his family, one life lost to save
His other children, I'd have understood.
But Helen was a slut, and her husband
Could not control a nymphomaniac:
That's why he put that child of mine to death.

Although he'd wronged me, I did not get mad;
And I would not have killed him just for that.
But he brought home a crazy lunatic,
And then installed her in our bed, hoping
To keep two wives together in one house!
Women are stupid sometimes, I'll admit,
But when one's husband takes advantage and
Deserts the wife he married, *quelle surprise*
When she hops off and finds herself a friend.
Sauce for the gander's sauce too for the goose!
But we're the ones who get called names, while they,
The men, escape, and nothing's said to them!

Imagine. If Menelaus was snatched
From home. Ought I to have had Orestes killed
To rescue Menelaus, my brother-in-law?
How well would that have worked for Agamemnon?
All right for me to suffer at his hands,
But wrong to kill my daughter's murderer?

I killed him. Got support from where I could,
From enemies. I doubt your father's friends
Would have been keen to help me with the task.

It's your turn now. You're free to prove me wrong.
Show how your father was not justly killed.

CHORUS LEADER

Your argument was sound: but it's not right.
A wife should give her husband full support,
If she's a wise one. If she disagrees with me,
Further discussion is a waste of time.

ELECTRA

Your final words to me - remember them.
You gave me freedom to defend my case.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I meant them, I'll not take them back, my child.

ELECTRA

You won't like what you hear. You'll punish me!

CLYTEMNESTRA

No fear of that. Say what you want to say.

ELECTRA

Well then I'll start. Begin at the beginning.
If only you were brighter, mother dear!
Your beauty's praised, like Helen's is: you are
Two sisters, and your mind is just like hers.
Unworthy both of your brother Castor.
She willingly accepted rape, and thus
Destroyed herself. While you destroyed someone
Who was the finest man in all of Greece.
"You killed your husband for your child" - this was
Th' excuse you used. Those who believe it don't
Know you. I do. Before the sacrifice
Was even mooted, when your husband had
Just left home, you were looking at yourself
Admiring your new hairstyle in the glass.
No wife needs beauty treatment while her man's
Away. Unless she is a whore, of course.
She has no business flaunting her good looks,
Unless she's got some evil scheme in mind.

Of all the women here in Greece you were
The only one to cheer when Troy did well,
And scowl if they were on the losing side,

Since Agamemnon might come back from war!

You might have been admired for self-restraint.
Aegisthus! Was he in truth a better catch?
Better than he whom Greece put in command?
Your sister Helen's crimes were so obscene:
Compared with her you could have won high praise:
Bad deeds make good ones shine more obviously.

Move on. My father killed your daughter, yes?
How did Orestes or myself offend?
What wrong did we do? With our father dead
Why did we not inherit his estates?
You used our property to buy a man,
And lured him to your bed at our expense!
Why wasn't he banished for banishing
Your son? Or later put to death because
He murdered me, made me a living corpse:
A fate much worse than Iphigeneia's?
If murder must have murder in response,
If that's what justice is, I'll murder you
Myself. Orestes, your own son will help.
If you were right then we are right as well.

CHORUS LEADER

For women marriage is a lottery.
Some turn out well, but clearly others don't.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Darling, you love your father. That's normal.
Children are like that: some are their father's,
While others seem to love their mothers best.
I sympathise and understand. In fact
My child, I'm not that proud of what I did.
I'm sorry for the mess I made of things.
My anger at him made me go too far.

ELECTRA

It's too late now for tears. There's no way out.
My father's dead. So why not bring your son
You forced to wander far and wide back home?

CLYTEMNESTRA

I'm scared to. My security means more
To me than his. He's full of furious rage,
At those who killed his father, so they say.

ELECTRA

You let your husband treat me cruelly. Why?

CLYTEMNESTRA

That's how he is. And you can be a pain!

ELECTRA

I am in pain. I'll try to make less fuss.

CLYTEMNESTRA

And then I'm sure he'll be less hard on you.

ELECTRA

The way he struts around! He's in my house!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Well there you go, stirring things up again.

ELECTRA

I'll say no more. I'm so much scared of him. [*with irony, perhaps making a gesture unseen by C.*]

CLYTEMNESTRA

Let's change the subject. Why've you sent for me?

ELECTRA

You heard - did you? - that I have had a child?
The ritual - supposed to be ten nights
After the birth. I don't know what to do,
A brand new mother, with my first baby!

CLYTEMNESTRA

That's not my job. The midwife, she, the one ...

ELECTRA

There was no midwife. I was all alone.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Was there no neighbour who could help? A friend?

ELECTRA

There's no one wants a pauper as a friend.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Look at you! Filthy dirty, dressed in rags!
You're a new mum - just days since giving birth.
Of course I'll go and make the sacrifice
Now baby's ten days old. And when I've done
You this good turn, I'll go on to the fields
And meet my husband for the sacrifice
He's making - to the Nymphs. You slaves there, take
My mules and give them feed. Allow me time
For worship of the gods, then pick me up:
I have to share my husband's business too!

ELECTRA

Then come inside our humble home. Watch out!
I wouldn't like the sooty walls to stain
Your lovely clothes. You must look nice for when
You go to make the sacrifice that's due.

Clytemnestra goes into the cottage as the slaves take the carriage and mules away.

The basket's there, the knife is razor-sharp,
The knife that killed the bull, who's waiting for
The cow to join him when her throat is cut.
In death you'll sleep beside the man you slept
With when you lived. This is my gift to you,
Along with justice for my father's death.

She follows her mother inside the cottage.

CHORUS

FOURTH STASIMON

The times' change'. The winds' of this' our fami'ly's fate' [*Strophe*]
Are shif'ting'. The day' when he was in' the bath',
He was my, he was my, my king', he fell',
The roof' tiles' cried out' as they were kil'ling him',
The stone' pill'ars screamed' as they were kil'ling him,
And this' is what was resound'ing: "Why', wretched wife',
What' are you kil'ling me for'?'
Now', after ten' years away'?

Two lines are missing

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The tide' changes'. Now' it is' the wo'man's turn' [*Antistrophe*]
To face' jus'tice, pay back her hus'band for'
All the things she did to him when he' came back'
At last', home' - his pa'lace that was built' by gods'.
She made' sure' her wea'pon was made keen' and sharp',
Then she' took hold of the axe', and hacked' him to death'.
Wret'ched Aga'memnon',
An' evil wife' married you'.
Like some' moun'tain li'on, she' preyed' on you',
Creeping through the bushes, steal'thily she pounced' on you'.

CLYTEMNESTRA [*Her muffled voice from inside*]

Don't kill your mother! Children! By the gods!

CHORUS (*An individual*)

Was that a cry I heard inside the house?

Clytemnestra's screams are heard more clearly.

CHORUS (*Leader - or a single member*)

I weep for her. Her children killing her!

FULL CHORUS (*singing*)

Thus' god' deals' out' jus'tice either soon' or late'.
What' you have suffered is hard; what you did before' was foul'.
Your own' hus'band! Wretch'!

CHORUS LEADER

As Orestes, Pylades and Electra emerge from the cottage, accompanied by slaves carrying the corpses of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

Here they come now, the mother-murderers,
Bathed in her blood, fresh from the kill, all three.
And here paraded as in triumph are
Their victims' corpses. Ne'er a family was
More tragic than the House of Tantalus.

Orestes, Electra and the Chorus sing

AMOIBAION: The predominantly iambic metre suggests a plainsong chant.

ORESTES

O Earth, O Zeus who sees all things, [*Strophe*]
All deeds of men. Witness these actions, foul,
Bloody, this pair of corpses on the ground,
Laid low by violence of mine.
My handiwork, reward for all my plans.
[Two lines are missing]

ELECTRA

Reason to weep, my brother, it was I
To blame. My hatred burned like fire
Against the one who gave me birth,
Ungrateful daughter of a wretched mother.

CHORUS

Alas for you, the mother who
Gave birth to killers. How you suffered at
Their hands, poor wretched woman, yet
you killed your husband and
Deserved your punishment.

ORESTES

Apollo, what your oracle proclaimed
Was justice - but justice of what sort?
It wasn't clear, but its results
Are clear for sure: pain, murder,
Banishment from Greece.
What other city can I go to now?
What decent man will want
To have a mother-killer in his home?

ELECTRA

Alas for me. Where can I go?
I can't join the dancing, and
There'll be no wedding, nor
A husband, nor a bed to share.

CHORUS

The wind has changed, your mind
Has changed: it's clean and pure.
Your thoughts were evil then,
And it was evil, what you made
Your brother do against his will.

ORESTES

Then did you see it? How she opened up
Her dress and showed her breast?
How did I strike her down?
The one who gave me birth?
My heart was melting.

CHORUS

I know just how it must have felt.
I heard her cries, the one
Who gave you life - your mother.

ORESTES

She reached a hand out, touched my face,
She was pleading with me : "Please, my son!"
Stroking my face so tenderly,
My sword fell from my grasp.

CHORUS

Poor lady! How could you bring yourself
To watch your mother bleed to death
Witness her final breath?

ORESTES

I wrapped my cloak around my face
Then, blindfolded, I took my sword
And cut my mother's throat.

ELECTRA

And I was helping guide the blade.
My hand was on the sword.

CHORUS

What dreadful things you did.

ORESTES

Come, let us cover up our mother's limbs
Arrange this robe to hide her wounds.
These murderers - you gave them birth.

ELECTRA

I'm doing it. This robe will cover one
A loved one who was not so loved.

CHORUS

The final chapter of your house's tragedy.

The twin brothers of Clytemnestra and Helen, now gods, appear above the roof of the cottage. The Chorus greet them with a chant (in anapaests). The horror story has come to its conclusion. The humans' remorse and powerlessness would make an ending at 1232 logical and dramatic. Euripides however, as usual, wraps up the tragic story with a miraculous ending. The audience knows that this has to be done - it's traditional! But I always see Castor or whoever as a spangly game-show host, slightly desperate to cheer the people up before they go home. The anapaestic metre following Castor's announcement signals this change in tone.

Look up there', on the roof' of the house',
Are they spi'rits or gods' who've come down'
From the sky'? For they both' look to me'
Not at all' like the men' here on earth!'
Tell me why' have they come' to us here'
To be plain' for us mor'tals to view'?

Castor speaks for himself and his twin Polydeuces.

CASTOR

Now listen up, you, Agamemnon's son
We are your uncles, sons of mighty Zeus,
The Heavenly Twins, your mother's brothers. Yes!
I'm Castor, this is Polydeuces, we
Just now arrived in Argos. Out at sea
We had to quell a raging storm - a ship

Was sinking - when we saw you murdering
Your mother and our sister (as you know).
Well she deserved it, but still what you did
Was wrong. I know Apollo told you to,
But he's my master, better say no more!
Because he is a god he must be wise,
But his advice to you was not so wise.
Though we must say it was. But now our job's
To tell you what the Fates and Zeus intend
For you to suffer from now on. Here goes!

Give Pylades your sister, let him take her as
His wife. But you must get away from here
You can't go back to Argos, having killed
Your mother! Anyway, the dog-faced ghouls
From Hell will soon be on your trail, and drive
You mad - an outcast and insane. But when
You get to Athens, throw your arms around
Athena's statue: she will stop the evil
Snake-haired bitches ever touching you!
She'll hold her Gorgon shield above your head.
In Athens there's a hill, called Ares' Hill,
Where once the gods all sat as jurymen,
The world's first murder trial it was,
When Halirrhothius was murdered by
The brutal Ares, outraged at the Sea-
God's son who'd raped his daughter. There
The gods all voted fair and square. And so
You too will stand there charged with homicide,
And when the votes for death are equal with
The votes to let you go, your life is saved!
Apollo will accept the blame at last:
His oracle it was that said you had
To kill your mother. Such shall be the rule:
When votes are tied, the prisoner goes free.

The ghastly hell-hounds then shall find their power
Has gone, and they'll be locked up in a cave
Nearby, from where they shall give oracles
To men who worship them. Orestes, you
Shall reach at last a land beside the river
Alpheus, and it is there you'll found
A city and they'll name it after you.

So much for you. The people of this town,
The Argives, shall arrange Aegisthus' tomb;
Your mother's tomb another shall provide:

The hero who took Troy and's just got home,
Your Uncle Menelaus and his wife
The lovely Helen. By the way I don't
Suppose you know she never went to Troy?
Her husband rescued her from Egypt, where
Almighty Zeus had kept her safe and sound.
He sent a phantom in her place to Troy,
To stir up trouble for mankind, and start
A brutal killing free-for-all which would
Reduce the population of the world.

Let Pylades, now, take his wife and go -
She's still a virgin - right away from here.
As for your brother-in-law - in name at least -
Give him a decent home in Phocis, where
He shall be made a wealthy man at last.
Your route now leads across the Isthmus, then
You soon will reach the famed Acropolis,
In Athens' glorious land - and there it is
Foretold you'll be acquitted of the charge
Of murder, and be happy ever more!

CHORUS (*It's all anapaests from now on*)

Permit us to speak if it's lawful for us
To come up so close to the twin sons of Zeus?

CASTOR

Of course: you have not been defiled by these deaths.

ELECTRA

Me too, can I speak, I have questions to ask?

CASTOR

Of course: it's Apollo I blame for the crime,
The shedding of blood.

ORESTES

How being gods, and her brothers, did you
Not come to protect
Our house from the demons of vengeance and doom?

CASTOR

Because once Apollo decided your fate
It couldn't be changed even if he was wrong.

ELECTRA

But how could Apollo just lay down the law
And force me to murder my mother? And why?

CASTOR

Both of you shared in the act, and your fate
You both have to share,
It's your family's curse.

ORESTES

Sister, I've only just met you again,
But almost at once I am losing your love,
You're leaving me, and I'm left all alone.

CASTOR

She has a husband who'll give her a home
No need for her to complain! She must say
Her goodbye to Argos.

ELECTRA

But tell me what fate can there be that is worse
Than leaving one's home and the land of one's birth?

ORESTES

I too must abandon my family home,
And charged with her murder I'll have to rely
On the votes of some strangers.

CASTOR

Don't worry, you'll find that the people of Athens
Are fair: so cheer up now!

ELECTRA

My brother, I love you, come close to me, please,
Put your arms round me!
We have to part now and bid our farewells

By the curse of our mother we're driven from home.

ORESTES

Keep holding me tight, and then sing me the song
That you'd sing at my funeral.

CASTOR

Oh dear, oh dear! I just can't bear to hear this:
Even gods can have feelings.
All us immortals who live in the sky
Can't help feeling sorry for mortals in pain.

ORESTES

I won't see you again ...

ELECTRA

We'll be parted for ever ...

ORESTES

The last time we'll speak ...

ELECTRA

Goodbye city.
And especially goodbye to you,
My friends who all shared in my life that I spent here.

ORESTES

My dearest, my dear. Must you leave me already?

ELECTRA

My tears make it hard to see which way to go.

ORESTES

Pylades, take care of her, make her your wife.
Be happy together!

CASTOR

Their wedding is something that they must sort out.
But here come the dogs. You must hurry to Athens.
They will track you and hound you, there will be no rest,
They hold snakes in their hands, they are dark as the night,
They bring retribution and torment and pain.
But look! There's a ship I can see that needs help
There, off the Sicilian coast, we must go!
As we skim through the broad open space of the sky
We ignore those whose lives have not been quite so pure,
We don't stop to help them; if someone's been good
And lived his life righteously, then we give aid.
So in the voyage of life you should never
Sail in a ship with a man who's done wrong.
Take it from me, I'm a god, and I know.

CHORUS

Goodbye then, farewell, to the pair of you gods.
But if a mortal can ever be said
To "Fare well", and keep clear of disaster, then he
Is someone who's lucky, exceptionally!

