

ELECTRA

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ELECTRA: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

There is no external evidence available for determining when Euripides' *Electra* was first produced. The play used to be dated to 413 BCE on the basis of a presumed allusion near its end to an episode in Athens' expedition against Sicily in that year, but more recently scholars have grown wary of this kind of argument and prefer to use the play's meter to date it, which would place it around 420 BCE. Presumably Euripides wrote it for the annual competition at the Great Dionysian Festival in Athens. What the other three plays were in Euripides' tetralogy of that year, and how they fared in the competition, are unknown.

The Myth

Electra presents an episode from the tragic vicissitudes of the house of the Pelopids, the royal dynasty of Argos (or Mycenae): Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra, her lover Aegisthus, and her children Iphigenia, Electra, and Orestes. After Agamemnon returned from Troy, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murdered him. The action of Euripides' play begins some years later. Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are still in power; Orestes has been hiding in exile; in what is surely a surprising Euripidean innovation, Electra has been married off to a local farmer to ensure that she will not bear children of high enough status to avenge her father's murder. After the beginning of the play introduces us to Electra and the farmer, Orestes returns from exile with his companion Pylades and is recognized by Electra. By the play's end, with the help of his sister, Orestes has succeeded in killing first Aegisthus, then their mother, Clytemnestra.

Euripides' *Electra* dramatizes one of the most popular stories in all of Greek tragedy. Euripides himself returned repeatedly to this mythic

complex to treat other episodes from it, in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (written ca. 414 BCE), *Orestes* (produced 408 BCE), and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (produced posthumously after 406 BCE). The same events that serve as the basis for Euripides' play also formed the subject of Aeschylus' surviving trilogy the *Oresteia*—it is its second play, *The Libation Bearers*, that bears closest comparison to Euripides' *Electra*—and Euripides' tragedy seems to make a number of obvious references, some of them apparently quite polemical, to Aeschylus' version. Furthermore, Sophocles dealt with exactly the same material in his *Electra*, which has also survived but cannot be dated precisely. There are evident similarities and no less evident differences between Sophocles' and Euripides' plays, and for centuries scholars have argued inconclusively about which play preceded—and may have influenced—the other. But only internal evidence is available, and it is slight and slippery. The question remains open.

Transmission and Reception

Electra was not one of Euripides' most popular plays in antiquity, in contrast to his enormously popular *Orestes*, but it has become increasingly influential in recent years, especially because of its obvious allusions and contrasts to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. It survived antiquity only by the accident of being among the so-called “alphabetic plays” (see “Introduction to Euripides” in this volume, p. 3). Like the others in this group, it comes down to us only by a single manuscript in rather poor condition (and by its copies) and it is not accompanied by the ancient commentaries (scholia) that explain various kinds of interpretative difficulties. Further evidence that it was not very popular in antiquity is that only two papyri bearing parts of its text have been discovered. The play has left little or no trace in ancient pictorial art.

While the story of Orestes' vengeance on Clytemnestra and Aegisthus has never ceased to fascinate authors and audiences in all literary genres and other media, it is hard to find clear cases in which it is specifically Euripides' tragedy—rather than Aeschylus' or Sophocles'—that has influenced a later version. Since the Renaissance it has tended to be Sophocles' tragedy, or, especially since the nineteenth century, Aeschylus'

trilogy, that has been preferred. Some of the few twentieth-century texts that display the direct influence of Euripides' tragedy are Maurice Baring's play *After Euripides' "Electra"* (1911), Robinson Jeffers' dramatic poem *The Tower beyond Tragedy* (1926, adapted for the stage 1950), Richard Aldington's poem "Troy's Down" (1943), Michael Cacoyannis' film *Elektra* with Irene Papas and music by Mikis Theodorakis (1962), Hugo Claus' tragedy *Orestes* (1976), and Suzuki Tadashi's Japanese adaptation *Clytemnestra* (1980).

ELECTRA

Characters

FARMER, married to Electra

ELECTRA, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra

ORESTES, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra

PYLADES, a friend of Orestes (nonspeaking)

CHORUS of Argive peasant women

OLD MAN

MESSENGER, a servant of Orestes

CLYTEMNESTRA, widow of Agamemnon, mother of Electra and Orestes

CASTOR and POLYDEUCES (the Dioscuri), Clytemnestra's brothers

Scene: In front of the Farmer's cottage in the countryside near Argos; before the house stands an altar to Apollo.

FARMER

Argos, old bright floor of the world,°

Inachus' pouring

tides—King Agamemnon once on a

thousand ships

hoisted the war god here and sailed across

to Troy.

He killed the monarch of the land of

Ilium,

5 Priam; he sacked the glorious city of

Dardanus;

he came home to Argos here and high on

the towering shrines

nailed up the massive loot of Barbary for
the gods.

So, over there he did well. But in his own
house

he died in ambush planned for him by his
own wife

10 Clytemnestra and by her lover Aegisthus'
hand.

He lost the ancient scepter of Tantalus;
he is dead.

Thyestes' son Aegisthus walks king in the
land

and keeps the dead man's wife for
himself, Tyndareus' child.

As for the children he left home when he
sailed to Troy,

15 his son Orestes and his flowering girl
Electra,

Orestes almost died under Aegisthus' fist,
but his father's ancient servant snatched
the boy away,

gave him to Strophius to bring up in the
land of Phocis.

Electra kept on waiting within her father's
house.

20 But when the burning season of young
ripeness took her,

then the great princes of the land of
Greece came begging

her bridal. Aegisthus was afraid—afraid
her son

if noble in blood would punish
Agamemnon's death.

He held her in the house sundered from
every love.

25 Yet, even guarded so, she filled his nights
with fear
lest she in secret to some prince might still
bear sons;
he laid his plans to kill her. But her
mother, though
savage in soul, then saved her from
Aegisthus' hand.

The lady had excuse
for murdering her
husband

30 but flinched from killing a child, afraid of
the world's ill will.
So then Aegisthus framed a new design.
He swore
to any man who captured Agamemnon's
son
running in exile and murdered him, a price
of gold.
Electra—he gave her to me as a gift, to
hold
her as my wife.

35 Now, I was
born of
Mycenaeans
family, on this ground I have nothing to be
ashamed of,
in breeding I shine bright enough. But in
my fortune
I rank as a pauper, which blots out all
decent blood.

He gave her to me, a weak man, to
weaken his own fear,
40 for if a man of high position had taken her
he might have roused awake the sleeping
Agamemnon's
blood—justice might have knocked at
Aegisthus' door.
I have not touched her and the love god
Cypris knows it:
I never shamed the girl in bed, she is still
virgin.
45 I would feel ugly taking the daughter of a
wealthy man
and violating her. I was not bred to such
an honor.
And poor laboring Orestes, my brother-in-
law in name—
I suffer his grief, I think his thoughts, if he
came home
to Argos and saw his sister so unlucky in
her wedding.
50 Whoever says that I am a born fool to
keep
a young girl in my house and never touch
her body,
I say he measures wisdom by a crooked
line
of morals. He should know he's as great a
fool as I.

(Enter Electra from the house, carrying a water jar on her head.)

ELECTRA

O night, black night, whose breast nurses the golden stars,
55 I wander through your darkness, head lifted to bear
this pot I carry to the sources of the river—
I do not need to, I chose this slavery myself
to demonstrate to the gods Aegisthus' outrageousness—
and cry my pain to Father in the great bright air.
60 For my own mother, she, Tyndareus' deadly daughter,
has thrown me out like dirt from the house, to her husband's joy,
and while she breeds new children in Aegisthus' bed
has made me and Orestes mere appendages to the house.

FARMER

Now why, unhappy girl, must you for my sake wrestle
65 such heavy work though you were raised in comfort?
Although I tell you often to stop, you just refuse.

ELECTRA

I think you equal to the gods in kindness:
for you've never taken advantage of me though I'm in trouble.
It's great fortune for people to find a kind physician
70 of suffering, which I have found in finding you.
Indeed without your bidding I should make your labor
as light as I have strength for; you will bear it better
if I claim some share with you in the work. Outdoors
you have enough to do; my place is in the house,
75 to keep it tidy. When a man comes in from work
it is nice to find his hearthplace looking swept and clean.

FARMER

Well, if your heart is set on helping, go. The spring
is not so distant from the house. At light of dawn

I will put the cows to pasture and start planting the fields.
80 A lazy man may rustle gods upon his tongue
but never makes a living if he will not work.

*(Exit Farmer and Electra to the side. Enter Orestes and
Pylades from the other side, with attendants.)*

ORESTES

Pylades, I consider you the first of men
in loyalty and love to me, my host and friend.
You only of my friends gave honor and respect
85 to me, Orestes, suffering as I suffer from Aegisthus.
He killed my father—he and my destructive mother.
I come from secret converse with the holy god
to this outpost of Argos—no one knows I am here—
to counterchange my father's death for death to his killers.
90 During the night just passed I found my father's tomb,
gave him my tears in gift and sheared my hair in mourning,
and sprinkled ceremonial sheep's blood on the fire,
holding these rites concealed from the tyrants who rule here.

I will not set my foot inside the city walls.
95 I chose this gatepost of the land deliberately,
compacting a double purpose. First, if any lookout
should recognize me I can run for foreign soil;
second, to find my sister. For they say she married
and, tamed to domestic love, lives here no longer virgin.
100 I want to be with her and take her as my partner
in killing, and learn more about things inside the city.

And now, since lady dawn is lifting her white face,
let's come away from the path on which we have been treading.
Perhaps a field-bound farmer or some serving woman

105 will meet us on the road, and we can ask discreetly
whether my sister lives anywhere in this place.

Quick now! I see some sort of serving girl approach
with a jar of fountain water on her close-cropped head—
it looks heavy for her. Let's sit here, let us listen
110 to the slave girl. Pylades, perhaps at last we shall hear
the news we hoped for when we crossed into this land.

(They hide behind the altar. Enter Electra from the side.)

ELECTRA [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*Quicken the foot's rush—time has struck—O
walk now, walk now weeping aloud,
O for my grief!*
115 *I was bred Agamemnon's child,
formed in the flesh of Clytemnestra,
Tyndareus' hellish daughter,
Argos' people have named me true:
wretched Electra.*

120 *Cry, cry for my toil and pain,
cry for the hatred of living.
Father who in the halls of death
lie hacked by your wife and Aegisthus, O
Agamemnon!*

MESODE A

125 *Come, waken the mourning again,
rouse up for me the sweetness of tears.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*Quicken the foot's rush—time has struck—
walk now, walk now weeping aloud,*

O for my grief!

130 *In what city and in what house, O
brother of grief, do you wander in exile?°*

*You left me locked in the cursed
palace chambers for doom to strike
your sister in sorrow.*

135 *Come, loose me from miseries, come
save me, pitiful me—O Zeus,
Zeus!—to help avenge our father's hate-spilled blood,
steering your exiled foot to land
in Argos.*

STROPHE B

140 *Set this vessel down from my head, O
take it, while I lift music of mourning
by night to my father.*

Father, the maenad song of death°

*I cry you among the dead
145 beneath the earth, the words I pour
day after day unending
as I move, ripping my throat with sharp
nails, fists pounding my shorn
head for your dying.*

MESODE B

150 *Ai, ai, strike my head!
I, like the swan of echoing song
in descant note at the water's edge
who calls to its father so dearly loved*

but dead now in the hidden net
155 of twisted meshes, mourn you thus
in agony dying, father,

ANTISTROPHE B

body steeped in the final bath,
rest most pitiful, sleep of death.
O for my grief!
160 Bitter the axe and bitter the gash,
bitter the road you walked^o
from Troy straight to their plotted net—
your lady did not receive you
with victor's ribbons or flowers to crown you,
but with double-edged steel she made you
165 savage sport for Aegisthus, and won herself a shifty lover.

(Enter the Chorus of Argive peasant women from the side.)

CHORUS [singing in a lyric interchange with Electra, who continues to sing]

STROPHE

Princess, daughter of Agamemnon,
we have come to your country dwelling,
Electra, to see you.
There came, came a man
bred on the milk of the hills,
170 a Mycenaean mountaineer
who gave me word that two days from now
the Argives proclaim at large
a holy feast, when all the maidens
will pass in procession up to the temple of Hera.

ELECTRA

175 *Dear friends, not for festivities,
not for twisted bracelets of gold
does my heart take wing in delight.
I am too sad, I cannot stand
in choral joy with the maidens of Argos*
180 *or beat the tune with my whirling foot;
rather with tears by night
and tears by day I fill my soul
shaking in grief and fear.
Look! Think! Would my filthy hair*
185 *and robe all torn into slavish rags
do public honor to Agamemnon's
daughter, the princess?
Honor to Troy which will never forget
my conquering father?*

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE

190 *Great, great is the goddess. Come,
I will lend you a dress to wear,
thick-woven of wool,
and gold—be gracious, accept—
gold for holiday glitter.*
Do you think your tears and refusing
195 *honor to the gods will ever hurt
your haters? Not by sounding lament
but only by prayer and reverent love
for the gods, my child, will you have gentler days.*

ELECTRA

200 *Gods? Not one god has heard
my helpless cry or watched of old
over my murdered father.
Mourn again for the wasted dead,
mourn for the living outlaw
somewhere prisoned in foreign lands
205 passing from one laborer's hearth to the
next
though born of a glorious sire.*

*And I! I in a peasant's
hut*

*waste my life like melting wax,
exiled and barred from my father's home
210 to a scarred mountain field,
while my mother rolls in her bloody bed
and plays at love with another man.*

CHORUS LEADER [*speaking*]

Yes, like Helen, your mother's sister—charged and found
guilty of massive pain by Greece and by your house.

(Orestes and Pylades appear from behind the altar.)

ELECTRA [*now speaking*]

215 Oh, oh! women, I break off my death-bound cry.
Look! there are strangers here close to the house who crouch
huddled beside the altar and rise up in ambush.
Run, you take the path, and I into the house
with one swift rush can still escape these criminals.

ORESTES

220 Poor girl, stand still, and fear not. I would never hurt you.

ELECTRA

Phoebus Apollo, help! I kneel to you. Do not kill me.

ORESTES

I hope I shall kill others hated more than you.

ELECTRA

Go away; don't touch. You have no right to touch my body.

ORESTES

There is no person I could touch with greater right.

ELECTRA

225 Why were you hiding, sword in hand, so near my house?

ORESTES

Stand still and listen. You will agree I have rights here.

ELECTRA

I stand here utterly in your power. You are stronger.

ORESTES

I have come to bring you a spoken message from your brother.

ELECTRA

Dearest of strangers, is he alive or is he dead?

ORESTES

230 Alive. I wish to give you all the good news first.

ELECTRA

God bless your days, as you deserve for such sweet words.

ORESTES

I share your gift with you that we may both be blessed.

ELECTRA

Where is he now, attempting to bear unbearable exile?

ORESTES

He is wrecked, and is included in no city's laws.

ELECTRA

235 Tell me, he is not poor? not hungry for daily bread?

ORESTES

He has bread, yet he has the exile's constant hunger.

ELECTRA

You came to bring a message—what are his words for me?

ORESTES

“Are you alive? And if you are, what is your life?”

ELECTRA

I think you see me. First, my body wasted and dry.

ORESTES

240 Yes, sadness has wasted you so greatly I could weep.

ELECTRA

Next, my head razor-cropped like a victim of the Scythians.

ORESTES

Your brother's life and father's death both bite at your heart.

ELECTRA

Alas, there's nothing else that I love more than them.

ORESTES

You grieve me. Whom do you think your brother loves but you?

ELECTRA

245 He is not here. He loves me, but he is not here.

ORESTES

Why do you live in a place like this, so far from town?

ELECTRA

Because I married, stranger—a wedding much like death.

ORESTES

Bad news for your brother. Your husband is a Mycenaean?

ELECTRA

But not the man my father would have wished me to marry.

ORESTES

250 Tell me. I am listening, I can say it to your brother.

ELECTRA

This is his house. I live quite isolated here.

ORESTES

A ditchdigger, a cowherd would look well living here.

ELECTRA

He is a poor man but well born, and he respects me.

ORESTES

Respects? What does your husband understand by “respect”?

ELECTRA

255 He has never been violent or touched me in my bed.

ORESTES

A vow of chastity? or he finds you unattractive?

ELECTRA

He finds it attractive not to insult my royal blood.

ORESTES

How could he not be pleased at marrying so well?

ELECTRA

He judges the man who gave me had no right to, stranger.

ORESTES

260 I see—afraid Orestes might avenge your honor.

ELECTRA

Afraid of that, yes—he is also decent by nature.

ORESTES

Ah.

You paint one of nature’s gentlemen. We must treat him well.

ELECTRA

We will, if my absent brother ever gets home again.

ORESTES

Your mother took the wedding calmly, I suppose?

ELECTRA

265 Women save all their love for their men, not for their children.

ORESTES

What was in Aegisthus' mind, to insult you so?

ELECTRA

He hoped that I, so wedded, would have worthless sons.

ORESTES

Too weak for undertaking blood-revenge on him?

ELECTRA

That was his hope. I hope to make him pay for it.

ORESTES

270 This husband of your mother's—does he know you are virgin?

ELECTRA

No, he knows nothing. We have played our parts in silence.

ORESTES

These women listening as we talk are friends of yours?

ELECTRA

Good enough friends to keep what we say well concealed.

ORESTES

How should Orestes play his part, if he comes to Argos?

ELECTRA

275 If he comes? Ugly talk. The time has long been ripe.

ORESTES

Say he comes; still how could he kill his father's killers?

ELECTRA

By being just as daring as once his enemies were.°

ORESTES

To kill your mother with his help—could you do that?

ELECTRA

Yes, with the very same axe that cut Father to ruin.

ORESTES

280 May I tell him what you say and how determined you are?

ELECTRA

Tell him how gladly I would die in Mother's blood.

ORESTES

O, I wish Orestes could stand here and listen.

ELECTRA

Yet if I saw him I should hardly know him, sir.

ORESTES

No wonder. You were both very young when you were parted.

ELECTRA

285 I have only one friend who might still know his face.

ORESTES

The man who saved him once from death, as the story goes?

ELECTRA

Yes, very old now—he was my father's tutor.

ORESTES

When your father died did his body find some burial?

ELECTRA

He found what he found. He was thrown on the dirt outdoors.

ORESTES

290 I cannot bear it. What have you
said? Even a stranger's
pain bites strangely deep and hurts
us when we hear it.

Tell me the rest, and with new
knowledge I will bring
Orestes your tale, so harsh to hear
but so imperative
to be heard. Uneducated men are
pitiless,

295 but we who are educated pity
much. And we pay
a high price for being intelligent.
Wisdom hurts.

CHORUS LEADER

The same excitement stirs my mind in this as his—

I live far from the city and I know its troubles
hardly at all. Now I would like to learn them too.

ELECTRA

300 I will tell if I must—and must tell you as my friend—
how my luck, and my father's, is too heavy to lift.
Since you have moved me to speak so, stranger, I must beg
that you will tell Orestes all my distress, and his.
First tell him how I am kept like a beast in stable rags,
305 my skin heavy with grease and dirt. Describe to him
this hut—my home, who used to live in the king's palace.
I weave my clothes myself and slavelike at the loom
must work or else walk naked through the world in nothing.
I fetch and carry water from the riverside,
310 I am deprived of holy festivals and dances,
I can't spend time with women since I am a girl,^o
I can't spend time with Castor, who is close in blood
and was my suitor, before he rose to join the gods.
My mother in the glory of her Phrygian loot
315 sits on the throne, while circled at her feet the girls
of Asia stoop, whom Father won at the sack of Troy,
their clothes woven in snowy wool from Ida, pinned
with golden brooches, while the walls and floor are stained
still with my father's black and rotting blood. The man
320 who murdered him goes riding grand in Father's chariot,
with bloody hands and high delight lifting the staff
of office by which Father marshaled the Greek army.
The tomb of Agamemnon finds no honor yet,
never yet drenched with holy liquids or made green
325 in myrtle branches, barren of bright sacrifice.
But in his drunken fits, my mother's lover, brilliant

man, triumphant leaps and dances on the mound
and pelts my father's stone memorial with rocks
and dares to shout against us with his boldened tongue:
330 "Where is your son Orestes? When will that noble youth
come to protect your tomb?" Insults to an absent man.

Kind stranger, as I ask you, tell him all these things.
For many call him home again— and I speak for them,
all of them, with my hands and tongue and grieving mind
335 and head, shaven in mourning; and his father calls too.
All will be shamed if he whose father captured Troy
cannot in single courage kill a single man,
although his strength is younger and his birth more noble.

CHORUS LEADER

Electra! I can see your husband on the road.
340 He has finished his field work and is coming home.

(The Farmer enters from the side.)

FARMER

Hey there! Who are these strangers standing at our gates?
What is the errand that could bring them to our distant
courtyard? Are they demanding something from me? A nice
woman should never stand in gossip with young men.

ELECTRA

345 My dearest husband, do not come suspecting me.
You shall hear their story, the whole truth. They come
as messengers to me with tidings of Orestes.
Strangers, I ask you to forgive him what he said.

FARMER

What news? Is Orestes still alive in the bright light?

ELECTRA

350 So they have told me, and I do not doubt their words.

FARMER

Does he still remember his father's troubles, and yours?

ELECTRA

We hope so. But an exile is a helpless man.

FARMER

Then what is this message of his? What have they come to tell?

ELECTRA

He sent them simply to see my troubles for themselves.

FARMER

355 What they don't see themselves I imagine you have told them.

ELECTRA

They know it all. I took good care that they missed nothing.

FARMER

Why were our doors not opened to them long ago?
Come into the house, you will find entertainment
to answer your good news, such as my roof can offer.
360 Servants, pick up their baggage, bring it all indoors.
Come, no polite refusals. You are here as friends
most dear to me who meet you now. Though I am poor
in money, I think you will not find our manners poor.

ORESTES

By the gods! Is this the man who helps you fake a marriage,
365 the one who does not wish to cast shame on Orestes?

ELECTRA

This is the man they know as poor Electra's husband.

ORESTES

Alas,
we try to find good men and cannot recognize them
when met, since all our human heritage runs mongrel.
At times I have seen descendants of the noblest family
370 quite worthless, while poor fathers had outstanding sons;
inside the souls of wealthy men bleak famine lives
while minds of stature struggle trapped in starving bodies.

How then can man distinguish man, what test can he use?°
The test of wealth? That measure means poverty of mind.
375 Of poverty? The pauper owns one thing, the sickness
of his condition, a compelling teacher of evil.
By nerve in war? Yet who, when a spear is aimed right at
his face, will stand to witness his companion's courage?
We might as well just toss these matters to the winds.

380 This fellow here is no great man among the Argives,
not dignified by family in the eyes of the world—
he is a face in the crowd, and yet I choose him champion.
Can you not come to understand, you empty-minded,
opinion-stuffed people, to judge a man by how
385 he lives with others: manners are nobility's touchstone?
Such men of manners can control our cities best,°
and homes, but the wellborn sportsman, long on muscle, short
on brains, is only good for a statue in the park—

not even sterner in the shocks of war than weaker
390 men, for courage is the gift of character.

Now let us take whatever rest this house can give;
this man here, Agamemnon's child, the absent man
for whom I've come, deserves no less. We should go now
indoors, servants, inside the house, since a poor host
395 who's eager to entertain is better than a rich one.
I do praise and accept his most kind reception
but would have been more pleased if your brother on the crest
of fortune could have brought me into a fortunate house.
Perhaps he may still come; Apollo's oracles
400 are strong, though human prophecy is best ignored.

(Exit Orestes and Pylades into the house with their attendants.)

CHORUS LEADER

Now more than ever in our lives, Electra, joy
makes our hearts light and warm. Perhaps now fortune, first
running such painful steps, will stand on firmer footing.

(To the farmer.)

ELECTRA

You thoughtless man! You know quite well the house is bare;
405 why take these strangers in? They are better born than you.

FARMER

Why? Because if they are the gentlemen they seem,
will they not be content with small things as with great?

ELECTRA

Small is the word for you. Now the mistake is made,

go quickly to my father's loved and ancient servant
410 who by Tanaus river, where it cuts the land
of Argos off from Spartan country, goes his rounds
watching his flocks in distant exile from the town.
Tell him these strangers have descended on me; ask
him to come and bring some food fit for distinguished guests.
415 He will surely be happy; he will bless the gods
when he hears the child he saved so long ago still lives.
Besides, we cannot get help from the family house,
from Mother—our news would fly to her on bitter wings,
cruel as she is, if she should hear Orestes lives.

FARMER

420 Well, if you wish it, I can pass your message on
to the old man. But you get quick into the house
and ready up what's there. A woman when she has to
can always find some food to set a decent table.
The house holds little, yet it is enough, I know,
425 to keep these strangers full of food at least one day.

(Exit Electra into the house.)

When things like this occur, my intellect reflects.
I contemplate the mighty power found in money:
money you can spend on guests; money you can pay the doctor
when you get sick. But little difference does money make
430 for our daily bread, and when a man has eaten that,
the rich man and the poor one hold just the same amount.

(Exit the Farmer to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*O glorious ships that sailed across to Troy once
moving on infinite wooden oars
attending the circling chorus of Nereid dancers
435 where the dolphin delighting in the pipe-
melody all about the sea-
blue prows went plunging;
you led the goddess Thetis' son,
light-striding Achilles, on his way
440 with Agamemnon to Ilium's cliffs
where Simois pours into the sea.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*The Nereids passed Euboea's headlands
bringing the heavy shield of gold,
forged on Hephaestus' anvil, and golden armor.
445 Up Mount Pelion, up the jut
of Ossa's holy slopes on high,
up the nymphs' spy-rocks
they hunted the aged horseman's hill
where he trained the boy as a dawn for Greece,
450 the son of Thetis, sea-bred and swift-
footed for the sons of Atreus.*

STROPHE B

*Once I heard from a man out of Troy, known to the port
in Nauplia close to Argos,
of your brilliant shield, O goddess'
455 child, how in its circled space
these signs, scenes, were in blazon warning,
terrors for Phrygia:*

running in frieze on its massive rim,
Perseus lifting the severed head
460 of the Gorgon, cut at the neck;^o
he walks on wings over the sea;
Hermes is with him, messenger of Zeus,
great Maia's
child of the flocks and forests.

ANTISTROPHE B

Out of the shield's curved center glittered afar the high
465 shining round of the sun
driving with wingèd horses,
and the chorused stars of upper air—
Pleiades, Hyades—Hector eyed them,
and swerved to flight.
470 Over the helmet of beaten gold
Sphinxes snatch in hooking nails
their prey trapped with song. On the hollow
greave, the lioness' fire breath
flares in her clawed track as she runs,
staring
475 at the wind-borne foal of Peirene.

EPODE

All along the blade of the deadly sword, hooves pounding,
horses leapt; black above their backs the dust blew.
But the lord of such spearmen
480 you killed by lust of sex and sin
of mind, daughter of Tyndareus.
For this the sons of heaven will send
you a judgment of death;^o some far

485 *day I shall still see your blood fall*
 red from your neck by the iron sword.

(Enter the Old Man from the side, carrying provisions for a feast.)

OLD MAN

Where is my young mistress and my lady queen,
the child of Agamemnon, whom I raised and loved?
How steep this house seems set to me, with rough approach,
490 as I grow old for climbing on these withered legs.
But when your friends call, you must come and drag along
and hump your spine till it snaps and bend your knees like pins.

(Enter Electra from the house.)

Why there she is—my daughter, look at you by the door!
I am here. I have brought you from my cropping sheep
495 a newborn lamb, a tender one, just pulled from the teat,
and flowers looped in garlands, cheese white from the churn,
and this stored treasure of the wine god, aged and fragrant—
not much of it, I know, but sweet, and very good
to pour into the cup with other, weaker wine.
500 Let someone take this all in to the guests indoors,
for I have cried a little and would like to dry
my face and eyes out here on my cloak—more holes than wool.

(A servant does as instructed.)

ELECTRA

Old man, please tell me, why is your face so stained with tears?
After so long has my grief stirred your thoughts again,
505 or is it poor Orestes in his cheerless exile

you mourn for, or my father, whom your two old hands
once raised and helped without reward for self or loved ones?

OLD MAN

Reward, no. Yet I could not stop myself, in this:
for I came past his tomb, circling from the road,
510 and fell to the earth there, weeping for him, alone,
and opening this winesack intended for your guests
I poured libation, and I wreathed the stone in myrtle.
And there I saw on the burning-altar a black-fleeced
sheep, throat cut and blood still warm in its dark stream,
515 and curling locks of bright blond hair cut off in gift.
I stopped, quiet, to wonder, child, what man had courage
to visit at that tomb. It could not be an Argive.

Is there a chance your brother has arrived in secret
and paused to wonder at his father's shabby tomb?
520 Look at the lock of hair, match it to your own head,
see if it is not exactly twin to yours in color.
Often a father's blood, running in separate veins,
makes siblings' bodies almost mirrors in their form.

ELECTRA

Old man, I always thought you were wiser than you sound
525 if you really think my brother, who is brave and bold,
would come to our land in hiding, frightened by Aegisthus!
Besides, how could a lock of his hair match with mine?
one from a man with rugged training in the ring
and games, one combed and girlish? It is not possible.
530 Besides, you could find many matching curls of many people
not bred in the same house, old man, nor matched in blood.

OLD MAN

At least go set your foot in the print of his hunting boot
and see if it is not the same as yours, my child.

ELECTRA

But how could rocky ground possibly receive
535 the imprint of a foot? And if it could be traced,
it would not be the same for brother and for sister,
a man's foot and a girl's—of course his would be bigger.

OLD MAN

Is there no piece then, if your brother should come home,
of weaving, that loom pattern by which you would know the cloth
540 you wove and I wrapped him in, to rescue him from death?

ELECTRA

You know quite well that when Orestes left for exile
I was still very small. And even if a child's hand
could weave, how could a grown man still wear those boy's clothes
unless his shirt and tunic lengthened with his body?
545 Some pitying stranger must have passed the tomb and cut
a mourning lock, or townsmen slipping past the lookouts.

OLD MAN

Where are the strangers now? I want to look them over
and draw them out with conversation of your brother.

(Enter Orestes and Pylades from the house.)

ELECTRA

Here they come striding lightly from the cottage now.

OLD MAN

550 Well. They look highborn enough, but the coin may prove
false. Often a noble face hides filthy ways.
Nevertheless—

Greetings, strangers, I wish you
well.

ORESTES

And greetings in return, old sir.

Electra, tell me,
to what friends of yours does this human antique belong?

ELECTRA

555 This is the man who raised and loved my father, sir.

ORESTES

What! the one who saved your brother once from death?

ELECTRA

Indeed he saved him—if indeed he still is safe.

ORESTES

Ah, so!

Why does he stare upon me like a man who squints
at the bright stamp on silver? Do I look like somebody?

ELECTRA

560 Perhaps he's just happy seeing someone of Orestes' age.

ORESTES

Dear Orestes. Why does he walk round me in circles?

ELECTRA

Stranger, I am astonished too as I look at him.

OLD MAN

Mistress, now pray. Daughter Electra, pray to the gods.

ELECTRA

For which of the things I have, or which that I don't have?

OLD MAN

565 For a treasure of love within your grasp, which god reveals.

ELECTRA

As you please; I pray the gods. Now, what was in your mind?

OLD MAN

Look now upon this man, my child—your dearest love.

ELECTRA

I have been looking long already; are you crazy?

OLD MAN

And am I crazy if my eyes have seen your brother?

ELECTRA

570 What have you said, old man? What hopeless impossible word?

OLD MAN

I said I see Orestes—here—Agamemnon's son.

ELECTRA

How? What sign do you see? What can I know and trust?

OLD MAN

The scar above his eye where once he slipped and drew
blood as he helped you chase a fawn in your father's court.

ELECTRA

575 I see the mark of a fall, but I cannot believe you.

OLD MAN

How long will you stand, hold back from his arms and love?

ELECTRA

I will not any longer, for my heart has trust
in the token you show.

O Brother so delayed by time,
I hold you against hope ...

ORESTES

And I hold you at last.

ELECTRA

... and never thought I'd see you.

ORESTES

580 I too abandoned hope.

ELECTRA

And are you he?

ORESTES

I am, your sole defender and friend.
Now if I catch the prey for which I cast my net!^o
I'm confident. Or never believe in the gods' power

again if evil can still triumph over good.

CHORUS [*singing*]

585 *You have come, you have come, our slow, bright day,
 you have shone, you have shown a beacon-
 lit hope for the state, who fled of old
 your father's palace, doomed and pained,
 drifting in exile.*

590 *Now god, some god restores us strong
 to triumph, my dear.
 Lift high your hands, lift high your voice, raise
 prayers to the gods, that in fortune, fortune
595 your brother may march straight to the city's heart.*

ORESTES

Enough. I find sweet pleasure in embrace and welcome,
but let us give ourselves over to pleasure later.
Old man, you came on the crest of opportunity—
tell me what I must do to punish Father's killer
600 and Mother too who lives in foul adultery.
Have I in Argos any strong measure of friends
or am I bankrupt in backing as I am in fortune?
Whom shall I look to? Shall it be by day or night?
What hunting track will lead me toward my enemies?

OLD MAN

605 My son, you lost your friends when luck deserted you.
That would indeed be luck met on the road for you,
someone to share both good and evil without change.
But you from root to leaf-top have been robbed of friends
while, leaving, you left them without all hope. Hear me:

610 in your own hand and in your fortune you hold all,
to capture back your city, home, and patrimony.

ORESTES

But what should we be doing now to reach our goal?

OLD MAN

Kill him. Kill Thyestes' son. And kill your mother.

ORESTES

Such the triumphal crown I came for, yet—how reach it?

OLD MAN

615 Not inside the city even if you were willing.

ORESTES

Is he so strongly fenced by bodyguards and spears?

OLD MAN

You know it. The man's afraid of you and cannot sleep.

ORESTES

Let that go, then. Tell me another way, old man.

OLD MAN

Yes—you shall hear, for something came to me just now.

ORESTES

620 I hope your plan and my reaction are equally good.

OLD MAN

I saw Aegisthus as I hauled my way up here.

ORESTES

Good, that sounds hopeful. Where did you happen on him?

OLD MAN

Close, down in the meadows where his horses graze.

ORESTES

What was he doing? Out of despair I see new light.

OLD MAN

625 Offering a banquet to the goddess nymphs, I think.

ORESTES

To keep his children safe? Or for one not yet born?

OLD MAN

I know only that he was preparing to kill a bull.

ORESTES

How many men were with him? Simply alone with servants?

OLD MAN

No citizens were there; a handful of household servants.

ORESTES

630 No one who might still recognize my face, old man?

OLD MAN

They are his private servants and they have never seen you.°

ORESTES

And would they, if we conquered, be, ah—kindly disposed?

OLD MAN

That is characteristic of slaves, and luck for you.

ORESTES

How would you suggest my getting close to him?

OLD MAN

635 Walk past where he will see you as he sacrifices.

ORESTES

He has his fields, I gather, right beside the road?

OLD MAN

And when he sees you he will ask you to join the feast.

ORESTES

He shall find a bitter banquet-fellow, if god wills.

OLD MAN

What happens next—you play it as the dice may fall.

ORESTES

640 Well spoken. The woman who gave me birth is—where?

OLD MAN

In Argos. She will join him for the feast tonight.

ORESTES

But why did she—my mother—not start out with him?

OLD MAN

The gossip of the crowd disturbs her. She held back.

ORESTES

Of course. She feels the city's disapproving looks.

OLD MAN

645 That's how it is. Everyone hates a promiscuous wife.

ORESTES

Then how can I kill them both at the same time and place?

ELECTRA

I will be the one to manage my mother's killing.

ORESTES

Good—then fortune will arrange that business well.

ELECTRA

Let our single friend here help the two of us.

OLD MAN

650 It shall be done. What death have you decided for her?

ELECTRA

Old uncle, you must go to Clytemnestra; tell her^o
that I am kept in bed after bearing a son.

OLD MAN

Some time ago? Or has your baby just arrived?

ELECTRA

Ten days ago, which days I have kept ritually clean.

OLD MAN

655 And how will this achieve the murder of your mother?

ELECTRA

She will come, of course, when she hears about the birth.

OLD MAN

Why? Do you think she cares so deeply for you, child?

ELECTRA

Yes—and she will weep about the boy's low breeding.

OLD MAN

Perhaps. Return now to the goal of your design.

ELECTRA

660 She will come; she will be killed. All that is clear.

OLD MAN

I see—she comes and walks directly in your door.

ELECTRA

From there she need go only a short way down to Hades.

OLD MAN

I will gladly die too, when I have seen her die.

ELECTRA

But first, old man, you ought to guide Orestes now.

OLD MAN

665 Where Aegisthus holds his sacrifices to the gods?

ELECTRA

Then go see my mother, tell her all about me.

OLD MAN

I'll speak so well she'll think it is Electra speaking.

(To Orestes.)

ELECTRA

Your task is ready. You have drawn first chance at killing.

ORESTES

Well, I will go if anyone will show me where.

OLD MAN

670 I will escort you on your way with greatest joy.

ORESTES^o

O Zeus of our Fathers, now be Router of Foes,
have pity on us, for our days are piteous.

OLD MAN

Pity them truly—children sprung of your own blood.

ELECTRA

O Hera, holy mistress of Mycenae's altars,
675 grant us the victory if our claim to victory is just.

OLD MAN

Grant them at last avenging justice for their father.

ORESTES

And you, O Father, dwelling wronged beneath the earth ...

ELECTRA

... and Earth, ruler below, to whom I stretch my hands ...

OLD MAN

... protect, protect these children here, so dearly loved.

ORESTES

680 Come now and bring as army all the dead below ...

ELECTRA

... who stood beside you at Troy with the havoc of their spears ...

OLD MAN

... all who hate the godless guilty criminals.

ORESTES

Did you hear us, wretched victim of our mother?°

OLD MAN

All, your father hears all, I know. Time now to march.

ELECTRA

685 I call to you again and say: "Aegisthus dies!"°

And if, Orestes, in your struggle you should die,

I too am dead, let them no longer say I live,

for I will stab myself with a two-edged sword.

I will go in and make our dwelling fit for the outcome:

690 then if a message of good fortune comes from you
the whole house shall ring out in triumph. If you die
triumph will shift to desolation. This is my word.

ORESTES

I understand you.

ELECTRA

Make yourself fit man for the hour.

695 You, my women, with your voices scream a fire-
signal of shouting in this trial. I shall stand guard,
a sword raised ready for the issue in my hand.
If I'm defeated, I shall never grant to those
I hate the right to violate my living flesh.

*(Exit Orestes, the Old Man, and Pylades to
the side, Electra into the house.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*The ancient tale is told
in Argos
700 still—how a magic lamb
from its gentle mother on the hills
Pan stole, Pan of the wild
beasts, kind watcher, Pan
who breathes sweet music to his jointed reed.
705 He brought it to show the gold
curls of its wool. On the stone
steps a standing herald called:
“To the square, to the square, you men
of Mycenae! Come, run, behold
710 a strange and lovely thing
for our blessed kings.” Swiftly the chorus in dance
beat out honor to Atreus' house.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*The altars spread their wings
of hammered
715 gold, fire gleamed in the town
like the moon on Argos' stones
of sacrifice, lotus pipes
tended the Muses, lilting
ripples of tune. The dance swelled in desire
tense for the lamb of gold—
whose? Quick, Thyestes' trick:
720 seducing in the dark of sleep
Atreus' wife, he brought
the strange lamb home, his own.
Back to the square he calls
all to know how he holds the golden creature,
725 fleece and horn, in his own house.*

STROPHE B

*That hour—that hour Zeus
changed the stars on their blazing course,
utterly turned the splendid sun,
735 turned the white face of the dawn
so the sun drives west over heaven's spine
in glowing god-lit fire.
The watery weight of cloud moved north,
the cracked waste of Egyptian Ammon
dried up, died, never knowing dew,
robbed of the beautiful rain that drops from Zeus.*

ANTISTROPHE B

Thus it is always told.

*I myself am won only to slight belief
that the sun would swerve or change his gold
740 countenance of fire, moved in pain
and sorrow at sin in the mortal world,
to judge or punish humans.
Yet terrible myths are useful,
they call men to the worship of the gods—
745 whom you forgot when you killed your husband,
sister of glorious brothers.*

(A cry is heard from offstage.)

Listen, listen.

Friends, did you hear a shout? Or did anxiety
trick me? A shout deep-rolling like the thunder of Zeus?

(Another cry.)

Again it comes! The rising wind is charged with news.
750 Mistress, come out! Electra, leave the house!

(Enter Electra from the house.)

ELECTRA

Dear friends, what is it? How do we stand now in our trial?

CHORUS

I only know one thing: I heard a voice of death.

ELECTRA

I heard it too. It was far off. But I too heard it.

CHORUS

It comes from a great distance, yet it is quite clear.

ELECTRA

755 Is it an Argive groaning there—or is it our friends?

CHORUS

I cannot tell; the note of clamoring is slurred.

ELECTRA

So you announce my death by sword. Why am I slow?

CHORUS

Lady, hold back until you learn the outcome clearly.

ELECTRA

Not possible. We are beaten. Where are the messengers?

CHORUS

760 They will come soon. To kill a king is not quick or light.

(Enter a Messenger, one of Orestes' servants, from the side.)

MESSENGER

Hail maidens of Mycenae, glorious in triumph!
Orestes is victor! I proclaim it to all who love him.
The murderer of Agamemnon lies on the earth
crumpled in blood, Aegisthus. Let us thank the gods.

ELECTRA

765 Who are you? Why should I think your message is the truth?

MESSENGER

You do not know you're looking on your brother's servant?

ELECTRA

Dearest of servants! Out of fear I held my eyes
shaded from recognition. Now indeed I know you.
What is your news? My father's hated murderer dead?

MESSENGER

770 Dead, dead. I say it twice if that is what you wish.

ELECTRA

O gods! O Justice watching the
world, you have come at last.

How did he die? What style of
death did Orestes choose,

to kill Thyestes' son? Give me the
details.

MESSENGER

When we rose from your cottage and walked down the hill
775 we came across a beaten double wagon-track,
and there we found the new commander of Mycenae.
He happened to be walking in the water-meadow,
picking young green shoots of myrtle for his hair.
He saw us and called out: "You are most welcome, strangers.
780 Who are you? Have you traveled far? Where is your home?"
Orestes answered, "We are Thessalians on our way
toward Alpheus' valley where we shall sacrifice to Zeus
of Olympia." When Aegisthus heard, he called again,
"Now you must stop among us as our guests and share
785 our feast. I am at the moment slaughtering a bull
for the nymphs. Tomorrow morning you shall rise at dawn
and get there just as soon. Come with me to the house"—

while he was still talking he took us by the hand
and led us off the road—"I will take no refusal."

790 When we were in the house he gave his men commands:
"Quick, someone fill a bowl of water for the strangers
so their hands will be clean near the lustrations at the altar."
But Orestes interrupted: "We are clean enough.
We washed ourselves just now in the clear river water.
795 If strangers may join citizens in sacrifice,
we are here, Aegisthus. We shall not refuse you, prince."

So this is what they said in public conversation.
Now the king's bodyguard laid down their spears
and sprang all hands to working.
800 Some brought the lustral bowl, and others baskets of grain,
some laid and lit the fire or around the hearth
set up the sacred ewers—the whole roof rang with sound.
Your mother's lover took the barley in his hands
and cast it on the altar as he said these words:
805 "Nymphs of the Rocks, may I kill many bulls for you,
and my wife, Tyndareus' child, who is at home.
Guard us in present fortune, ruin our enemies."
(Meaning you and Orestes.) But my master prayed
the utter reverse, keeping his words below his breath,
810 to take his dynastic place again. Aegisthus raised
the narrow knife from the basket, cut the calf's front lock,
with his right hand dedicated it to the holy fire,
and, as his servants hoisted the beast upon their shoulders,
slashed its throat.

Now he turns to your brother and
says,

815 "One of your great Thessalian talents, as you boast,
is to be a man of two skills: disjointing bulls

and taming horses. Stranger, take the iron knife,
show us how true Thessalian reputation runs.”

Orestes seized the beautifully tempered Dorian blade,
820 loosened his brooch, flung his fine cloak back from his shoulders,
chose Pylades as his assistant in the work,
and made the men stand off. Holding the calf by its foot,
he laid the white flesh bare by pulling with his hand.
He stripped the hide off whole, more quickly than a runner
825 racing could double down and back the hippodrome course,
and opened the soft belly. Aegisthus scooped the prophetic
portions up in his hands and looked.

The liver lobe

was missing. But the portal vein and gall sac showed
disaster coming at him even as he looked.
830 His face darkened, drew down. My master watched and asked,
“What puts you out of heart?” “Stranger, I am afraid.
Some ambush is at my door.◦ There is a man I hate,
the son of Agamemnon, an enemy to my house.”
He answered, “You can scarcely fear a fugitive’s
835 tricks when you control the state? So we can feast
on sacrificial flesh, will someone bring a chopper—
Phthian, not Dorian—and let me split this breastbone?”
He took it and struck. Aegisthus heaped the soft parts, then
sorted them out. But while his head was bent above them,
840 your brother stretched up, balanced on the balls of his feet,
and smashed a blow to his spine. The vertebrae of his back
broke. Head down, his whole body convulsed, he gasped
to breathe, writhed with a high scream, and died in his blood.

The servingmen who saw it leaped straight to their spears,
845 an army for two men to face. And yet with courage

they stood, faced them, shook their javelins, engaged—
Pylades and Orestes, who cried, “I have not come
in wrath against this city nor against my servants.
I have only paid my father’s killer back in blood.
850 I am the much-suffering Orestes—do not kill me, men
who helped my father’s house of old.”

They, when they heard
his words, lowered their spears, and he was recognized
by some old man who used to serve the family.
Swiftly they crowned your brother’s head with flower wreaths,
855 shouting aloud in joy and triumph. He comes to you
bringing something to show you—not the Gorgon’s head,
only Aegisthus whom you loathe, who was in debt
for blood and found the paying bitter at his death.

(Exit to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

Come, lift your foot, lady, to dance
860 *now like a fawn who in flying*
arcs leaps for joy, light, almost brushing the sky.
He wins a garland of glory
greater than any Olympic victory,
your own brother; now, in the hymn strain,
865 *praise the fair victor, chant to my step.*

ELECTRA

O flame of day and sun’s great chariot charged with light,
O earth below and dark of night where I watched before,
my eyes are clear now, I can unfold my sight to freedom,

now that Aegisthus, who had killed my father, falls.
870 Bring me my few belongings, what my house keeps treasured
as ornaments of splendor for the hair, dear friends,
for I will crown my brother as a conqueror.

CHORUS [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE

*Lay now the bright signs of success
over his brow, as we circle
875 our chorused step, dancing to the Muses' delight.
Now again in our country
our old and loved kings of the blood capture the power,
in high justice routing the unjust.
Raise to the pipe's tune shouts of our joy.*

(Enter Orestes, Pylades, and servants with a corpse from the side.)

ELECTRA

880 O man of triumph sprung of our triumphant father
who fought and won below the walls of Troy—Orestes!
Take from my hands these woven bindings for your hair.
You come, a runner in no trifling race, but long
and challenging, to your home goal, killing Aegisthus
885 who was your enemy, who once destroyed our father.
And you, companion of the shield, Pylades, son
of a most pious father, please receive your crown
from my hand, for you have won an equal share of glory
in this trial. May I see your fortune always high!

ORESTES

890 You must believe, Electra, that the gods have been

first founders of our fortune; then you may turn to praise
me as the simple servant of both god and fortune.

I come to you the killer of Aegisthus, not
in words but action. You know this, but more than this^o

895 I have here in my hands the man himself, quite dead.
You may want to display him for the beasts to eat
or stick him on a stake as a toy for carrion birds
born of bright air. He's yours—once master, now slave.

ELECTRA

900 I am ashamed to speak and yet I wish to speak.

ORESTES

What is it? Speak your mind, for now you're free from fear.

ELECTRA

I am ashamed to insult the dead; some hate may strike me.

ORESTES

There is no man on earth, nor will be, who could blame you.

ELECTRA

Our city is harsh to please and takes delight in slander.

ORESTES

905 Speak as you need to, sister. We were joined to him
in bonds of hatred which could know no gentle truce.

ELECTRA

So be it.

Which words of hatred shall I speak
in prelude;

which shall I make finale, or marshal in the center?
And yet dawn after dawn I never once have missed
910 calling aloud what I wished to tell you to your face
if only I were liberated from my fears
now past. We are at that point now. I'll give you the full
torrent of abuse I hoped to tell you living.

You ruined me, orphaned me, and him too, of a father
915 we loved dearly, though we had done no harm to you.
You bedded my mother in shame, and killed her husband
who captained the Greeks abroad while you skulked far from
Phrygia.

You climbed such heights of stupidity that you imagined
your marriage to my mother would not marry you
920 to cuckoldry, though she had stained our father's bed
adulterously. Know this: when a man seduces another's^o
wife in secret sex and then is forced to keep her,
he must be stupid if he thinks that she, unchaste
to her first husband, will suddenly turn chaste for him.

925 Your household life was painful though you could not see it;
you knew in your heart that you had made a godless marriage,
and Mother knew she had acquired a godless husband,
so each in working evil shouldered the other's load
in mutual pain: she got your evil, you got hers.

930 Every time you walked outdoors in Argos, you heard
these words: "He's hers." And never: "She belongs to him."

O what perversion, when the woman in the house
stands out as master, not the man. I shake in hate
to see those children whom the city knows and names
935 not by their father's name but only by their mother's.
It marks the bridegroom who has climbed to a nobler bed;
when no one mentions the husband, everyone knows the wife.

Where you were most deceived in your grand unawareness
was your boast to be a man of power since you had money.
940 Wealth stays with us a little moment if at all;
only our characters are steadfast, not our possessions,^o
for character stays with us to the end and faces
trouble, but unjust wealth dwells with poor fools but then
wings swiftly from their house after brief blossoming.

945 The women in your life I will not mention—a maiden
ought not—but only hint that I know all about them.
You took liberties since you lived in a grand palace
and were handsome enough. But let me have a husband
not girlish-faced like you but virile and well built,
950 whose sons would cling bold to the craggy heights of war;
good looks are only ornamental at the dance.

To hell with you! You know not what you did, but time
has found you out. You've paid the price. So should no criminal
who starts his race without a stumble vainly believe
955 that he has outrun Justice, till in the closing stretch
he nears the finish line and gains life's final goal.

CHORUS LEADER

He wrought horrors, and has paid in horror to you
and your brother. Justice has enormous power.

ELECTRA

Enough now. Servants, take his corpse into the house;
960 conceal it well in darkness so that when she comes
my mother sees no dead man till her throat is cut.

(The corpse is carried into the house.)

ORESTES^o

Hold off a little; let us speak of something else.

ELECTRA

What's there? You see his men from Mycenae coming to help?

ORESTES

Not his men. What I'm seeing is my mother who bore me.

ELECTRA

965 How beautifully she marches straight into our net!^o
See how grandly she rides with chariot and finery.

ORESTES

What—what is our action now toward Mother? Do we kill her?

ELECTRA

Don't tell me pity catches you at the sight of her.

ORESTES

O god!
How can I kill her when she bore me and brought me up?

ELECTRA

970 Kill her just the way she killed your father and mine.

ORESTES

O Phoebus, your holy word was brute and ignorant ...

ELECTRA

Where Apollo is ignorant shall men be wise?

ORESTES

... that said to kill my mother, whom I must not kill.

ELECTRA

Nothing will hurt you. You are only avenging Father.

ORESTES

975 As matricide I'll be exiled. But I was clean before.

ELECTRA

Not clean before the gods, if you neglect your father.

ORESTES

I know—but will I not be punished for killing Mother?

ELECTRA

And will you not be punished for not avenging Father?

ORESTES

Did a polluted demon speak in the shape of god?

ELECTRA

980 Throned on the holy tripod? I shall not believe so.

ORESTES

And I shall not believe those oracles were pure.

ELECTRA

You must not play the coward now and fall to weakness.
Go in. I will bait her a trap as she once baited one^o
which sprang at Aegisthus' touch and killed her lawful husband.

ORESTES

985

I am going in. I walk a cliff edge in a sea^o
of evil, and evil I will do. If the gods approve,
let it be so. This game of death is bitter, not^o sweet.

*(Exit Orestes and Pylades into the house. Enter Clytemnestra
from the side in a chariot, attended by Trojan slaves.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

Hail! hail!
Queen and mistress of Argos, hail,
Tyndareus' child,
990 *sister in blood to the lordly sons*
of Zeus who dwell in starred and flaming
air, saviors adored by men
in the roar of the salt sea.
Hail! I honor you like the gods
995 *for your wealth and brilliant life.*
The time to serve^o your fortunes
is now, O Queen. Hail!^o

CLYTEMNESTRA

Get out of the carriage, Trojan maids; hold my hand
tight, so I can step down safely to the ground.

(They do as instructed.)

1000 Mostly we gave the temples of our gods the spoils
from Phrygia, but these girls, the best in Troy, I chose
to ornament my own house and replace the child
I lost, my loved daughter. The compensation is small.

ELECTRA

Then may not I, who am a slave and also tossed
1005 far from my father's home to live in misery,
may I not, Mother, take your most distinguished hand?

CLYTEMNESTRA

These slaves are here to help me. Do not trouble yourself.

ELECTRA

Why not? You threw me out of home like a war captive;
and with my home destroyed, then I too was destroyed,
1010 as they are too—left dark, lonely, and fatherless.

CLYTEMNESTRA

And dark and lonely were your father's plots against
those he should most have loved and least conspired to kill.
I can tell you—no. When a woman gets an evil
reputation she finds a bitter twist to her words.

1015 This is my case now, but it is not rightly so.
If you have something truly to hate, you ought to learn
the facts first; then hate is more decent. But not in the dark.

My father Tyndareus gave me to your father's care,
not to kill me, not to kill what I bore and loved.
1020 And yet he tempted my daughter, slyly whispering
of marriage with Achilles, took her from home to Aulis
where the ships were stuck, stretched her high above the altar
and, like pale field grass, slashed Iphigenia's throat.
If this had been to save the state from siege and ruin,
1025 if it had helped our home and spared our other children,
to rack one girl for many lives—I could have forgiven.
But now for the sake of Helen's lust and for the man
who took a wife and could not punish her seducer—

for their lives' sake he took the life of my dear child.
1030 I was unfairly wronged in this, yet not for this
would I have gone so savage, nor murdered my own husband,
but he came home to me with a mad, god-filled girl
and introduced her to his bed. So there we were,
two brides being stabled in a single stall.
1035 Oh, women are fools for sex, deny it I shall not.
Since this is in our nature, when our husbands choose
to despise the bed they have, a woman is quite willing
to imitate her man and find another lover.
But then the dirty gossip puts us in the spotlight;
1040 the guilty ones, the men, are never blamed at all.
If Menelaus had been abducted from home on the sly,
should I have had to kill Orestes so my sister's
husband could be rescued? You think your father would
have borne it? Then was it fair for him to kill my child
1045 and not be killed, while he could make me suffer so?
I killed. I turned and walked the only path still open,
straight to his enemies. Would any of his friends
have helped me in the task of murder I had to do?
Speak if you have need or reason. Refute me freely;
1050 demonstrate how your father died without full justice.

CHORUS LEADER

Justice is in your words but your justice is shameful.
A wife should give way to her husband in all things
if her mind is sound; if she refuses to see this truth
she cannot be fully counted in my reckoning.

ELECTRA

1055 Keep in mind, Mother, those last words you spoke,

giving me license to speak out freely against you.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I say them once again, child; I will not deny them.

ELECTRA

But when you hear me, Mother, will you then treat me badly?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Not so at all. I shall be glad to humor you.°

ELECTRA

1060 Then I shall speak—and here is the keynote of my song:
Mother, you who bore me, if only your mind were healthier!
Although for beauty you deserve tremendous praise,
both you and Helen, flowering from a single stalk,
you both grew foolish and have been a disgrace to Castor.
1065 When she was abducted she walked of her own will to ruin,
while you brought ruin on the finest man in Greece
and screened it with the argument that for your child
you killed your husband. The world knows you less well than I.
You, long before your daughter came near sacrifice,
1070 the very hour your husband marched away from home,
were setting your blond curls by the bronze mirror's light.
Now any woman who works on her beauty when her man
is gone from home indicts herself as being a whore.
She has no decent cause to show her painted face
1075 outside the door unless she wants to look for trouble.
Of all Greek women, you were the only one I know
to hug yourself with pleasure when Troy's fortunes rose,
but when they sank, to cloud your face in sympathy.

You wanted Agamemnon never to come home.
1080 And yet life gave you every chance to be wise and fine.
You had a husband not at all worse than Aegisthus,
whom Greece herself had chosen as her king and captain;
and when your sister Helen did the things she did,
that was your time to capture glory. For black evil
1085 is outlined clearest to our sight by the blaze of virtue.
Next. If, as you say, our father killed your daughter,
did I do any harm to you, or did my brother?
When you killed your husband, why did you not bestow
the ancestral home on us, but took to bed the gold
1090 which never belonged to you to buy yourself a lover?
And why has he not gone in exile in exchange
for your son's exile, or not have died to pay for me
who still alive have died my sister's death twice over?
If murder judges and calls for murder, I will kill
1095 you—and your son Orestes will kill you—for Father.
If the first death was just, the second too is just.
Whoever has a view to money or to birth^o
and marries a bad woman is stupid: better to have
a low-born wife who's chaste than one of noble birth.

CHORUS LEADER

1100 It's luck determines marriage. Some seem to turn out well,
but I have seen that others have been the opposite.

CLYTEMNESTRA

My child, from birth you always have adored your father.
This is part of life. Some children always love
the male; some turn more closely to their mother than to him.
1105 I know you and forgive you. I am not so happy

either, child, with what I have done or with myself.

How poorly you look. Have you not washed? Your clothes are bad.°

I suppose you just got up from bed and giving birth?

O god, how miserably my plans have all turned out.

1110 Perhaps I drove my hate too hard against my husband.

ELECTRA

Your mourning comes a little late. There is no cure.

Father is dead now. If you grieve, why not

bring back the son you sent to wander in foreign lands?

CLYTEMNESTRA

I am afraid. I have to watch my life, not his.

1115 They say his father's death has made him very angry.

ELECTRA

Why do you let your husband act like a beast against us?

CLYTEMNESTRA

That is his nature. Yours is wild and stubborn too.

ELECTRA

I was hurt. But I am going to bury my anger soon.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Good; then he never will be harsh to you again.

ELECTRA

1120 He has been haughty; now he is staying in my house.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You see? You want to blow the quarrel to new flames.

ELECTRA

I will be quiet; I fear him—the way I fear him.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Stop this talk. You called me here for something, girl.

ELECTRA

I think that you have heard that I have given birth.

1125 Make me the proper sacrifice—I don't know how—
as the law runs for children at the tenth night moon.
I have no knowledge; I have never had a child.

CLYTEMNESTRA

This is work for the woman who acted as your midwife.

ELECTRA

I acted for myself. I was alone at birth.

CLYTEMNESTRA

1130 Your house is set so desolate of friends and neighbors?

ELECTRA

No one is willing to make friends with poverty.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Then I will go and make the gods full sacrifice
as law prescribes for a child. I give you so much
grace and then pass to the meadow where my husband is,
1135 sacrificing to the nymphs. Servants, take the wagon,
set it in the stables. When you think this rite

of god draws to an end, come back to stand beside me,
for I have debts of grace to pay my husband too.

ELECTRA

Enter our poor house. And, Mother, take good care
1140 the smoky walls put no dark stain upon your robes.
Pay sacrifice to heaven as you ought to pay.

*(Exit Clytemnestra into the house, her slaves
to the side with the chariot.)*

The basket of grain is ready and the knife is sharp
which killed the bull, and close beside him you shall fall
stricken, to keep your bridal rites in the house of death
1145 with him you slept beside in life. I give you so
much grace and you shall give my father grace of justice.

(Exit Electra into the house.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*Evils are interchanging. The winds of this house
shift now to a new track. Of old in the bath
my leader, mine, fell to his death;
1150 the roof rang, the stone heights of the hall echoed loud
to his cry: "O terrible lady, will you kill me now
newly come to my dear land at the tenth cycle of seed?"*◦

ANTISTROPHE

1155 *Justice circles back and brings her to judgment,
she pays grief for love errant. She, when her lord
came safe home, after dragging years,*

where his stone Cyclopes' walls rose straight
to the sky, there with steel
1160 freshly honed to an edge killed him, hand on the axe. O wretched
husband, whatever
suffering gripped that cruel woman:
a lioness mountain-bred, ranging out
from her oak-sheltered home, she sprang. It was done.

CLYTEMNESTRA [*singing in this brief lyrical interchange from inside the house while the Chorus sings in reply*]

1165 O children—by the gods—do not kill your mother—no!

CHORUS

Do you hear a cry within the walls?

CLYTEMNESTRA

O, O, I am hurt—

CHORUS

*I moan aloud too, to hear her in her children's hands.
Justice is given down by god soon or late;
1170 you suffer terribly now, you acted terribly then,
cruel woman, against your husband.*

*(Enter Orestes, Electra, and Pylades from the house, and the
corpses of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are revealed.)*

CHORUS LEADER

Behold them coming from the house in robes of blood
newly stained by a murdered mother, walking straight,
living signs of triumph over her frightful cries.
1175 There is no house, nor has there been, more suffering

or pitiable than this, the house of Tantalus.

ORESTES [*singing this lyric ode in alternation with Electra and the Chorus*]

STROPHE A

*O Earth and Zeus who watch all work
men do, look at this work of blood
and corruption, two bodies in death
1180 lying battered along the dirt^o
under my hands, payment
for my pain.*

ELECTRA

*Weep greatly, my brother, but I am to blame.
A girl burning in hatred I turned against
the mother who bore me.*

CHORUS

*1185 Weep for destiny; destiny yours^o
to mother unforgettable wrath,
to suffer unforgettable pain
beyond pain at your children's hands.
You paid for their father's death as justice asks.*

ORESTES

ANTISTROPHE A

*1190 Phoebus, you hymned justice in obscure
melody, but the deed has shone
white as a scar. You granted me rest
as murderers rest—to leave the land
of Greece. But where else can I go?*

1195 *What state, host, god-fearing man
will look steady upon my face,
who killed my mother?*

ELECTRA

*O weep for me. Where am I now? What dance—
what marriage may I come to? What man will take
1200 me as bride to his bed?*

CHORUS

*Circling, circling, your uncertain mind
veers in the blowing wind and turns;
you think piously now, but then
thoughtless you did an impious thing,
1205 dear girl, to your brother, whose will was not with you.*

ORESTES

STROPHE B

*You saw her agony, how she threw aside her dress,
how she was showing her breast there in the midst of death?
My god, how she bent to earth
the limbs which I was born through? and I melted!°*

CHORUS

1210 *I know, I understand; you have come
through grinding torment hearing her cry
so hurt, your own mother.*

ORESTES

ANTISTROPHE B

She broke into a scream then, she stretched up her hand
1215 *toward my face: "My son! Oh, be pitiful, my son!"*
She clung to my face,
suspended, hanging; my arm dropped with the sword.

CHORUS

Unhappy woman—how could your eyes
bear to watch her blood as your own mother
1220 *fought for her breath and died there?*

ORESTES

STROPHE C

I snatched a fold of my cloak to hood my eyes, and, blind,
took the sword and sacrificed
my mother—sank steel into her neck.

ELECTRA

I urged you on, I urged you on,
1225 *I touched the sword beside your hand,*
I worked a terrible pain and ruin.°

ORESTES°

ANTISTROPHE C

Take it! shroud my mother's dead flesh in a cloak;
clean and close the sucking wounds.
Your own murderers were the children you bore.

ELECTRA

1230 *Behold! I wrap her close in this robe,*
her whom I loved and could not love,

ending our family's great disasters.

(Enter the Dioscuri above the house.)

CHORUS [*now chanting*]

*Whom do I see high over your house
shining in radiance? Are they hero spirits
1235 or gods of the heavens? They are more than men
in their moving. Why do they come so bright
into the eyes of mortals?*

CASTOR [*speaking for both Dioscuri*]

O son of Agamemnon, hear us: we call to you,
the Twins, born with your mother, named the sons of Zeus,
1240 I Castor, and my brother Polydeuces here.
We come to Argos having turned the rolling storm
of a sea-tossed ship to quiet, when we saw the death
of this our murdered sister, your murdered mother.
Justice has claimed her, but you have not worked in justice.
1245 As for Phoebus, Phoebus—yet he is my lord,
silence. He knows what is wise, but his oracles were not wise.
Compulsion is on us all to accept this, and in future
to go complete those things which fate and Zeus assigned you.
Give Pylades Electra as a wife in his house,
1250 and leave Argos yourself. The city is not yours
to walk in any longer, since you killed your mother.
The dreadful beast-faced goddesses of destiny
will roll you like a wheel through maddened wandering.
But when you come to Athens, fold the holy wood
1255 of Pallas' statue to your breast—then she will check
the fluttering horror of their snakes, they cannot touch you

as she holds her Gorgon-circled shield above your head.
 In Athens is the Hill of Ares, where the gods
 first took their seats to judge murder by public vote,
 1260 the time raw-minded Ares killed Halirrhothius
 in anger at his daughter's godless wedding night,
 in anger at the sea lord's son. Since then this court
 has been holy and trusted by both men and gods.
 There you too must run the risk of trial for murder.
 1265 But the voting pebbles will be cast equal and save you;
 you shall not die by the verdict: Loxias will take
 all blame on himself for having required your mother's death,
 and so for the rest of time this law shall be established:
 "When votes are equal the accused must have acquittal."
 1270 The dreadful goddesses, shaken in grief for this,
 shall go down in a crack of earth beside the Hill
 to keep a dark and august oracle for men.
 Then you must found a city near Arcadian
 Alpheus' stream, beside the wolf god's sanctuary.
 1275 and by your name that city shall be known to men.
 So much I say to you. Aegisthus' corpse the men
 of Argos will hide, buried in an earth-heaped tomb.
 Menelaus will bury your mother. He has come just now
 to Nauplia for the first time since he captured Troy.
 1280 Helen will help him. She is home from Proteus' halls,
 leaving Egypt behind. She never went to Troy.
 Instead, Zeus made and sent a Helen-image there
 to Ilium so men might die in hate and blood.
 So. Let Pylades take Electra, girl and wife,
 1285 and start his journey homeward, leaving Achaea's lands;
 let him also to his Phocian estates escort
 her "husband," as they call him—set him deep in wealth.

Turn your feet toward Isthmus' narrow neck of earth;
make your way to the blessed hill where Cecrops dwelt.
1290 When you have drained the fullness of this murder's doom
you will again be happy, released from these distresses.

CHORUS [*chanting from now until the end of the play, like all the other characters*]

*Sons of Zeus, does the law allow us
to draw any closer toward your voice?*

CASTOR

The law allows; you are clean of this blood.

ELECTRA

1295 *Will you speak to me too, Tyndarids?*◦

CASTOR

*Also to you. On Phoebus I place all
guilt for this death.*

CHORUS

*Why could you, who are gods and brothers
of the dead woman here,
1300 not turn her Furies away from our halls?*

CASTOR

*Fate is compelling; it leads and we follow—
fate and the unwise song of Apollo.*

ELECTRA

*And I? What Apollo, what oracle's voice
ordained I be marked in my mother's blood?*

CASTOR

1305 *You shared in the act, you share in the fate:
 both children a single
 curse on your house has ground into dust.*

ORESTES

*O sister, I found you so late, and so soon
 I lose you, robbed of your healing love,
1310 and leave you behind as you leave me.*

CASTOR

*She has a husband, she has a home, she
 needs no pity, she suffers nothing
 but exile from Argos.*

ELECTRA

*Are there more poignant sorrows or greater
1315 than leaving the soil of a fatherland?*

ORESTES

*But I go too; I am forced from my father's
 home; I must suffer foreigners' judgment
 for the blood of my mother.*

CASTOR

*Courage. You go
1320 to the holy city of Pallas. Endure.*

ELECTRA

*Hold me now closely breast against breast,
 dear brother. I love you.*

*But the curses bred in a mother's blood
dissolve our bonds and drive us from home.*

ORESTES

1325 *Come to me, clasp my body, lament
as if at the tomb of a man now dead.*

CASTOR

*Alas, your despair rings terribly,
even
to listening gods;
pity at mortal labor and pain still*

1330 *lives in us and the lords of
heaven.*

ORESTES

I shall not see you again.

ELECTRA

I shall never more walk in the light of your eye.

ORESTES

Now is the last I can hear your voice.

ELECTRA

Farewell, my city.

1335 *Many times farewell, women of my city.*

ORESTES

O loyal love, do you go so soon?

ELECTRA

I go. These tears are harsh for my eyes.

ORESTES

1340 *Pylades, go, farewell; and be kind to
Electra in marriage.*

CASTOR

*Marriage shall be their care. But the hounds
are here. Quick, to Athens! Run to escape,
for they hurl their ghostly tracking against you,
1345 serpent-fisted and blackened of flesh,
offering the fruit of terrible pain.
We two must hurry to Sicilian seas,
rescue the salt-smashed prows of the fleet.
As we move through the open valleys of air
1350 we champion none who are stained in sin,
but those who have held the holy and just
dear in their lives we will loose from harsh
toils and save them.
So let no man be desirous of evil
1355 nor sail with those who have broken their oaths—
as god to men I command you.*

(Exit with Polydeuces.)

CHORUS

*Farewell. The mortal who can fare well,^o
not broken by trouble met on the road,
leads a most blessed life.*

(Exit all.)