

EURIPIDES ORESTES

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Note that in the text below the line numbers in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text; the line numbers without brackets refer to the lines in the translated text. In numbering the lines of the English text, the translator has normally counted a short indented line with the short line above it, so that two short lines count as one line. The stage directions and explanatory footnotes have been added by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of words ending in *-s* are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding *-’s* (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus’s*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound *-iz*). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Orestes* and *Orestes’* are both three-syllable words; whereas, *Orestes’s* has four syllables).

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of M. L. West’s commentary on the play (Aris & Phillips, 1987).

BACKGROUND NOTE

Euripides assumes that his audience will be thoroughly familiar with the family history of his main characters, Orestes and Electra, the younger members of the house of Atreus. This family suffered from an ancient curse originating with a

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distant ancestor, Pelops, who, in order to win his bride, killed the bride's father in a chariot race by getting a co-conspirator to tamper with the father's chariot. Pelops then killed his confederate by throwing him in the sea. The drowning man cursed Pelops and his future family.

As a result of the curse, Pelops's two sons, Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled, and Atreus, after inviting Thyestes to a reconciliation banquet, killed Thyestes's sons and served them to him at dinner, revealing what he had done only after Thyestes had already eaten them. Thyestes then fathered a child by his daughter to produce a son, Aegisthus, who could avenge the notorious Thyestean banquet.

When Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta, who had married Menelaus, eloped with Paris to Troy, many of the Greek warrior leaders gathered an army and sailed to Troy to get Helen back, thus launching the Trojan War. The expedition was led by Agamemnon, Menelaus's brother (and a son of Atreus), who sacrificed his eldest daughter, Iphigeneia, in order to appease the gods and allow the army to sail from Greece.

While Agamemnon was at Troy, Aegisthus, Thyestes's son, seduced Agamemnon's wife, Clytaemnestra (a sister of Helen), and as soon as Agamemnon returned from Troy, they murdered him, thus avenging the Thyestean banquet and the killing of Iphigeneia. Orestes, Agamemnon's young son, was away from Argos at the time. However, he eventually returned and, with help from his sister Electra, murdered his mother Clytaemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, as revenge for the killing of their father. The play opens a few days after that double murder.

Other details of this family story will be provided in the footnotes, as needed.

ORESTES

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ELECTRA: daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, sister of Orestes.

HELEN: wife of Menelaus, sister of Clytaemnestra.

HERMIONE: daughter of Menelaus and Helen.

CHORUS: young women of Argos.

ORESTES: son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra.

MENELAUS: brother of Agamemnon, uncle of Orestes and Electra.

TYNDAREUS: father of Helen and Clytaemnestra, an old man.

PYLADES: prince of Phocis, a friend of Orestes.

MESSENGER: an old man.

PHRYGIAN: one of Helen's Trojan slaves, a eunuch.

APOLLO: divine son of Zeus and Leto, god of prophecy.

[The action of the play takes place in Argos just outside the royal palace a few days after Orestes has avenged the murder of his father by killing his mother, Clytaemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. At the opening, Orestes is lying ill on a couch near the doors. Electra is sitting close to him.]

ELECTRA

There's nothing terrible one can describe,
no suffering or event brought on by god,
whose weight humans may not have to bear.
The blessed Tantalus—and I don't mock him
for his misfortunes—who was, so they say,
born from Zeus, flutters in the air, terrified
of a rock hanging right above his head.
People claim he's paying the penalty,
because, although he was a mortal man
who was considered equal to the gods
in the feasts they shared together, he had
a shameful illness—he could not control
his tongue.¹ Well, Tantalus fathered Pelops,
and then from that man Atreus was born,
the one for whom the goddess combing yarn
spun out strife, making him the enemy

10

[10]

¹Tantalus, a son of Zeus, offended the gods, who punished him by placing him in Hades, where he is constantly tempted by food and drink which he cannot reach (Odysseus tells us of seeing the shade of Tantalus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*). His offense varies, depending on the story. In some accounts, he stole food from the gods and revealed their secrets to human beings. In others, he cut up his son Pelops and served him up as food for the gods. Electra is here summarizing the history of her family, the House of Atreus, which suffered from a dreadful curse, originating with Pelops, son of Tantalus.

ORESTES

of his own brother, Thyestes.² But why
should I describe these horrors once again?
Then Atreus killed Thyestes' children
and fed them to him. Then, there's Atreus— 20
I won't mention what happened in between.
With Aerope, who came from Crete, as mother,
Atreus fathered glorious Agamemnon,
if, indeed, he was a glorious man,
and Menelaus, too. Menelaus
then wed Helen, a woman gods despise, [20]
while lord Agamemnon, in a wedding
notorious in Greece, took Clytaemnestra
as his wife. To him from that one woman
were born three daughters—Chrysothemis, 30
Iphigeneia, and me, Electra,
and a son, as well, Orestes, all of us
from an abominable mother, who snared
her husband in a robe he could not escape
and slaughtered him. It's not appropriate
for a young girl to talk of why she did it,
and so I leave the matter indistinct
for people to consider. Why should one
accuse Phoebus of injustice, even though
he did persuade Orestes to strike down 40
the mother who had given birth to him,
an act which did not earn him a good name [30]
in all men's eyes?³ Still, he obeyed the god
and killed her. I helped with the murder, too,
doing as much as any woman could,
and Pylades assisted us as well.
After that poor Orestes grew so ill.
Infected with a savage wasting sickness,
he's collapsed in bed and lies there, driven
into fits of madness by his mother's blood. 50
I am ashamed to name those goddesses,
the Eumenides, who keep driving him
through terrible ordeals.⁴ It's the sixth day

²The Fates set a man's destiny at birth by spinning yarn, measuring, and cutting it. Traditionally there were three female Fates.

³Phoebus is the name of the god Apollo, whose oracle Orestes consulted before returning to murder his mother and Aegisthus in revenge for his father's death.

⁴The Eumenides (literally the "Kindly Ones") are the Furies, goddesses of blood revenge within the family, who are tormenting Orestes because he killed his mother. Electra does not call them by

ORESTES

since our mother perished in that slaughter
and her body was purified in fire— [40]
in that time he's not swallowed any food
or washed his skin. He stays wrapped in a cloak.
And when his body does find some relief
and his mind clears from the disease, he weeps.
At other times he leaps up out of bed 60
and bolts like a colt released from harness.
Argos has proclaimed no one should shelter us,
receive us by their hearths, or speak to us,
since we killed our mother. This very day
will be decisive—the Argive city
will cast its vote whether the two of us
must be stoned to death or have our throats cut [50]
with a sharpened sword. We do have one hope
we won't die—the fact that Menelaus
has reached this land from Troy—his flotilla 70
now fills up the harbour at Nauplia,
where he rides at anchor by the headlands,
after wandering for so long at random.⁵
But as for Helen, who caused such grieving,
he sent her on ahead to our own house, [60]
waiting until night, in case anyone
whose children died at Troy might see her,
if she went strolling there during the day,
and injured her by starting to throw stones.
She's inside now, weeping for her sister 80
and the troubles which have struck her family.⁶
Though she suffers, she has some consolation—
Hermione, the daughter she left at home
when she sailed off to Troy, who Menelaus
brought from Sparta and gave to my mother
to bring up, is a great joy and helps her
forget her troubles. I keep on watching
all the roads for the moment I can see
Menelaus coming. Unless he saves us,
we don't have much strength to ride this out. 90
A house plagued with bad luck has no defence. [70]

their official name but uses a common euphemism, presumably because she does not want to risk offending them.

⁵Menelaus took a long time to sail home from Troy: his ships were blown off course, and they ended up in Egypt.

⁶Orestes's mother, Clytaemnestra, whom he has just murdered, and Helen are sisters.

ORESTES

[Helen enters from the palace.]

HELEN

Child of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon,
poor Electra, you've remained unmarried
such a long time now. How are things with you
and your unlucky brother Orestes,
who killed his mother? That was a mistake.
But I ascribe it to Apollo, and so
I don't risk pollution talking to you.
And yet I do lament my sister's death,
Clytaemnestra, whom I never saw 100
after I sailed off to Troy, driven there
by that fated madness from the gods.
Now I've lost her, I weep for our misfortune. [80]

ELECTRA

Helen, why should I now describe for you
what your eyes can see—Agamemnon's home
facing disaster? I sit here sleepless
beside this wretched corpse—his faint breathing
makes the man a corpse. Not that I blame him
for his suffering. You're the one who's lucky.
Your husband's fortunate as well. You've come 110
when what's going on with us is miserable.

HELEN

How long has he lying like this in bed?

ELECTRA

Ever since he shed his mother's blood.

HELEN

Poor wretch! [90]
And his mother, too, given how she died.

ELECTRA

That's how it is. He's broken by his troubles.

HELEN

Girl, would you do something for me please,
in the name of the gods?

ORESTES

ELECTRA

I'm busy here,
sitting with my brother.

HELEN

Would you be willing
to come with me to my sister's tomb?

ELECTRA

To my own mother? Is that what you want?
But why?

120

HELEN

So I can take an offering from me,
hair and libations.⁷

ELECTRA

Is it somehow wrong
for you to visit a family burial mound?

HELEN

I'm ashamed to show myself in public
among the Argives.

ELECTRA

After all this time
you're thinking wisely. Back when you left home
that was disgraceful.

HELEN

What you say is right.
But you're not talking to me as a friend.

[100]

ELECTRA

What makes you feel shame among the people
in Mycenae?⁸

HELEN

I fear the fathers of those men

130

⁷Placing a lock of one's hair on a burial mound and pouring libations beside it are traditional marks of respect for the dead.

⁸The names Argos and Mycenae are often used interchangeably for the same city, although in some accounts they are two different communities.

ORESTES

who died at Troy.

ELECTRA

That's a real fear. In Argos
it's on people's lips.

HELEN

So relieve my fears.
Do me that favour.

ELECTRA

I couldn't do it—
look at my mother's grave.

HELEN

But for servants
to take these offerings would be disgraceful.

ELECTRA

Why not send Hermione, your daughter?

HELEN

It's not good for a young unmarried girl
to walk around in public.

ELECTRA

She'd be repaying
the dead woman for looking after her.

HELEN

What you say is right, girl. You've convinced me.
I'll send my daughter. Your advice is good.

140 [110]

[Helen calls in through the palace doors.]

Hermione! Come on, my child,
out here in front.

[Hermione enters from the palace.]

Take the libation
in your hands and this hair of mine, and go
to Clytaemnestra's burial site. Pour out
the stirred-up honey, milk, and frothing wine.

ORESTES

Then stand on top the mound and say these words,
“Helen, your sister, offers these libations,
fearing to come to your tomb in person,
afraid of the Argive mob.” And ask her
to look with kindness upon you and me
and my husband, and on this wretched pair
some god has ruined. Promise funeral gifts,
all the things I should give to my sister.
You must leave now, my child, and go quickly.
When you’ve offered libations at the tomb,
return back here as quickly as you can.

150

[120]

[Hermione takes the offerings and leaves, going away from the palace. Helen exits into the palace.]

ELECTRA

O nature, how vicious you are in men,
a saviour, too, for those who do possess
what works to their advantage. Did you see
how she’s trimmed her hair only at the ends
to preserve her beauty? She’s the woman
she has always been. May the gods hate you
for ruining me and him and all of Greece!
I’m so unhappy!

160

[130]

[The Chorus enters.]

Here they are again,
my friends who sing with me in my laments.
They’ll soon end my brother’s peaceful sleep
and melt my eyes with tears once I see him
in his mad fit. You women, dearest friends,
move with a quiet step and make no noise,
no unexpected sound. Your kindness here
is dear to me, but if you wake him up,
what happens will be difficult for me.

170

CHORUS

Keep quiet! Silence! let your steps be light.
Make no sound at all.

[140]

ELECTRA

Keep away from him—
further from his bed, I’m begging you!

ORESTES

CHORUS

There, I have done as you requested.

ELECTRA

Ah yes, but speak to me, dear friend,
like the breathing of a tiny reed
on a shepherd's pipe.

CHORUS

There, you see. 180
I'm keeping my voice pitched soft and low.

ELECTRA

Yes, that's fine. Come over. Come on.
Move gently. Keep moving quietly.
Tell me the reason why you had to come. [150]
He hasn't fallen asleep like this for ages.

CHORUS

How is he? Give us a report, dear friend.
What shall I say has happened to him?
What's ailing him?

ELECTRA

He's still breathing—
feeble groans.

CHORUS

What are you saying? The poor man!

ELECTRA

You'll kill him if you distract his eyes 190
while he's still enjoying sweet gifts of sleep.

CHORUS

Pitiful man, suffering for those hateful acts [160]
inspired by a god.

ELECTRA

Yes, it's pitiful.
An unjust god uttered unjust things
in what he decreed, when Loxias

ORESTES

from Themis's tripod passed his sentence,
the unnatural murder of my mother.⁹

CHORUS

Do you see? His body's moving in his robes.

ELECTRA

You wretch, you've forced him to wake up
with your chatter.

CHORUS

No, I think he's sleeping. 200

ELECTRA

Won't you just go away? Leave the house. [170]
Retrace your steps, and stop the shuffling.

CHORUS

He's asleep.

ELECTRA

You're right. O sacred lady Night,
who gives sleep to toiling mortal men,
come from Erebus, come, wing your way here
to Agamemnon's home.¹⁰ In misery
and suffering we've gone astray. We're lost. [180]
You're making noise again. O my dear friend,
won't you keep quiet, stay silent, and take care
to keep your voice some distance from his bed? 210
Let him enjoy the peaceful gift of sleep.

CHORUS

Tell us what's in store to end his troubles.

ELECTRA

Death. What else? He's lost desire for food.

CHORUS

Then this is obviously his fate. [190]

⁹Loxias is a common name for Apollo, whose shrine Orestes consulted before killing Clytaemnestra. Themis, the goddess of righteousness, was the original god of the oracle.

¹⁰Erebus is the deepest and darkest region of Hades, the underworld.

ORESTES

ELECTRA

Phoebus made us his sacrificial offering
with his pitiful unnatural proposal
to kill our mother, who killed our father.

CHORUS

But it was just.

ELECTRA

Yes, but it was not good.
You killed, mother who bore me,
and were killed. You wiped out 220
a father and children of your blood.
We're done for, good as dead, destroyed. [200]
You are with the dead, and my own life
is gone—the greater part of it now spent
with groans, laments, and tears each night,
unmarried, childless—so pitiful—
I drag out my life on and on forever.

CHORUS LEADER

Electra, you're right beside your brother.
Check that he hasn't died without your knowing.
I'm worried—he's looking too relaxed. 230 [210]

ORESTES [*waking up*]

O lovely charms of sleep which bring such help
against disease, how sweetly you came over me
when I was in such need. Sacred Oblivion,
who removes all troubles, how wise you are,
for those who suffer from misfortune,
a goddess worth invoking in their prayers.
But where did I come from to arrive here?
How did I reach this place? I can't recall.
I've lost all my earlier recollections.

ELECTRA

Dearest one, how happy it made me feel 240
when you fell into that sleep. Do you want me
to hold you and to prop your body up?

ORESTES

Yes, hold me. Give me some support. And wipe
the dried up foam from my sore mouth and eyes. [220]

ORESTES

ELECTRA

There. It's sweet to be able to help out.
I won't refuse to nurse my brother's limbs
with a sister's hand.

ORESTES

Support my side with yours,
and push the matted hair out of my face.
My eyes aren't seeing very well.

ELECTRA

O this filthy hair, your poor suffering head—
so much time has passed since it's been washed,
you look just like a savage. 250

ORESTES

Put me back,
on the bed again. Once the madness leaves,
I'm exhausted . . . no strength in my limbs.

ELECTRA

There you are.
The sick man loves his bed, a painful place,
but still it's necessary. [230]

ORESTES

Set me up again.
Turn my body round. The sick are helpless—
that's why they're hard to please.

ELECTRA

Would you like
to have me put your feet down on the ground?
You haven't tried to walk for some time now.
A change is always pleasant. 260

ORESTES

Yes, do that.
It's better if I look as if I'm well,
even though that's far from being true.

ELECTRA

Now, my dear brother, listen to me,
while the Erinyes let your mind stay clear.

ORESTES

ORESTES

You've got some news. If it's good, you'll help me—
if harmful, I've had enough misfortune.

[240]

ELECTRA

Menelaus has come, your father's brother.
His ships are now anchored at Nauplia.

ORESTES

What are you saying? Has he just arrived
to be a light to save us from these troubles,
yours and mine, a man of our own family,
with a sense of gratitude to father?

270

ELECTRA

He's come—you can trust what I'm telling you—
and he's brought Helen from the walls of Troy.

ORESTES

He'd be someone to envy even more
if he'd managed to survive all by himself.
By bringing back his wife, he's coming here
with all kinds of trouble.

ELECTRA

Yes, Tyndareus
fathered a race of notorious daughters,
dishonoured throughout Greece.

280

[250]

ORESTES

Make sure you're different,
not like those evil women. You can be.
But don't just say it. You have to feel it.

ELECTRA

Alas, brother, your eyes are growing wild.
In an instant you have gone mad again,
and just now you were thinking clearly.

ORESTES *[in a fit]*

Mother, I'm begging you, don't threaten me,
not those young snake girls with their bloodshot eyes.
They're here! They're closing in to jump on me!

ORESTES

ELECTRA

Poor suffering wretch, stay still there on your couch. 290
You think you see them clearly, but it's nothing—
there's nothing there for you to see.

ORESTES

O Phoebus, [260]
they're killing me, those dreadful goddesses,
the fierce-eyed, bitch-faced priestesses of hell.

ELECTRA [*holding Orestes*]

I'll not let go. I'll keep my arms around
and stop you writhing in this painful fit.

ORESTES

Let go! You're one of those Furies of mine,
grabbing me around the waist to throw me
deep into Tartarus!

ELECTRA

I feel so wretched.
What help can I get when the gods' power 300
is ranged against us?

ORESTES

Give me my horn-tipped bow,
Apollo's gift—he said I should use it
to defend myself against these goddesses
if they frightened me with bouts of madness. [270]
One of those divine women will get hurt
by a human hand if she doesn't move
out of my sight. Aren't you paying attention?
Don't you see the feathered arrows speeding
from my far-shooting bow? Ah . . . ah . . .
Why are you waiting then? Use your wings 310
and soar into the upper air, and blame
Apollo's oracles. But wait a moment!
Why am I raving and gasping for air?
Where . . . where have I jumped? Out of bed?
After the storm I see calm water once again.
Sister, why wrap your head in your dress and cry? [280]
I'm ashamed to make you share my suffering,
to bring distress to an unmarried girl
with this sickness of mine. Don't pine away

ORESTES

because of my misfortunes. Yes, it's true 320
you agreed to do it, but I'm the one
who shed our mother's blood. I blame Apollo,
who set me up to carry out the act,
which was profane. His words encouraged me,
but not his actions. And I think my father,
if I'd looked him in the eye and asked him
if I should kill my mother, would've made
many appeals to me, reaching for my chin, [290]
not to shove my sword into the neck
of the woman who'd given birth to me, 330
since he would not return into the light
and I'd be wretched, suffering ills like these.
So now, sister, take that veil off your head.
And stop your crying, even though our plight
is desperate. When you see me in a fit,
you must reduce the harsh destructive parts
inside my mind and soothe me. When you groan,
I must be beside you and comfort you
with my advice. When people are close friends [300]
it's a noble thing to offer help like that. 340
But now, you poor girl, go inside the house.
Lie down and let your sleepless eyelids rest.
Have some food to eat and wash your body.
For if you leave me or catch some disease
by sitting here with me, then I'm done for.
You're the only help I've got. As you see,
all the others have abandoned me.

ELECTRA

I won't leave. I choose to live here with you,
even to die. The choice remains the same.
If you die, what will I, a woman, do? 350
How will I be saved all on my own,
without a brother, father, or my friends?
Still, I must do it, if you think it's right. [310]
But set your body back down on the bed,
and don't fret too much about the terror,
the agony that drives you from your bed.
Lie still here on the couch. For even if
you're not really sick but think you're ill,
that still makes people tired and confused.

[Electra goes into the house.]

ORESTES

CHORUS

Aaaiiii . . . you winged goddesses 360
roaming in that manic frenzy,
your god-appointed privilege,
not some Bacchic ritual,
but one with tears, cries of grief— [320]
you dark-skinned kindly ones,
racing through the wide expanse of air
demanding justice for blood,
a penalty for murder,
how I beseech you, beg you,
let the son of Agamemnon lose 370
all memory of furious madness.
Alas! What harsh work you strove for,
you poor man, when you received,
from Phoebus' tripod, the oracle [330]
which he delivered in his shrine,
that cavern where, so people say,
one finds the navel of the earth.¹¹

O Zeus, what pitiful event,
what bloody struggle is now here,
goadng you in your misfortune— 380
an avenging spirit bringing tears
to add to all your tears, sending
your mother's blood into your home
and driving you to raving madness?
I grieve for you—how I grieve for you.
Among mortal men great prosperity [340]
never lasts. No. Some higher spirit
shatters it like the sail on a fast ship
and hurls it into waves of dreadful sorrow,
as deadly as storm waves out at sea. 390
What other house should I still honour
as issuing from marriage with the gods
apart from those who come from Tantalus?¹²

[Menelaus enters, with an escort.]

¹¹The navel, or central point, of the earth was, according to tradition, located in Apollo's shrine in Delphi.

¹²Tantalus is the founder of the royal family of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Orestes, and Electra. He was a son of Zeus and a divine nymph.

ORESTES

CHORUS

But look, the king is now approaching—
lord Menelaus. His magnificence [350]
makes it plain to see that by his blood
he comes from the sons of Tantalus.
Hail to you, who with a thousand ships
set off in force for Asian land, and find
good fortune now among your company. 400
With god's help you've managed to achieve
all those things you prayed for.

MENELAUS

O my home—
I look on you with joy, now I've come back
from Troy, but I'm also full of sorrow
at the sight, for never have I seen
another home surrounded in this way
with such harsh disaster. For I learned [360]
of Agamemnon's fate, the death he suffered
at his wife's hand, as I steered my ship
towards Malea.¹³ The sailors' prophet, 410
truthful Glaucus, Nereus's seer,
told me from the waves. He placed himself
in open view and then said this to me:
"Menelaus, your brother's lying dead—
collapsed inside his bath, the final one
his wife will give him." His words made us,
me and my sailors, weep many tears.
When I touched land at Nauplia, with my wife [370]
already coming here, I was expecting
to give a loving greeting to Orestes, 420
Agamemnon's son, and to his mother.
I assumed that they were doing well.
But then I heard from some fisherman
about the profane murder of the child
of Tyndareus. Tell me now, you girls,
where he may be, Agamemnon's son,
who dared this horrible atrocity.
For back then, when I left home for Troy,
he was a babe in Clytaemnestra's arms,
so my eyes would not recognize him now. 430

¹³Menelaus's return from Troy (as he tells us in the *Odyssey*) was long delayed. He was blown off course to Egypt, where he stayed for a while. Malea is the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese.

ORESTES

[Orestes moves over unsteadily from his bed and crouches down in front of Menelaus.]

ORESTES

Menelaus, I am Orestes—the man [380]
you asked about. I'm willing to reveal
all the suffering I've been through. But first,
I clasp your knees in supplication,
and offer prayers from the mouth of a man
who holds no suppliant branch.¹⁴ Rescue me.
This is the crucial moment of my suffering,
and you've arrived in person.

MENELAUS

O gods,
what's this I see? Which of the dead
am I now looking at?

ORESTES

What you say is true. 440
With the agony I'm in, I'm not alive,
though I can glimpse the light.

MENELAUS

You're like a savage,
you poor man, with that tangled hair.

ORESTES

It's not my looks
which cause me grief. It's what I've done.

MENELAUS

Your ravaged eyes—
that look of yours is dreadful.

ORESTES

My body's gone. [390]
But my name has not abandoned me.

MENELAUS

You're an unsightly mess—not what I expected.

¹⁴In a formal supplication the petitioner carries an olive branch. Orestes doesn't have one available.

ORESTES

ORESTES

Here I am, my wretched mother's killer.

MENELAUS

So I've heard. Don't talk about it—such evils
should be mentioned only sparingly.

450

ORESTES

I'll not say much. But the divine spirit
fills me with afflictions.

MENELAUS

What's wrong with you?
What's the sickness that's destroying you?

ORESTES

It's here—in my mind—because I'm aware
I've done something horrific.¹⁵

MENELAUS

What do you mean?
Wisdom comes from clarity. It's not obscure.

ORESTES

What's truly destroying me is the pain.

MENELAUS

She's a fearful goddess, but there are cures.

ORESTES

Mad fits—retribution for my mother's blood.

[400]

MENELAUS

When did this frenzy start? What day was it?

460

ORESTES

On the day I was raising up the mound
on my miserable mother's grave.

¹⁵West makes the useful observation (p. 210) that the Greeks did not yet have a clear sense of a good or bad conscience. This line suggests something like a sense of guilt arising out of one's awareness of the moral qualities of an act. As West observes, Menelaus in his response seems confused by the idea.

ORESTES

MENELAUS

Were you in the house or sitting down
keeping watch beside her fire?

ORESTES

It was at night,
while I was waiting to collect the bones.

MENELAUS

Was someone there as your support?

ORESTES

Yes.
Pylades was there—he acted with me
in shedding blood, my mother's murder.

MENELAUS

You're sick from phantom apparitions.
What are they like?

ORESTES

I thought I saw three girls—
they looked like Night. 470

MENELAUS

I know the ones you mean.
But I have no wish to speak their names.

ORESTES

No. They incite awe. You acted properly
in not mentioning them. [410]

MENELAUS

Are they the ones
driving you insane for family murder?

ORESTES

How miserably I suffer their attacks.

MENELAUS

But harsh suffering is not unusual
for those who carry out such dreadful acts.

ORESTES

ORESTES

But we do have a way out of our troubles.

MENELAUS

Don't talk of death—that's not wise.

ORESTES

It was Phoebus
who ordered me to carry out the act,
my mother's killing.

480

MENELAUS

Showing his ignorance
of what's good and right.

ORESTES

We are mere slaves
to the gods, whatever the gods are.

MENELAUS

In this suffering of yours does Loxias
offer some relief?

ORESTES

He's planning to.
That's the nature of the gods.

[420]

MENELAUS

And your mother—
how long is it since she stopped breathing?

ORESTES

This is the sixth day. Her burial fires
are still warm.

MENELAUS

How quickly the goddesses
came for you because of your mother's blood.

490

ORESTES

God is not wise, but by nature he is true

ORESTES

to those who are his friends.¹⁶

MENELAUS

And your father—
does he assist you for avenging him?

ORESTES

Not yet. And if he's still intending to,
I call that the same as doing nothing.

MENELAUS

After what you've done how do you stand
among the citizens?

ORESTES

I am so despised
that people will not talk to me.

MENELAUS

Have you cleansed
your hands of blood in the appropriate way? 500

ORESTES

No. Wherever I go, doors are shut to me. [430]

MENELAUS

Which citizens are forcing you to leave?

ORESTES

Oeax, who holds my father responsible
for that hateful war at Troy.

MENELAUS

I see.
He seeks revenge for Palamedes' death.¹⁷

¹⁶I have adopted West's suggestion that this line refers to the god (Apollo) rather than to Orestes himself: "I am not wise, but by nature I am true to my friends" (see West 212).

¹⁷Oeax is the brother of Palamedes, an Achaean warrior at Troy. When Odysseus pretended to be mad so that he would not have to go on the expedition to Troy, Palamedes tricked him into revealing his sanity. Later, in Troy, Odysseus forced a Phrygian (Trojan) prisoner to write a treasonous letter apparently from Palamedes. Agamemnon found the letter and put Palamedes to death.

ORESTES

ORESTES

I had no part of that—I'm being killed,
but that death is two removes from me.

MENELAUS

Who else?
Some of Aegisthus' friends, I imagine?

ORESTES

They slander me. Now the city listens.

MENELAUS

Agamemnon's sceptre—does the city
let you keep it?

510

ORESTES

How could they do that?
They won't let me stay alive.

MENELAUS

What will they do?
Can you give me a definite idea?

ORESTES

Today there'll be a vote against us.

[440]

MENELAUS

For you to leave the city? Or a vote
to kill or spare you?

ORESTES

For death by stoning
by all the citizens.

MENELAUS

Why not escape—
flee across the border?

ORESTES

We're surrounded
by soldiers, fully armed.

MENELAUS

Private enemies

ORESTES

or by a force of Argives?

ORESTES

The whole city—
to make sure I die. There's no more to say. 520

MENELAUS

Poor wretch. You're facing total disaster.

ORESTES

My hope to get out of this emergency
rests on you. You've come loaded with success.
So share your prosperity with your friends [450]
in desperate straits. Don't get the benefits
and keep them for yourself alone. Take on,
in your turn, a portion of these troubles,
paying back my father's kindnesses for those
to whom you have an obligation. Those friends 530
who, when misfortune comes, aren't there to help
are friends in name but not in deed.

[Enter Tyndareus with attendants.]

CHORUS LEADER

Look—
the Spartan Tyndareus is coming here,
shuffling on his old legs, wearing black robes,
with short hair, in mourning for his daughter.

ORESTES

I'm done for, Menelaus. Look at this—
Tyndareus is moving over to us. [460]
I feel particularly ashamed to come
into his sight because of what I've done.
For he raised me when I was still a child. 540
He filled my life with love and carried me,
the child of Agamemnon, in his arms.
And Leda did the same. They honoured me
no less than they did those twins from Zeus.¹⁸

¹⁸Tyndareus and Leda had four children at the same time: Helen, Clytaemnestra, Castor, and Pollux (also called Polydeuces). However, Tyndareus was the biological father of only two of them, Castor and Clytaemnestra. Helen and Pollux were conceived by Zeus (in the form of a swan) and Leda. In some accounts (as here) both Castor and Pollux are children of Zeus.

ORESTES

O my miserable heart and spirit!
I have not paid them back a good return.
What darkness can I find to hide my face?
What sort of cloud can I set in front of me
to escape the eyes of that old man?

[Tyndareus and his attendants move up to the palace.]

TYNDAREUS

Where can I catch a glimpse of Menelaus,
my daughter's husband? Where? I was pouring
libations on the grave of Clytaemnestra
when I heard he'd anchored at Nauplia
with his wife, home safe after all these years.
Take me to him. I want to stand beside him,
on his right hand, and greet him as a friend
whom I'm seeing again after all these years.

550 [470]

MENELAUS

Welcome, old man whose head shared the same bed
as Zeus himself.

TYNDAREUS

 Welcome to you, too,
Menelaus, my kinsman. Ah, it's bad
we don't know what it is the future brings.
Here's that dragon snake who killed his mother,
right outside the house, with his eyes flashing
that sick glitter—an abomination to me.
Menelaus, you're not talking to him,
not to that impious wretch?

560

[480]

MENELAUS

 Why would I not?
He's the son of a father whom I loved.

TYNDAREUS

His natural son? And he turned out like this?

MENELAUS

Yes, he's his son by birth. If he's in trouble,
I must respect him.

TYNDAREUS

ORESTES

You're a barbarian—
you've been so long among the savages. 570

MENELAUS

In Greece we always honour relatives.

TYNDAREUS

And we don't wish to be above the law.

MENELAUS

But among those with some intelligence
anything that's forced is something slavish.

TYNDAREUS

You hold to that. I'll not subscribe to it.

MENELAUS

Your anger and old age are not being wise.

TYNDAREUS

What's a dispute about such foolishness
have to do with him? If what's good or bad
is plain to all, who has been more stupid 580
than this fellow? He did not think about
what justice requires. Nor did he turn to
the common practices among the Greeks.
When Agamemnon took his final breath,
after my daughter struck him on his head—
a shameful act, which I never will defend—
he should have gone after just punishment [500]
for bloodshed and followed what's appropriate
in our religion, throwing his mother
out of the house. He would have won himself, 590
instead of this disaster, some credit
for moderation. And he'd have followed
the law and been a righteous man. But now,
he's come to the same fate as his mother.
He was right to think that she was wicked,
but he's made himself more evil killing her.
I'll ask you this question, Menelaus.
If a man's wedded wife should murder him
and the son, in his turn, killed his mother, [510]
and after that the son paid for the murder 600
with his death, where would these disasters end?

ORESTES

Our ancestors dealt with these issues well.
They did not let a man with bloody hands
come in their sight or cross their path. Instead,
they purified him, not by killing him
as a punishment, no, they banished him.
Otherwise, the man who has pollution
on his hands last is always going to face
his own murder. I hate an evil woman,
especially my daughter who slaughtered
her own husband. And I'll never approve
of Helen, your wife, or even speak to her.
I don't think much of your voyage to Troy
to get that worthless woman back again.
But with all my power I'll defend the law
to put an end to this bestial killing,
which always ruins the city and the state.

610 [520]

[Tyndareus moves up to Orestes.]

You miserable creature, what was in your mind
when your mother exposed her breasts to you
and begged? I did not see that dreadful sight,
but still my ancient eyes dissolve in tears.
And there's one thing which supports my case—
the gods do hate you, and you're being punished
for your mother with roaming fits of fear
and madness. Why do I need to search out
other witnesses, when I can see it
for myself? So you should remember this,
Menelaus—don't act against the gods
by wanting to assist this man. Let him
be stoned to death by all the citizens,
or else don't set your foot on Spartan land.
My daughter's dead. And that deed was just.
But she should not have died at that man's hand.
I was born a fortunate man in all things
except my daughters. There I've been unlucky.

620

[530]

630

[540]

CHORUS LEADER

The man who's fortunate in his offspring,
who does not have children who bring on him
notorious trouble—that's a man to envy.

ORESTES

ORESTES

I am afraid to talk to you, old man,
at a time when I'm bound to pain your heart. 640
Let your age, which hinders me from speaking,
be set aside, and I'll proceed. But now,
your gray hair makes me too hesitant.
I know my mother's murder has made me
unholy, and yet, in another sense,
a pious man who avenged his father. [550]
What should I have done? Set these two things
against each other. My father planted me,
your daughter bore me—she was the plough land
who received the seed from someone else. 650
Without a father there would never be
a child. I reasoned that I ought to take
the side of the one who gave me being,
rather than the woman who undertook
to raise me. Now your daughter—I'm ashamed
to call her mother—went to a man's bed
in a private and an unwise marriage.
When I say bad things against her, I speak
against myself, but nonetheless I will. [560]
At home Aegisthus was her secret husband. 660
I killed the man, and then I sacrificed
my mother. I did an unholy act,
but I did get vengeance for my father.
As for the reasons you now threaten me
with death by stoning, you should listen to
how I am benefiting all of Greece.
If women grow so bold they start to kill
their husbands and then seek to find safety
with their children, fishing for sympathy
with their breasts, they'd start killing husbands 670
for any reason and would pay no price. [570]
You claim I committed a dreadful crime,
but I've put an end to practices like that.
I hated my mother and killed her justly.
She betrayed her husband, who was away
with the army, commander of all Greeks,
and did not keep his bed free of dishonour.
When she understood the mistake she'd made
she did not face up to the penalty.
No. In order to escape being punished, 680
she murdered my father. By the gods!
It's not a good thing to recall the gods

ORESTES

in a defence against a charge of murder,
but if by saying nothing I endorsed [580]
my mother's act, what would the murdered man
have done to me? Would he now hate me
and terrify me with his band of Furies?
Or does my mother have those goddesses
as her allies, but he does not, although
he's the one who's been more greatly wronged. 690
You have destroyed me, old man—yes, you have—
you're the father of an evil daughter.
Thanks to her outrageous act, I have lost
a father and become my mother's killer.
You notice Telemachus did not kill
Odysseus' wife, for she did not marry
husband after husband, and in their home [590]
their bedroom remained quite unpolluted.
Do you know Apollo, who makes his home
at earth's navel stone and gives mortal men 700
the clearest spoken words, whom we obey
in all he says? I was obeying him
when I killed my mother. Call him impious,
and kill him. It was his mistake, not mine.
What should I have done? Or is the god
not good enough to cleanse me of my crime
when I turn to him? Where else can one flee,
if the one who commanded me to do it
cannot rescue me from death? So don't say
this action was not done appropriately, 710 [600]
but rather that it didn't work out well
for those who did it. Among mortal men,
when marriages are properly set up,
their life is blessed. But those whose marriages
fall out badly have no luck, indoors and out.

CHORUS LEADER

Women by nature always interfere
in the affairs of men, with bad results.

TYNDAREUS

Since you speak so boldly and hide nothing,
but give me answers which will pain my heart,
you'll spur me on to bring about your death. 720
I'll count that as an extra benefit [610]
in the work for which I came here, to dress

ORESTES

my daughter's grave. I'll go to the Argives,
to their assembly, and set them on you
and your sister, against their will or not.
You'll pay the penalty, death by stoning.
She deserves to die even more than you.
She incited you against your mother,
always carrying stories for your ears
to make you hate her more, reporting dreams 730
of Agamemnon and her sexual life
with her Aegisthus—may gods below the earth
despise it—it was bitter up here, too, [620]
until she set the house ablaze with flames
not kindled by Hephaestus. I tell you this,
Menelaus, and I will do it, too.
So if you give my hatred any weight
and my relationship to you through marriage,
don't act in opposition to the gods—
do not protect this man from death. Leave him 740
for the citizens to kill by stoning,
or don't set foot on Spartan land. Listen,
and understand this well. You must not choose
ungodly men as friends, pushing aside
the ones who act more righteously. You men,
lead me away. Take me from this house.

[Tyndareus and his attendants leave.]

ORESTES

Well, be off with you, so that what I say 630
may reach this man without an interruption,
quite free from your old age. Menelaus,
why are you walking around, lost in thought, 750
going back and forth, as if quite divided
in what you plan to do?

MENELAUS

Leave me alone.
I'm debating with myself. I'm not sure
which course of action I should follow.

ORESTES

Don't decide on what seems to be the case.
First listen to the things I have to say
and then make up your mind.

ORESTES

MENELAUS

You're right. Speak up.
There are times when silence may be better,
but there are also times when speaking
is preferable to saying nothing.

ORESTES

Then I'll speak. 760
A long speech is better than a short one, [640]
and it's much clearer for the listener, too.
You don't have to give me anything of yours,
Menelaus. Just pay back what you took,
what you got from my father—not property,
that's not what I mean. If you save my life,
that's the dearest thing I own. I've done wrong.
To counter this bad act, I have to get
an unjust deed from you, for my father,
Agamemnon, did wrong when he gathered 770
those Greeks to go to Troy, and not because
he made mistakes himself, no, but to heal [650]
the error and injustice of your wife.¹⁹
And for this one act you should pay me back.
For he willingly sacrificed his life,
as family members should for those they love,
toiling hard in battle right beside you,
so you could have your wife back. Pay me back
in the same way for what he gave you then,
working hard, not for ten years, but just one day. 780
Stand up, and save me. As for what Aulis took,
with my sister slaughtered as a sacrifice,
I'll let you have that. You don't have to kill
Hermione. For in my present plight,
you must have the upper hand. That I grant.
But offer my poor father my own life
and my sister's. For a long time now [660]
she's been unmarried, and if I should die,
I'll leave my father's house without an heir.

¹⁹The immediate cause of the Trojan War was Paris's abduction of Helen, Menelaus's wife, from Sparta (Helen went willingly enough). Agamemnon, the senior of the two brothers, took command of the Greek army which assembled at Aulis in response to a promise all the kings had made to Helen's father, Tyndareus, that they would help Helen's husband, should he ever require their assistance. The goddess Artemis prevented the Greek fleet from sailing until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia, an action which Agamemnon carried out.

ORESTES

You'll say it can't be done. But that's the point. 790
Kinsmen must help their friends when things are bad.
When fortune gives success, what need of friends?
When gods are keen to help, then their assistance
is quite sufficient. All of Greece believes
you love your wife—and I'm not saying this [670]
to win your favour with mere flattery—
but in her name I am appealing to you.
O this wretched situation I am in!
How did I get into such trouble? Well,
I have to see it through until the end. 800
I'm making this appeal for my whole house.
O uncle, you're brother to my father.
Imagine if, from his grave, the dead man
is listening to this and if his spirit
is hovering above you and saying
what I am saying with these laments and tears
in this misfortune. I've given my speech
and pleaded to be saved, chasing after
what all men seek, not just myself alone.

CHORUS LEADER

Although I'm just a woman, I too beg you 810 [680]
to help these people when they're in such need.
You have the power to do that.

MENELAUS

Orestes,
I do respect you, and I want to share
these troubles with you. Besides, it's right
to help one's family members in bad times,
if god gives one the power, by killing
enemies and even dying oneself.
I need to get that power from the gods.
I'm here without a group of fighting spearmen,
after roaming through thousands of ordeals 820
with little help from my surviving friends. [690]
In any fight we could not overcome
Pelasgian Argos. If we could prevail
with reassuring words, then my best hopes
would be relying on that. For how can any man
achieve great things with small resources?
It's foolishness to even wish for that.
Whenever people fall into a frenzy,

ORESTES

it's like a blazing fire, hard to extinguish.
 If one, in responding to the tension, 830
 gently eases off one's grip, backs away,
 and times things right, it may blow itself out.
 If the winds die down, you might well get [700]
 whatever you want from them. For people
 do have pity, as well as their great passion,
 a quality of utmost value to the man
 who looks for it. And so on your behalf
 I will try to persuade Tyndareus
 and the city to act on their passions
 wisely. For a ship can take on water 840
 if the sheet is pulled too tight, but if
 one eases off the rope, then that ship
 will once more right itself. The gods dislike
 excessive zeal, as do the citizens.
 I must save you—I don't deny the fact—
 but by using cleverness, not by force [710]
 against a stronger group. I'd not save you
 with power alone, as you perhaps may think.
 It's not easy to take a stand and win
 with a single spear against the hardships 850
 which afflict you. It never was my style
 to try to soften up the Argive state,
 but now it must be done—the wise man
 is a slave to circumstance.

[Menelaus and his attendants leave.]

ORESTES

You're useless,
except to head up an expedition
for a woman's sake, the worst of men
in helping out your friends. Are you turning
your back on me and running away, [720]
so Agamemnon's cause has disappeared?
O father, once things have turned out badly 860
you have no friends. Alas, I've been betrayed,
and there's no longer any hope for me
of turning somewhere and escaping death
at Argive hands. For that Menelaus
was my refuge, my hope of being saved.

[Pylades enters.]

ORESTES

But I see Pylades, my greatest friend,
rushing here from Phocis. A welcome sight!
A man who can be trusted in hard times
is finer to behold than tranquil waters
for men at sea.

PYLADES

I've come through the city, 870
and I had to move quickly once I heard [730]
and clearly witnessed for myself the crowds
of citizens gathering there against you
and your sister so they can kill you both
without delay. What's going on? How are you?
What are you doing? Of people my own age,
friends and relatives, you are my favourite.
You're all those things to me.

ORESTES

I am done for—
those few words make clear to you my troubles.

PYLADES

Then you must do away with me as well. 880
Friends share things in common.

ORESTES

Menelaus
is the worst of men to me and to my sister.

PYLADES

It's natural enough that any man
with a bad wife should grow bad himself.

ORESTES

His coming here was as much help to me
as if he hadn't come.

PYLADES

So it's true then
that he's arrived and landed here?

ORESTES

He took a while, but in no time at all [740]

ORESTES

revealed he was an enemy to his friends.

PYLADES

That wife of his—the nastiest of women—
did he bring her on his ship?

890

ORESTES

No, not him.
She's the one who brought him here.

PYLADES

Where is she, that one woman who destroyed
all those Achaeans?

ORESTES

She's in my home—
if it's all right to call it mine.

PYLADES

What did you say
to your father's brother?

ORESTES

Not to just look on
while the townsfolk killed me and my sister.

PYLADES

By the gods, how did he respond to you?
That I'd like to know.

ORESTES

He was very cautious—
the way false friends behave with families.

900

PYLADES

What sort of excuses did he offer?
Once I know that, I'll understand it all.

ORESTES

That man arrived—the one who has produced
those splendid daughters.

[750]

PYLADES

Ah, you mean Tyndareus.
I suppose he was all worked up at you

ORESTES

for his daughter's sake?
ORESTES

Yes, you have that right.
And Menelaus preferred family ties
with him instead of with my father.

PYLADES
So when he was here he lacked the courage
to share your troubles?

ORESTES
That man wasn't born
a warrior. He's brave among the women. 910

PYLADES
So you're in the gravest danger and must die?

ORESTES
The citizens will cast their votes on us
about the murder.

PYLADES
What must the vote decide?
Tell me. I'm growing fearful.

ORESTES
For life or death—
it's not something that takes much time to say,
though it involves something that lasts forever.

PYLADES
Leave the palace now, flee with your sister.

ORESTES
Do you not see how we are both being watched,
surrounded by armed soldiers? [760]

PYLADES
I noticed
streets in town blocked off by men with weapons. 920

ORESTES
We're physically hemmed in, like a city
by its enemies.

ORESTES

PYLADES

You must ask me now
how I am doing, for I, too, am quite destroyed.

ORESTES

By whom? This would add further disasters to the ones I face.

PYLADES

Strophius, my father,
has banished me—he was so furious
he sent me from the house.

ORESTES

What's the charge
he's leveling against you, something private
or is it one the townsfolk share?

PYLADES

He claims
it was an unholy sacrilege to help you
murder your own mother.

930

ORESTES

That's bad news.
It seems what's hurting me is harming you, as well.

PYLADES

It's something I'll just have to bear. I'll not act like Menelaus.

ORESTES

But are you not afraid
Argos will want to kill you, just like me?

[770]

PYLADES

I'm not theirs to punish. I'm from Phocis.

ORESTES

The mob is nasty, when it has leaders bent on doing wrong.

PYLADES

ORESTES

But when it's controlled
by decent men, the things that they decide
are always good.

940

ORESTES

All right. We must think this through,
working together.

PYLADES

What must we do?

ORESTES

What if I went and told the citizens . . .

PYLADES *[interrupting]*

. . . that what you did was just?

ORESTES

. . . I sought revenge
for my father's sake?

PYLADES

They might be happy
to seize you on the spot.

ORESTES

Am I to crouch here
and die without a word?

PYLADES

That's cowardly.

ORESTES

Then what should I do?

PYLADES

If you stayed here,
would you have a way of being rescued?

ORESTES

No. I don't have anything.

PYLADES

ORESTES

And if you left, 950
is there some hope you might be saved?

ORESTES

Perhaps— [780]
there might be.

PYLADES

That's better than staying here, then.

ORESTES

All right, I'll go.

PYLADES

At least that way, if you die,
you'll die more nobly.

ORESTES

You're right—that way
I won't be a coward.

PYLADES

More than staying here.

ORESTES

And what I did was right.

PYLADES

Make sure you pray
that's how it looks to them.

ORESTES

And someone there
might pity me . . .

PYLADES *[interrupting]*

Yes, your noble birth
is a great asset.

ORESTES

. . . being so upset
at my father's death.

ORESTES

PYLADES

All that's easy to perceive.

960

ORESTES

I have to go. It's not a manly thing
to die a shameful death.

PYLADES

I agree with you.

ORESTES

Should we tell my sister?

PYLADES

By the gods, no.

ORESTES

There'd certainly be tears.

PYLADES

That would be a serious omen.

ORESTES

It's clear it's better to say nothing.

PYLADES

And you'll save time.

ORESTES

I still have one problem.

[790]

PYLADES

What now? Are you talking of something new?

ORESTES

I'm worried the goddesses will stop me
with this madness.

PYLADES

But I'll take care of you.

ORESTES

It's unpleasant looking after someone sick.

970

ORESTES

PYLADES

Not to me. Not when I'm looking after you.

ORESTES

Be careful you don't start my madness.

PYLADES

Don't worry over that.

ORESTES

You won't hold back?

PYLADES

It's a great evil to hold back with friends.

ORESTES

Then, you pilot of my steps, let's go now.

PYLADES

That's a service I'm glad to undertake.

ORESTES

And lead me to my father's tomb.

PYLADES

Why there?

ORESTES

So I may appeal to him to save me.

PYLADES

That's the righteous thing to do.

ORESTES

May I not glimpse
the memorial to my mother!

PYLADES

No, not that.

980

She was your enemy. But you must hurry—
the vote the Argives cast may catch you first.
Lean your side that's weakened by disease
against my side, so I can carry you

[800]

ORESTES

through town. I won't be worrying about
the crowds or feeling any sense of shame.
For how can I show I'm a friend of yours
if I don't help when you face great danger?

ORESTES

That's the point. Make sure you get good comrades
and not just relatives. A man may be 990
from somewhere else, but if he bonds with you
in how you act, then he's a better friend
than a thousand members of one's family.

[Pylades and Orestes leave.]

CHORUS

That great prosperity and lofty name
so proudly celebrated throughout Greece
and there beside the waters of the Simois
has declined once more from the success [810]
of Atreus' sons so many years ago—
from an old misfortune in their house,
when strife came to the sons of Tantalus 1000
about a golden ram, the saddest feasts
and slaughter of children nobly born,
that's why murder moves on to murder
through blood and does not leave alone
the double line of Atreus.²⁰
What's good is not good, to slice up [820]
a parent's flesh with metal forged in fire
and to display in the sun's light a sword
stained black with murdered blood. To commit
a virtuous crime is sheer profanity, 1010
the mad delusion of wrong-thinking men.
The wretched daughter of Tyndareus,
terrified of death, screamed at him, "My child,
don't you dare carry out such sacrilege
and slaughter your own mother—in honouring
your father, don't tie yourself to such disgrace,
such shame which lasts for an eternity." [830]

²⁰The "double line" is the families of Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus. The "golden ram" mentioned refers to an animal in Atreus's flocks, on the basis of which he claimed the throne over the objections of his brother Thyestes. The slaughter at the banquet is another reference to the dinner in which Atreus served up to his brother Thyestes the latter's sons as the main course.

ORESTES

What affliction or distress, what agony
in all the earth surpasses this, to have
on one's own hands a mother's murdered blood? 1020
For undertaking such a act, the man
has been driven into fits of madness,
prey hunted by the Kindly Ones, his eyes
rolling in her whirling blood, the son
of Agamemnon. The miserable wretch, [840]
when he saw his mother's breast appear
above her dress, a robe of woven gold,
he made his own mother a sacrifice
to avenge the sufferings of his father.

[Enter Electra from the house.]

ELECTRA
You women, has poor Orestes left the house, 1030
overcome by madness from the gods?

CHORUS LEADER
No. He's gone to the people in Argos,
to give himself up for the vote they've set,
in which you two must live or die.

ELECTRA
Alas! Why did he do that? Who convinced him?

[A Messenger appears, coming toward the house.]

CHORUS LEADER
Pylades did. But this messenger, it seems, [850]
will soon tell us news about your brother,
what happened to him there.

MESSENGER
You poor girl,
unhappy daughter of Agamemnon,
our army's leader, lady Electra, 1040
hear the disastrous news I bring you.

ELECTRA
Alas! We're finished! Your words are clear enough—
you've come, it seems, with catastrophic news.

ORESTES

MESSENGER

Pelasgians have, in their vote, decreed
that you, unhappy lady, are to die,
you and your brother, on this very day.²¹

ELECTRA

Alas! What I expected has arrived—
I've been afraid of it a long time now, [860]
dissolved in sorrow for what might come true.
How was the trial? What did the Argives say 1050
to convict us and ratify our deaths?
Tell me, old man, whether my life will end
by stoning or a sword—for I do share
in those misfortunes of my brother.

MESSENGER

I happened to be coming from the country
and was walking through the gates—I wanted
to find out about you and Orestes.
I always liked your father, and your house
provided food. I was poor but honourable [870]
in helping out my friends. I saw a crowd 1060
going up and sitting on the higher ground
where, they say, Danaus first gathered up
his people and they sat down together
to judge the charge against him by Aegyptus.²²
Seeing the crowd, I asked a citizen,
“What's new in Argos? Has some fresh report
about an enemy caused a great stir
in this city of Danaus' descendants?”
He said, “Don't you see Orestes coming,
rushing to a trial where his life's at stake.” 1070
Then I saw something I did not expect—
how I wish I'd never seen it!—Pylades [880]
and your brother moving there together,
one with his head down and doubled over

²¹The word Pelasgian is frequently used to describe the Argives. The word hearkens back to the original inhabitants of the area.

²²The fifty daughters of Danaus married the fifty sons of Aegyptus and killed their husbands (all but one) on the wedding night. In some accounts Aegyptus prosecuted Danaus for the mass murder.

ORESTES

by his infirmity and the other,
 like a brother, sharing his friend's ordeal,
 caring for his sickness, as if he were
 schooling a young boy. Once the Argives
 had gathered in a crowd, a herald stood
 and cried, "Who desires to make a speech
 whether Orestes should be killed or not
 for his mother's murder?" Talthybius stood,
 the man who helped your father demolish
 those Phrygians.²³ He spoke ambiguously—
 well, he's always been a subordinate
 of those in power—praising your father
 but saying nothing good about your brother,
 weaving good and misleading words together,
 claiming it would be setting up bad laws
 concerning parents, and all the time
 he kept looking at Aegisthus's friends
 with those bright eyes of his. The herald tribe
 is like that—they're always jumping over
 to the side of the successful. Any man
 who has ruling power in the city
 is a friend of theirs. After he'd finished,
 lord Diomedes spoke. He was against
 killing you or your brother but proposed
 they act with reverence and as punishment
 use exile. Some of the people there roared out
 that what he'd said was good, but then others
 did not favour the idea. But after that,
 a man stood up who can't keep his mouth shut,
 whose strength comes from his boldness—an Argive,
 but not from Argos—and forced himself on us,
 relying on bluster, ignorant free speech,
 persuasive enough to get them involved
 in some bad scheme or other. When a man
 with bad intentions but a pleasing style
 persuades a mob, that's a great disaster
 for the city, but those who always give
 useful, sound advice, even if their words
 are not immediately appropriate,
 are beneficial later to the state.
 That's how one should view a party leader—

1080

[890]

1090

[900]

1100

1110

[910]

²³Talthybius is a character in the *Iliad*, a herald in the Achaean army who serves Agamemnon. Phrygians is a term commonly used to designate the Trojans or barbarian Asiatics.

ORESTES

what happens with a man who gives a speech
is much the same as with a man in office.
Well, this man said that you and Orestes
should be stoned to death. But Tyndareus
was the one who set out the arguments 1120
the speaker used to urge you both be killed.
Another man stood up opposing him.
He wasn't much to look at physically,
but the man had courage. He rarely came
into the city and the market place.
He was a farmer—they're the only ones [920]
who keep our country going—but clever
and keen to wrestle with the argument,
someone with integrity, who lived a life
beyond reproach. He said they should crown 1130
Orestes, Agamemnon's son, who wished
to avenge his father, who'd been murdered
by an abominable, godless woman—
she'd stop men taking up their weapons
and fighting foreign wars, if those people
who stayed behind corrupted things at home
by abusing the men's wives. What he said
appeared convincing, at least to decent folk. [930]
There were no other speakers. Your brother
then came up and said, "You who are the heirs 1140
of Inachus, who were Pelasgians
so long ago, then sons of Danaus,
I was fighting on your behalf, no less
than for my father, when I killed my mother.
For if the fact that women murder men
is permitted, you'll be dead in no time,
or else we'll have to be the women's slaves—
and you'll be doing the very opposite
of what you should be doing. As it is,
the woman who betrayed my father's bed 1150
is dead, but if you execute me now, [940]
the law would be relaxed, and men will die
as fast as possible—there'll be no lack
of such audacity." His speech was good,
but he could not convince the crowd. Instead,
the verdict of the entire group supported
the nasty rogue who'd spoken out in favour
of executing you and your brother.
Poor Orestes just managed to persuade them

ORESTES

not to stone him to death, by promising
to end his life, to die by his own hand,
along with you, as well, this very day.
Pylades, in tears, is bringing him here
from the assembly. His friends are coming,
weeping and lamenting. This spectacle,
so painful for you, is heading this way,
a distressing sight. Get your swords ready
or a noose around your neck—you must leave
the light. Your noble birth has been no help.
Nor has Phoebus, seated there in Delphi
on his tripod. Instead he has destroyed you.

1160
[950]
1170

[The Messenger leaves.]

CHORUS LEADER

O you unfortunate girl, you're speechless,
with your clouded face bent toward the ground,
as if you'll rush to cry and make laments.

ELECTRA

O Pelasgia, now I start to weep,
pushing white nails through my cheeks,
blood lacerations, and striking my head,
actions appropriate to Persephone,
lovely child-goddess of the world below.
Let the Cyclopan land now wail aloud
the sorrows of this house, setting iron
against its head to shave it close.²⁴
Pity, yes, pity now comes forward
for those who are about to die,
once warrior leaders of the Greeks.

[960]
1180
[970]

It's gone—the entire race of Pelops,
passed away and gone, all the glory
that once made it a blessed house.
Envy from the gods seized them—
and that hateful vote for blood
among the citizens. Alas, alas,
you tribes of men bowed down with work,

1190

²⁴The Cyclopan land is a reference to the city of Mycenae whose walls were so big that legend had it they had been built by the Cyclopes. Shaving the head is often an important element in a mourning ritual.

ORESTES

who live a brief life full of tears,
 see how Fate moves to thwart your hopes.
 As time runs on at length, different men
 take turns with different troubles, [980]
 and all of human life remains uncertain.

If only I could reach that boulder
 hanging in the winds on chains of gold
 mid-way between the earth and heaven, 1200
 that fragment carried from Olympus,
 so I could shout out my laments
 to old father Tantalus, who sired
 and made my house's ancestors,
 the ones who witnessed such disasters—
 the race of flying horses, when Pelops
 in a four-horse chariot raced to the sea [990]
 and murdered Myrtilus by hurling him
 into the ocean swell, driving his chariot
 near Geraestus, where the surging surf 1210
 foams white along the shore.²⁵
 From that there came upon my house
 a dreadful curse, when Maia's son
 arranged a birth within the flocks,
 the lamb with a fleece of gold,
 ominous portent of the ruin
 of horse-breeding Atreus. [1000]
 Because of that, Strife then reversed
 Sun's winged chariot to a western path
 across the sky by placing under yoke 1220
 the snow-white horses of the Dawn
 and Zeus changed onto another path
 the seven-tracked moving Pleiades.²⁶

²⁵These lines refer to the origin of the troubles in the House of Atreus. Pelops wanted Hippodamia as his bride. Her father, Oenomaus, demanded a chariot race to determine the outcome: if Pelops won he could wed the daughter, and if Pelops was not successful he would die. Pelops bribed Myrtilus to sabotage the king's chariot and, as a result, won the race. Then he killed his co-conspirator, Myrtilus, by throwing him into the sea. Myrtilus cursed Pelops's family as he was drowning. Myrtilus was a son of the god Hermes, son of Zeus and the nymph Maia (as is mentioned a couple of lines further on), and the god made sure the curse took effect by introducing a golden lamb into the flocks belonging to the sons of Pelops, thus inciting the brothers Atreus and Thyestes to quarrel.

²⁶The suggestion here seems to be that before this change, the sun did not move from east to west. I have adopted West's useful emendation of the text to read "white horses" rather than "single horse." The Pleiades is a constellation consisting of seven stars.

ORESTES

Death followed death at that banquet
to which Thyestes gave his name
and the bed of Aerope from Crete,
a traitor in her deceitful marriage.²⁷ [1010]
The final chapter comes with me
and with my father in these troubles,
all these afflictions laid on our house. 1230

[Pylades and Orestes enter.]

CHORUS LEADER

Look, here comes your brother, condemned to die
by general vote, and with him Pylades,
the truest of all men, like a brother,
guiding his sick limbs, treading carefully
like a pace horse giving its support.

ELECTRA

Alas! My brother, I'm seeing you here
before your tomb, confronting face to face
the gates of those below, and I weep.
Alas, once more! This last sight of you [1020]
before my eyes will make me lose my mind. 1240

ORESTES

Why can't you just be quiet and finish off
these womanish laments for what's been done?
It's pitiful, but still you must endure
the circumstances we now face.

ELECTRA

But how
can I stay silent? We poor sufferers
will no longer see the sun god's light.

ORESTES

Don't be so tedious. It's quite enough
that I'll be suffering a wretched death
at Argive hands. So just set aside
your present sorrow.

²⁷Aerope was the wife of Atreus and the mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus. In some versions of the story, she had an adulterous affair with Thyestes and was executed.

ORESTES

ELECTRA

Alas for your sad youth, 1250
Orestes, and for your early death.
You should live on, but now you'll be no more. [1030]

ORESTES

By the gods, you'll strip me of my manhood—
by bringing our calamities to mind
you'll have me crying.

ELECTRA

We're going to die.
It's impossible not to grieve for that.
It's pitiful. To all men life is sweet.

ORESTES

This is our appointed day. So we must
sharpen a sword or fix a hanging noose.

ELECTRA

Then you kill me, my brother, so no Argive 1260
executes me and starts hurling insults
at Agamemnon's children.

ORESTES

I won't kill you.
It's enough to have my mother's blood on me.
No. You must die by your own hand somehow— [1040]
in whatever way you wish.

ELECTRA

All right, then.
I won't lag behind you with my sword.
But I want to wrap my arms around your neck.

ORESTES

Enjoy that empty pleasure, if embraces
bring any joy to those about to die.

ELECTRA [*embracing Orestes*]

O my dearest one! O that longed-for name, 1270
so very sweet to your own sister—
we share one single spirit.

ORESTES

ORESTES

You'll melt my heart.
I want to respond to you with loving arms.
Why should a wretch like me still feel such shame?

[Orestes embraces Electra.]

Ah, my sister's heart, how I love holding you!
For us in our misery these pleasures [1050]
replace our children and a marriage bed.

ELECTRA

If only the same sword could kill us both,
if that's permitted, and one burial chamber
made of cedar wood receive us both. 1280

ORESTES

That would be very sweet. But you do see
we're short of friends who'd let us share a tomb.

ELECTRA

Did that coward Menelaus, the one
who betrayed my father, not speak out
on your behalf, making some attempt
to stop you being killed?

ORESTES

Not at all—
he didn't even show his face. His hopes
were on the sceptre, so he was careful
not to save the members of his family.
But come now, as we move on to our deaths, 1290 [1060]
let's act bravely, in a way that's worthy
of Agamemnon. So I, for my part,
will show the city I am nobly born,
when I push the sword into my liver.
You, in turn, must match my courage.
Pylades, you must supervise our deaths—
when we are dead, dress our bodies properly.
Carry them to our father's burial mound,
and bury us together. So farewell.
I'm on my way to do it, as you see. 1300

[Orestes starts to move into the house.]

ORESTES

PYLADES

Hold on! There's first something I blame you for—
if you believed I'd want to go on living [1070]
after you were dead.

ORESTES

But why is it right
that you should die with me?

PYLADES

You're asking that?
How can I live without you as my friend?

ORESTES

You didn't kill your mother, as I did,
to my misfortune.

PYLADES

I acted with you.
For that I should have to suffer something.

ORESTES

Surrender your body to your father.
Don't die with me. You still have a city. 1310
I do not. You have your father's house
and the safety of great wealth. You failed
to marry my poor sister, as I promised,
out of a sense of our companionship.
But you must take another marriage bed [1080]
and have children. The family bonds we had
no longer hold with you and me. Be happy,
beloved face of my great friend. For us
that is impossible, but you can be—
we dead lack any sources of delight. 1320

PYLADES

How far you are from understanding
what my intentions are. May fruitful earth
refuse to take my blood and the bright sky
my spirit, if ever I betray you,
if I let myself go free and leave you.
I did the murder, too. I don't deny it.

ORESTES

And I planned all those things for which you now [1090]
are paying the penalty. And so I must
go to my death along with you and her.
Since I consented to the marriage, 1330
I consider her my wife. What would I say
if I ever came to the land of Delphi,
and reached the high citadel of Phocis,
if I'd been your friend before your troubles
but was no longer any friend of yours
now you're in this distress? I can't do that.
I'm involved in this, as well. Since we'll die
let's see if we can find a way together
to make Menelaus miserable as well.

ORESTES

My dearest friend, if only I could see 1340 [1100]
something like that before I die.

PYLADES

Then listen.
You must postpone this sword blow.

ORESTES

I will,
if I can get even with my enemy.

PYLADES [*indicating the Chorus*]

Be quiet. I don't have much confidence
in these women.

ORESTES

Don't worry about them.
These women here are friends of ours.

PYLADES

Let's murder Helen—for Menelaus
that would be a bitter pain.

ORESTES

But how?
I'm prepared to do it, if there's a chance
we'd be successful.

ORESTES

PYLADES

By hacking her to death.
She's hiding in your house. 1350

ORESTES

That's true enough.
In fact, she stamps her seal on everything.

PYLADES

Not any more. She's engaged to Hades.

ORESTES

How do we do it? She has attendants—
those barbarians. [110]

PYLADES

What do they matter?
I'm not afraid of any Phrygians.

ORESTES

The kind of men who take care of mirrors
and look after perfumes!

PYLADES

Did she come here
bringing the luxuries of Troy with her?

ORESTES

Oh yes. For her Greece is too small a space
to live in. 1360

PYLADES

That race of slaves is nothing
compared to those who're free.

ORESTES

If I do this,
I'm not afraid of dying twice.

PYLADES

Nor am I,
if I'm getting my revenge for you.

ORESTES

ORESTES

Explain the plan—keep on describing
what you were talking about.

PYLADES

We'll go in,
inside the house, as if we're on our way
to kill ourselves.

ORESTES

I understand that part. [1120]
But I don't know the rest.

PYLADES

We'll parade our grief
for what we're suffering in front of her. 1370

ORESTES

So she'll begin to weep, though on the inside
she'll be overjoyed.

PYLADES

Then the state she's in
will match our own.

ORESTES

After that, what do we do
according to our plan?

PYLADES

We'll have swords
hidden in our clothes.

ORESTES

And her attendants—
do we kill them first?

PYLADES

We'll lock them up
in different places in the house.

ORESTES

And anyone
who won't keep quiet we'll have to kill.

ORESTES

PYLADES

Once that's done, the job itself will tell us
where we direct our efforts.

ORESTES

Helen's murder. 1380 [1130]
I know what that means.

PYLADES

That's right.
Now listen to how well I've planned this out.
If we drew our swords against a woman
with greater moderation, the killing
would be notorious, but as it is,
she'll pay the penalty to all of Greece—
she killed their fathers, destroyed their children,
and robbed married women of their husbands—
there'll be shouts of joy, people lighting fires 1390
to the gods and calling many blessings down
on you and me for carrying out the murder
of such an evil woman. With her death
you won't be called "killer of your mother"— [1140]
you'll move past that and find a better name.
They'll call you killer of Helen, the one
who slaughtered thousands. It can't be right,
it never would be right for Menelaus
to keep being successful while your father,
your sister, and yourself go to their deaths,
and your mother . . . but I'll avoid that subject 1400
as something indelicate to mention,
or for him to have your house—after all,
it was thanks to Agamemnon's spear
he got his wife back. May I stop living
if we don't pull out our swords against her!
If we don't succeed in killing Helen,
before we die we'll set the house on fire. [1150]
We won't fail to win at least one glory—
a noble death or a fine salvation.

CHORUS LEADER

Tyndareus' daughter disgraced her sex 1410
and justly earned the hatred of all women.

ORESTES

ORESTES

Ah me, a true friend—there's nothing better,
not wealth or sovereignty. One cannot count
what one would exchange for a noble friend.
You're the one who devised those nasty things
against Aegisthus, then stayed at my side
when danger threatened. And now once again [1160]
you're offering me a way of punishing
my enemies and are not running off.
But I'll stop praising you—excessive praise 1420
can prove a burden. Now, in any case,
since my spirit is going to breathe its last,
I want to do something to my enemies
before I die, so I can demolish,
in their turn, those who were traitors to me
and make the ones who made me suffer grieve.
Yes, I was born son of Agamemnon,
who was considered worthy to rule Greece.
He was no tyrant yet had god-like strength.
I will not disgrace him, going to my death 1430 [1170]
as if I were a slave. No. My life force
I shall release quite freely. And I'll take
revenge on Menelaus. If we could get
just one thing, we could get lucky—some way
to save ourselves despite all expectations
might fall our way from somewhere, so we'd kill
and not get killed ourselves. I pray for that.
It's sweet to talk about what I desire
in words with wings which cheer my spirit
and don't cost anything.

ELECTRA

Brother, I think 1440
I've got the very thing you're praying for,
a way of rescuing the three of us,
you, him, and me.

ORESTES

You mean divine good will?
That can't be it, because I know your mind [1180]
is too intelligent for that.

ELECTRA

Just listen—
and you, Pylades, pay attention, too.

ORESTES

ORESTES

All right, talk. The idea that there's good news
makes me feel good.

ELECTRA

 You know Helen's daughter?
Of course, you do.

ORESTES

 Yes, I know Hermione.
My mother raised her.

ELECTRA

 Well, she's gone off
to Clytaemnestra's grave. 1450

ORESTES

 What's she doing there?
What hope are you suggesting?

ELECTRA

 She's gone to pour
libations on our mother's burial mound.

ORESTES

How does what you've said help us to safety?

ELECTRA

Seize her on her way back. Make her a hostage.

ORESTES

We three here are friends—so what remedy [1190]
are you suggesting for us?

ELECTRA

 Once Helen's dead,
if Menelaus tries to do something
to you or him or me—for this friendship
unites us all as one—tell him you'll kill 1460
Hermione. You must pull out your sword
and hold it here, across the young girl's throat.
Once Menelaus sees Helen collapsed

ORESTES

in her own blood, if he tries to save you,
because he doesn't want the girl to die,
then let her father have Hermione back,
but if his passions get the best of him
and he seeks your death, cut the young girl's neck.
I think he'll put on quite a show at first,
but soon enough his temper will calm down.
He's not a bold courageous man by nature.
That's the defence I have to rescue us.
That's it. I'm finished.

[1200]

1470

ORESTES

You've got a man's heart,
though your body shows that you're a woman.
How much more you deserve to stay alive
than die. Pylades, it would be bad luck
if you should lose a woman like Electra,
but if you live, you'll be a happy man
to share her marriage bed.

PYLADES

I hope that happens.
May she come to my home in Phocis
and be honoured with fine wedding songs!

1480

[1210]

ORESTES

How long before Hermione gets home?
All the things you said were really good,
provided we succeed in seizing her,
that whelp of a sacrilegious father.

ELECTRA

I expect she's already near the house,
judging from the length of time she's taken.

ORESTES

Good. Now, Electra, you remain right here.
Wait in front of the house for her return.
And keep an eye out, in case anyone—
my uncle or one of his associates—
comes too near the house before the murder.
If so, make a signal to those inside,
by knocking on the door or sending word.
Pylades, we'll go in and arm ourselves,

1490

[1220]

ORESTES

get swords in hand to finish this last fight—
you'll help me in carrying out the work.
O father living at home in murky night,
your son Orestes is summoning you
to come and stand by those who need your help. 1500
In this distress I'm suffering injustice
for your sake. I've acted righteously,
but I've been betrayed by your own brother.
Now I wish to take his wife and kill her—
be our accomplice in this act.

ELECTRA

O father,
do come, if from there beneath the earth
you hear the calls of your own children
who are dying for your sake.

PYLADES

O Agamemnon,
my father's kinsman, hear my prayers as well—
save your children.

ORESTES

I murdered my mother . . . 1510

ELECTRA

I handed him the sword . . .

PYLADES

I urged him on
and overcame his hesitation.

ORESTES

I was defending you, father.

ELECTRA

And I
did not betray you.

PYLADES

Surely you'll listen
to these reproaches and stand by your children.

ORESTES

ORESTES

I'm pouring a libation to you in my tears.

ELECTRA

And I with my laments.

PYLADES

Stop this now.

[1240]

Let's get to work. If it's true that prayers
do pierce the ground, then he is listening.

O ancestral Zeus and holy Justice,
grant success to him, to her, to me,
to three friends facing a single struggle,
a single punishment—we all will live,
or pay the price and die.

1520

[Orestes and Pylades enter the house. Electra turns to face the Chorus.]

ELECTRA

O you women of Mycenae, my friends,
among the first ranks of those who live
in the Argives' Pelasgian home.

CHORUS LEADER

What is it you want to say, my lady?
You still retain this title in the city
where the sons of Danaus live.

[1250]

1530

ELECTRA

Place yourselves where you can watch the house—
some of you there on the chariot roadway,
some of you here along the other path.

CHORUS LEADER

Why are you calling me to do these tasks?
Tell me, dear girl.

ELECTRA

I'm afraid someone
may come across the murderous bloodshed
in the house and witness new disasters
to add to old calamities.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Let's hurry on our way.

ORESTES

Let's go. I'll stand guard on this pathway,
the one towards the east.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

And I'll guard this road,
the one towards the west.

1540 [1260]

ELECTRA

Keep your eyes moving
back and forth, checking on both sides.

CHORUS

Back and forth, then once more back again—
I'm following what you said.

ELECTRA

Keep your eyes alert.
Let them see everything through that hair of yours.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Who's that man approaching down the road?
What country fellow's wandering round your home?

[1270]

ELECTRA

We're lost, my friends! He'll tell our enemies
about those predators with swords in there—
and do so right away.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Calm your fears, my dear.
It's not what you think—the path is empty.

1550

ELECTRA

What's going on? Is your side still clear for me?
Give me a report if it's all right,
if there's no one there by the front courtyard.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

It's fine here. Just keep watching on your side.
None of Danaus' sons is moving toward us.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Same thing over here. And there's no noise.

[1280]

ELECTRA

ORESTES

All right. I'll try listening at the doorway.
It's so quiet. You there inside the house,
why the delay in bloodying your victim? 1560
They can't hear. Alas, this looks bad for me!
Has her loveliness made their swords grow blunt?
Soon some armed man will be rushing here,
coming from the Argives to rescue her [1290]
and attack the house. Keep better guard.
This is not a contest in sitting still.
You women circle around over there,
you others over there.

CHORUS

I shift around—
I'm looking everywhere along the road.

[Helen screams from inside the house.]

HELEN *[within]*

O Pelasgian Argos! I'm being butchered! 1570

CHORUS *[speaking as separate individuals]*

—Did you hear that? The men have set their hands
to killing.

—It's Helen screaming. That's my guess.

ELECTRA

O Zeus, O eternal power of Zeus—
just come and help my friends. [1300]

HELEN *[within]*

Menelaus, I'm dying—you're close by
but you won't help me!

ELECTRA

Slaughter her, finish her off!
Destroy her! Let your two swords
slash her with their double blades,
the one who left her father, 1580
left her husband, and butchered
so many Greeks, killed by spears
beside the river bank, where tears
and then more tears were shed,

ORESTES

with iron weapons all around
the whirling waters of Scamander.²⁸

[1310]

CHORUS LEADER

Be quiet! Don't say a thing! I hear the sound
of someone coming along the pathway,
near the house.

ELECTRA

 You women, dearest friends,
Hermione's coming, while the murder's
still going on. We must stop shouting. She'll walk
headlong into the meshes of our net.
Our catch will be a fine one, if she's caught.
Go back to your positions once again.
Keep your looks serene. Don't let your colour
reveal what's happened. I'll keep my eyes
looking sad, as if I had no knowledge
of what's been done.

1590

[1320]

[Hermione enters, coming towards the house.]

ELECTRA

 Ah my girl, have you come
from placing wreaths on Clytaemnestra's grave
and pouring out libations to the dead?

1600

HERMIONE

Once I obtained her favour, I returned.
But a certain fear has come over me—
when I was still some distance from the house
I heard some screaming coming from inside.

ELECTRA

Is that so strange? What's happening to us
deserves such cries of sorrow.

HERMIONE

 Don't say bad things.
What news have you to speak of?

²⁸The Scamander is a river near Troy, right in the middle of the areas where the battles between Greeks and Trojans took place.

ORESTES

ELECTRA

The state
decrees Orestes and myself must die.

HERMIONE

No, no! You're my blood relatives!

ELECTRA

It's done. [1330]
We're strapped under necessity's harsh yoke. 1610

HERMIONE

Was that why someone screamed inside the house?

ELECTRA

A suppliant cried out as he fell down
at Helen's knees.

HERMIONE

Who was it? Tell me—
if you don't, I won't know any details.

ELECTRA

It was poor Orestes. He was begging
not to die—and for me, as well.

HERMIONE

The house
has a good reason then to cry aloud.

ELECTRA

What other better reason could there be
for someone to scream about? But come now,
join your relatives in their entreaties, 1620
prostrating yourself before your mother,
now she enjoys such great prosperity,
so Menelaus will not see us die.
You who were nursed in my own mother's arms, [1340]
have pity on us and assist us now
in our distress. Enter the struggle here.
I'll lead you in myself, for you alone
are our last hope of rescue.

ORESTES

HERMIONE

Watch me—
my feet are hurrying towards the house.
As far as it lies within my power,
may you be safe. 1630

[Hermione enters the palace.]

ELECTRA

You friends inside the house—
why not take your swords and seize your prey?

HERMIONE *[from within the house]*
O no! Who are these men I see?

ORESTES *[from within]*

Silence!
You've come to save us, not yourself.

ELECTRA *[at the doorway, looking in]*

Grab her!
Hold her down! Put your sword across her throat—
and keep quiet, so Menelaus will know
he's met some men, not Phrygian cowards,
and has been dealt with as bad men deserve. [1350]

[Electra enters the house.]

CHORUS

O friends, begin the rhythmic beat,
the noise and shouts, before the house, 1640
so that this murder, once complete,
may not inspire a dreadful fear
among the Argives and they run here
to help the royal house, not before
I see for certain Helen's dead
and lying in blood there in the house
or hear the news from her attendant.
I know a part of what's gone on,
but there are things I do not know. [1360]
Justice from the gods has rightly come 1650
with retribution now to Helen—
because she filled all Greece with tears

ORESTES

thanks to that accursed destroyer,
Paris from Ida, who led Greeks to Troy.

CHORUS LEADER

The bolts on the palace doors are creaking.
Be quiet. One of the Phrygians
is coming out. We'll find out from him
how things are going inside.

*[A Phrygian enters, quite terrified. He chants or sings his first speeches.]*²⁹

PHRYGIAN

I've fled death from an Argive sword
by scrambling in my Asian slippers 1660 [1370]
over bedroom cedar ceiling beams
and the Doric carvings on the frieze
Ruined! Gone! O earth, earth,
in my barbarian flight! Alas for me!
You strange ladies, how can I flee—
by flying up through the shining sky
or out to sea, which bull-headed Ocean,
as he rolls in circles round the earth,
holds in his arms' embrace?

CHORUS LEADER

What's going on,
you slave of Helen, creature from Ida? 1670 [1380]

PHRYGIAN

Ilion, O Ilion! O woe is me
city of Phrygia, Ida's sacred hill
with its rich earth, how I lament
with my barbarian cries your ruin,
funereal melodies and dirges,
because the vision of loveliness
born from a swan-feathered bird,
Leda's lion cub, that hellish Helen,
that evil Helen, avenging fury
for Apollo's polished citadel. 1680

²⁹There is some dispute about how the Phrygian enters—does he come through the doors (as the Chorus Leader's line about the bolts suggests) or does he come down from the roof (as his opening lines suggest). West, who opts for an entry down from the roof, has a useful note on the point (p. 275-6).

ORESTES

Alas! Alas, for these laments, [1390]
these dirges for Dardania,
for the horsemanship of Ganymede
Zeus's sexual partner in his bed.³⁰

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us what's happening inside the house,
clearly and in detail. Your words so far
are difficult for me to understand.

PHRYGIAN

O Linus, Linus—as barbarians say
in their Asian tongue, once death begins,
whenever royal blood spills on the earth 1690
from iron swords of Hades. They came there, [1400]
inside the house—I'm giving you each detail—
twin lions of Greece, one who was called
the commander's son, the other one
the son of Stophius, with a wicked mind,
just like Odysseus, a silent traitor,
but faithful to his friends, bold in a fight,
clever in war, a deadly serpent. Damn him
for his quiet deviousness, the scoundrel!
They came in, up to where she was sitting, 1700
the woman archer Paris married, faces [1410]
wet with tears, and humbly crouched down there,
one on either side, keeping her hemmed in.
They threw their suppliant arms around her knees—
both laid hands on Helen. Then on the run
her Phrygian servants came rushing up,
each calling to the others in their fear
that it might be a trick. To some of them [1420]
it looked all right, but it seemed to others
that the snake who murdered his own mother 1710
was entangling the child of Tyndareus
in a devious plot to snare her.

³⁰These lines are such a strained evocation of different myths that it's hard not to see them as either satirical or intentionally comical. The reference to the swan is a reminder of Helen's conception, when Zeus in the form of a swan had sex with Leda, wife of Tyndareus. Apollo's polished citadel is a reference to the high tower of Troy. And Ganymede, a prince of Troy, was so beautiful that he was taken up to Olympus as a young boy to be Zeus's cup bearer and sexual playmate. It's not clear what the mention of his "horsemanship" indicates, unless it's a sexual pun. Dardania is a reference to Troy, the land of Dardanus (the founder of the city).

ORESTES

CHORUS LEADER

Where were you?
Had you run off in terror long before that?

PHRYGIAN

It so chanced that I, as a Phrygian,
was following Phrygian fashions
and with a circular feathered fan
was wafting breezes, breezes by the curls
of Helen, on Helen's cheeks—a habit
we barbarians have. She was twisting yarn [1430]
wrapping her fingers round the spindle. 1720
The thread was falling down onto the floor.
With those Phrygian spoils she wished to make
some purple clothes, a gift for Clytaemnestra,
to adorn her tomb. Orestes then spoke up
and called out to the Spartan girl, "Child of Zeus,
leave your chair and stand up over here, [1440]
by the ancient hearth of Pelops, our ancestor,
so you can hear the words I have to say."
He led her, yes led her, and she followed—
she had no idea what he was planning. 1730
His partner, that evil man from Phocis,
moved off, going about some other business.
"You Phrygian cowards, leave—go somewhere else!"
Then he locked them up in different places
all through the house—some in the stables,
some in the porticoes—some here, some there, [1450]
leaving them in various locations
some distance from their mistress.

CHORUS LEADER

Then what happened?

PHRYGIAN

Mother of Ida! O sacred mother,
holy one! O the murderous suffering, 1740
the lawless evil I saw there, I witnessed
in the royal palace. Their hands pulled swords
out from the darkness of their purple robes,
rolling their eyes back and forth, here and there,
to check that no one else was there. They stood,
like mountain boars, facing the woman there, [1460]

ORESTES

and said, "You'll die. You'll die. Your evil mate
is the one who's killing you—he abandoned
his brother's family to die in Argos."

She screamed, she howled, "Alas for me!"
and beat her white forearm against her breast
and struck her fist against her wretched head.
Then she ran off—on golden-sandaled feet
she rushed off, she fled. But then Orestes,
jumping ahead in his Mycenaean boots,
shoved his fingers in her hair, bent her neck
on his left shoulder, and was quite prepared
to drive his black sword right into her throat.

1750

[1470]

CHORUS LEADER

Where were you Phrygian household servants
to defend her?

PHRYGIAN

We yelled—then with crowbars
battered the doors and door posts in the rooms
where we'd been held and ran from every spot
to her assistance. One man carried stones,
one had spears, and one held a drawn sword.
But Pylades came at us without fear,
just like Trojan Hector or like Ajax,
with his triple plumes, whom I saw once—
I saw him at Priam's gate. So we met
at sword point. And then the Phrygians showed
in their full glory how for warlike spirit
they were born inferior in fighting strength
compared to Greeks. One man ran away,
one man was killed, another wounded,
another pleaded to protect his life.
We ran off, into the shadows, while men
were falling dead. Some would soon collapse,
and some were killed already. At that point,
poor Hermione came in the palace,
just as her mother, the unlucky one
who'd given birth to her, had fallen down,
sprawling on the ground about to die.
The two men, like followers of Bacchus
chasing a mountain cub without a thyrsus,

1760

[1480]

1770

[1490]

1780

ORESTES

ran up and grabbed her.³¹ Then they turned again
to slaughter Zeus's daughter. But Helen
had vanished from the room—and from the house—
O Zeus, and earth, and light, and darkness—
either by magic spells or wizard's skill
or god's deceit! What happened after that
I've no idea. Just like a fugitive,
my legs crept from the house. So Menelaus,
after going through such painful, painful toil,
got his wife Helen out of Troy in vain.

1790

[1500]

[Orestes enters from the house.]

CHORUS LEADER

Look how one strange sight succeeds another!
I see Orestes, sword in hand, coming here,
before the palace—his pace is nervous.

ORESTES

Where's that man who ran out of the house,
to escape my sword?

PHRYGIAN *[throwing himself on the ground]*

I bow to you, my lord,
making obeisance, as is the habit
of we barbarians.

ORESTES

We're not in Troy.
We're in the land of Argos.

1800

PHRYGIAN

But everywhere
life is more welcome to wise men than death.

ORESTES

Those shouts you made—you weren't calling out
for Menelaus to bring up help, were you?

[1510]

³¹The followers of Bacchus are the ecstatic worshippers who roam the mountains, sometimes capturing wild animals and tearing them apart. The thyrsus is a plant stem, often with magical properties, which they carry as part of the ritual frenzy.

ORESTES

PHRYGIAN

No, no. I was helping you, the worthier man.

ORESTES

So it was just for Tyndareus' daughter
to be put to death?

PHRYGIAN

It was most just,
even if she had three throats to slit.

ORESTES

Your cowardice makes your tongue delightful—
that's not what you think inside.

PHRYGIAN

That's not true.
Was she not the one who wiped out Greece
and Phrygians, too?

1810

ORESTES

Swear you're not just saying this
to humour me—or else I'll kill you.

PHRYGIAN

I swear it on my life—an oath I'll keep.

ORESTES [*holding up his sword*]

Were all the Phrygians at Troy afraid
of iron, the way you are?

PHRYGIAN

That sword of yours,
put it away. When it's so close to me
it has a dreadful glint of murder.

ORESTES

Are you afraid you'll turn to stone, as if
you'd seen a Gorgon?³²

[1520]

³²The Gorgons were three sisters whose looks could turn people into stone. One of them who was mortal (Medusa) was killed by Perseus.

ORESTES

PHRYGIAN

No, not to a stone,
but to a corpse. I don't know anything
about the Gorgon's head. 1820

ORESTES

You're just a slave.
Do you fear Hades, which will release you
from your troubles?

PHRYGIAN

Every man, slave or not,
is glad to look upon the light of day.

ORESTES

Well said. Your shrewd mind is your salvation.
Go inside the house.

PHRYGIAN

You will not kill me?

ORESTES

You're free to go.

PHRYGIAN

That's beautiful, what you just said.

ORESTES

But I am about to reconsider.

PHRYGIAN

Now your words are not so nice.

ORESTES

You fool! 1830
Do you think I could stand to stain your neck,
make it bloody? You weren't born a woman
and don't belong with men. I left the house
to stop you making such a noise. Argos
is quick to action once it hears the call. [1530]
But still I'm not afraid of matching swords
with Menelaus. Let him come—the man
who's so proud of that golden hair of his
reaching to his shoulders. If he gathers

ORESTES

Argives up and leads them to the palace, 1840
seeking to avenge the death of Helen,
and will not rescue me and my sister
and Pylades, who worked with me in this,
he'll see two dead, his daughter and his wife.

[Orestes enters the palace. The Phrygian leaves.]

CHORUS *[different parts speak different sections]*

Alas, alas, how things fall out!
Another struggle—once more the house
is plunged into another fearful round
afflicting the family of Atreus!

What do we do? Tell the news in town?
Or stay quiet? That's the safer course, my friends. 1850 [1540]

Look there, in front of the palace.
Look! That smoke rushing up to heaven
is telling its own public story.

They're lighting torches—they're going to fire
the house of Tantalus! They won't stop killing!

God determines how things end for mortal men,
whatever end he wishes.

Those demons of revenge have mighty power.
The house has fallen—fallen through blood,
thanks to Myrtilus tumbling from his chariot.³³ 1860

CHORUS LEADER

But look! I see Menelaus coming—
he's near the house and moving quickly.
He must have heard what's happening here. [1550]
You descendants of Atreus in there,
hurry now to close and bolt the doors.
A man who's had success is dangerous
for those whose situation is not good—

³³As noted before, Myrtilus conspired with Pelops to trick king Oenomaus in a chariot race, so that Pelops could win Hippodameia, the king's daughter. Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, sabotaged the royal chariot. Pelops then killed Myrtilus by throwing him out of his chariot into the sea. This event launches the disasters which befall the House of Atreus (Atreus is one of Pelops's sons).

ORESTES

that means men like you, Orestes.

[Menelaus enters with an armed escort.]

MENELAUS

I came because I heard of dreadful acts,
violent deeds committed by two lions. 1870
I don't call them men. I was told my wife
did not die but has gone and disappeared,
an idle rumour which some fool deluded
by his fear reported to me. It's a trick
made up by that man who killed his mother. [1560]
Ridiculous! Someone open up the house.
I'm telling my escort to break down the doors,
so I may rescue my own child at least
from the hands of those bloodstained murderers,
and take back my poor unfortunate wife. 1880
Those who killed my consort must die with her—
my own hands will kill them.

[As the escort moves towards the doors of the palace, Orestes appears on the roof with Pylades. Orestes is holding Hermione with a sword at her throat, and Pylades is holding burning torches.]

ORESTES *[from the roof]*

You down there!
Keep your hands off those door bolts. I mean you,
Menelaus, you who exalt yourself
with impudence. I'll break this parapet—
the wall was made by masons long ago— [1570]
and smash your head in with a coping stone.
The bolts are fastened down with metal rods.
They'll check your eagerness to bring help fast
and stop you gaining access to the house. 1890

MENELAUS

Hold on. What's happening? I see torches blazing,
men cornered up there on the palace roof,
with a sword poised to cut my daughter's throat.

ORESTES

You want to question me or hear me talk?

ORESTES

MENELAUS

Neither. But it seems I'll have to hear you out.

ORESTES

I'm going to kill you daughter—if you want to know.

MENELAUS

After killing Helen, you're going to pile
one murder on another?

ORESTES

I wish I'd done it,
instead of having the gods trick me. [1580]

MENELAUS

You deny you killed her just to mock me? 1900

ORESTES

Yes. It hurts to say I did not do it.
If I only had . . .

MENELAUS

If only you'd done what?
You're trying to frighten me.

ORESTES

. . . thrown the woman
who pollutes all Greece down into Hades.

MENELAUS

Give me my wife's corpse, so I can bury her.

ORESTES

Ask the gods for her. But your daughter here
I will kill.

MENELAUS

The man who killed his mother
compounds that murder with another.

ORESTES

The man who stands up for his father—
the man whom you betrayed and left to die. 1910

ORESTES

MENELAUS

Isn't your mother's blood now on your hands
enough for you?

ORESTES

No. I'd never get tired
if I had to keep on killing evil woman
for an eternity. [1590]

MENELAUS

And you, Pylades,
are you his partner in this murder?

ORESTES

His silence speaks for him. It's quite enough
if I say he is.

MENELAUS

Well, you'll regret it,
unless you can sprout wings and fly away.

ORESTES

We're not going to run. We'll burn the palace.

MENELAUS

What? You're intending to destroy this house,
your own ancestral home? 1920

ORESTES

So you won't have it.
And in the flames I'll sacrifice this girl.

MENELAUS

Kill her, then. After the slaughter, you'll pay.
I'll punish you.

ORESTES

All right, I will.

[Orestes moves as if he is going to kill Hermione.]

MENELAUS

No, no!
Don't do it!

ORESTES

ORESTES

Silence! You must endure this,
justice for the crimes you have committed.

MENELAUS

It is just that you should live?

ORESTES

Yes, it is— [1600]
and rule a country.

MENELAUS

A country? Where?

ORESTES

Right here. In Pelasgian Argos.

MENELAUS

O yes,
you'd be so good at handling those vessels 1930
we use for ritual washing.³⁴

ORESTES

Why not?

MENELAUS

And killing animals for sacrifice
before a battle.

ORESTES

Would you be suitable?

MENELAUS

Yes, my hands are pure.

ORESTES

But your heart is not.

MENELAUS

What man would speak to you?

³⁴One of the duties of a king was to lead important religious ceremonies. These could only be conducted by someone free of the pollution from any crime he had committed.

ORESTES

ORESTES

Any man
who loved his father.

MENELAUS

What about the one
who respects his mother?

ORESTES

Someone like that
is born a lucky man.

MENELAUS

You're not like that.

ORESTES

No, I'm not.
Bad women are not something I enjoy.

MENELAUS

Take your sword away from my daughter's throat. 1940

ORESTES

You're a born liar.

MENELAUS

You'll kill my daughter?

ORESTES

Yes. Now you're not spreading lies.

MENELAUS

That's dreadful.
What should I do?

ORESTES

You should go to the Argives
and win them over . . . [1610]

MENELAUS

What should I tell them?

ORESTES

Tell them not to kill us. Beg the city.

ORESTES

MENELAUS

Or else you'll kill my child?

ORESTES

That how it stands.

MENELAUS

O poor Helen . . .

ORESTES *[interrupting]*

What about my troubles?

MENELAUS

. . . I brought you back from Phrygia to be killed.

ORESTES

If only she had been!

MENELAUS

After I went through
all that effort.

ORESTES

Except on my behalf.

1950

MENELAUS

I've had to endure such awful suffering!

ORESTES

Because you were no help at all back then.

MENELAUS

You've caught me out.

ORESTES

No. You caught yourself
by being such a coward.

[Orestes calls down to Electra who comes out in front of the palace doors in response to his call.]

ORESTES

Electra,
set fire to the house from underneath.

ORESTES

And you, Pylades, my most trusty friend,
burn down the parapets of these walls here.

[1620]

MENELAUS

O land of the Danaans and you who live
in horse-rich Argos, take up your weapons
and bring help on the run. To save his life
this man here is using force against you,
against the entire city, though he carries
the pollution of his mother's murdered blood.

1960

[Menelaus's escort starts moving en masse toward the palace doors. Meanwhile fire breaks out on the roof and inside the palace. Then Apollo and Helen suddenly appear descending from on high.]

APOLLO

Menelaus, you must blunt the sharp edge
of your temper. I am Phoebus, Leto's son,
calling you from close at hand—and that man
holding a sword and standing by that girl,
Orestes, so you know the news I bring.
As for Helen whom you were so eager
to destroy in your rage at Menelaus,
you failed to kill her, and she's here with me
in the surrounding air. I rescued her.
She was not murdered. Yes, I saved her.
I snatched her away from that sword of yours,
at my father Zeus's bidding, for Helen,
a child of Zeus, is to live forever.
She'll sit with Castor and Polydeuces,
held up in the upper air, a saviour
for sailing men. So choose another wife,
Menelaus, and take her home. The gods
used this one's outstanding loveliness
to bring Greeks and Phrygians together
and cause a slaughter, so they might stop
the overwhelming crowds of mortal men
destroying the earth. So much for Helen.
And as for you, Orestes, you must cross
the borders of this country and then live
on Parrhasian soil for one entire year.³⁵
Because you'll be an exile there, that land

[1630]

1970

1980

[1640]

³⁵Parrhasia is a region in Arcadia, an area in the central Peloponnese.

ORESTES

will be called the country of Orestes 1990
by people in Azania and Arcadia.
From there you'll go to the Athenians' city
and must stand trial for murdering your mother [1650]
against the three Eumenides. The gods
who on the Hill of Ares judge your case
will act righteously—they'll divide their votes,
and from that it's certain you will triumph.
And then, Orestes, it is foreordained
that you will wed Hermione, the girl
whose throat you're threatening with that sword. 2000
The man who thinks he's going to marry her,
Neoptolemus, will never wed her.
He's fated to die by a sword in Delphi,
when he demands I give him satisfaction
for the killing of his father, Achilles.³⁶
Give your sister in marriage to Pylades,
as you once promised. His future life
will be a happy one. As for Argos, [1660]
Menelaus, you must leave Orestes
to rule the state. Go and govern Sparta. 2010
Keep that as a dowry from your wife.
The countless troubles she has always brought
up to this point will end. I'll set things right
between Orestes and the city, for I
was the one who made him kill his mother.

ORESTES

O prophetic Loxias—in your oracles
you prophesy the truth, there's nothing false.
And yet fear gripped me that I might have heard
some demon when I listened to your voice.
But all has ended well. I will obey 2020 [1670]
what you have said. See here—I now release
Hermione from death, and I agree
to take her as my wife, just as soon as
her father gives her to me.

MENELAUS

All hail, Helen,

³⁶Achilles was killed at Troy. His son Neoptolemus came to Troy, joined the fighting, and killed Priam, king of Troy. He was later killed by a priest at Delphi, Apollo's shrine. There are other stories, however, which have Neoptolemus marrying Hermione.

ORESTES

daughter of Zeus. I wish you happiness
in the gods' sacred home. Orestes,
following what Phoebus said, I here pledge
my daughter to you. You're a noble man.
May you prosper in a noble marriage,
and may I as well, who give her to you.

2030

APOLLO

Then each of you set out to the place
I have arranged, and end your quarreling.

MENELAUS

I must obey.

ORESTES

So must I. I'll make peace
with you, Menelaus, in this matter,
and, Loxias, with what your oracle has said.

[1680]

APOLLO

Go on your way now, and honour Peace,
the fairest of the gods. I'll bring Helen
to the halls of Zeus, once I've moved across
the star-bright sky. There she will be seated
by Hera and Hebe, wife of Hercules,
and men will forever pay her honour
as a goddess, making their libations.
With those two Zeus-born sons of Tyndareus,
she'll be a guardian for sailors out at sea.

2040

[1690]

*[Apollo and Helen leave. Orestes, Hermione and Pylades move down into the house.
Menelaus and his escort depart.]*

CHORUS

O great and holy Victory,
may you take possession of my life,
and never cease to crown me with your garlands.