

Once dismissed as a mere "melodrama" unworthy of Euripides, Orestes would now be considered by many to be his masterpiece. Like Helen, it transcends category. The theme could not be more serious. It is a play about madness and personal responsibility for one's actions. The characters, however are superbly comic - hence the problems. Traditional scholars and critics could not handle a tragedy that was funny.

ORESTES

By EURIPIDES

Translated by Andrew Wilson

For Amanda & James, and all
members of the legendary
FOAD Theatre Company

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a tragedy

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This version was performed by Foad Theatre Company directed by James Wilson at the Square Theatre Edinburgh in August 1993, as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It has also been performed by students at University of Hannover, Germany.

Characters

Electra, daughter of Agamemnon

Orestes, her brother

Helen, their aunt

Menelaus, their uncle

Tyndareus, their grandfather

Hermione, their cousin, daughter of Helen and Menelaus

Pylades, Orestes' friend

An old man

A Phrygian slave, brought back from Troy by Helen

Apollo, the god

Scene

A squalid hut, near Argos

[Orestes is on stage huddled under a blanket. Electra kneels behind him]

Electra:

Imagine all horror, all god-sent suffering.
There is no pain that words can tell
That has not fallen on the human race,
Buckling shoulders with its weight.
Our ancestor, Tantalus, the blest - no sarcasm intended -
Was Zeus' son, they say: though mortal, the gods considered him
Their equal, inviting him to share their feast.
But he did not display due deference.
For speaking out of turn - embarrassing affliction -
The penalty he pays is an eternity of fear,
Dreading the impending rock for ever poised above his head
To crush him.
His son was Pelops, who was Atreus' father.
His thread of fate had a special twist, courtesy of the goddess:
A quarrel, then all-out war
With his own brother, Thyestes.
I won't repeat the tale in full:
Enough to say that Atreus killed his brothers' sons
And dished them up for him to dine on.
Atreus had two sons by Aerope, his Cretan wife:
Glorious Agamemnon -
If "glorious" is the word to use - and Menelaus.
Menelaus married Helen
Whom the gods justly hate.
Agamemnon's lovely bride
Was Helen's sister Clytemnestra,
Whose name all Greeks have learned to loathe.
He had three daughters
Chrysothemis, Iphigeneia, and me, Electra,
And one son Orestes.
Our mother, that vicious monster,
Enmeshed her husband in a knotted net
And murdered him, as helplessly
He flailed his prisoned limbs.
Her motive was not something you should ask
An unmarried girl to describe.
Please draw your own conclusions.

Can a god be charged as accessory to murder?
Apollo told Orestes to kill the mother who gave him birth -
hardly a heroic act, most would agree.
But he could not disobey the god; he killed her.
And I helped.
I too played my part in the killing,

Although I am only a woman.

Orestes collapsed, and lies where he fell,
Shattered by savage madness,
Sprawled on this pitiful bed.
His mother's blood is a charioteer
Driving him round and round with madness.
I do not dare to name the powers
That terrorise him,
Whom we euphemistically call "The Kindly Ones".
It's six days since our mother's
Murdered body was cremated.
He hasn't eaten since;
Nor has he washed.
His huddled body lies hidden in his cloak.
Whenever the disease leaves his body
And he knows himself
He cries from the bed
Or leaps up, like an unbroken colt
Throwing off its harness.

The people of Argos have banned us
"The mother murderers"
From their hearths and homes.
Not one is allowed to speak to us.
Today they vote to decide our fate:
Whether we shall be stoned to death - or not.

We have one slim hope for life.
Menelaus has returned home from Troy - at last.
His ships are anchored in the bay at Nauplia.
His wife Helen he sent ahead last night
Fearing that in daylight
Those whose sons had died at Troy
Might recognise her, and stone her to death.
She is indoors, weeping
for her sister Clytemnestra,
And for all the misery our house has seen.
She has something to take her mind off sorrow:
Their daughter Hermione; Menelaus
Brought her here from Sparta when he sailed for Troy,
And gave her to my mother to bring up.
The reunion has brought her some consolation
Amid the grief.

I'm keeping a lookout down the road, hoping
To see Menelaus on his way here. Unless he can save us

We have nowhere to turn.
This is a house of doom.

[Helen enters from right. She is carrying a small jug.]

Helen:

Electra! [she looks at her slowly and pityingly] You were a royal princess - but now your life is ruined. There can be no question of marriage for you now or ever. What sort of people are you and your brother Orestes, to be their own mother's murderers? I blame Apollo - otherwise I would not put myself at risk by talking to you. I can't help weeping for Clytemnestra, my sister. I never saw her after I sailed to Troy - and it was madness sent by a god that made me sail off then. Now I'm alone and pity all our fates.

Electra:

What do you expect me to say? If you can't see for yourself, there's no point in explaining. [she puts her arms round Orestes] There's me - life-support for this pathetic corpse, worried each breath may be his last; and there's you, the lovely Helen, with Menelaus, the golden conqueror of Troy, at your side.

Helen:

How long has he been lying there like this?

Electra:

Since he spilt his mother's blood.

Helen:

Poor thing. [pause] How she must have suffered.

Electra:

It happened and that's that.

Helen:

Would you do something for me, darling? It's important.

Electra:

I'm rather busy at the moment. I have a dying brother to nurse.

Helen:

Would you go to my sister's grave for me?

Electra:

My mother's grave you mean? Why?

Helen:

To do the honours - take a lock of my hair and pour the offering.

Electra:

Are you banned from visiting the family graves?

Helen:

No, but I am embarrassed to show my face in Argos.

Electra:

You've left it a bit late for that: where was your conscience last time you left home?

Helen:

That's harsh - but fair, I suppose.

Electra:

So what's this 'problem' you have with facing the people?

Helen:

It's the fathers who lost their sons at Troy. I'm frightened of them.

Electra:

Dear me! Yes - people can be very unreasonable.

Helen:

It's not such a big favour to ask. I'm really scared.

Electra:

It is my mother's grave, you know. I do have feelings.

Helen

It would be most embarrassing if I had to send servants to do it.

Electra

Why don't you send your own daughter, Hermione?

Helen

No - it wouldn't be nice for a young girl to have to go through that crowd.

Electra

She could repay Clytemnestra for bringing her up so nicely.

Helen

You're right. That's what I'll do. Hermione!

[Enter Hermione from the house]

Darling, come over here. Take the tray with the offerings. Go to Clytemnestra's grave. Pour out the offering from the jug and put this lock of my silky blonde hair on the tomb. Stand on the mound and say this:

Your sister Helen sends you these gifts. She's sorry she's not here in person: you'll understand that the natives are not very friendly at the moment...Ask her please to show understanding to you and I, to my husband, and the two poor wretches that the god destroyed. Promise my sister that I will do all that's necessary - in due course. Hurry along then, dear, and come straight back.

[Exit Hermione right. Helen goes into the house.]

Electra

How awful to be rich and beautiful! You noticed how she'd only clipped off the ends of her hair so as not to ruin the style? Same old Helen! Why don't the gods hate you like I do? You ruined my life, you ruined his, you ruined everyone's in Greece.

Oh dear. Here come the chorus. It's time for our wailing. They're sure to wake him just as I'd got him off to sleep, and make me cry again. I can't help weeping when I'm forced to remember my brother is insane.

[Enter Chorus from left]

Quietly, sisters, quietly! I know you mean well, but I'm the one who suffers if he wakes.

Chorus

Be quiet! Be quiet! Shoes delicately on the ground. Don't stamp!

Electra

Keep away! Keep away! Over there, not near the bed!

Chorus

Look, I'm doing it!

Electra

No! no! The music's far too loud. That wretched flute's too grating!

Chorus :

Listen! I'm whispering, you can hardly hear me now!

Electra :

Yes, that's better. Come closer, come closer. Keep still. Keep quiet. Thanks for turning up - but you took your time: he's been like this for a week.

Chorus :

How is he? What's wrong with him? Poor boy - must be in so much pain.

Electra :

It's been agony, but his breathing is regular now.

[Orestes groans in his sleep]

Chorus : [to Orestes] What are you trying to say? What's the matter?

Electra : You'll kill him if you force him to open his eyes just as he's fallen asleep.

Chorus : It's horrible to see what pain the gods can cause. He looks so ill.

Electra : He's fighting hard. He was wrong; what he did was wrong, but it was Apollo who turned him into a murderer. The order to kill my mother came from a god - who called it justice.

Chorus : [poking at him] Look, he's moving under the covers.

Electra : You fool, you've woken him up!

Chorus : I thought he was fast asleep.

Electra : Out of my sight, get away from here! Take your clumping feet back where you came from!

Chorus : He's dozing off again.

Electra : No thanks to you. [She prays]

Darkness, my queen.
You send us the gift of sleep.
Come from the blackness;
Unfold your wings and fly

Here to Agamemnon's house.
Pain and suffering are destroying us, killing us.

[To chorus] You're making too much noise! Quietly! Quietly! No talking. Keep still. Keep away from the bed, and let him sleep, please!

Chorus : Tell me, what will cure his suffering?

Electra : Death. Death, of course; he isn't eating.

Chorus : His fate is sealed then.

Electra : Apollo took our lives when he made us our mother's killers - killers of the mother who killed our father.

Chorus : She deserved it.

Electra : That doesn't make it right. Mother: you gave me life; you killed and were killed. You killed my father, and now you kill your children too. We're finished. We're corpses. You are as good as dead, and my life is over; days wasted in mourning and grief and nights in weeping. There'll be no husband, no children - no future.

Chorus : I don't like the way he's so still. Could he have died without us noticing?

Orestes : [waking] Sleep! You are a miracle. You can make illness disappear. Thank you for visiting me when I needed you most. Lethe! Blessed Oblivion! You make us forget our troubles - you help those who suffer and send forgetfulness when we pray to you. Where am I? How did I get here? I can't remember - my mind's a blank.

Electra : My darling, I was so pleased you could sleep. Let me hold you and soothe the pain.

Orestes : Hold me! Hold me tight! Wipe the horrible stuff off my mouth. [She wipes his face] It's round my eyes too.

Electra : That's better! I love being your nurse. I'm not embarrassed to be seen stroking my brother - you'll find your sister's hands a great comfort.

Orestes : Help me sit up. Brush the hair out of my eyes; I can still hardly see.

Electra : [stroking his hair] Your hair's all matted - it used to be so beautiful.

Orestes : Lie me back down on the bed. When a fit of madness attacks me I go stiff and can't control my arms and legs.

Electra : All right. The bed is the best place for an invalid. It's terrible - but you can't help it.

Orestes : Sit me up straight! I feel dizzy. Sorry, it's this illness that makes me so hard to please.

Electra : Would you like to see if you can stand up?

Orestes : Yes, it would be like being well. Pretending is better than nothing.

Electra : While the Fiends of Madness let you be yourself, listen ...

Orestes : Out with it; if it's good news, fine. If it's bad - well, things could hardly get worse.

Electra : Menelaus is home. His ships are in the harbour at Nauplia.

Orestes : What? There is hope for us. Our uncle, he'd be on our side - he could win back the popularity in Argos our father had!

Electra : Trust me. He's back - bringing Helen fresh from the walls of Troy.

Orestes : If he had survived alone, without her - he'd be a truly lucky man! If he's brought his wife, he's bringing trouble.

Electra : Yes, Tyndareus had two lovely daughters - dogs of a fine pedigree.

Orestes : You've a chance to be different from them - don't just say you'll help, do something! [the madness is returning]

Electra : My god, look at your eyes! You were fine, but now the madness is coming back.

Orestes : Mother, please, don't let them! You're making them stampede towards me, those bloody-eyed snake-haired fiends. There they are, just there, leaping up at me!
[he writhes and twists]

Electra : It's all right, darling, stay on your bed. There's nothing there - you're just imagining things.

Orestes : [looking up] Apollo, the bitch-faced gorgons are going to kill me - the bloody priestesses of death, the terror-spirits.

Electra : I won't let you go. I've got my arms round you tightly. Stop thrashing about and writhing like a madman! [she has an arm round his neck]

Orestes : Let go! You are one of the Fiends come to throw me into the black pit of Hell! [he struggles free]

Electra : I'm helpless - how can I protect him when we've got the power of god against us?

Orestes : Hand me my special bow - the horn one Apollo gave me, which he said would beat the bitches off, when they tried to scare me with these mad fits. [The bow is a figment of his imagination - he is pointing it at Electra - she cowers and covers her head] A goddess is going to get shot, if she doesn't get out of range. Can't you hear? Can't you see the feathers that make my deadly arrows fly straight at you? There! [he 'shoots'] Take that! [he shoots again] Had enough yet? Go on! Time to spread your wings and fly. If you want someone to blame, tell Apollo it's his fault! No! Where am I going? Why am I so exhausted and out of breath? Was I sleep-walking? Why? Why? The restless waves are still - the sea is calm again. Electra, why are you crying and crouched covering your head? I'm embarrassed, letting you see my insanity, and frightening you with my fits. It's my problem - don't let it make you distressed. All you did was agree to it - I was the one who struck the actual blow that took our mother's life. I find Apollo guilty. I was set up - his words urged me on, but when it came to it he did nothing. I believe my father, if I could have asked him man to man, if I should kill my mother, would have grabbed hold of me and made me promise never to draw my sword against the one who gave me birth. As nothing could bring him back to life, and I would suffer torments of remorse.

Electra, don't hide your face; stop crying - let's not give up all hope. When I am helpless, when the raging terror strikes, stay close and comfort me. And when you break down, I'll hold you close to me, and give the love and support you need. This is what we do for those we love. Go indoors, get something to eat, have a bath and go to bed. If anything happens to you, I'm finished. You are all I've got - there's no one else.

Electra : No. My place is with you - I'll share your life: or share your death. If you die, what shall I do - a woman alone? Without a brother, a father or a husband I would be helpless. [responding to a look in Orestes' eye] All right, I will rest. But you lie down: try to ignore the things that come to frighten you - just keep still under the bedclothes. The sickness may be in the mind - but it is terrifying none the less. [Exit]

Choral ode 1

Chorus : Hurtling wing-borne goddesses
Blood black Furies
Who exact the price of bloodshed
Hear our prayers.
Release him, we beseech you
From the chains of madness.
Poor Orestes!
Destroyed by obedience
To Apollo's voice.

Orestes I pity your fate
It's tragic to see you like this
For shedding the blood of your mother
The furies now send you insane.
Your family once seemed so secure;
With wealth, fame, honour and power.
Now king Agamemnon lies murdered;

His queen Clytemnestra lies dead,
Orestes who killed her is raving -
Can Apollo be really to blame?

Look here's mighty Menelaus.
The royal blood, the royal bearing
Mark a king for all to see.
Admiral of a thousand ships
General at the walls of Troy
Success has always been your friend,
The gods have always heard your prayers.

Scene 2

Enter Menelaus

Menelaus: Home! Good to be back, though grim to think what's happened there. This must be the the most unfortunate house I know. The first I heard of Agamemnon's death was when I'd just sighted Greece. Out of the waves rose Glaucus - a minor sea-god: sailors' guardian, spokesman for the Old Man of the Sea, that sort of thing - totally reliable. He told me this: "Menelaus, your brother is dead. His wife has laid him out and given his body its farewell bath." I was prostrate with grief, and so was my crew. When I reached Nauplia, I expected a warm reunion with my brother's son Orestes and his mother. I'd assumed they at least were well - and then I heard from an old salt of Clytemnestra's shocking murder. Where is he? Tell me, you girls, where is Agamemnon's son who performed this foul act? He was just a babe in his mother's arms when I left for Troy - I wouldn't know him if I saw him.

Orestes : You'll find me over here, Menelaus. I'm Orestes, the one you're looking for. I'm guilty as charged. I throw myself on your mercy - excuse the lack of protocol, but you're only just in time. Save me.

Menelaus : My god - what a sight! Whose corpse is this?

Orestes : Accurate diagnosis; I am a corpse that's still breathing.

Menelaus : Look at your hair, it's disgusting...

Orestes : It's not my appearance you should be worrying about - it's what I've done.

Menelaus : You look terrible - your eyes staring out of their shrunken sockets.

Orestes : There's nothing left of me - except my name.

Menelaus : I'm looking at the invisible man, it seems.

Orestes : I'm real - my mother's murderer.

Menelaus : No need to keep repeating it: least said, soonest mended. Spare yourself.

Orestes : There's not much to spare - but I'm rich in troubles, thanks to the god.

Menelaus : What's wrong with you? Has your condition been diagnosed?

Orestes : It's a disease called knowledge. I know that what I've done is a crime.

Menelaus : What do you mean? I don't want a smart answer, I want the truth.

Orestes : Remorse is killing me - that's the best I can do!

Menelaus : If that's all it is - it'll be tricky, but we'll snap you out of it.

Orestes : And I get these fits, fits of madness - my mother's revenge.

Menelaus : When did you get the first symptoms? How long ago?

Orestes : The night of her funeral.

Menelaus : Are you sure it wasn't just a bad dream? Was anyone with you?

Orestes : Yes, Pylades, my partner [very slight pause] in the crime. He helped me cope.

Menelaus : Hallucinations - that seems to be the problem. What form do they take?

Orestes : I see three hags as black as midnight.

Menelaus : I know who you mean - though I don't like to speak their name.

Orestes : Yes - it's not quite done to talk of such things.

Menelaus : They are what drives one mad when one kills a member of one's family?

Orestes : Certainly they've done a fine job on me.

Menelaus : It's quite normal for those who've done abnormal acts to have to suffer.

Orestes : But there is one solution to my problem...

Menelaus : [quickly jumping to the wrong conclusion] Don't ! You'd have to be insane to kill yourself.

Orestes : ...my mother was executed on Apollo's orders.

Menelaus : And an uncouth order it was - indecent and unjust.

Orestes : But if we disobey the gods we are punished anyway. "The gods" are our masters - whatever that actually means.

Menelaus : You are bitter because Apollo hasn't done anything to back you up.

Orestes : Tomorrow, he says - always tomorrow - that's what gods are like.

Menelaus : How long since she - passed on?

Orestes : A few days - her ashes would still be warm.

Menelaus : So the Furies, at least, are quick off the mark!

Orestes : What I did wasn't clever - but it was what any loyal son would have done.

Menelaus : For your father's sake? Did your revenge do him any good?

Orestes : It didn't. It hasn't yet. It won't.

Menelaus : How have the people of Argos taken it?

Orestes : They hate me. I'm an outcast; no one is allowed to speak to me.

Menelaus : Who's behind this hate campaign? Aegisthus's party?

Orestes : Yes; his bully-boys. The city takes its orders from them now.

Menelaus : Does the state recognise you as Agamemnon's heir?

Orestes : Hardly - it doesn't recognise my right to live!

Menelaus : What specifically have they done to you? I need hard facts.

Orestes : Today is referendum day. The vote will go against us.

Menelaus : Why not disappear? Once across the frontier you'd be safe.

Orestes : We're trapped. Armed men all round the house.

Menelaus : [looks around slightly disbelievingly] Hired thugs - or are they regular troops?

Orestes : No - just ordinary people; everyone wants to kill us.

Menelaus : It does all seem hopeless.

Orestes : Maybe not quite, if I can depend on you. You've come home a hero - share some of your success with us. You owe us some of it - think what our father did for you. A family's not a family unless it sticks together at times like this.

[The Chorus see Tyndareus approaching]

Chorus : Look! An old man battling his way towards us as fast as his legs will carry him. It's Tyndareus, from Sparta, Clytemnestra's father, in full old-fashioned mourning, complete with shaven head.

Orestes : I'm dead, then, Menelaus. Tyndareus is the last person I wanted to see - I can't face him after what I've done. He took care of me when I was small - I was his beloved grandson; he was so proud of me. I remember the hugs he - and my grandmother Leda - used to give me. What a way to repay their love! Where can I hide myself? How can I escape the old man's accusing stare?

[Tyndareus enters, panting with exhaustion and rage]

Tyndareus : Where can I find my daughter's husband - Menelaus? I was leaving my offerings at Clytemnestra's - my other daughter's - grave when I heard he'd arrived at Nauplia with his wife. Safe after all these years! Take me to him. I want to shake his hand, and welcome him home; it's been so long.

Menelaus : Good day to you, sir! [aside to Orestes] This is the man who shared his wife with Zeus!

Tyndareus : [warmly] And good day to you, Menelaus, my boy! [he catches sight of Orestes and groans as if in pain] My day has just been ruined. The viper, the butcher, his mother's...I feel tainted from having to set eyes on him. He disgusts me. You shouldn't be seen speaking to him; he is an animal.

Menelaus : He is my brother's son, my nephew.

Tyndareus : Hard to believe Agamemnon could spawn this.

Menelaus : He is his son. And I respect him for doing what he had to do.

Tyndareus : You've grown soft - soft ideas from living abroad too long.

Menelaus : Standing by one's family is a good Greek custom.

Tyndareus : Not if they break the law it isn't.

Menelaus : Blind obedience to the law - or anything else - is the mark of a slave; that's the accepted modern view.

Tyndareus : Liberal claptrap you are free to believe if you like. If that's what modern education means, I'm glad I didn't have it.

Menelaus : Careful; the elderly should avoid over-excitement. That's another modern view.

Tyndareus : You don't need one of your fancy modern educations to know the difference between right and wrong. And anyway, what could be less intelligent than the way Orestes completely ignored the basic principles of Greek law? When Agamemnon...died - a dreadful crime - my daughter was to blame - I don't condone it - his duty was to have his mother properly charged - according to law - with causing death. He should have had her sent away. People would have said he was 'understanding' and 'reasonable' - and he'd have remained within the law and stayed respectable. As it is, he's put himself on the same level as his mother. She was guilty, yes; but, by killing her, he has made himself a criminal too. Here's an 'intellectual challenge' for you, Menelaus: what if Orestes' wife killed him, then his son killed his mother, then his son killed him and so on... and so on: what's the solution?

Our ancestors got it right: whoever was guilty of shedding blood should be shunned, ostracised, driven out - but not killed. Otherwise each generation passes on the murder virus to the next. Don't think I'm proposing any special treatment for lawbreakers who happen to be women; particularly not for a woman who kills her husband, like my daughter. I hate all wicked people, female or otherwise, including my other daughter, Helen, your wife. I feel nothing but disgust for her - I wouldn't give her the time of day. Yours was a thankless mission - going to Troy to reclaim a worthless woman. The law is a country's only defence against barbarism and terror. I am a responsible citizen, so I give it my total and unwavering support. [turning to confront Orestes] You! What went through your mind when your mother bared her breasts, and grovelled before you begging for mercy? I wasn't there, but just picturing it to myself makes me break down and weep, hardbitten old fool though I be. Here is the confirmation of my argument: you are hated by the gods, and are being punished for the murder of your mother - the punishment is your insanity, your attacks of panic. Looking at you now, you are the living proof of divine retribution. Now, Menelaus, to spell it out. Don't go against the will of the gods in your desire to help this man. My daughter deserved to die, but he was wrong to take the law into his own hands. I'm a lucky man. The gods have been good to me - except in one respect. They gave me two daughters.

Chorus Leader: Yes, it's nice to have good children. It must be awful to have two appalling monsters.

Orestes : I'm not going to enjoy saying this. I know it will upset you. But I don't intend to show you any special respect just because you are my grandfather and you are old. I will try to be polite. I know I was wrong to kill my mother, but I was right to avenge my father. There is another side to the argument. What ought I to have done? Your daughter gave me birth, but my father gave me life. She was the field he ploughed which nursed the seed he planted. I reasoned I was more the son of the one who started me off, than of the one who fed me later on. And your daughter - the name "mother" sticks in my throat - searching for sexual satisfaction seduced a man. I'm embarrassing myself with these revelations; her "secret husband" was Aegisthus. I executed him - as Greek law says we should - and then I finished the cleansing by taking her life. You say I should be stoned to death for this - but it

could equally be said that I am doing the men of Greece a favour. If the female sex is not controlled, it could become trendy for wives to murder husbands, take refuge with their children and fish for sympathy by flashing their breasts. What would there be to stop them husband-murdering on any pretext? My so-called "heinous crime" has saved us from such conduct becoming common. I took a stand and punished my mother for betraying her husband's bed, while he was away leading his country's army in defence of Greece. Although she knew she'd done wrong, she did not face the consequences. To escape due punishment at her husband's hands, she did the punishing, and killed my father. What should I have done? Disobey the gods and betray my father? It's your fault my life is ruined. You're the one who fathered my mother, and she made me fatherless and a mother murderer. Apollo's the one you should be looking at. Apollo has his temple at the centre of the world. He gives men very clear advice, and we accept that whatever he tells us as the truth. When I killed my mother, I was obeying Apollo. He's the criminal, stone him to death! He was wrong, not me! What should I have done? Is the god powerless to absolve my guilt? Who can a man turn to, if the god whose orders he obeyed can't get him a reprieve from death? What was done was for the best - though not the best for those who did it.

Chorus Leader : Women are here to spoil men's happiness - that's the rule.

Tyndareus : What bare-faced gall! How dare you speak to me like that! If you were trying to rile me, son, you succeeded! I shall do all within my power to see you dead - and soon! It'll be an excellent souvenir of my visit here to view my daughter's grave. I shall go to the meeting and make such a stir that the Argives will be falling over themselves to have you stoned to death - you and your sister. She deserves it more than you, continually sniping at her mother, spreading vicious rumours about her, declaiming her messages from beyond: "I saw Agamemnon in a dream last night..."; "Hades can't wait to get you and Aegisthus, he hates bed-cheats as much as we do". So she ranted until the whole house as it were went up in flames. Menelaus. This is what I say. This is what I shall do. Calculate what I am worth as an enemy and as a friend before you defend this [indicating Orestes] who's wanted for murder by the gods. Let the people stone him until he is dead. Otherwise, never set foot on my Spartan soil again. Think about it. Don't cast off friends who are decent and god-fearing to stand by a criminal the gods detest. It's time to go. Servants, take me away!

[Tyndareus storms off. Menelaus is pacing anxiously.]

Orestes : [shouting after him] Quick march! My uncle and I can continue our civilised discussion without your senile pontificating! Menelaus, why are you pacing and circling like that?

Menelaus : Leave me alone - I don't know which way to go; my mind's in a whirl.

Orestes : Don't make any decision until you've heard my side.

Menelaus : Very well. [portentously] There is a time when silence is better than speech and when speech is better than silence...

Orestes : Listen, then. I'll take my time and make everything very clear. Do not give me anything of yours, Menelaus. Simply repay to me what you had from my father. [Menelaus looks puzzled] I don't mean money! Although my life is extremely valuable - if you can save it for me. I have done wrong. So has Helen, your wife. To mend the wrong she did, my father risked his life fighting at Troy - doing wrong for you. Now it's your turn to pay back what you owe him - tit for tat - by doing a little wrong for me. I'm not demanding the full ten years - one day will do; today, when you fight and rescue me. There is the matter of my sister Iphigeneia, whom the Greeks killed ; sacrificed to get a wind for Troy. But we'll forget about her. No need for Hermione to be killed. I'm in no position to drive a hard bargain; I don't mind if you make a small profit on the deal. It's my life I'm interested in: give this to my father to repay the debt you owe. If I die, his family has no heir - it is extinct. [Menelaus shakes his head] "Impossible" you say? This is exactly the point I'm making: families in trouble must stick together. We don't need each other in good times - when we've got the gods on our side. All Greece knows you love your wife - and I'm not saying this out of flattery to ingratiate myself. In Helen's name, I beseech you... [aside] What a sad man I am to be reduced to this ploy! So what? I must force myself to grovel - or else my family is finished.... [to Menelaus] O my uncle, my father's revered brother; imagine the murdered man in his tomb listening to this; imagine his spirit hovering over you - speaking my words, weeping my tears, feeling my pain, sharing my agony! I have spoken. I have asked for life. I'm nothing special. I only want what everyone else in the world has.

Chorus Leader : I'm only a woman, but add my prayers to his. Please help. You have the power to.

Menelaus : Orestes, I respect you, and I want to help you work your problems out. It is one's duty to help one's family bear its troubles - if the gods have given one the strength to do so. One should be ready to destroy the family's enemies or die oneself. How I wish the gods had given me the power to assist! I've come back a refugee beset with countless problems of his own, with an empty ship, and a few feeble followers. We could not challenge the ancient might of Argos in battle. Whether I could use my powers of persuasion ... we must pin our hopes on this. Never attack when faced with a superior force: first principle in the military rulebook. [pompously] We are up against a mob. Dealing with an angry mob is like fighting a fire. The secret is to let it blaze; wait for the flames to die down: then you take control. A mob has compassion; a mob has heart - great qualities! - if you know how to handle it. I shall go and attempt to persuade Tyndareus and the Argives to channel their passion. A mob is like a ship; stretch the sails too tight and she keels over: slacken the ropes off and up she comes again! Never be too eager to please a mob, nothing puts an audience off more. They detest extremists. To help you - and help I must - I shall need all my intelligence. No sense in charging a brick wall. This isn't cowardice, as you may think - what problems could my one spear solve? We need the Argives' sympathy - we can't win that by force. [smugly] Accept we are slaves of fortune - that's the modern way.

[Exit Menelaus]

Orestes : [shouting after him] Sorry! I forgot! You don't fight unless it's for a woman! Bastard! So much for family solidarity - turn your back; run away! [pause] Agamemnon's

cause is lost. No friends left, father. I am betrayed. No more hope; no way I can escape my death from the Argive stones. My final chance of life has gone with Menelaus.

[Pylades approaches, running]

What a coincidence, it's my best friend Pylades, turning up just when everything seemed lost! A true friend when you need him is like a calm sea to sailors.

Pylades : [he hugs Orestes eagerly] I've been running all the way from the city. I heard about the meeting - saw them gathering - to condemn you and your sister. What's happening? How are you? What's going to become of you - the person I love most in all the world?

Orestes : I'm a dead man. There! That gets the bad news over quickly.

Pylades : Is there room for me in your grave? I want us to go on sharing everything.

Orestes : Menelaus has been an utter bastard to my sister and me.

Pylades : Predictable way for the bitch's husband to turn out.

Orestes : He came, but he might as well not have bothered, for all the help he gave.

Pylades : He's really back, though?

Orestes : Finally - but it didn't take him long to reveal what a bastard he is.

Pylades : He's brought his lovely whore with him, I presume?

Orestes : She brought him.

Pylades : Where is the face that launched a thousand ... funerals?

Orestes : At home - if you can still call it my home.

Pylades : What did you ask your uncle?

Orestes : Not to let the people kill us - my sister and myself.

Pylades : And his answer was?

Orestes : "Do nothing rash!" Very useful advice!

Pylades : What was his excuse?

Orestes : Someone else arrived; the father of the two lovely daughters.

Pylades : Tyndareus. Furious over his daughter?

Orestes : You can imagine! Menelaus took his side rather than my father's.

Pylades : He didn't have the guts to back your case?

Orestes : He's no warrior - unless it was in a women's regiment!

Pylades : You are in serious shit. Has the death sentence been passed?

Orestes : The people are holding a vote on it.

Pylades : How is it worded? Give me the details. I'm very frightened.

Orestes : There's nothing complicated; just two words - "life" and "death".

Pylades : Escape! Take your sister and run !

Orestes : Didn't you notice? We are surrounded by armed guards.

Pylades : Yes - the city was like a military camp as I passed through.

Orestes : We're like a town under siege.

Pylades : Now ask me about my problems. I'm dead, too.

Orestes : How so?

Pylades : My father ... Strophius ... has thrown me out.

Orestes : Why?

Pylades : Because I helped you kill your mother.

Orestes : I seems we've had it, both of us.

Pylades : I'm not Menelaus; I'm no coward. We must do something.

Orestes : Aren't you scared the Argives will put you to death as well?

Pylades : They can't touch me - I'm a Phocian citizen!

Orestes : The mob are dangerous, when they have crooked leaders.

Pylades : But with decent leaders they can make good decisions!

Orestes : Right! [pause] I'd better speak at the meeting, then.

Pylades : Saying what?

Orestes : If I say ...

Pylades : you were justified ...

Orestes : in avenging my father?

Pylades : They'd have your blood. They'd be delighted.

Orestes : So shall I stay here meekly and wait to be killed?

Pylades : That's the coward's choice.

Orestes : What's the alternative?

Pylades : If you stay here, can you possibly save your life?

Orestes : No.

Pylades : So if you go, there would be some hope?

Orestes : A very small one.

Pylades : Then it would be better to go?

Orestes : All right! I'll go!

Pylades : Even if you do get killed, it would be a more acceptable way to die. Manlier.

Orestes : You are right. I'll avoid the "coward" label if I go.

Pylades : More likely to.

Orestes : And I do have a good case.

Pylades : As long as it seems good to them, that's what you've got to hope.

Orestes : And I can play the sympathy card.

Pylades : You're a royal, too. That always commands respect.

Orestes : "Royal father's death rocks loyal son." I like it!

Pylades : That should get them.

Orestes : Let's go. I'll do the family proud and die like a man!

Pylades : Excellent!

Orestes : [stopping and hesitating] Ought we to tell my sister?

Pylades : No way!

Orestes : No, she'd just start crying and make a scene.

Pylades : And make it harder for us.

Orestes : Say nothing, then?

Pylades : It'll be for the best.

Orestes : [hesitating again] There's one other thing.

Pylades : What now?

Orestes : If I get one of my fits ... the Furies ...

Pylades : I'll look after you.

Orestes : Getting close during an attack can be dangerous.

Pylades : Not for me, when it's you.

Orestes : It could be infectious.

Pylades : I'm immune!

Orestes : You won't be disgusted?

Pylades : I'm your friend!

Orestes : Forward, then. Lead the way.

Pylades : You're safe with me.

Orestes : First to my father's tomb.

Pylades : [impatiently] What on earth for?

Orestes : So I can ask for his help.

Pylades : Fine - he owes you enough.

Orestes : Keep well away from my mother's.

Pylades : Of course! Get a move on, or they'll have had the vote before you get there. Put your arm round me. My god, you're so thin! I will lead you openly through the town. I don't care what people think. I'm proud to be the one helping you. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I wasn't happy to stick with you in a crisis.

Orestes : Pylades ... all the old clichés! How about "Better one true friend than a thousand relations"? But you prove they're true; my grandfather and my uncle were useless.

[Pylades and Orestes move painfully off]

Choral Ode 2

Chorus : The family had such wealth.
Its warriors were the pride of Greece,
Our leaders at the siege of Troy.

But once again disaster dogs
the House of Atreus. Two themes
Are constant.
"The death of the innocent."
"The gruesome revenge."

Atreus butchered his brother's babies.
Agamemnon put his daughter to death.
Clytemnestra took revenge.
And now Orestes ...

A tradition of vendetta cannot excuse a crime.
There is no glory, nothing noble
in slicing a parent's flesh,
carving it like meat,
displaying the clotting blood-slime on the knife.

There's no such thing as a "just killing". The words are a contradiction
A clever excuse
Cooked up by criminals
So totally enmeshed in evil
Their minds are lost.
Tyndareus' daughter screamed, poor thing,
Yelled out in panic as she looked at death:
"I gave you birth - killing your mother
you break the most sacred of all taboos.
Your reward for avenging your father is
shame everlasting"

The disease has no cure.

We can only weep and feel pity
For one who made his own hand
Spill his mother's blood.
There can be no worse tragedy than the son of Agamemnon's.
The wage for his handiwork is to be possessed
By devils, to be the quarry that the Furies hunt,

Everywhere he runs
Everything he sees
Is distorted through a lens of blood.

The man of pain, when his mother tore open
her golden robe, and he saw her quivering breast,
killed her as religiously as a priest performing sacrifice:
taking her life in payment for his father's.

Scene 3:

[Enter Electra from the house. She stares at her brother's empty bed]

Electra : Where is Orestes? Has he been taken bad?

Chorus Leader : Far from it. He's gone to confront the people of Argos - to battle for his life, and yours, too.

Electra : O god! What possessed him! Somebody must have talked him into it.

[An Old Man is seen hurrying towards them]

Chorus Leader : Pylades - but here comes someone. He should have the latest news of your brother.

Old Man : You poor, wretched, miserable child! The war-hero's daughter! Mistress Electra, listen to the terrible news I have to tell you.

Electra : We are finished. It's obvious what you are going to say. I take it your news is not good?

Old Man : The Argives have voted that your brother and yourself must die today.

Electra : It's what I was expecting. All along I was afraid this would be the outcome. How was the trial? What were their arguments for putting us to death? Tell us; am I to look forward to stoning, or will I have their permission to take a sword and be my own executioner?

Old Man : I was on my way back into town from the farm. I was wanting to find out how it was going with you and young Orestes. All my life I've been an admirer of your father, and your family always saw me all right. I'm an ordinary man; but you don't need to be a toff to believe in sticking by your friends. Well, I see this mob streaming up the hill and sitting themselves down in the old open-air court. I asked one of the crowd: "What's going on?" says I, "Why the panic? Has war broken out?" And he says to me "That there's Orestes. Can't you recognise him? He's coming here to be put on trial for his life." Suddenly - like seeing a ghost - there he was; your brother and Pylades. Orestes stumbling, shattered by his illness; Pylades helping him walk and shielding him. When the meeting-place was full, the usher got up and said "The motion is 'Should Orestes the mother-killer be put to death.' Who wishes to speak?" First on his feet was Talthybius - one of your father's officers at Troy. He was always one to back the folks in power, and today was no different. He sat on the fence, hedging his bets. He said what a great man your father was, but didn't say anything to support your brother. He was pretending to be fair, muttering things like "dangerous precedent" and "parents' rights" - but all the time with shifty glances at Aegisthus' friends. Typical professional soldier! Always takes his orders from the men in power. Next to get up to speak was Lord Diomedes. He didn't want you or your brother killed - he said expelling you both from Argos would be the right punishment. A lot thought this was an excellent idea - but others objected. Then he came forward. The one with the gob marked "we never close". A man cocksure and without shame - an Argive unworthy of the name; a mere puppet, an ignorant loudmouth who said you and Orestes should be put to death by public stoning. He used the words Tyndareus had told him to. The next speaker was totally different. Nothing much to look at - but a manly man; not one of the usual political in-crowd, but a working farmer - backbone of the country - a man of solid common sense, itching to take their arguments apart; his own man, with an instinct for what's right and proper. He proposed they should give a state reward to Orestes. A golden crown for Agamemnon's son, who'd had the guts to avenge his father; who'd killed an evil and godless woman. She, he said, had attacked the very roots of our society. Who would ever take up arms or volunteer to fight for their country abroad, if those they'd left behind invaded their homes and stole the wives they'd trusted? A good speech - or so it seemed to decent folk. Then there was a pause. Your brother came forward. I thought he spoke well; but he did not win the audience over. The winner was that toady who'd demanded the death penalty for the two of you. Orestes managed to persuade them only on the method of execution. No stoning, if he undertook to end his own life today - with you. Pylades, in tears, is helping him home; his friends are with him. They are distraught with grief, but try to comfort him. You will see a pathetic and heartbreaking sight. Fetch a sword, then, or rope to hang yourself. You must end your life. Your royal blood was of no use; nor was Apollo with his temple and his oracles - quite the opposite, in fact.

[Old Man departs slowly as Electra starts the funeral chant. Drum beats.]

Electra : I lead the dirge, o ancient land
 With bloody nail I tear my cheek
 Spoiling my beauty.

 I beat my head; I carry out
 The rites for the dead below the earth,

Persephone's orders.

Choral Ode 3

Chorus : O let my ancient land scream out
As the iron blade cuts through my hair,
Mourning a family.

Sorrow and sadness march in step
As the clan that bred the war-leaders of Greece
Comes to extinction.

Electra : A dynasty dies as my family ends;
The house of Pelops so envied once
All over Hellas.

The gods of Olympus grudged us our glory;
The men of Argos panting with bloodlust
Voted to kill us.

Chorus : Alas! Mankind is doomed to tears;
Our life is short and full of pain -
Fate's not what you hoped for.

We each exchange our pain for pain;
However long each life may last,
The end is uncertain.

Electra : The family curse goes back to Tantalus.
I blame his crime for all we suffer still.
He tried to cheat the gods and failed; was caught.
Then Pelops, his son, in the fatal chariot-race
Doubled our family's debt to crime.
Atreus next, whose fratricidal feud
Brought butchery of babes and filthy feast.

The curse then took my father, and, today, myself.

[Orestes and Pylades return.]

Chorus : Look! Here comes your brother, victim of the vote for death; and Pylades, more like a brother than a friend, guiding Orestes' faltering steps, like an extra horse for a crippled chariot.

Scene 4

Electra : [she cries out as if in pain] I see you at your grave, and mourn, my darling, as you stand before the gates of death. [she cries again] I'm sorry. Looking at you for the last time, I can't control myself. [she weeps hysterically]

Orestes : Stop it! You are snivelling like a typical woman! Pull yourself together - accept the facts. The verdict is harsh, but still ...

Electra : Stop? How can I stop? We are the damned. We shall look no more on the blessed light of the sun.

Orestes : Please! One death-sentence is enough - I don't need to be bored to death by your dismal droning. Things are bad enough without that!

Electra : Poor Orestes, you are so young to die, it's too soon. You are dying with your whole life in front of you!

Orestes : [fighting her off] For heaven's sake, stop smothering me - unless you want a blubbering coward on your hands.

Electra : We are going to die. What else is there to do but cry?

Orestes : Look. Today is the day. We can choose the sword or the rope. That's all.

Electra : Then - you, my darling brother, you kill me. I can't bear the thought of some common Argive boasting he took the life of Agamemnon's daughter.

Orestes : No, I won't do it. Killing my mother was bad enough. Choose your method and do it yourself.

Electra : All right. I'll take the sword when you do. Give me one last hug.

Orestes : Enjoy it; but the proximity of death may mar the pleasure somewhat.

Electra : My truest love; your body excites me so. I want you. Our hearts are one.

Orestes : I'm melting; I can't help it. I feel it too; I want to crush you in my arms. Why be embarrassed at this stage? Your breasts, your sweet embrace - no children to look forward to, no marriage-joys - let me make it up to you ...

Electra : O god! ... It's a wicked thought - but I'd like to die like this - together - one weapon through us both, then together in one cedar coffin and one tomb.

Orestes : That would be wonderful. But we'll have no say about what they do to our bodies. We've no one left who cares.

Electra : He didn't speak up for you, then, despite his zeal to save you - Menelaus, the coward, the man who betrayed my father?

Orestes : Never showed his face. He sees himself as the next king; he took good care not to spoil his chances by helping his friends. But let's go! Our death must live up to our family's pride - and Agamemnon's. I shall show the city what I am made of when they see me plunge the sword into my heart. You must be as brave as I and do what I do. Pylades, you are the stage-manager of our final show. When we both are dead, lay out our bodies, properly, take us to our father's tomb, and bury us together. Goodbye. No more words - time for action.
[he turns to enter the house. Pylades blocks his way]

Pylades : Wait! One thing! To expect me to go on living if you are dead is grossly unfair.

Orestes : What's the point of dying with me?

Pylades : Are you serious? What's the point of living without you?

Orestes : You did not kill your mother. I was the fool who did that.

Pylades : I helped you. It's only right that I should suffer, too.

Orestes : Go home to your father; make his day. Don't die with me. You have a country; I don't. You have your father's house, a family fortune - a future. The marriage with my sister is off. I promised her to you in celebration of our friendship - I'm sorry: but there will be another wife who'll bear your sons. I am sad that we won't now ever be brothers. Goodbye. We alone know what our friendship meant. Find happiness: you can and I can't - there's not much joy where I'm heading.

Pylades : You've completely missed the point! I don't want to save myself! I am a murderer too - why deny it? I planned the crime you're now being punished for! The least I can do is die with you - and with her. I agreed to marry her and I think of her as my wife. What excuse could I make back home in Phocis, if I was a friend until your troubles came, and then deserted you? Impossible. But my idea is this: since we are all going to die, let us make sure Menelaus suffers too.

Orestes : I would love to see that before I die!

Pylades : Listen, then. Put your sword away for a moment.

Orestes : I'll certainly wait if there's a way to punish my enemy.

Pylades : Keep your voice down. I don't trust these women.

Orestes : They are our friends. It's all right.

Pylades : Let us kill Helen. Hit Menelaus where it hurts him most.

Orestes : How?

Pylades : Hack her to pieces. She's in your house isn't she, in hiding?

Orestes : Yes, and making herself quite at home.

Pylades : A shame; it won't be hers for long. That great removal-man, Death, is on his way!

Orestes : One problem. She has these foreign servants.

Pylades : I'm not scared of a few Phrygians.

Orestes : What? Not even the lipstick squad and the mirror patrol? The scent-sentries?

Pylades : She's brought all her Trojan paraphernalia, then?

Orestes : She finds Greece such a slum.

Pylades : Slaves are no match for freeborn men.

Orestes : If we pull this off, I shall be happy to die twice.

Pylades : So shall I, avenging you.

Orestes : Go over the plan. Explain the details.

Pylades : We go into the house and pretend we're going to kill ourselves ...

Orestes : Yes ... and then?

Pylades : We start to moan in front of her about what we're having to go through.

Orestes : Then she starts weeping too - though secretly delighted.

Pylades : Just as we will be!

Orestes : And then?

Pylades : We'll have our daggers hidden in these robes.

Orestes : How shall we get rid of the servants?

Pylades : Lock them up in different parts of the house,

Orestes : Kill anyone who refuses to go quietly.

Pylades : Then on to the inevitable climax.

Orestes : "The death of Helen". That is the grand finale.

Pylades : You have it. Now hear why my plan is so brilliant. If we put an ordinary woman to the sword, they'd call us animals, terrorists. But we shall be punishing Helen in the name of all Greeks; she killed their fathers, she killed their sons, she made their wives widows. They will cheer with glee, they will light bonfires, they'll pray for all good things to come to you and me, because we terminated a worthless whore. Now they'll point the finger at you, not as "mother-killer", "matricide" - but as the man who executed Helen, for genocide! Menelaus must never, ever profit from your father's death, or from yours, or your sister's, or your mother's - well perhaps we'd better leave her out. He must never have your house, or keep the bride restored by Agamemnon's spear. We shall take our swords to her, you may depend on it: but if we fail, we shall in any case burn the house down before we kill ourselves. We cannot lose - there's glory either way: gloriously we die, or gloriously we save our lives!

Chorus Leader : All women are right to hate Tyndareus' daughter; she disgraced our sex.

Orestes : My god! There is nothing better than a true friend - not money, not power. Friendship is the one thing you cannot put a price on. It was you who planned the Aegisthus business and shared all the risks. And again, here you are, thinking how to destroy my enemies. But enough praise - too much starts to sound insincere. Before my life is snuffed out, I would so love to see my enemies meet their doom. O to see the biter bit, and hear those who made me suffer scream in agony themselves! I am the son of Agamemnon, a king who ruled Greece by consent, not force - though the power he earned was something like a god's. I shall not disgrace him by dying like a slave: I freely take my life myself, and may Menelaus rot! If only we could wish for just one piece of luck, if it were somehow possible for the killers not to be killed! I know it's stupid, but I have nothing to lose by voicing my thoughts - talk is cheap!

Electra : Brother - I think I may have a cunning plan: a way to save you and Pylades, and myself as well.

Orestes : Incredible! What is it? I've always respected your brains - you are a genius!

Electra : Listen, then - and you, Pylades. Apply your minds to this ...

Orestes : I can't wait to hear your brilliant idea.

Electra : You know Helen's daughter? Well, of course you do!

Orestes : Yes, Hermione, the girl my mother raised.

Electra : She has gone to Clytemnestra's tomb.

Orestes : To do what? Where is this leading?

Electra : To pour libations on the grave. Her mother sent her.

Orestes : How does this save my life?

Electra : When she gets back, grab her as a hostage.

Orestes : This is some miracle-cure for the three of us?

Electra : When Helen is dead, if Menelaus tries to do anything to you, or me, or Pylades (we're all in this together), say you will kill Hermione. Your sword will be out and you will be holding it at the girl's throat. And if Menelaus, seeing Helen lying in a pool of blood, does not want his daughter put to death, and promises to rescue you, then give her back to him. But if he can't control his seething temper, and tries to kill you, you start to slit Hermione's throat. My hunch is that even if he blusters at first, he'll soon calm down. He isn't really the fearsome warrior type. And then you're home and dry. There; I've said my piece.

Orestes : You are as beautiful as any woman, but you think like a man: your instinct is to fight for life - and you deserve to live. Pylades, this is the woman you'd be losing: what a wife she'll make if you survive!

Pylades : If only! I'd take her back to Phocis and give her the slap-up wedding she deserves.

Orestes : How soon will Hermione be back? Sorry to interrupt your plans for the future, old chap - but first we've got that stinking bastard's sprog to trap.

Electra : She should be well on her way - she's had plenty of time to do what she had to.

Orestes : Excellent! Electra, you stay near the house. Keep the girl there, and watch out that no one - like our uncle or one of his men - manages to enter the house until the killing is done. Knock, or shout if there's a problem. Pylades, let us draw our swords and go in, ready to face our last ordeal. O father, which art in the gloomy house of Night, thy son Orestes calls on thee to succour him. Help us to kill the wife of that traitor Menelaus.

Electra : O father, thy children call on thee in thy grave to come to their aid. We face death for thy sake.

Pylades : Agamemnon, though I am more distantly related, hearken unto my prayers also. Save thy children.

Orestes : I killed my mother ...

Electra : I held the sword ...

Pylades : I planned the crime, and quelled their doubts ...

Orestes : All to help thee, our father!

Electra : I did not betray thee!

Orestes : My tears are my outpoured offering ...

Electra : So are mine!

Pylades : Enough! We have our job to do. If prayers can penetrate the ground, no doubt he hears you. Thou, o Zeus our begetter, and holy Justice, grant to Orestes, Electra and myself success! We three share one task, one cause and one destiny - together we live or together we die.

[Exeunt Orestes and Pylades into the house]

Electra : My dear kind friends, wives of the noble citizens of ancient Argos.

Chorus Leader: Tell us how we can help. You are still our royal mistress.

Electra : Some of you stand along the road this side: the rest guard the other approach to the palace.

Chorus Leader: What for?

Electra : I'm scared someone could interrupt the bloody work within - give us more problems.

First Semichorus: Come on, let's move. I'll take the path going east.

Second Semichorus: I'll take the one to the west.

Electra : Now, both of you turn your eyes left and right. This way and that way. Now start again. Keep practising!

Chorus : We understand!

Electra : Keep those eyes circling now - and try to keep your hair out of your face.

First Semichorus: There's someone coming! Look out! A rough-looking fellow prowling round the walls!

Electra : Disaster! What if he finds our two lions as they wait to pounce, and alerts our enemies?

First Semichorus: It's all right! Stop panicking! There's nobody there after all.

Electra : What about your side? Still secure? Check the front of the palace is still clear.

Second Semichorus: Fine our side. No Argives over here. What about you?

First Semichorus: The same. No people here either.

Electra : I'll put my ear to the door. [shouting to those inside] What are you waiting for? Cut her throat now while you've got the chance!

Damn! They can't hear. [shouting] Forget she's a woman, use your swords! If you don't hurry up, some Argive will come bursting in!

[to Chorus] Keep a close watch. Keep on the move. Patrol up and down.

Second Semichorus: I am moving - turning , observing.

Helen : [inside the palace] Argos! Help! Murder!

Chorus : -- You heard? The men are at work!

-- Yes, that's Helen screaming, I'm certain.

Electra : O Zeus! O god! Your power! - use it ! Help my friends!

Helen : [inside] Menelaus! I'm dying! Why aren't you here to help me?

Electra : Kill! kill! kill!
 Swords stabbing, thrusting home!
 Both together, blades in time!
 Kill her! The deserter!
 She ran from her father, she ran from her man
 She slaughtered in thousands the Greeks by the river
 Their tears fell like rain as cold steel took their lives
 At Troy by the banks of Scamander.

Chorus : Hush! Quiet! I heard footsteps coming up the path to the house!

Electra : Don't worry, my dears! It's Hermione - right on cue. Quiet now. She's heading straight into the trap; what a catch if we bag her! Back on watch. Keep calm. Don't let your faces show what's going on. I shall wear my usual scowl - as if I didn't know a thing.

[Hermione enters]

Sweetheart, have you been to Clytemnestra's grave and made the proper offerings to the gods?

Hermione: Yes. And she was so nice. But what was that noise coming from the palace? It really scared me.

Electra : Probably just us crying and wailing. Quite normal.

Hermione: What has happened?

Electra : Orestes and myself have been condemned to death.

Hermione: I don't believe it! Not my own cousins!

Electra : It's all settled. There is no mistake.

Hermione: So was that what all the shouting was?

Electra : Someone was on their knees, pleading for their life.

Hermione: Who was? I don't understand.

Electra : Poor Orestes - trying to save his life, and mine.

Hermione: There was a good reason for the noise, then.

Electra : The best reason in the world. But you must come and help us save our lives; ask your mother not to let Menelaus stand by and see us killed. My mother brought you up; you are like a sister: share my pain and lift the weight of suffering from our backs. Go in and argue for us; I'll show you the way. You are the only one who can save us.

Hermione: I will go in. If there is anything I can do to save you, I shall do it!

[she goes into the palace as Electra opens the door for her]

Electra : [shouting through the open door to Orestes] You inside! Swords ready! The victim is coming - grab her!

Hermione: [within] Oh god! Who are these men?

Electra : Shut up! I said you'd save our lives - unfortunately you won't save your own! [to Orestes, as Hermione's screams are heard] Grab her! Get hold of her! Sword to her throat - keep her quiet. Menelaus will find he's got men to deal with, no soft Trojans this time! I can't wait to see the coward grovel!

[Electra goes into the palace. Music]

Choral ode 4

Chorus : It's party time! Let's shout and dance!
 Play the music! Raise the roof!
 Let them think "it's just the chorus" -
 The victim's screams will not be heard.

 I can't wait to view Helen's body
 Oozing blood, her butchered corpse.
 Or would I rather hear a description?
 Either way, I have to know!

Helen had it coming.
I'm glad she's dead.

She made Greece weep
Because Paris
Took Greece
To Troy.

But hush! There's a noise - someone's coming - they'll tell us - it's one of the Phrygian slaves who's escaped!

Scene 5

[The Phrygian has appeared on the palace roof, and is clambering down]

The Phrygian: I have evaded the Grecian swords
and saved my life!
In my Trojan slippers I ran like a Trojan
and escaped,
By ascending to the cedar-wood architrave and the Doric triglyphs!
Doomed! Doomed! My country! My country!
How shall I flee, stranger women?
Shall I grow wings and soar through the sullen sky
Or boat across the surging Ocean tides?

Chorus Leader: Tell us, Mr Chambermaid, what is going on?

The Phrygian: O Troy! O Troy! Omoi! Omoi!
O Phrygian metropolis! O lovely-sodded
Holy mountain of Ida! How I weep my Trojan tears
For your demise, caused by the bird-babe,
The swanny-winged beauty queen,
Leda's little puppy-dog.
Miss Helen! Miss-stake! Miss-taken and Miss-appropriated!
You were fatal to the marbled courts Apollo built.
Ottotoi!
Misery! Misery!
Wretched Troy!
O Ganymede, cock-horse of Zeus!

Chorus Leader : You are not making much sense, I'm afraid. Just tell us what is happening inside the palace. [shouting] What - is - happ - en - ing?

The Phrygian: Ailinoi! Ailinoi!
At news of death this is what the Trojans say.
It is the Trojan for "aaargh!"
It is what we say when royal blood
Is spilled upon the earth

By death swords of steel.

They came into the the palace -
I tell you the whole tale -
Lions, Greeks, two, twins.
Number one was General's son,
Number two the son of Strophius - the master-crook;
Like Odysseus: a quiet killer,
Trusty to friends, fight-keen
War-skilled - a bloody viper!
Blast his crafty plans - he is
A villain!

Inside, towards the throne they creep
Where sitting was the woman Paris the shooter married.
Their eyes puffy with tears they kneel low down
One on left one on right.
She is besieged.
Round Helen's knees they threw, both threw
Their pleading hands.
Then up the servants ran, all ran
Her Trojan bodyguard.

Each speaks to each
Each full of fear -
Could this be a plot?
"No!" thought some; but others
Believed the mother-murdering monster
Had trapped Tyndareus' daughter
In a noose of treachery!

Chorus Leader: Were you still there at this point? Or had you panicked and run off?

The Phrygian: I was on duty!
I am a highly-trained Trojan specialist
As all we Trojans are.
I'm Helen's head fanner. I fan
Helen's head with my fan
With my feathery fan -
Only Trojans can do this.

She was twisting
Thread, spinning:
The wool came from Troy
To weave fine purple cloths
As a gift for Clytemnestra's grave mound.

Up spoke Orestes to
The Laconian maid "O
Child of Zeus, please put

Upon the ground your foot
Rise from your chair and sit here
Near the ancient hearth of Pelops
Who was my father's father's father.
I have some words to share with you alone."

Her led her, he did
And she followed, she did;
Not wise enough to guess her fate.
The colleague meanwhile, the wicked Phocian
Had his own allotted task.
"You! Out of the way! Beat it, Trojan scum!"
He shut us all in different rooms -
Stables, or sheds - some here, some there;
Locking us away from our mistress.

Chorus Leader: Go on, what happened then?

The Phrygian: O mother which art on Ida!
O mother, o fearsome, o dread!
Alas! The bloody things
I saw; the evil, wicked things
I saw in the palace of kings.

From the darkness under their colourful robes
They pulled out swords, each
Darting glances right and left
in fear of witnesses.

Like wild boar on a mountain
They cornered the woman.
They say: "You die!
You die! Your wicked husband
Is the killer -
He betrayed
His brother's children leaving them
To die in Argos."

She is yelling, yelling
"Omoi! Moi! Help me! Help!"
Her smooth white arms are beating her breast
Are pounding her head with blows.

She was wearing her best golden sandals -
I saw them as she started to run, started
Away. But Orestes -
He was wearing Mycenaean hunting-boots -

Wound his fingers in her hair
And twisted her head
Till it touched her shoulder - the left -
And he was poised to plunge
The black sword in her neck.

Chorus Leader: And where were you Trojans when she needed you?

The Phrygian: We yelled!
We smashed our prison doors,
And ran from every corner of the house
Towards her screams.
Some had stones or knotted ropes
A few held swords they'd found.
But facing us was Pylades -
Blast him! Like, he was like -
Hector the Trojan! Or Ajax!
I once saw Ajax, I did, I saw him
Wearing his massive helmet
At the gates of Troy.

Our swords clashed.
Then, surprise! How inferior
We Trojans were to warriors from Greece!
We had one deserter, one corpse, one
Wounded, one grovelling to save his life.
We backed away, into the shadows:
Some dead, some dying, some
Just lying still.

Then she arrived, the sad Hermione
To find her mother bleeding on the ground.
Like Bacchants, though more ruthless, pouncing
On some wild cub, they charged
And caught her.
Then back to Helen - to finish her off. But she was
Not in the room, not in the house. She was
GONE!
O Earth! O Sky! O Day! O Night! Where is she?
Was it drugs, or magic, or theft
By the gods?

I did not stay to find out the truth.
I stole from the palace and started to run!

Poor Menelaus! For nothing he struggled to get his wife back;
For nothing he fought to regain her from Troy - for nothing!
She's no use to him now!

Chorus Leader: This is an incredible story - but there's more! I see Orestes storming from the palace, sword in hand.

[Orestes runs on; The Phrygian prostrates himself at his feet.]

Orestes : Where is he? One of the rats escaped. The Phrygian: Here, master, sir, underneath you, grovelling in correct barbarian fashion.

Orestes : Get up! You're not in Troy now! This is Greece! [he drags him to his feet then hurls him down again]

The Phrygian: It is deemed intelligent throughout the world to prefer life to death.

Orestes : Weren't you the one bawling for Menelaus to come and help?

The Phrygian: Oh no, sir! I was shouting "Help! Help Orestes!" You are a much greater man.

Orestes : So was I correct to murder Tyndareus' daughter?

The Phrygian: Very very correct, your honour. If she had three throats, they should all have been cut.

Orestes : You're just sucking up to me, you pathetic cur! I know what's really in your mind.

The Phrygian: No, no! Did Helen not ruin Troy along with Greece?

Orestes : Swear - or I'll kill you - you're not just saying that to make me like you. [he holds his sword to The Phrygian's throat]

The Phrygian: I swear on my life - it's all I've got to swear on.

Orestes : Were all of you at Troy as scared of steel?

The Phrygian: Please, remove your sword . It's too close. I can see the blood glistening.

Orestes : Suppose it was the Gorgon's head. Afraid you'd turn to stone?

The Phrygian: No, to a corpse. I cannot see any Gorgon's head.

Orestes : A slave should not fear death - death sets you free!

The Phrygian: Freedom to live - that's what all men want, slave or not.

Orestes : [A sudden change : the Phrygian has unconsciously echoed Orestes' own philosophy]

Excellent! Your brilliant argument saves your life. Get back inside!

The Phrygian: You will not be killing me then?

Orestes : You are free!

The Phrygian: Free - I love that word!

Orestes : On second thoughts...

The Phrygian: That is not a lovely thing to say.

Orestes : Cretin! Do you really think I would slit your throat? What sex are you? You're not actually a woman - but you're surely not a man! I merely came out to stop you waking all Argos up with your squealing.

[The Phrygian runs off]

But I'm not worried if Menelaus comes in range of my weapon. Let golden boy come out, with his shoulder-length curls. I'm ready! If he brings an Argive force to get revenge for Helen, and still refuses to see me safe - and my sister, and Pylades - he will have two corpses to view, his daughter's as well as his wife's.

[Orestes goes back into the house]

Choral Ode 5

Chorus : Io! Io! Fate!

Another blow another dreadful blow
Befalls the tragic house of Atreus.

— What should we do? Should we report it to the authorities?
Or should we keep quiet - that would be safer, dears.

— Look, from the house! What does it mean -
That thick plume of smoke?

— They've got burning branches! They're going to torch the palace!
Is there no end to the murder in their hearts?

— The gods control us.
They work their purpose out
Anyway they like.

— So - the mighty dynasty collapses.
 We see its death-throes.
 The final act of the tragedy
 That began with Pelops' crime
 Is over.

But look - it's Menelaus - in a hurry - he's heard what's going on, that's for sure.
You inside! Inside the palace! Make sure the doors are bolted fast!
If you don't watch out, a great man, a man of power, will show you, Orestes, what an
impotent nobody you are.

Scene 6

[Menelaus enters]

Menelaus : I am here. I have been informed of the actions
Of the two animals. I refuse to call them men.
I hear that my wife
"Is not dead, but has disappeared" -
A ruse, no doubt, a rumour spread
By someone who feared to tell the truth. The mother-killer -
This has the smell of one of his witty little jokes.

Open the door someone! You servants! I'm talking to you!
Open this door! So I can ... my daughter ...
I can save her from the killers' bloody claws.
And my poor wife ...
I can ... remove her.
They shall share her death,
I shall kill the men who killed my wife - with my own hands.

[Orestes appears on the roof of the palace with Hermione, holding a sword to her throat.]

Orestes : Hey, you! Hands off that door! Yes, you, Menelaus, you pompous poser! Go on -
or I'll have to spoil this architectural masterpiece and use some of the masonry to crack your
skull. Forget the rescue bid. The door is hero-proof.

Menelaus : Men on the roof! Blazing torches! My daughter with a sword at her throat! My
god, what's going on?

Orestes : Do you want to ask questions or be told the answer?

Menelaus : Neither! Is there a choice?

Orestes : I intend to kill your daughter, if that's of any interest.

Menelaus : You want more blood? Wasn't Helen's murder enough?

Orestes : Yes, if I had killed her, and the gods had not robbed me ...

Menelaus : Don't dare to joke with me, sonny.

Orestes : It's not a joke. Unfortunately. It's true. If only I had ...

Menelaus : What? What now?

Orestes : ...really put Helen in Hell.

Menelaus : Give me my wife's body! I wish to bury her.

Orestes : Ask the gods for it. Now! It's your daughter's turn.

Menelaus : More blood! More murder! Mother-killer!

Orestes : What of my father? I avenged him; you let him die.

Menelaus : Since tasting your mother's blood are you addicted to murder?

Orestes : Let's call it my mission - to rid the world of bitches.

Menelaus : And you, Pylades - do you go along with this new crime too?

Orestes : No need to ask him. He does.

Menelaus : I'll make you sorry. You'll need wings to get away from me.

Orestes : Who said anything about getting away? Our plan is to burn down the palace ...

Menelaus : What? Set fire to your home? The family home?

Orestes : - so you can't have it, ever; ... and then cut Hermione's throat over the flames!

Menelaus : Kill her, then! But I'll have your blood ...

Orestes : Here we go!

Menelaus : No! No! Please! Stop! Don't do it!

Orestes : Oh shut up! You've got what you deserve - learn to live with it.

Menelaus : Live? You shouldn't be allowed to live!

Orestes : I shall live. And I shall be the king of the land.

Menelaus : What land?

Orestes : The glorious land of Argos, the ancestral kingdom. Here.

Menelaus : What, you - perform the ancient sacred rites?

Orestes : Why not?

Menelaus : Bless our armies off to face the foe?

Orestes : You are better qualified, then, are you?

Menelaus : My hands are clean!

Orestes : Because the shit is all inside you.

Menelaus : Who would respect you?

Orestes : Anyone who loves his father.

Menelaus : And if he loves his mother?

Orestes : Well, he's a lucky bastard.

Menelaus : Which you are not.

Orestes : Evil bitches I can live without.

Menelaus : Take your sword away from my daughter.

Orestes : You are a liar. You lied to me.

Menelaus : You will kill my daughter.

Orestes : Now that's not a lie

Menelaus : What can I do?

Orestes : [pause] You could go to Argos, and tell them ...

Menelaus : Tell them what?

Orestes : Not to kill us. Take our case to the people.

Menelaus : Or else you murder my daughter.

Orestes : Well done!

Menelaus : O Helen, my unhappy wife ...

Orestes : Don't I have a right to happiness?

Menelaus : I brought you back from Troy for sacrifice,

Orestes : If only that were true.

Menelaus : I fought, I struggled, ...

Orestes : Not for me, though.

Menelaus : ... I went through so much.

Orestes : And achieved - nothing.

Menelaus : You have me cornered.

Orestes : No, not me, it was your own character, or lack of it, that trapped you.

Now, Electra, light the fires down there! And Pylades, my only friend, let's see a conflagration!

Menelaus : People! Argives! Where are you? Help! You people out there! The mother-killer want to kill us all!

[The god Phoebus Apollo suddenly and mysteriously appears ex machina. He holds a star, which is the catasterized Helen]

Apollo : O Menelaus, check now the passion welling in your breast!
'Tis I, Apollo, Leto's son, stand here and call your name!
And you, with sword, who terrorise that maid,
Orestes, I am come so all may learn their fate.

Helen, whom you tried so eagerly to kill,
To rouse Menelaus' wrath, has gone.
I saved her and I spirited her away,
On Zeus' orders, from your sword.
As Zeus' daughter she'll immortal be
And live in heaven with her brothers twain,
Pollux and Castor, the heavenly twins,
An extra star for ships to steer their courses by.
Menelaus, choose another wife:
Helen's beauty was exploited by us gods
To force the Greeks and Trojans into war -
A needed cleansing of the earth,
When populations grow too large.

So much for Helen. You, Orestes there,
Must cross the frontiers of this land
And live an exile 'til a year has passed.

The natives of the place you stay
Will not forget you, you'll be pleased to know.
In memory they'll call the town Oresteion.
Thence unto Athens must you make your way,
To court; charged by the Furies with your mother's death.
Don't fret: we gods will rig the votes.
You'll win your case and then walk free.

She at whose throat you aim that sword,
shall then (surprise!) become your wife.
You promised Pylades your sister once;
Give him Electra, let them both find bliss.

Menelaus, let Orestes rule the Argive land:
You go and reign on Sparta's throne,
A compensation for the wife you lost,
And all the grief she heaped on you.

Orestes, I'll fix things with the people here:
I made you kill your mother, so it's only fair.

Orestes : O Phoebus, lord of prophecy, thy oracles are great!
Thou didst not lie to me, thou spakest the truth!
That voice I heard and thought was thine,
Was (now I know) a demon's voice.
I must confess I was a little scared,
But all ends well, and now I heed thy words.
See! Hermione I free until anon
In marriage bonds we join, when father wills.

Menelaus : And so farewell then, Helen, child of Zeus.
I envy thee thy heavenly bliss.
Orestes: Hermione is to you betrothed
As Phoebus ordered. What a splendid pair
We'll make! The noble father and his noble son!

Apollo : Depart then each unto his fate,
Your quarrels over.

Menelaus : I obey.

Orestes : And I do too. I make my peace

With you my uncle, and, Apollo, thee.

Apollo : Go on your way, rejoice!
 Thank Peace, most beautiful
 Of all the gods. And now
 I must take Helen to the sky
 And show her Zeus' halls,
 Where she will be a gleaming star,
 She'll sit with Hera, Zeus' wife,
 And Heracles and Hebe, too.
 While here on earth
 You'll light the way
 For sailors, with your brother stars.

[Hopefully, the final platitudes of the chorus are drowned by a surge
of electronic organ music as Apollo disappears from view]

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