

ORESTES

Translated by WILLIAM ARROWSMITH

ORESTES: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

Euripides' *Orestes* was first produced in 408 BCE 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 dramatic competition, are unknown.

The Myth

Orestes presents an episode from the tragic vicissitudes of the house of the Pelopids, involving the royal dynasties of Argos (or Mycenae) and Sparta: Atreus' son Agamemnon, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra, her lover Aegisthus, and her children Iphigenia, Electra, and Orestes, along with Agamemnon's brother Menelaus, his Spartan wife Helen (Clytemnestra's sister), and their daughter Hermione. The story is best known to ancient and modern audiences alike from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. After Agamemnon returned from sacking Troy and helping his brother recover Helen, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus murdered him; and then Orestes, at the behest of Apollo, killed Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in turn.

It is at this point that the action of Euripides' play begins. When Orestes, who is suffering from bouts of madness for his crime, and Electra are condemned to death by the Argive assembly for matricide, they decide, prompted by Orestes' comrade Pylades, to murder Helen in order to make their enemies suffer too, and then to seize Hermione as a hostage and to threaten to set fire to the palace so as to coerce Menelaus into persuading the Argives to let them live. Orestes and Pylades enter the palace to put this plan into effect. After much confusion, Apollo appears above the palace to explain that Helen has been rescued and deified, and to predict the future:

Orestes will be tried and acquitted in Athens, and he will marry Hermione, be reconciled with Menelaus, and rule Argos. All ends, seemingly, well.

Other episodes in the history of the House of Atreus were brought onto the stage by many other tragedians, including Aeschylus (in the *Oresteia*) and Sophocles (in his *Electra*). Euripides himself had already dramatized parts of this mythic complex in *Electra* (probably around 420 BCE) and *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (written ca. 414 BCE), and he returned to it again soon after *Orestes* in *Iphigenia in Aulis* (produced posthumously after 406 BCE). But the specific story presented here has no parallels in any surviving tragedy and is likely to have been invented by Euripides. All of the characters and some of the elements of the plot—Orestes’ trial for murdering his mother, Menelaus’ return from Troy after the death of Agamemnon, the comradeship between Orestes and Pylades, Apollo’s intervention to help Orestes, and the divinization of Helen—are perfectly traditional; but Euripides has integrated them into a thoroughly novel plot full of twists and surprises. His exploration of the tumultuous relationships involving Orestes, Electra, and Pylades is likewise highly original, while his deployment near the end of a singing Phrygian in place of the usual speaking messenger to report (confusingly) on the events in the palace, and the final scene with actors at three levels of elevation (stage, roof, and “machine”) provide some of the most sensational and spectacular moments in all of ancient theater.

Transmission and Reception

The evidence of quotations and allusions among later authors and the survival of at least twenty-four papyri containing fragments of the play (more than for any other Greek tragedy except Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*) indicate that *Orestes* was extremely popular throughout antiquity. One remarkable papyrus, now in Vienna, dates from about 200 BCE and preserves parts of lines 338–44 with musical notation. An inscription reports that the tragedy was successfully performed again at Athens in 341/40 BCE, with the famous actor Neoptolemus playing the title role. Further evidence for the play’s continuing vitality on ancient stages may be the numerous interpolations in the text that have been detected by scholars,

at least some of which may have been due to expansion by directors or actors. It seems too that Euripides' representation of Orestes' madness and hallucinations became almost proverbial. As for the play's critical reception in antiquity, some ancient scholars remarked that the play had a "rather comic turn of events," presumably in the sense that its plot turned out happily, and they noted that it was among the most celebrated plays on the stage. But they also complained that its characters were inappropriately bad, since all except Pylades were quite wicked. Already in the fourth century BCE Aristotle had criticized Euripides for having made Menelaus' character even worse than his plot required.

Orestes not only was selected as one of the ten canonical plays most studied and read in antiquity, but also, together with *Hecuba* and *The Phoenician Women*, became one of the three plays of the so-called Byzantine triad. As a result, it is transmitted in hundreds of medieval manuscripts and is equipped with very full ancient and medieval commentaries. But for the most part it does not seem to have left much of a trace on ancient pictorial art, with the exception of a striking wall painting in Ephesus from the second century CE, depicting two actors playing the roles of Electra and Orestes in the opening scene of the play, with Orestes lying on his sickbed.

The popularity of *Orestes* in the Greek Middle Ages continued during the Renaissance in the West. But by the end of the eighteenth century its fortunes had already begun to decline. The increasing popularity of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Electra* meant that for over two centuries their canonical versions have tended to eclipse Euripides' more eccentric one. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the play's elements of political nihilism, its extreme mood swings, and its peculiar mixture of high and low examples of human behavior, as well as its musicality and bold stage effects, have attracted a resurgence of stage productions, adaptations, and critical interest. One provocative revival of the play was that by Jan Kott (1968). Other productions of note (some of them quite heavily adapted) were directed by Alexis Solomos (1971), John Barton (1981), and Emma Gersche (2009). Adaptations of the play have been also been written by Adrienne Kennedy (1972), Tadashi Suzuki (1983), Charles Mee (1992), and Nancy Meckler (1986, 2006), and by now

it ranks once again among the most staged—but still also as one of the most disconcerting—of all of Euripides' dramas.

ORESTES

Characters

ELECTRA, sister of Orestes; daughter of Clytemnestra

HELEN, wife of Menelaus

HERMIONE, daughter of Menelaus and Helen

CHORUS of women of Argos

ORESTES, brother of Electra; son of Clytemnestra

MENELAUS, husband of Helen

TYNDAREUS, king of Sparta; father of Helen and Clytemnestra

PYLADES, friend of Orestes

MESSENGER

PHRYGIAN SLAVE

APOLLO

Scene: In front of the palace of Agamemnon in Argos. Near the door, huddled under blankets on a pallet, lies Orestes asleep. Electra is sitting next to him.

ELECTRA

There is no form of anguish with a name—

no suffering, no fate, no fall

inflicted by heaven, however terrible—

whose burden human nature could not bear.

- 5 Tantalus, the son—they say—of Zeus himself,
and blessed by birth and luck, now writhes and trembles
in terror of the rock that overhangs his head,
though even as a man he sat as honored equal

10 at the table of the gods, but could not hold his tongue,
being sick with pride.

Or so at least they say.

The son of Tantalus in turn was Pelops,
father of Atreus for whom the weaving Fates
wove the threads of strife, a war with his own brother,
Thyestes.

But why should I linger on the horrors
of my house?

15 Atreus feasted him on his murdered sons.°

I pass over in silence the intervening years.

Atreus with Aerope fathered two sons,
Menelaus and famous Agamemnon—
if what he had was fame.

The wife of Menelaus
was Helen, whom the gods in heaven themselves
20 despise, while Agamemnon married Clytemnestra
in a marriage that was noted throughout Greece.
By her he had three daughters—me, Electra,
and my two sisters, Chrysothemis and Iphigenia—
and one son, Orestes there. All of us his children
by that one mother, wickedest of women,
25 who snared her husband in the meshes of a net
and murdered him.

I leave it to the world
to consider her motive. It is no topic for a maiden
like myself.

And why repeat the old charges
against Apollo?

The world knows all too well
how he pushed Orestes on to murder the mother

30 who gave him birth, an act not everyone
 approved. But persuaded by the god, he killed,
 and I did what a woman could to help him,
 while Pylades, our friend, shared the deed
 with us. ◊

35 After the murder Orestes collapsed
to bed. There he lies, wasted by raging fever
and whirled on to madness by his mother's blood—
I dare not breathe the name of those Eumenides^o
who pursue him now, hounding him with terror.
Six days have passed now since our mother's murder,
40 and since her body was purified in the pyre.
And all that time he has not tasted food
or bathed himself, but there he lies instead,
huddled in the blankets. When the fever lifts,
he turns lucid and cries; then suddenly, madly,
45 bolts from the bed like an untamed colt.
Meanwhile Argos has declared us matricides
and outlaws, forbidding anyone to speak to us
or give us shelter.

But this day decides our fate.
On this day the city gathers in assembly
50 to vote on whether we two shall live or die,
and, if we die, then by stoning or the sword. ◊

One single hope is left.
Our uncle Menelaus has just come home
from Troy. His fleet fills the harbor at Nauplia,
riding at anchor just offshore after all those years
out of Troy.

But Helen—the cause of so much grief—

he was so terrified that she might be seen
and stoned by the fathers of those who died at Troy,
that Menelaus sent her on ahead last night
under cover of darkness.

60 She is here now,
inside the house, weeping over her sister's death
and the ruin of our house.

 She has as comfort
for her woes her unwed daughter, Hermione,
whom Menelaus, before he sailed for Troy,
65 brought from Sparta and entrusted to my mother's care.
In her she finds some solace, and can forget
her troubles. Now I watch the roads in hope
of seeing Menelaus on his way.
Unless he helps us now, then we must die,
for we are strengthless. Nothing is so weak
70 and helpless as a fallen house.

*(Enter Helen from the palace, carrying a pitcher
for libations and a lock of her own hair.)*

HELEN

 There you are.
Oh, dear Electra, Clytemnestra's daughter ...
But you poor girl, still not married!
And how are you, dear?
 And how is poor Orestes?
To murder his own mother! But for my part
75 I can see no reason on earth for shunning you.
The real culprit was Apollo.
 And yet, poor sister,

Clytemnestra! To think I sailed for Troy
on that tragic voyage without even seeing her!
Some god must have driven me mad.

And now she is gone,
80 and I am left to mourn for her misfortune!

ELECTRA

Why tell you, Helen, what you can see for yourself?
There lies the wreck of Agamemnon's son,
while I sit here at my sleepless post
beside his corpse. But for a little breath,
a corpse is what he is.

85 I do not complain
on his account.

But you, so fortunate, you and your husband both,
you come to us now in our utter misery.

HELEN

When did he collapse in bed like this?

ELECTRA

On the day
he spilt his mother's blood.

HELEN

90 Poor man, and oh! Poor mother,
for how she died.

ELECTRA

Indeed, that's how things stand:
so he collapsed.

HELEN

I wanted to ask, niece,
could you do me a favor?

ELECTRA

Only if I can:
you see I'm busy sitting by my brother.

HELEN

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

ELECTRA

What?
You want *me* to go to my mother's grave?
But why?

HELEN

To pour libations on her grave
and leave this little clipping of my hair.

ELECTRA

But she was *your* sister. You should go yourself.

HELEN

I am afraid, ashamed to show my face
in Argos.

ELECTRA

This repentance comes a little late.
Where was your shame when you ran away from home
and left your husband?

HELEN

100

Spoken with more truth than kindness.

ELECTRA

Why are you ashamed to face the Myceneans?

HELEN

The fathers of those who died fighting at Troy—
they frighten me.

ELECTRA

They should. You're quite a byword
here in Argos.

HELEN

Please go. Save me from this fear.

ELECTRA

105 I could not bear the sight of my mother's grave.

HELEN

But it wouldn't do to send a servant there.

ELECTRA

Then send Hermione.

HELEN

Send an unmarried girl
on an errand in public?

ELECTRA

It is her duty.

She owes it to my mother for bringing her up.

HELEN

Quite right, my dear.

110 I'll follow your advice.°

Yes, I'll call her out. An excellent suggestion!

(Helen calls into the palace.)

Hermione, dear, please come outside the house.

(Enter Hermione from the palace.)

Take this libation and these clippings of hair
115 and go to Clytemnestra's grave. Stand there
and pour this mixture of honey, milk, and wine
over the grave and, as you pour, repeat these words:

“Your loving sister Helen,
prevented by her fear of the Argives from coming
to your grave in person, sends you these gifts.”
Then implore her to be gracious to us all,
120 to you, my husband, me, and these poor children
whom a god has destroyed. Promise her besides
that I will labor to perform, like a good sister,
all the dues and rites of the gods below.
Now go, dear. Hurry there, make your offering
125 and then come back as quickly as you can.

(Exit Hermione with offerings to the side, Helen into the palace.)

ELECTRA

Oh, what a vileness beauty is in humans,

and yet salvation for those whose nature's fine!^o
Did you see how she clipped the merest tips of her curls,
so stingy with her loveliness?

The same old Helen!

130 O gods, how can you help loathing this woman,
who has completely ruined my brother and me
and all Hellas?

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

But here they come again,
those loving friends who sing in lamentation
with me.

Now if they wake him from his sleep,
135 if I must see my brother going mad
once more, I shall cry out my eyes with grief.

(To Chorus.)

Walk softly, friends. Gently!
Hush.
Quiet, quiet. Not a step or sound.
Your kindness is well meant, of course, but still
it will be a great misfortune if you wake him.^o

CHORUS [*singing in this lyric interchange with Electra, who sings in response*]

Hush.

STROPHE A

140 *Not a sound. Tiptoe softly.^o*
Barely, barely touch the ground.

ELECTRA

Back, back from the bed!

CHORUS

Back we go.

ELECTRA

Your music, friends—

145 *keep it down, flute it low,
as soft as gentle breath may go
down the stem of your reed.*

CHORUS

*There. Hear it, so soft,
so low.*

ELECTRA

Yes, just like that.

Now tiptoe to me, softly, so,
150 *and tell me why you come
now that he sleeps at last,
he sleeps.*

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE A

*How now? How?
Will he live? Will he die?*

ELECTRA

He breathes, he breathes—
155 *but his breath comes slow.*

CHORUS

*What?
The wretched man!*

ELECTRA

*If you wake
his sleeping eyes, you kill him!
He is enjoying sweet sleep
at last.*

CHORUS

160 *Condemned to suffer
for a god's command!
How terribly he suffers!*

ELECTRA

*Evil the act, evil the god,
that evil day Apollo on his throne*
165 *commanded my mother's death,
murder for murder!*

CHORUS

STROPHE B

*Look, look!
In the bed—his body stirring!*

ELECTRA

*Yes, your cries have wakened him,
have broken his sleep!*

CHORUS

*No, no.
He sleeps, he sleeps.*

ELECTRA

*Back,
back from the bed.*
170 *Not a sound,
not a cry.
For god's sake, go!*

CHORUS

Now he sleeps.

ELECTRA

*Then let him sleep.
O Night, mother of mercy,^o
blessed night,
175 who gives to human anguish
the lovely gift of sleep,
rise,
rise from your abyss
and soar to Agamemnon's house,
where all is ruin,
180 all is loss!
Hush.
No more.*

*In the name of god, be still,
be still! No more mourning,
or you rob him of his peace,
185 this gracious peace of sleep!*

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE B

Where, where will it end?

ELECTRA

Death, death.

*What is left
but death? He refuses food.*

CHORUS

190 *Then death must come.*

ELECTRA

*Yes,
Apollo has sacrificed us both,
giving bloody vengeance for our mother,
the murderer of our father!*

CHORUS

The revenge was just.

ELECTRA

*But terrible!
O mother who gave me birth,
195 who killed and was killed,
 you slew your husband,
 you killed your children too.
 By your death we died.
200 We are the living dead.
 This man is dust and ashes,
 while I, a living ghost,*

*dead to this sunlit world,
stalk with withered life,
205 childless, unmarried,
crying my sorrow, lost,
alone in the endless night.*

CHORUS LEADER

Electra! Look and see if your brother has died
210 while we were mourning. He lies so still now—
I do not like it.

(Orestes wakes.)

ORESTES

O sweet wizard sleep,
savior of the sick, dear loveliness
that came to me in my worst need of you!
O goddess sleep, goddess of forgetting,
to whom the unhappy make their prayers,
how skilled, how wise!

But what happened?
Who put me here?

215 I somehow—can't remember.

ELECTRA

How happy it made me to see you fall asleep
at last.

Should I raise you up, my dear?

ORESTES

Yes, please. Help me up.
Now wipe away

220 this crust of froth around my mouth and eyes.

ELECTRA

 This service is sweet, and I do it gladly,
 nursing my brother with a sister's love.

ORESTES

 Sit here
 beside me. Now brush this matted hair
 from my eyes so I can see.

ELECTRA

 Oh, that poor head!
225 And your hair, all snarled and dirty! You're so wild
 and unwashed!

ORESTES

 Let me lie back down.
 That's better. After these attacks of fever,
 my arms and legs seem somehow limp.

ELECTRA

 Lie down
 and don't move. Sick men must stay in bed.
230 Frustrating, I know, but it can't be helped.

ORESTES

 Prop me up again. Now turn me around.
 What nuisances we sick are in our helplessness!

ELECTRA

 Would you like to try walking a step or two?

The change may do you good.

ORESTES

With all my heart.

235 Right now even the suggestion of health,
however false, would be welcome.

ELECTRA

Listen, Orestes,
I have something to say. But you must listen now
while your mind is clear and the Furies leave you free.

ORESTES

If your news is good news, by all means tell me.
240 If not, I have troubles enough.

ELECTRA

Listen then.
Our uncle Menelaus is here, in Argos.
His fleet lies at anchor at Nauplia.

ORESTES

What?
Is it true? Then this darkness has a dawn?
Our uncle here? The man for whom our father
did so much?

ELECTRA

245 Here in person—trust my words—
and Helen too. He has brought her home from Troy.

ORESTES

I'd envy him more if he'd survived alone.
If his wife is here, he has brought his trouble home.

ELECTRA

Poor Tyndareus.

What daughters he fathered!°

250 And both disgraced him in the eyes of Hellas.

ORESTES

Take care that you act differently: *you* can.

I mean purity of heart as well as word.

(Orestes starts to behave wildly.)

ELECTRA

Orestes!

O gods, your eyes are whirling!

Oh no! No!

Help! He is going mad!

ORESTES

No, Mother!

255 For god's sake, Mother,
keep them away, those bitches with
bloodshot eyes,
those writhing snakes!

Help! They're
coming,

they're leaping at me!

ELECTRA

Please, go back to bed. You don't see what you think

you see.

ORESTES

Apollo, save me!

260 They want to kill me,
those bitches with Gorgon eyes, those goddesses
of hell!

ELECTRA

I won't let you go. I'll hold you with my arms
and stop you from this wild jumping!

(She grasps Orestes around his waist.)

ORESTES

Let me go!

I know *you*. You're one of my Furies too!
265 You're holding me down to hurl me into hell!

(He breaks loose and springs up.)

ELECTRA

What can I do?

How can I help
him now?

There's nothing human that can
save us. No,

heaven hates us both.

ORESTES [*speaking to an imagined attendant*]

Get me my horn-tipped bow,
270 the bow Apollo gave me to scare these bitches off

if they threatened me with madness.

(He shoots from an imaginary bow.)

Vanish, demons!
Goddesses you may be, but unless you go,
this human hand shall draw your blood.

Damn it, go!
Ignore me, do you?

Don't you see this bow
already drawn, this arrow already flying?
What? Still here?

275 Vanish, spread your wings!
Skim the air, will you! Go hound Apollo,
accuse his oracle. But go! Go!

(He returns to sanity.)

What was I saying?
And why am I panting so?
What am I doing here, out of bed?
But wait—

I remember now—a great storm, the waves crashing—
but now this calm—this peace.

(To Electra.)

280 Why are you crying?
Why do you hide your face?
Oh, my poor sister,
how wrong it is that what I have to suffer,
this sickness, this madness, should hurt you too

and cause you trouble.

Please, dear, please don't cry,
not on my account.

Let me bear the burden.

I know, you consented to the murder too,
but I killed, not you.

No—

285 I accuse Apollo. The god is the guilty one.

It was he who drove me to this dreadful crime,
he and his words, egging me, encouraging me,
all words, no action.

I think now
if I had asked my dead father at the time
if I should kill her, he would have begged me,
290 gone down on his knees before me, and pleaded,
implored me not to take my mother's life.
Her death could never bring him back to life
and I, by killing her, would have to suffer
as I suffer now.

It seems so hopeless, dear,
I know.

295 But lift your head; do not cry.
And sometimes when you see me morbid and depressed,
comfort me and calm me, and I in turn,
when you despair, will counsel you with love.
In families there is no better way,
for each to help the other.

300 Now go inside.
Bathe and eat and give those tired eyes
the sleep they need. If you too should collapse,
if you fall ill yourself from nursing me,

305 then I am dead. You are my only help;
 there's no one else.

ELECTRA

 I could never leave you.
Live or die, I live or die with you, Orestes.
For you are my hope too, as I am yours.
What am I without you?

 A woman,
brotherless, fatherless, friendless, alone
and helpless.

310 But since you think it best, dear,
I'll go inside.

 But you go back to bed
and rest. Above all else, try to stay calm
and master your terror, if you can. Remember:
no getting out of bed.

 A sickness may be real
or something in the mind, but in either case,
315 a person still feels exhaustion, pain, despair.

(Exit Electra into the palace. Orestes returns to his bed.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*Goddesses of terror,
runners on the wind,
revelers of sorrow
320 whose rites are tears!
Women of darkness,*

*Eumenides whose wings
shiver the taut air,
demanding blood,
avengers of murder,
we implore you—
release this boy,
325 Agamemnon's son,
from madness of murder,
the blood that whirls him on!
Pity, pity we cry,
pity for the crime,
murder that came on,
drove from Apollo's throne,
the god's command to kill
breaking the hushed, the holy air,
with the word of blood—
330 spoken, spoken in the shrine
of Delphi—
Delphi,
holiest of holies
and navel of the world!*

ANTISTROPHE

*O Zeus, what mercy?
What mercy for this boy
335 for whom the struggle persists,
the spirit of vengeance
for his mother's blood,
savage spirit, dancing into his house
in gust on gust of grief,
blood and the madness of blood,*

*madness born of murder?
I mourn; I mourn.
Happiness is brief.
340 It will not stay.
God batters at its sails,
the tossing seas are wild;
anguish like a wind
whips down,
sorrow strikes,
swamps the scudding ship
and happiness goes down
and glory sinks.
And yet
345 what other house, what name
more deserves our praise
than this line of glory,
born of Tantalus and Zeus?*

(Enter Menelaus from the side.)

*[chanting]
And now behold the king—
royal Menelaus
350 whose magnificence declares
the blood of Tantalus!
All hail, the king!
Hail to the king who led
a thousand ships to Troy,
and did with heaven's help
355 all he vowed to do!
Hail him! Glory and success*

go beside the king!.

MENELAUS

Home from Troy at last.

How happy I am
to see this house once more—
but also sad,

for never have I seen a house more hedged about
by suffering than this.

I was putting in to shore
360 near Cape Malea when I first heard the news
of Agamemnon's murder at the hands of his wife.
For Glaucus, the god of sailors and a prophet
who does not lie, suddenly rose from the sea
in clear view, and he cried out:

365 "Menelaus,
your brother lies dying in his bath,
the last bath his wife will ever give him."
My crew and I alike burst into tears
at this dreadful news.

Well, so we reached Nauplia.
370 My wife Helen came on ahead at night,
and I was looking forward to seeing Orestes and his mother,
thinking, of course, that they at least were well,
when some sailor told me of the shocking murder
of Clytemnestra.

375 Can you tell me, women,
where I might find my nephew Orestes,
who brought himself to do this dreadful deed?
He was still a baby in his mother's arms
when I left for Troy, so I would not know him

if I saw him.

ORESTES

Here I am, Menelaus:

380 Orestes in person, and only too willing
to tell you the story of my sufferings.
But first I fall before you on my knees
and beg you, even without the suppliant's branch,
to rescue me from imminent disaster.
You come in the nick of time.

MENELAUS

385 Oh mighty gods,
is this some corpse I see?

ORESTES

More dead than living,
I admit. Still alive, but dead from all my troubles.

MENELAUS

And that wild, matted hair—how horrible you look!

ORESTES

It is my crimes, not my looks, that disfigure me.

MENELAUS

That awful stare—and those dry, cold eyes!

ORESTES

390 My body is dead. I am the name it had.

MENELAUS

But I did not expect this—alteration.

ORESTES

I am a murderer. I murdered my mother.

MENELAUS

So I have heard. Kindly spare me your horrors.

ORESTES

I spare you—although no god spared me.

MENELAUS

What is your sickness?

ORESTES

395 I call it conscience,
the certainly that I've committed evil.

MENELAUS

You speak somewhat obscurely. What do you mean?

ORESTES

I mean remorse. I am sick with remorse ...

MENELAUS

A harsh goddess, I know. But there are cures.

ORESTES

400 ... and madness too. The vengeance of my mother's blood.

MENELAUS

When did this madness start?

ORESTES

The very day
we built her tomb. My poor mother's tomb!

MENELAUS

Were you indoors or by the funeral pyre?

ORESTES

I was outdoors by the pyre to gather her ashes.

MENELAUS

405 Was there anyone there who could help you?

ORESTES

Pylades. My accomplice in the murder.

MENELAUS

But these phantoms. Can you describe them?

ORESTES

I seemed to see three women, black as night.

MENELAUS

I know them but I will not speak their name.

ORESTES

410 Yes, they are dreadful. Naming them is uncouth.

MENELAUS

So it's they who madden you for murdering your mother?

ORESTES

Oh, if you knew the torture, how they're hounding me!

MENELAUS

That criminals should suffer is hardly strange.

ORESTES

There is one recourse left.

MENELAUS

415 Suicide, you mean?

Most unwise.

ORESTES

No, not that. I mean Apollo.

It was he who commanded my mother's murder.

MENELAUS

A callous, unjust, and immoral order.

ORESTES

We obey the gods—whatever the gods may be.

MENELAUS

Apollo, despite all this, refuses to help?

ORESTES

420 Oh, he will. In his own good time, of course.

Gods are slow by nature.

MENELAUS

How long has it been
since your mother's death?

ORESTES

Six days now.
Her pyre is still warm.

MENELAUS

How quick they've been,
your mother's avengers coming after you!

ORESTES

Any man who acts ignobly to his friends
isn't truly wise.°

MENELAUS

425 Well, what then of your father?
Is there any help from him?

ORESTES

Nothing yet.
And nothing yet means nothing ever.

MENELAUS

How do you stand with the city?

ORESTES

So hated
and despised that not one person in Argos
will speak to me.

MENELAUS

Have your hands been cleansed
of the blood you shed?

ORESTES

430

They shut their doors in my face.

MENELAUS

Who are your worst enemies in Argos?

ORESTES

Oeax,
Palamedes' brother. He hated my father
because of what happened at Troy.

MENELAUS

I see.
He wants your death in revenge for his brother.

ORESTES

Whom I never hurt. Three things really are killing me.

MENELAUS

435 Who else then? Friends of Aegisthus, I suppose?

ORESTES

Yes, they all hate me, and the city gives them
a hearing now.

MENELAUS

But will they let you keep
your father's scepter?

ORESTES

Let me keep the scepter
when they won't let me live?

MENELAUS

What are their plans?

ORESTES

440 The city is voting on our sentence today.

MENELAUS

Exile from here? Or is it death or life?"

ORESTES

Death by stoning.

MENELAUS

Then why not try to escape?

ORESTES

We are surrounded by a ring of bronze weapons.

MENELAUS

Are they Argive soldiers? Or mercenaries
hired by your enemies?

ORESTES

445 It comes to this:
everyone in Argos wants me dead.

MENELAUS

Poor boy, you've reached the end.

ORESTES

And that is why
I turn to you.
You are now my only hope.

Menelaus, we are desperate. You, in contrast,
450 arrive in Argos at the moment of success.
I implore you: share that happiness with us,
your kin; don't hoard your power and success.
Help us.

Repay my father's services to you
by saving us.

For true friends show their love
455 in times of trouble, not just in happiness.

(Enter Tyndareus from the side, escorted by attendants.)

CHORUS LEADER

Look:

aged Tyndareus of Sparta,
he's hurrying here, his hair shorn close
and dressed in black mourning for his daughter.

ORESTES

Menelaus, this is the end for me. Here comes
460 Tyndareus. Of all the men on earth,
the one in whose presence I feel the deepest shame
for what I did.

My grandfather, Tyndareus—
the man who cared for me when I was small,
who held me in his arms so tenderly—
Agamemnon's baby boy—who loved me,
465 he and Leda both, no less than their own sons,
Castor and Polydeuces.

They loved me,
and how have I returned their tenderness and love?

O gods, this worthlessness I am!

Where can I run?

470 What cloud can hide my face
from that old man's eye?

TYNDAREUS

 Where can I find
my son-in-law Menelaus, women?
I was pouring libations on my daughter's grave
when I heard the news of his arrival home
at Nauplia after those long years abroad.
Helen is also here, I understand.
Can you show me the way?

 I am most eager
475 to grasp his hand again after his long absence.

MENELAUS

 Hello, old Tyndareus, who shared your wife with Zeus!

TYNDAREUS

 Menelaus, my son!

(He sees Orestes.)

What?°

 Look at him: the man who murdered his mother,
coiled like a snake at the door, those sick eyes
glowing like coals!

480 What a loathsome sight!
How can you bear to speak to such a monster?

MENELAUS

Why not? I loved my brother. This is his son.

TYNDAREUS

This, Agamemnon's son? A creature like *this*?

MENELAUS

His son, in trouble, and I honor him.

TYNDAREUS

485 Your foreigners, I see, have taught you their own ways.

MENELAUS

It is a Greek custom, I think, to honor your kin.

TYNDAREUS

But not to put yourself above the laws.

MENELAUS

Necessity is legislator here.

The wise say: under compulsion, no man's free.

TYNDAREUS

That is your view. It never will be mine.

MENELAUS

490 Your age—and anger—cripple your understanding.

TYNDAREUS

The man being tried for lack of understanding
is this one!°

If right and wrong are clear to all,
what man ever acted with smaller understanding

of right and wrong than this man?

Not once,
mind you, did he weigh the justice of his cause
495 or avail himself of the common law of Greece!
What should he have done?

When his father died—
killed, I admit, by my own daughter's hand,
an atrocious crime which I do not condone
and never shall—he should have prosecuted
500 his mother, charged her formally with murder,
and made her pay the penalty prescribed,
expulsion from his house.

Instead of disaster
he would have gained much fame for moderation,
sticking to the law and remaining pious.

But now,
what difference is there between him and his mother?
No, she was vicious, he was right—and yet
505 the evil he has done by killing her
has far surpassed her crime.

Think again, Menelaus.
Suppose now this man's wife murders her husband.
Her son then follows suit by killing her,
and his son then must have his murder too
and so on.

510 Where can this chain of evils end?
No, our ancestors handled these matters well
by banning their murderers from public sight,
forbidding them to meet or speak to anyone.
515 But the point is this: they purged their guilt
by banishment, not death. And by so doing,

they stopped that endless vicious cycle
of murder and revenge.

Do not mistake me.

I despise adultery and unfaithful wives,
and my daughter, that husband-slayer, most of all.

520 As for your wife Helen, I loathe her too
and never wish to speak to her again.

Nor, I might add, do I envy you at all
that you went to Troy to get that evil woman.

No sir, not my daughters, but the law:
that is my concern. There I take my stand,
defending it with all my heart and strength
against the brutal and inhuman spirit of murder
525 that corrupts the cities and ruins this whole land.

(To Orestes.)

You monster! Where was your pity, your humanity,
when your mother bared her breast and beseeched you
for her life?

I did not see that pitiful sight,
but the very thought of it makes the tears come
to these old eyes.

530 One proof I know for certain:
that heaven loathes you. These fits of madness
are the price you pay for murder; heaven itself
has made you mad. No further proof is needed.
So be warned, Menelaus.

535 If you help this man,
you challenge the express will of heaven.
So let him be. Let them stone him to death

or—I give you warning, sir—never set foot
in Sparta again.°

My own daughter is dead,
and she deserved to die, but it was wrong
that he should kill her.

540 Except for my daughters,
I might have lived a happy man and died in peace.
But there my fortunes failed.

CHORUS LEADER

Lucky that man
whose children are his happiness, and not
a notorious grief.

ORESTES

545 Sir, I shrink from speaking,
knowing almost anything I say will displease you
or offend you.°

My murder of my mother was,
I admit, a crime. But in another sense,
since, by killing her, I avenged my father,
there was no crime at all.

Wait. Listen.
Let me speak. This respect I feel for your age
cripples me, overawes me. If you only knew
550 how that white hair of yours harrows me
with shame.

What else could I have done?
I had two duties, two clear options,
both of them conflicting.

My father begot me,

my mother gave me birth. She was the furrow
in which his seed was sown. But without the father,^o
555 there is no birth. That being so, I thought,
I ought to stand by him, the true agent
of my birth and being, rather than with her
who merely nourished me.

And then your daughter—
I blush with shame to call that woman my mother—
in a mock marriage went to a lover's bed.
I disgrace myself as much as I hurt her
560 by this admission. And yet I must admit it.
Aegisthus was her secret husband at home.^o
And so I killed them both, first him, then her—
committing, indeed a very impious act,
but avenging my father.

For this you threaten me
565 with stoning. But, in fact, I did a service
for all of Greece.

For tell me, what would happen
if our women decided to adopt my mother's example,
killed their husbands and then came rushing home
to their children, exposing their breasts for pity?
Why, they could murder a man for any trifle,
570 on any pretext. But my "crime," as you call it,
has stopped that practice for good.

As for my mother,
I had every right to hate her and to kill her.
Her husband away from home, leading all Greece
575 in arms—what did she do? She took a lover
and betrayed his bed!

And when she saw she'd erred,

did she do the proper thing and punish herself?
No, not my mother. Instead, she murdered him
to save herself.

I should not invoke the gods
when defending myself on a charge of murder,
but in the name of the gods, if I'd accepted
580 her deed, what would that dead man have done to me?
Hounded me with the Furies of a father's hatred!
Or are there Furies on my mother's side,
but none to help him in his deeper hurt?
It was you: you destroyed me, Tyndareus.
585 You were the father of that woman who killed
my father and made a murderer of me.
And what of this?

Odysseus had a son,^o
but was Telemachus compelled to kill *his* mother?
590 No. And why? She refused to take a lover.
She was loyal to Odysseus.

And what of this?
Have you forgotten Apollo, the god of Delphi,
navel and center of the world? The one god^o
whose every oracle and word mankind obeys
blindly? He commanded my mother's murder.
595 Accuse him of murder, then. Put him to death.
He is the culprit, not I.

What could I do?
Or was he competent to command a murder,
but now incompetent to purge the guilt?
Then where can I go, what can I do,
if the god who ordered me to kill my mother

cannot, or will not, save me?

One more thing.

600 Let no man say that what we did was wrong,
but only that doing what we did, we did it
to our great cost and misery.

As in action,^o

so in marriage too. Marry, and with luck
it may go well. But when a marriage fails,
then those who marry live at home in hell.

CHORUS LEADER

605 Women by nature, it seems, were born to be
a great impediment and inconvenience
in the lives of men.

TYNDAREUS

Since bluster is your answer,
since you insist on brazening it out
and every word you speak is said in spite,
I am even more impatient than before
to see you die.

My purpose in coming here
610 was to lay some flowers on my daughter's grave.
But now, by god, I have a further motive—
your death!

I will go to the assembly of the Argives.
I'll fire them up against you and your sister
until they vote to stone you both to death!
Yes, your sister too!

615 She deserves it,
by god, even more than you do!

It was she,
that girl, who incited you against your mother,
stuffing your ears day in and day out
with her malice, telling of Agamemnon's fate,
tattling to you of your mother's adultery—
620 which I dearly hope offends the gods below
as much as it disgusted us on earth!
That was her effort. Yes, she worked on you
until she set this whole house on fire
with the arson of her malice.

One thing more,
Menelaus: I warn you, if my love or hate
matter to you at all, do not oppose the gods
by rescuing this man.

625 No, let them stone him,^o
or—mark my words—never set foot in Sparta
again.

I warn you, do not make the mistake
of siding with outlaws and criminals like this
against god-fearing and law-abiding men.
Servants, lead me away.

(Exit Tyndareus to the side, escorted by attendants.)

(To Tyndareus as he departs.)

ORESTES

630 Good. Go.
Let Menelaus hear the rest of my appeal
uninterrupted. Spare us the nuisance
of your senility.

But, Menelaus,

why that troubled look? And why are you pacing
up and down that way?

MENELAUS

Let me think.

635 I am trying to decide on the wisest course.
And, frankly, I am puzzled.

ORESTES

Then postpone decision
for a while. Hear what I have to say
and then deliberate.

MENELAUS

That's fair enough.
There are times for keeping still and times
for speaking out. This is the time to speak.
Go ahead.

ORESTES

640 Forgive me if I speak
at length.
Longer speeches can be more
persuasive,
and better, than short ones.
Listen, Menelaus.
It's nothing of your own that I need
now. What I want
back from you is what my father gave
you once—
by which I don't mean possessions. I
mean life.

645 Give me my life and you give me my
most precious
possession.

I committed a crime, and I
admit it.

It's fair that you should wrong me in
return.

When my father mustered an army for
the siege

of Troy, he also did a wrong—and yet
that wrong was generous. He did that
wrong for you,

650 to right the wrong that your wife Helen
did.

And wrong for wrong, you owe me that
wrong now,

Menelaus.

Good brother that he was,
my father volunteered his life for you,
fighting as a soldier at your side.

And why? For this: to help you get
your wife
and bring her home.

655 What you had of him,
I now exact of you. Fight on my behalf,
not ten long years, but one brief day.

Again, my sister Iphigenia died at
Aulis

on your account. But any claim I have
on you

for my sister's death, I freely waive.

660 Hermione may live. For as things stand

now,
I cannot press my claim, and I forgive
you
your advantage.

But repay my father's loan;

settle your score with him
by saving me,

and my sister too, unwedded to this
day.

Think: if I die, I leave my father's
house

heirless, orphaned of life.

665 Impossible,
you say?

But surely this is just the
point,

Menelaus.

If you love us, this is the
time

to help, now, when everything we have
is lost.

Who needs help when the
gods are good

and all is well? No, the man whom
heaven helps

has friends enough. But now we need
your help.

All Hellas knows how much
you love your wife.

670 I am not trying to flatter you or
 wheedle you,
but in Helen's name, I beg you—

O poor me!
What I have come to! And yet I must
endure
humiliation and make this supplication
in the name of all our house, our
family,
O Uncle, my father's brother, save us
now!
675 Imagine that my dead father in his
grave
listens to me now, that his spirit is
hovering
over you, that he himself is speaking,
pleading
through my lips!
You have seen our
sufferings
and our despair, and I have begged you
for my life—
life, the one hope of every man on
earth,
not mine alone.

CHORUS LEADER

680 I am only a woman,
but I implore you: help them, save them, please.
It's in your power.

MENELAUS

Of course I honor you,
Orestes, and I want to share your troubles.
For we are joined by a common bond of blood,

685 and I am honor bound to help you out
when you're in trouble, if the gods will let me,
dying myself, and killing your enemies.°
But the power to help you only the gods can give.
And I've arrived in Argos in a weakened state—
devoid of support—my allies have dwindled away—
690 myself exhausted by my terrible ordeal.
So defeating Argos by a show of strength
is out of the question.

Instead, our weapons must be
diplomacy and tact. Inadequate,
I admit, but not, perhaps, quite hopeless.
Whereas even to suggest the use of force°
as a way out, given our present weakness,
695 is folly.

Mobs in a fury are like a fire,
it's dangerous to try to fight their rage.
Hands off is best. You sit quietly by,
watching and waiting, patiently biding your time
while their anger runs its course unchecked.
With any luck, it quickly burns itself out,
700 and in the lull, while the wind is shifting,
anything you want is yours for the asking.
Anger, however, is only one of their moods;°
pity is another—they're precious assets both,
if you know what you're doing.

Now this is my plan.
I'll go and smooth matters over
705 with Tyndareus and the city and persuade them
to moderate their tone.

As with sailing,

so with politics: make your cloth too taut,
and your ship will dip and keel, but slacken off
and trim your sails, and things head up again.
The gods, you know, resent being importuned
too much; in the same way the people dislike
being pushed or hustled. And our only chance
710 of saving you at all lies in skill and tact,
not in force, as you perhaps imagine.
I lack the men and strength your rescue requires;
and the Argives, I know, are not the sort of men
to be overawed by threats.°

No, if we're wise,
715 we will do what we must and accept the facts.
We have no other choice.

(Exit Menelaus to the side.)

ORESTES

You vile coward!
What in god's name have you ever done
but fight a war to bring your wife back home?
So now you turn your back and you desert me?
720 What Agamemnon did for you's forgotten?
My father, in trouble, was deserted by his friends.
And now my last hope, my only refuge
from death at the hands of the Argives has abandoned me.

(Enter Pylades from the side, running.)

But wait.

Look! I see Pylades,
725

my best friend, running here to me, on his way
from Phocis!

Thank god! What a sight!
A friend, a loyal friend, in my despair.
No sailor ever saw a calm more greedily
than I now see my friend!
Pylades!

PYLADES

I seem to have reached here none too soon,
Orestes.
730 Coming through town, I heard that the
Argives are meeting
and saw it myself. They're discussing some
proposal
to execute your sister and you.

What's
happening?

How are you doing, Orestes, dearest friend
and cousin and age-mate—you're all that to
me!

ORESTES

To put it in a nutshell: we are ruined.

PYLADES

735 If that is so, include me in that "we."
Friends share and share alike.

ORESTES

That traitor Menelaus—
he betrayed my sister and me.

PYLADES

I am not surprised.
A vicious husband for a vicious wife.

ORESTES

By coming home
he helped my cause as much as if he'd stayed in Troy.

PYLADES

Then the rumor was true? He really has returned?

ORESTES

740 Somewhat late. His treachery, on the other hand,
was promptness itself.

PYLADES

What about that bitch Helen?
Did he bring her home?

ORESTES

No, the other way around.
She brought him.

PYLADES

Where is she hiding now?
Where is that woman who murdered so many Argives?

ORESTES

In my house—if I have any right to call it mine.

PYLADES

What did you ask Menelaus?

ORESTES

745 To intercede for us
 and save our lives.

PYLADES

 By god, what did he say to that?
 This I want to hear.

ORESTES

 Oh, patience, caution, and so on.
 What cowards say to friends.

PYLADES

 And his excuse?
 That tells me everything.

ORESTES

 We were interrupted.
750 That old man came. You know the man I mean—
 the father of those precious daughters.

PYLADES

 Tyndareus himself?
 Furious with you, I suppose, because of your mother?

ORESTES

 You've hit it. So Menelaus took the old man's side
 against my father.

PYLADES

 He refused to help you at all?

ORESTES

Oh, he's no soldier—though he's quite the man
with the ladies.

PYLADES

Then you really are in trouble.

755 Must you die?

ORESTES

The citizens are trying us for murder.

PYLADES

What will their verdict be? I dread your answer.

ORESTES

Life or death—small words, but big in meaning.

PYLADES

Then leave your house, escape together with Electra.

ORESTES

760 Don't you see the sentries posted everywhere?

PYLADES

I saw armed men patrolling the streets.

ORESTES

We are surrounded
like a city under siege.

PYLADES

Ask what happened to me.

I have suffered too.

ORESTES

Your troubles on top of mine?
What happened?

PYLADES

765 My father Strophius banished me from Phocis.

ORESTES

Banished you? On his authority as your father?
Or did he take you to court on a formal indictment?

PYLADES

For aiding and abetting the murder of your mother—
that “shocking crime,” as he calls it.

ORESTES

Heaven help you,
if you must suffer on my account!

PYLADES

I am no Menelaus.
I can take it.

ORESTES

770 But aren't you afraid of the Argives?
Suppose they decide to put you to death with me?

PYLADES

They have no jurisdiction. I am a Phocian.

ORESTES

Don't be too certain. In the hands of vicious men,
a mob will do anything.

PYLADES

But under good leaders
their counsels are always excellent.

ORESTES

You're right.
So let's discuss together.

PYLADES

What about?

ORESTES

⁷⁷⁵ Suppose, for instance, I went to the meeting myself
and told them ...

PYLADES

... that you were completely justified?

ORESTES

Yes, that I avenged my father.

PYLADES

I doubt they'd be satisfied.

ORESTES

But what am I supposed to do? Sit here and sulk?
Die without saying a word in my own defense?

PYLADES

A coward's act.

ORESTES

Well, what then should I do?

PYLADES

Can you hope to survive by staying here?

ORESTES

No, not at all.

PYLADES

And if you go to the meeting?

ORESTES

Something might be gained.

PYLADES

780

Then, clearly, you have to go.

ORESTES

Good enough. I'll go.

PYLADES

You may be killed, of course,
but at least you'll die fighting.

ORESTES

And escape a coward's death.

PYLADES

Better than by staying here.

ORESTES

And my cause is just.

PYLADES

Pray heaven that it seem that way to them.

ORESTES

Besides, they may pity me ...

PYLADES

Yes, your high birth.

ORESTES

785 ... feeling indignation at my father's murder.

PYLADES

Then our course is clear.

ORESTES

Absolutely. I must go.
I refuse to die a coward's death.

PYLADES

Spoken like a man.

ORESTES

Wait. Should we tell Electra?

PYLADES

Great heavens, no!

ORESTES

There'd probably be tears.

PYLADES

Which wouldn't be auspicious.

ORESTES

Clearly silence is best.

PYLADES

And will save no little time.

ORESTES

One strong objection still remains ...

PYLADES

790

What's that?

ORESTES

My madness, if I have an attack.

PYLADES

Have no fear.

You are in my hands.

ORESTES

Madmen are hard to handle.

PYLADES

I will manage.

ORESTES

But if my madness strikes you too?

PYLADES

Forget it.

ORESTES

You're certain then? You're not afraid?

PYLADES

Afraid? Fear in friendship is an ugly trait.

ORESTES

Then lead on, my helmsman ...

PYLADES

795 Love leads you. Follow me.

ORESTES

Take me first to my father's grave.

PYLADES

What for?

ORESTES

To implore his help.

PYLADES

Agreed. This pilgrimage is good.

ORESTES

But don't, for god's sake, let me see my mother's grave!

PYLADES

No. She hated you.

But hurry. We must go now,
or the Argives may have voted before we arrive.
Here, lean yourself on me.

800 Now let the people jeer!
I'll lead you through the city, proud and unashamed.
What is my friendship worth unless I prove it now
in your time of trouble?

ORESTES

“Provide yourself with friends
as well as kin,” they say. And the proverb tells the truth.
805 One loyal friend is worth ten thousand kinsmen.

(Exit Orestes and Pylades to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*Where, where are they now—
that glister of golden pride,
glory that camped at Troy
beside the Simois,
the boast of happiness
blazoned through Hellas?
810 Back and back they ebb,
a glory decays,
the greatness goes
from the happy house of Atreus.
Beneath the proud facade*

*the stain was old already—
strife for a golden ram,
and the long stain spread
as the curse of blood began—
815 slaughter of little princes,
a table laid with horror,
a feast of murdered sons.
And still corruption swelled,
murder displacing murder,
as through the blooded years
the stain spread on in time
to reach at last
the two heirs of Atreus.*

ANTISTROPHE

*And what had seemed so right,
as soon as done, became
evil, monstrous, wrong!
A mother murdered—
820 her soft throat slashed
by the stabbing sword,
and the blade raised high
while the brandished blood
fell warm from the steel,
staining, defiling
the sun's immaculate light.
Damnable, awful crime!
Sacrilege of madness born!
In horror, in anguish,
before she died,
825 his mother screamed—*

“No, no, my son, no!
Do not kill your mother
to revenge your father!
Do not make your life
830 an eternity of shame!”

EPODE

*What madness like this?
What terror, what grief
can compare with this?
Hands, hands of a son,
stained with mother’s blood!
Horror too inhuman
for mortal mind to bear.
The man who slew his mother
835 murdered and went mad.
Raving Furies stalk him down,
his rolling eyes are wild—
mad eyes that saw
840 his mother bare her breast
over her cloth of gold—
saw, and seeing, stabbed,
avenging his father
with his mother’s murder!*

(Enter Electra from the palace.)

ELECTRA

But where is Orestes? For god’s sake, women,
845 where did he go? Has he had another attack?

CHORUS LEADER

No, Electra. He went to the Argive meeting
to stand his trial and speak in his own defense.^o
Upon what happens there your lives depend.

ELECTRA

But why? And who persuaded him?

CHORUS LEADER

Pylades.

850 But I think I see a messenger on the way.
He can answer your questions.

(Enter Messenger from the side.)

MESSENGER

Lady Electra,^o
poor daughter of our old general Agamemnon,
I bring you bad news.

ELECTRA

855 If your news is bad,
I hardly need to guess: we must die.
The sentence is death.

MESSENGER

Yes. The Argives have voted
that you and your brother must die today.

ELECTRA

Death!
But I expected no less. For a long time now

860 I dreaded in my heart that this would happen.
But what did they say? What were the arguments
that condemned us to death?

And how are we to die,
865 my brother and I? By being stoned to death
or by the sword?

MESSENGER

I happened to be coming,
madam, by chance, from the country
into town,
thinking to get some news of how
things stood
with you and Orestes. Your family,
you see,
always took good care of me and, for
my part,
I was grateful to your father to the
end.
I may be only a poor peasant, ma'am,
870 but when it comes to loyalty, I'm as
good
as any man.

Well then, I saw a crowd
go streaming up to take their seats on
the hill—

the same place where they
say that Danaus

held the first public meeting in Argos
when Aegyptus put him on trial.

But anyhow,
seeing all that crowd, I went up and

asked,
875 “What’s happening here? Is there a
war?
What’s all this excitement for?”
“Look down,”
says someone. “Don’t you see
Orestes there?
He’s on his way to stand trial for his
life.”
Then I saw a sight I never saw before,
and one whose likes I never hope to
see
again:

880 Orestes and Pylades
together,
the one hunched down with sickness
and despair,
the other sharing his troubles like a
brother
and helping him along as though he
were a child.
As soon as the seats were filled, a
herald rose.
885 “Who wishes,” he cried, “to speak to
the question?
What is your wish? Should the
matricide Orestes
live or die?”
Then Talthybius got up—
the same man who fought with your
father at Troy.
But he spoke like the toady he always

was:
890 a two-faced speech, compliments for
your father
in contrast to Orestes, cheap
malicious stuff
puffed out with rolling phrases. And
the gist?
Orestes' example was dangerous for
parents.
But, needless to say, he was all smiles
and sweetness

for Aegisthus' cronies.

895 But that's your herald
for you—^o
always jumping for the winning side,
the friend
of any man with influence or power.

After him
King Diomedes spoke. It was his
opinion
that you both should be banished, not
killed,
900 since this would be enough for piety's
sake.

The response was mixed: some
agreed with what he said;
others disapproved noisily.

The next to speak
was one of those cocky loudmouths,
an Argive
but not really from Argos—if you
take my meaning—

anybody's man—for a price, of
course—
905 sure of himself and reckless in his
bluster,
but glib enough to take his hearers in.

He moved that Orestes and you
should be stoned
915 to death, but in fact it was Tyndareus
prompting him
as to what he ought to say.°

But then at last
someone stood up to take the other
side.
Nothing much to look at, but a real
man;
not the sort one sees loafing in the
market
or public places, ma'am, but a small
farmer,
920 part of that class on which our
country depends;
knowing how to argue closely when
he wants,
an honest, decent, and god-fearing
man,
beyond reproach.

Now in this man's
opinion,
Orestes deserved a crown. What had
he done,
after all, but avenge his father's
murder

925 by killing a godless, worthless,
adulterous woman?
A woman, too, who was keeping men
from war,
making them stay at home, tormented
by the fear
that if they left, those who remained
behind
would seduce their wives and destroy
their families
and homes.

930 His words convinced the
better sort.

No one else spoke.

So then Orestes rose.

“Men of Argos,”^o he said, “it was for
your sake
as much as for my father that I killed
my mother.

935 For if you sanction this murder of
husbands by wives,
you might as well go kill yourselves
right now
or accept the domination of your
women.

But you will not, you must not, do it.^o

As things now stand, my father’s
unfaithful wife

940 is dead. But if you vote that I must
die,
then the tradition of inherited norms
and customs
must fall, and you are all as good as

dead,
since wives will have the courage of
their crimes.”
In short, a well-framed speech, and
yet he failed;
while that cheap blabber, by playing
to the mob,
945 induced them to pass a sentence of
death.
Poor Orestes was barely able to
persuade them
not to stone him to death, and then
only
by promising that you and he would
kill yourselves
today.
950 Pylades, in tears, is
bringing him home
from the meeting, followed by a
group of friends,
all weeping and mourning. Such is
his return,
and a bitter sight it is.
So prepare the noose,
or bring out the sword, for you must
die
and leave the light. Neither your high
birth
955 nor Apollo in his shrine at Delphi
helped. No,
Phoebus has destroyed you both.

(Exit Messenger to the side.)

CHORUS LEADER

Poor wretched girl.^o
Look at her now, her head hung down,
dumb with grief, trembling on the verge of tears!

CHORUS^o [*singing*]

STROPHE

O country of Pelasgia,
960 *let me lead the cry of mourning!*
With white nails I furrow my cheeks,
beat my head,
each blow struck
for the queen of the dead,
goddess Persephone underground!
965 *Mourn, you Cyclopean land!*
Shear your hair, you virgins,
and raise the cry of pity,
pity for those who die,
970 *who led the fighting men of Hellas!*

ANTISTROPHE

Down and down, this house.
Pelops' line is ended,
the ancient happy house,
its envied greatness gone.
Envy and resentment
out of heaven struck.
975 *Envy was the vote*
the men of Argos took.

O generations of

mortals,

*tearful, toilsome mankind,
look, look on your hopes,
cut down with failure and crossed with
death.*

*The passing generations go,
980 changing places, changing lives.
Human life passes understanding.*

ELECTRA^o [*singing*]

*O gods in heaven, take me,
lift me to heaven's middle air
where the great rock,
shattered from Olympus,
swings and floats on golden chains!
Lift me, take me there
985 and let me cry my grief to Tantalus,
founder of my house,
father of my fathers,
the ruin of my house that I have seen—
the winged race
as Pelops' swerving car
spurred along the sea,
990 Myrtilus hurled in murder down,
the body tossed
from the hurtling car
where the boiling surf
pounds and batters on Geraestus!
And the curse drove on
995 and the stain of blood spread—
the sign appeared*

*in Hermes' flocks, °
a ram with golden fleece,
portending terror,
1000 doom to Atreus, breeder of horses, °
the quarrel in the blood
that drove the golden sun awry,
forced the glistening car
westward through the sky
where lonely Dawn drives down
her snow-white steeds.
1005 And Zeus, in horror of that crime, °
changed the paths
where the seven Pleiades turned and flared.
And still the spreading stain,
murder displacing murder,
betrayal and broken faith,
Thyestes' feast of horror
and the adulterous love
1010 of cunning Aerope of Crete.
And now the curse comes home,
the inescapable taint,
finding fulfillment at last
in my brother and me!*

(Enter Orestes and Pylades from the side.)

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*And here your brother comes
under his sentence of death.
And with him comes Pylades,
1015 most loyal of his friends,*

guiding like a brother
poor Orestes' stumbling steps.

ELECTRA

Orestes—

O gods, to see you standing there,
so close to death, the grave so near—

1020 I cannot bear it! I weep. To see you now
for the very last time! I'm going to lose my mind!

ORESTES

Enough, Electra. No more of these womanish tears.
Resign yourself. It is hard, I know,
but you must accept our fate.◦

ELECTRA

1025 How can I stop?
Look, look at this light, this gleaming air
we shall never see again!

ORESTES

No more, Electra.
Isn't it enough that the Argives have killed me?
Must you kill me too?

ELECTRA

But you are so young,
1030 too young to die! You should live, Orestes! Live!

ORESTES

Don't make me weep! These lamentations of yours
will make me a coward.

ELECTRA

But I'm about to die!
Life is sweet, sweet! No one wants to die.

ORESTES

1035 No, but we have no choice. Our time has come.
We merely have to choose the way in which we die:
by the sword or the rope.

ELECTRA

Kill me yourself then,
Orestes. Don't let some Argive disgrace
the daughter of Agamemnon.

ORESTES

I have my mother's blood
1040 upon my hands. I will not have yours too.
Do it in any way you wish, but you must do it
yourself.

ELECTRA

If I must, then I must. I'll stab myself
right after you do! But let me put my arms
around your neck.

ORESTES

What is it worth,
this poor hollow pleasure—if those who are dying
have any pleasure left?

ELECTRA

Oh, my brother,

1045 dearest, sweetest name I know—my life!

ORESTES

O gods, this breaks my heart—
with all my love

I want to hold you too.

What shame on earth
can touch me any more?

Oh, my sister,^o
these loving words, this last sweet embrace

1050 is all that we shall ever know in life
of marriage and children!

ELECTRA

If only one sword
could kill us both! If we could only share
one coffin together!

ORESTES

Then death might be sweet.
1055 But how little now of all our family is left
to bury us!

ELECTRA

Menelaus said nothing to help?
He betrayed our father like the coward he is?

ORESTES

No, not once did he so much as show his face. Not once. His eyes were glued upon the throne; oh, he was careful not to help.

But come,

1060 we must die as we were born—nobly,
as the children and heirs of Agamemnon should.
I shall show the city of what blood I come
by falling on my sword. As for you,
follow my example and die bravely.

Pylades,

1065 you please oversee our deaths; then lay us out
when we are dead, and make us both one grave
beside my father's tomb.

And now, good-bye.
I go to do what must be done.

PYLADES

Wait!

Stop, Orestes. I have one reproach to make.

1070 How could you think that I would want to live
once you were dead?

ORESTES

Why should my dying
mean that you should die?

PYLADES

You can ask me that?
How can I live when my only friend is dead?

ORESTES

It was I who murdered my mother, not you.

PYLADES

We murdered together, and it is only just
that I share the cost with you.

ORESTES

1075

No,

Pylades. Live; go home to your father.

You still have a country you can call your own;

I do not. You have your father's house

and you inherit wealth, great wealth.

That marriage with Electra which, as my friend,

1080

I promised you, you've lost. But marry elsewhere;
have children.

The bonds which bound us once
are broken now. And now good-bye, my friend,
my best, my only friend.

And so fare well.

Faring well at least is something you may have,
but I cannot. The dead have lost their joys.

PYLADES

1085

How little you seem to understand, Orestes.

If I desert you now to save myself,

may this green and growing earth refuse

my ashes, the golden air shelter me no more!

I murdered with you, and I affirm it

1090

proudly. And it was I who planned that
crime

with you and her.

Yes, with her, I said.

She is my wife, the wife you promised me.

What would my story be when I go home
to Delphi and Phocis?

1095

That when all was well,

I was your firm friend, but my friendship
withered

when your luck ran
out?

No, Orestes,
I have my duty too.

But since we have to die,
let us think and see if there is any way
of making Menelaus suffer too.

ORESTES

1100 Let me see that sight and I could die
content.

PYLADES

Then do what I ask you and wait now.

ORESTES

With pleasure, if only I can be revenged.

(Indicating the Chorus.)

PYLADES

Whisper. Those women there—I don't trust them.

ORESTES

They're all right. They're friends.

PYLADES

Then listen.

1105 We'll murder Helen. That will touch
Menelaus where it hurts.

ORESTES

But how?

If we can manage it, I'm more than willing.°

PYLADES

A sword in the throat. Unless I'm mistaken,
she's hiding in your house now.

ORESTES

Oh yes,
and putting her seals on everything we own.

PYLADES

But not for long. Hades will be her new husband.

ORESTES

1110 But how can we do it? She has a retinue
of slaves.

PYLADES

Slaves? Is that all she has?
I'm not afraid of any Phrygian slaves.

ORESTES

Creatures who manage her perfume and mirrors!

PYLADES

Gods! Did she bring those luxuries here from Troy?

ORESTES

Oh, Hellas is far too small to hold that woman now.

PYLADES

1115 What are slaves worth in a fight with men
 who were born free?

ORESTES

 If we can bring this off,
 I'll gladly die twice.

PYLADES

 And so would I,
 to get revenge for you.

ORESTES

 But describe your plan.
 Every step.

PYLADES

 First of all, we go inside
 on the pretext of killing ourselves.

ORESTES

1120 Good enough.
 But then?

PYLADES

 Then we make a great show of tears
 and tell her how much we suffer.

ORESTES

 At which, of course,
 she'll burst into tears. But she'll be laughing inside.

PYLADES

Why then, so will we—exactly the same.

ORESTES

But how do we kill her?

PYLADES

1125 We'll carry swords
hidden in our robes.

ORESTES

But what about her slaves?
Should we kill them first?

PYLADES

No, we'll lock them up
in different rooms.

ORESTES

But if they scream for help,
then we'll kill them.

PYLADES

And once we're through with them,
the way is clear. Right?

ORESTES

1130 Death to Helen!
That will be our motto.

PYLADES

Now you have it.

But observe the beauty of my plan.

First,
if we killed a better woman than Helen,
it would be outrageous murder.

This is not.
No, we punish her in the name of all Hellas
1135 whose fathers and sons she murdered, whose wives
she widowed.

Mark my words, Orestes.
There will be bonfires and celebrations in Argos;
men will call down blessings on our heads,
thank us, congratulate us for doing away
1140 with a vicious, worthless woman. No longer
shall they call you “the man who murdered his mother.”
No, a fairer title awaits you now,
the better name of “the killer of Helen
who killed so many men.”

And why, in god’s name,
should Menelaus prosper when you, your sister,
1145 and your father have to die?—I omit your mother
with good reason. If, through Agamemnon,
Menelaus has his wife, he shall not, must not,
have your house.

For my part, let me die
if I do not lift my sword against that woman!
But should we fail, should she escape our hands,
1150 we’ll burn this house around us as we die!
One way or another, Orestes, we shall not be cheated
of glory.

Honor is ours if we die;

fame, if we escape.

CHORUS LEADER

Every woman
justly loathes the name of Helen, the woman
who disgraced our sex.

ORESTES

1155 Nothing in this world
is better than a friend. For one true friend
I would not take in trade either power or money
or all the people of Argos. It was you,
my best friend, who planned our murder of Aegisthus.
You shared the risks with me, and once again,
1160 good friend, you give me my revenge
and all your help.

But I say no more,
lest I embarrass you by praising you
too much.

I have to die. Very well then,
but above all else I want my death
1165 to hurt the people I hate. They betrayed me,
they made me suffer, so let them suffer now
for what they did to me.

Am I or am I not
the son of Agamemnon, the man who ruled
all Hellas, not as a tyrant, but by his merits,
with godlike power?

And I shall not shame him
by dying like a slave. No, I die free,
1170 and I shall have my free revenge on you,

Menelaus!

That revenge alone
would make me happy. If—which I doubt—
we could murder Helen and then escape,
so much the better. But this is a dream,
1175 a prayer, a futile hope. It cheers the heart,
but nothing more.

ELECTRA

Orestes, I have the answer!
A way out for us all!

ORESTES

That would take a god.
But where is this answer? I ask you because
1180 I know your intelligence.

ELECTRA

Listen then. You too, Pylades.

ORESTES

Go on. Good news would make pleasant hearing now.

ELECTRA

Do you remember Helen's daughter, Hermione?

ORESTES

That little girl our mother took care of?

ELECTRA

Yes.
1185 She has gone just now to Clytemnestra's tomb.

ORESTES

What for? And what if she has?

ELECTRA

She went
to pour libations for her mother's sake.

ORESTES

And so?
What does this have to do with our escape?

ELECTRA

Seize her as a hostage when she comes back.

ORESTES

What good will that do us three?

ELECTRA

1190 Listen, Orestes.
Once Helen is dead, Menelaus may attempt
to hurt one of us three—you or him or me—
though it hardly matters who: we are all one here.
Well, let him try. You merely set your sword
at Hermione's throat and warn him you will kill her
1195 at the first false move. If then, seeing Helen
lying in a pool of blood, he decides he wants
his daughter's life at least and agrees to spare you,
let the girl go. On the other hand,
if he tries to kill you in a frantic burst of rage,
1200 you slit the girl's throat. He may bluster
in the beginning, but he'll soon see reason,

I think. The man's a coward, as you know:
he won't fight.

And there you have my plan
for our survival. That's it.

ORESTES

What a woman!

1205 The mind of a man with a woman's loveliness!
If ever a woman deserved to live, not die,
that woman is you.

What do you say now,
Pylades? Will you forfeit a woman like this
by dying, or will you live, marry her,
and be happy?

PYLADES

Nothing would please me more.
My dearest wish is to go home to Phocis
with Electra as my bride.

ORESTES

1210 Electra, I like your plan
in every respect—provided we can catch
the traitor's cub. How soon, do you think,
will Hermione return?

ELECTRA

Any moment now.
The length of time at least is right.

ORESTES

1215 Perfect.

Electra, you stay here outside the house
and wait for her. Watch out too in case someone,
especially an ally or brother of her father,
1220 gets into the house before the murder's done:
beat with your fist on the door or raise a cry,
to let us know.

You and I, Pylades—
I know I can count on your help now, my friend—
will go inside, get our swords and make ready
to settle our final score.

1225 O you my father,
ghost who walks the house of blackest night,
your son Orestes calls upon your help
in his hour of need! It is for you, Father,
I suffer. For you I was condemned to death
unjustly! And your own brother has betrayed me,
though what I did was right. Come, Father,
1230 help me to capture his wife! Help me kill her!
O Father, help us now!

ELECTRA

O my father,
if you can hear our prayers beneath the earth,
come, rise in answer! We are dying for you!

PYLADES

O Agamemnon, kinsman of my father,
hear my prayers!
Help us! Save your children!

ORESTES

I murdered my mother ...

PYLADES

1235

I held the sword that killed!

ELECTRA

I encouraged him! I made him brave!

ORESTES

... helping you, father!

ELECTRA

I didn't betray you either.

PYLADES

Hear our reproaches and save your children now!

ORESTES

I offer my tears to you.

ELECTRA

And I my grief.

PYLADES

Enough.

1240

We must be about our business now.

If prayers can penetrate this earth below,
he hears.

—O Zeus, Zeus of our fathers,
great power of justice, help us now,
help us to victory!

Three friends together,

one common cause, one trial,
1245 and together we shall live or die!°

(Exit Orestes and Pylades into the palace.)

ELECTRA [*alternately singing and speaking in this lyric exchange with the Chorus, who sing in reply*]

STROPHE

*Women of Mycenae,
noble women of Argos, one word with you, please.*

CHORUS°

*What is it, my lady? For you
1250 are mistress still in the city of Argos.*

ELECTRA [*speaking*]

I want half of you to watch the highway.
The rest of you will stand guard over here.

CHORUS

*But why this task, lady?
Tell me, my dear.*

ELECTRA [*singing*]

1255 *A premonition. I am afraid
someone might see my brother about to kill
and cause us new grief on top of old grief.*

(The Chorus divides into two sections.)

FIRST HALF-CHORUS LEADER [*speaking here and throughout*]

Come on now, women, hurry! To your posts!

I'll watch the road to the east.

SECOND HALF-CHORUS LEADER [*speaking here and throughout*]

1260 And I'll watch here
on the westward side.

CHORUS

We are turning our eyes to one side
1265 *and the other, just as you say.*

ELECTRA

ANTISTROPHE

Whirl your eyes around
on every side; through your flying hair look all around you.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS [*singing here and throughout*]

Someone is coming! Look—a peasant
approaching the palace.

ELECTRA [*speaking*]

1270 Then this is the end.
He'll betray our ambush to our enemies.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS

No. A false alarm. The road is empty.
There's no one there.

ELECTRA [*singing*]

You on the other side,
1275 *is all well? Is there anyone in sight?*

SECOND HALF-CHORUS LEADER

All's well here. You watch there.
Not an Argive in sight anywhere here.

FIRST HALF-CHORUS LEADER

1280 Nor here either. Not a soul in sight.

ELECTRA

Wait then. I'll go and listen at the door.

CHORUS

Why is all quiet?

Why this delay?

1285 *For god's sake, spill the victim's blood!*

ELECTRA [*speaking*]

EPODE

They do not hear us. O gods, what has happened?
Has her loveliness blunted their swords?

CHORUS

In a few minutes some Argive will be here
1290 *to rescue her, rushing up with drawn sword!*

ELECTRA

Look sharper than ever. No time for napping now!
Some of you turn to this way, some to that.

CHORUS

1295 *I'm moving along the path and looking everywhere.*

(From within.)

HELEN

Help me, Argos! Help! They'll murder me!

ELECTRA

Did you hear her scream? They're killing her!

That shriek! I'm sure that that was Helen screaming!

CHORUS

1300 *O Zeus, Zeus, send strength!*

Come, O Zeus! Help my friends now!

(From within.)

HELEN

Help me, Menelaus! Help! I'm dying!

ELECTRA AND CHORUS [*singing together*]

Murder!

Butcher!

Kill!

Thrust your twin swords home!

Slash, now slash again!

Run the traitress through,

1305 *kill the whore who killed*
so many brave young Greeks
by the spear beside the river,
those for whom we mourn,
1310 *by the waters of Scamander!*

CHORUS LEADER

Wait! Silence!

I hear the sound of footsteps.

Someone is coming.

ELECTRA [*now speaking*]

Here is

Hermione

at the very moment of murder!

But

not a sound.

1315 Here she comes—walking straight for
our trap,
and a sweet catch she is, if I can take
her.

Quick, back to your posts.

Seem

natural

and unconcerned; don't give us away.

I had better have a sullen
sort of look,

1320 as though nothing had happened here.

(Enter Hermione from the side.)

Ah,

have you been to Clytemnestra's grave, dear?

Did you wreath it with flowers and pour libations?

HERMIONE

Yes, I gave her all the dues of the dead.

But, you know, I was frightened coming home.

1325 I thought I heard a scream in the distance.

ELECTRA

A cry?

Really? But surely we have every right
to cry a little.

HERMIONE

Not more trouble, Electra?
What has happened now?

ELECTRA

Orestes and I
have been sentenced to death.

HERMIONE

God forbid!
You, my own cousins, must die?

ELECTRA

We must.
1330 This is necessity whose yoke we bear.

HERMIONE

Then that was why I heard that cry?

ELECTRA

Yes.
He went and fell at Helen's knees ...

HERMIONE

Who went?
I don't understand.

ELECTRA

...Orestes, to implore Helen
to save our lives.

HERMIONE

1335 Then well might the palace
have rung with your cries.

ELECTRA

What better reason
could there be?

But if you love us, dear,
go now, fall at your mother's feet
and beg her, implore her by her happiness
to intercede with Menelaus now
1340 on our behalf. My mother nursed you in her arms:
have pity on us now and save our lives.
Go plead with her. You are our last hope.
I will take you there myself.

HERMIONE

Oh yes, yes!
1345 I will go quickly! If it lies in my power,
you are saved.

(Exit Hermione into the palace. Electra follows her to the door.)

ELECTRA

For god's sake, Orestes,
Pylades! Lift your swords and seize your prey!

(From within.)

HERMIONE

Who are these men?

Help!

Save me!

ELECTRA^o

Silence,

girl.

You are here to save us, not yourself.

Hold her, seize her!

1350 Put your sword to her throat
and bide your time.

Let Menelaus learn
with whom he has to deal now. Show him
what it means to fight with men, not cowards
from Troy. Make him suffer for his crimes!

(Exit Electra into the palace.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

—*Quick, raise a shout!*

—*A cry!*

—*Drown the sound of murder in the palace!*

1355 —*A shout, before the Argives hear
and come running to the rescue!*

—*Before they come, first let me see
Helen, dead for sure, lying in her blood,
or hear the story from one of her slaves.*

1360 —*Something has happened; but what I do not know.*

—*God's vengeance on Helen,*

justice crashing from heaven!

—Justice for Helen

who made all Hellas mourn,

mourn for her lover's sake—

1365 *—For Paris, bitter curse of Ida,*

Paris, who led all Hellas to Troy!

(Enter Phrygian Slave, running, from the palace.)

CHORUS LEADER

Hush. Be still.

The bolts on the great doors
are sliding—a Phrygian is coming out—
someone who can tell us what has happened.

PHRYGIAN [*singing*]

The Argive sword I've fled,

from death I've escaped

on barbarian slippers

1370 *past the bedroom's cedar chambers*

and the Doric triglyphs,

gone, gone, Earth, Earth,

with barbarian runnings!

Oh, oh.

1375 *Where can I run, foreign ladies?*

Fly up to the white air?

Or to the sea the godbull Ocean cradles,

circling the world?

CHORUS LEADER

1380 What is it, man of Ida, Helen's slave?

PHRYGIAN

Oh, oh,

Ilium, Ilium, Troy, Troy!

Holy hill of Ida!

1385 *Hear the barbarian dirge I cry, °*
death by Helenbeauty brought,
eye of doom,

of birdborn loveliness the eye,
Helen from Hell, Helen from Hell!

Leda's puppy, Fury

1390 *that broke Apollo's burnished walls of Troy!*
Otototoi!

Pity, pity, I cry

for ill-fated

Troy and for Ganymede,

ravished to bed

by Zeus the rider!

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us clearly what has happened indoors.

For what you've said so far bewilders me. °

PHRYGIAN

1395 *Ailinos!*

Ailinos!

the dirge begins,

the dirge we barbarians cry in Asian
voices

for royal blood and princes dead

by murderous iron sword!

Ai ai!

I tell you all.

1400 *Into the palace*
 came
 a pride of lions, Greeks, twins.
 One was the son of a general;
 the other, Pylades, man of plots, evil;
 just like Odysseus, a silent cheater,
1405 *but loyal to friends, and bold,*
 skilled for war, a killer-snake.
 God damn him dead
 for his cool plotting of evil!
 Once they're in they make for the
 throne

1410 *of bowman Paris' wife,*
 sobbing tears smeared everywhere.
 Oh so humble, they sit down,
 one on the left, one on the right,
 put their hands on the lady's knee,
 begging life.

1415 *The Phrygian attendants were scared,*
 came running, jumping, jumping.
 One said, "Hey, treachery!"
 "Look out, lady!" someone cried.
 "No no," guessed other slaves,
 but some were thinking,

1420 *"Hey,*

that snake who killed his
mother

has tangled lady Helen
in cunning hunting nets."

CHORUS LEADER

1425 And where were you? Or had you run away?

PHRYGIAN

No, no, no.

1430 *In Phrygian fashion
with foreign fan of feathers, yes,
I was fanning the hair of lady Helen,
rippling the air, the air to and fro,
gently over her cheek.
And while I fan,*

*slow, slow,
Helen's fingers wind the flax.
Spindle turning, fingers moving,
round and round flax on the floor,
1435 Trojan spoils for a cloth of purple,
a gift, yes, for Clytemnestra's tomb.*

Orestes speaks to the Laconian woman:

*"Deign, O madam, child of Zeus,
to place your feet on the ground,
come away from the dais, please.
1440 Stand by ancient Pelops' hearth,
hear what I have to say, please."
So he led her, led her, she followed,
poor suspecting nothing Helen.
Meanwhile, yes, his evil friend,
1445 his Phocian partner in crime,^o
was doing other work.*

*"Go, go somewhere else!" he shouted,
"you Phrygian cowards!"
Oh, and then he locked them up,*

*some in stables, others in colonnades,
some here, some there,
1450 all of them from lady Helen barred away'.*

CHORUS LEADER

And then what happened? Go on.

PHRYGIAN

*O Mother of Ida! O mother!
Mighty, mighty! Oh, oh!
What I saw, I saw, in the house of princes!
Bloody sufferings, lawless evils!
1455 Out of hiding,
out of purple cloaks
they drew their swords!
And their eyes! Oh, spinning round
1460 to look for danger anywhere.
And then they came.
Like savage mountain boars
standing in front of the woman,
they shouted,
“Die! Die!
Die for your traitor husband, that coward
who betrayed his brother's son,
who left him to die in Argos!”
She screamed, screamed out,
1465 “Ah, ah!”
snow-white arms flailing, flailing,
beating bosom, beating head!^o
Then in sandals golden
she leaped to run!*

*But after her, after,
came Orestes on stout Mycenaean boots,
1470 caught her, oh,
winding fingers in her hair
and neck forced back,
down, down,
against the shoulder,
lifted, ah, sword to strike her throat!*

CHORUS LEADER

But where were the Phrygian slaves? Couldn't you help?

PHRYGIAN

*Oh, we shouted, yes!
We battered doors
1475 with iron bars, broke down panels
where we were!*

*Then we ran
to rescue her! From here, from
there! Some with stones,
others with bows, with swords.*

*But then!
Pylades came on—unflinching
1480 like Phrygian Hector or Ajax with
his triple helms
(I saw him once at Priam's gates).
Steel on steel together met,
but soon we saw:*

1485 *Phrygian men are no match
for Greek ones. °*

One ran, one dead,

*this one wounded, and that one
begging for his life.*

*So quick, quick, we ran, we hid!
Falling some, dying others,
staggering one with wounds.
And then, oh!*

1490 *Hermione came in
just as her poor mother was sinking
to die.*

*The men, like Bacchants^o
catching their wild prey on the
mountain,
yet with no thyrsos in hand,
they snatched the girl, then turned
back*

1495 *again to kill Zeus' daughter.
But then, oh then—
suddenly, ah, ah!
she had vanished from the house,
O Zeus! O Earth! O Day! O Night!
as if by some magic drugs
or sorcerer's tricks or thieving gods!
What happened then I do not know.
No, no, run, I ran!
But Menelaus—*

1500 *all his suffering, all his hurt
to bring the lady Helen home from
Troy,
ah ah,*

all in vain.

(Enter Orestes from the palace, his sword drawn.)

CHORUS LEADER

On and on, one strangeness after another.

1505 And here's Orestes rushing from the palace
with drawn sword!

ORESTES

Where is that coward slave
who ran from my sword inside?

PHRYGIAN [*speaking henceforth*]

I bow down, my lord,
kiss the ground. It's Eastern custom, sir.

ORESTES

This is Argos, fool, not Troy.

PHRYGIAN

But anywhere
wise men want to live, not die.

ORESTES

And those screams of yours?

1510 Admit it: you were shouting to Menelaus for help.

PHRYGIAN

Oh no, sir. Not I. For you I was screaming.
You need more help than he.

ORESTES

Did Helen deserve to die?

PHRYGIAN

Oh, yes sir. Three times cut madam's throat,
and I won't object.

ORESTES

This is cowardly flattery.
You don't believe it.

PHRYGIAN

Oh sir, I believe, sure.
1515 Helen ruined Hellas, yes, killed the Phrygians too.

ORESTES

Swear you're telling me the truth or I'll kill you.

PHRYGIAN

Oh, oh! By my life I swear—my highest oath!

ORESTES

Were all the Phrygians as terrified by cold steel
at Troy as you?

PHRYGIAN

Ooh, please, please, not so close!
All shiny murderous!

ORESTES

What are you afraid of, fool?
1520 Is it some Gorgon's head to turn you into stone?

PHRYGIAN

Not stone—a corpse! But this Gorgon thing

I do not know.

ORESTES

What? Nothing but a slave
and afraid to die? Death might end your suffering.

PHRYGIAN

Slave man, free man, everybody likes to live.

ORESTES

Well spoken. Your wit saves you. Now get inside.

PHRYGIAN

You will not kill me?

ORESTES

I spare you.

PHRYGIAN

1525 Oh, thank you, thank you.

ORESTES

Go, or I'll change my plan.

PHRYGIAN

I don't thank you for that.

(Exit the Phrygian to the side.)

ORESTES

Fool, did you think I'd dirty my sword on your neck?
Neither man nor woman—who could want your life?
No, I came to stop your frightened screams. This city

1530 of Argos is quickly roused to arms by any cry
for help.

Not that I'm afraid of Menelaus either.
No, let him come. His glory is his golden curls,
not his sword.

But if he brings the Argives here
and in revenge for Helen's death refuses his help
1535 to my sister, my friend and helper, and myself,
then his daughter too shall join his wife in death.

(Exit Orestes into the palace.)

CHORUS^o [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE

O gods! Fate!
Grief comes down once more
upon the house of Atreus!
What should we do? Send to the city for help,
or keep silent?
1540 *Silence is the safer course.*
Look! Look up there on the roof—the smoke
pouring, billowing up!
And the glare of torches!
They are burning the house, the ancestral house!
They shrink from nothing!
1545 *God works his way with man.*
The end is as god wills.
Great too is the power of the fiends of vengeance,
blood for blood, against this house,
in vengeance for Myrtilus!

(Enter Menelaus with armed attendants from the side.)

CHORUS LEADER

Wait. I see Menelaus coming this way
in great haste. He must have heard some news
of what has happened here.

1550 Stand your guard,
inside the house! Quick, bolt the palace doors.
Beware, Orestes.
This man in his hour of triumph
is dangerous. Take care.

MENELAUS

 I have come
1555 to investigate a tale of incredible
 crimes
 committed by two lions—I cannot
 bring myself
 to call them men.

 I am also told that
 Helen
 is not dead, but has disappeared,
 vanished
 into thin air, the idiotic fiction
 of a man whose mind was almost
 crazed with fear
 or, more probably, as I suspect, the
 invention

1560

of the matricide and
patently absurd.

Inside there, open the doors!

(The doors remain closed.)

Very well.

Men, break down that door so I can rescue
my poor daughter from the hands of these murderers
and recover Helen's body^o

1565 In revenge for her,
I personally shall put these men to death.

*(Orestes, Pylades, and Electra appear on the roof of the
palace holding Hermione, a sword at her throat.)*

ORESTES

You there, don't lay a finger on that door.
Yes, I mean *you*, Menelaus, you braggart!
Touch that door and I'll rip the parapet
1570 from this crumbling masonry and smash your skull.
The doors have been bolted down with iron bars
on purpose to keep you out.

MENELAUS

 Gods in heaven!
Torches blazing—and people standing on the roof
like a city under siege, and—*no!*
1575 A man holding a sword at my daughter's throat!

ORESTES

Do you want me to ask the questions, Menelaus,
or would you prefer that I do the talking?

MENELAUS

Neither.

But I suppose I must listen.

ORESTES

For your information,
I am about to kill your daughter.

MENELAUS

Her too?
Wasn't it enough that you murdered her mother?

ORESTES

1580 No, heaven stole her and robbed me of the pleasure.

MENELAUS

This is mockery. Do you deny you killed her?

ORESTES

It pains me to deny it. Would to god I had ...

MENELAUS

Had what? This suspense is torture.

ORESTES

...killed her,
struck down the whore who pollutes our land.

MENELAUS

1585 Let me have her body. Let me bury her.

ORESTES

Ask the gods for her carcass. In the meanwhile
I will kill your daughter.

MENELAUS

The mother-killer^o
murders again!

ORESTES

His father's avenger,
betrayed by you.

MENELAUS

Wasn't your mother's blood enough?

ORESTES

1590 I can never have my fill of killing whores.

MENELAUS

But you, Pylades! Are you his partner
in this murder too?

ORESTES

His silence says he is.
But I speak for him.

MENELAUS

Unless you fly away,
you will regret this act.

ORESTES

We won't run away.
In fact, we'll burn the house.

MENELAUS

1595 Burn the house!

Burn the palace of your fathers?

ORESTES

To keep it from you.

But your daughter dies. First the sword,
then the fire.

MENELAUS

Kill her. I shall get revenge.

ORESTES

Very well.

MENELAUS

No, wait! For god's sake, no!°

ORESTES

Silence. You suffer justly for what you did.

MENELAUS

Can justice let you live?

ORESTES

1600

Live—and reign too!

MENELAUS

Reign where?

ORESTES

Here in Argos.

MENELAUS

You?

You officiate as priest?

ORESTES

And why not?

MENELAUS

Or sacrifice for war?

ORESTES

If you can, I can too.

MENELAUS

My hands are clean.

ORESTES

Your hands, yes, but not your heart.

MENELAUS

Who would speak to you?

ORESTES

1605

Those who love their fathers.

MENELAUS

And those who love their mothers?

ORESTES

Were born lucky.

MENELAUS

That leaves you out.

ORESTES

Yes. I loathe whores.

MENELAUS

Keep that sword away from my daughter!

ORESTES

You're a liar, ° traitor.

MENELAUS

Could you kill my child?

ORESTES

Ah, the truth
at last!

MENELAUS

What do you want?

ORESTES

1610 Persuade the people ...

MENELAUS

Persuade them of what?

ORESTES

...to let us live.

MENELAUS

Or you will kill my child?

ORESTES

It comes to that.

MENELAUS

O gods, my poor wife ...

ORESTES

No pity for me?

MENELAUS

... brought home to die!

ORESTES

Would to god she had!

MENELAUS

All my countless labors ...

ORESTES

1615 Nothing done for me.

MENELAUS

All I suffered ...

ORESTES

Because you wouldn't help me.

MENELAUS

I am trapped.

ORESTES

Trapped by your own viciousness.

All right, Electra, set the house on fire!

You there, Pylades, most loyal of my friends,

1620 burn the roof! Set these parapets

to blazing!

MENELAUS

Help, help, people of Danaus,
knights of Argos!

To arms! To arms!
This man with mother's blood upon his hands
threatens our city, our very lives!

(Apollo appears together with Helen above the palace.)

APOLLO

1625 Stop.
Menelaus. Calm your anger.

It is I,
a god, Phoebus Apollo, son of Leto, who
speak.

You too, Orestes, standing
there
with drawn sword over that girl, hear
what I say.

Helen is here with me—
1630 yes, that same Helen whom you tried to
kill
out of hatred for Menelaus. This is she^o
whom you see enfolded in the gleaming
air,
delivered from death. You did not kill her.
For I, so commanded by Zeus the father,

snatched her from
your sword.

Helen lives,

1635 for being born of Zeus, she could not die,
and now, between the Dioscuri in the
swathe
of air, she sits enthroned forever, a savior
for sailors.

Menelaus must marry
again,^o
since the gods by means of Helen's
loveliness
drove Phrygians and Greeks together in
1640 war
and made them die, that earth might be
lightened
of her heavy burden of humanity.
So much for Helen.

I now turn to you,
Orestes.
It is your destiny to leave this land
1645 and go in exile to Parrhasia for a year.
Henceforth that region shall be named for
you,
called Oresteion by the Arcadians and
Azanians.^o
From there you must go to the city of
Athena
and render justice for your mother's
murder
to the three Eumenides.

1650 Gods shall be
your judges,
sitting in holy session on the hill of Ares,
and acquitting you by sacred verdict.

Then,

Orestes, you shall marry Hermione,
the girl against whose throat your sword
now lies.

1655 Neoptolemus hopes to make her his wife,
but never shall, for he is doomed to die
when he comes to Delphi seeking justice
from me for his father's death.

Give

Electra in marriage
to Pylades as you promised. Great
happiness
awaits him.

1660 Let Orestes reign in Argos,
Menelaus. But go yourself and be king in
Sparta,
the dowry of Helen, whose only dowry so
far
has been your anguish and suffering.

I

myself
shall reconcile the city of Argos to Orestes,
for it was I who commanded his mother's
1665 murder.
I compelled him to kill.

ORESTES

Hail, Apollo,
for your prophetic oracles! True prophet,
not false!

And yet, when I heard you speak,
I worried I was hearing the whispers of some fiend

speaking through your mouth.

1670 But all is well,
and I obey.

 See, I now release Hermione,
and we shall marry when her father gives
his blessing and consent.

MENELAUS

 Farewell, Helen,
daughter of Zeus! You're blessed in your home
and happiness among the gods.

1675 Orestes,
I now betroth my only child to you,
as Apollo commands.

 We come of noble birth,
you and I: may this marriage bless us both.

APOLLO

Let each one go to his appointed place.
Now let your quarrels end.

MENELAUS

I obey lord.

ORESTES

1680 And I, Menelaus, I accept our truce
and make my peace with Apollo and his oracle.

APOLLO [*chanting*]

*Let each one go his way.
Go and honor Peace,
loveliest of goddesses.*

*Helen I now lead
to the halls of Zeus,
upon the road that turns
1685 among the blazing stars.
There with Hera she shall sit,
with Heracles and Hebe throned,
a goddess forever;
forever adored—
there between her brothers,
the sons of Zeus,
1690 reigning on the seas,
a light to sailors.*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Hail, O Victory!^o
Preserve my life
and let me wear the crown!*

(All exit.)