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The Electra of Sophocles

Translated by Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb

Translator’s Introduction

From Rivingtons’ 2nd edition of 1870, pp. v-xiv.

The Electra is the only extant play in which Sophocles draws on the legends connected with the house of Pelops — the source to which Aeschylus was indebted in his Oresteian trilogy, and Euripides in his Electra and Orestes. The contrast between Euripides and his predecessors is too well marked to gain much in clearness from the accident of his having treated the same subject. But there is perhaps no method by which the distinctive character of the Sophoclean Electra can be more readily brought out than by viewing it in connexion with the Choephoroe. Before attempting a brief comparison, it will be useful to glance at the Pelopid story in its historical growth — as it appears in the Iliad, in the Odyssey, in early fragments, and in Pindar.

1. The Iliad

In the Iliad the Pelopidae are prominent, but only as the ancestors of Agamemnon — as a long line of princes deriving from Zeus and succeeding each other in peace, until the sceptre was handed down to the leader of the war against Troy.¹

In this record there is no hint of the later conception, which throws out the fate of Agamemnon against a deep background of antecedent family horrors — the sin of Pelops — the murder of Chrysippus — the murder of Pleisthenes — the episode of Atreus and Thyestes.

2. The Odyssey

Here, for the first time, appears the germ of an epic Oresteia. In the council of the gods,² Zeus says that Aegisthus had, ὑπερ μορον, “beyond his destiny,” wedded the wife of Agamemnon and slain the king, though the gods had warned him

... neither to slay Agamemnon, nor to woo his wife; for there shall be a retribution from Orestes, descendant of Atreus, so soon as he shall come to man’s estate, and feel a yearning for his own land. Thus spake Hermes, but he persuaded not the mind of Aegisthus by his friendly counsels; and now Aegisthus has paid at one reckoning for all the guilt.

¹ See Il. ii, 100:

“Agamemnon the king rose up, holding the sceptre that Hephaestus wrought; Hephaestus gave it to Zeus, son of Cronus, supreme; and then Zeus gave it to Hermes, messenger of the gods; and Hermes the god gave it to Pelops, smiter of horses; and then Pelops gave it to Atreus, shepherd of the people; and Atreus at his death left it to Thyestes, rich in lambs; and then Thyestes left it to Agamemnon, that it should be borne in his hand, and that he should rule over many islands and all Argos.”

² Od. i, 35
Again, Nestor says to Telemachus:

Of Atreides, you of Ithaca have yourselves heard, though afar off, how he came, and how Aegisthus plotted dark death. But verily the man paid a dreadful reckoning; so that it is good that at least the son of a dead man should survive: for thus Orestes was avenged on the slayer of his father, on treacherous Aegisthus, who slew his famous sire.

Lastly, the story is told with circumstance where Menelaus recounts to Telemachus what he had learned in Egypt from Proteus respecting the fate of Agamemnon. The ships of the chieftain and his comrades, driven northward from “the steep mount of Malea,” had found harbour near a spot “where Thyestes had his dwelling aforetime, but where Aegisthus son of Thyestes then dwelt.” Then did Agamemnon

. . . set foot joyously on his fatherland . . . But so it was that a spy saw him from a place of espial; for treacherous Aegisthus had taken a spy and set him there, and promised him pay, two talents of gold; and the spy watched for a whole year, lest Agamemnon should slip past him, and have time to collect a warrior’s might. And the man set out to bring the news to the house, to the shepherd of the people. And straightway Aegisthus devised a cunning scheme: he chose twenty of the boldest men of all the people, and set an ambush; but over against it he commanded to prepare a feast. Then he went to bid Agamemnon, shepherd of the people, with chariots and horses, plotting cruel things; and he brought him back, dreaming not of death, and when he had feasted him, he slew him, as a man slays an ox at the manger.

In this epic version of the story two points are noticeable: the place held by Aegisthus, and the character of the vengeance taken by Orestes.

1 In the passage just quoted, as also in the speech of Nestor, Aegisthus is the sole contriver of the deed. The other notice presents him as a bold and wicked man, who defied the express warning of the gods, and took the consequence of his deed, εἰδὼς αἰτίαν ολέθρου. This is plainly a different Aegisthus from the despicable accomplice seen dimly in the background of the Aeschylean Clytaemnestra’s crime — from the Aegisthus who is termed by the Electra of Sophocles, ὁ παντ’ ἀναλκίς οὗτος — ὁ συν γυναιξί τὰς μαχας ποιομένος. It is true that, even in the Odyssey, the treacherous and cowardly means employed by Aegisthus are always dwelt upon; it is true, moreover, that the criminal complicity of Clytaemnestra is twice referred to. But the fact remains that, in the epic Oresteia, Aegisthus stands in the foreground, and is at least credited with so much force of character as is requisite to originate and execute a great crime.

2 It is nowhere said in the Odyssey that Orestes slew Clytaemnestra. He slays Aegisthus only — a stranger in blood, and the murderer of Agamemnon. From

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1 Od. iii, 193
2 Od. IV, 514 ff.
3 Od. iii, 193
4 Od. i, 35
5 Od. iv, 92: xxiv, 97
the meritorious character of such a deed there was absolutely no deduction to be made; it was, according to the usage of the Homeric age, his plain and urgent duty; its performance was a title to good repute:

\begin{center}
\textit{η οὐκ ἀεὶς οἰον κλέος εἶλαβε διὸς Ορεστὶς πάντας επ’ ανθρώποις, επεὶ εκτάει παροφονήν;}\textsuperscript{1}
\end{center}

3. Early Epic and Lyric poets

From these, in the interval between Homer and Aeschylus, the story of the Pelopidae appears to have received an important development. In his \textit{Einleitung zur Electra}, Schneidewin notices its treatment by Agias of Troezen in his \textit{Νοσσοὶ} (circa 740 B.C.) — by an unknown author in an epic called the \textit{Αλκμαϊωνις} — and by Stesichorus of Himera (circa 610 B.C.) in a poem which was probably a comprehensive lyric Oresteia. To Stesichorus appear to have been due three important innovations in the story. First, the notion of an hereditary curse begins to be interwoven — not, indeed, as resident in the line of Pelops, but as entailed on Clytaemnestra by her father Tynedarus. Secondly, Clytaemnestra, and not Aegisthus, is brought into the foreground as chief agent in the murder of Agamemnon. Thirdly, Orestes slays, not Aegisthus only, but Clytaemnestra also. And now for the first time the Furies appear on his track, while Apollo comes forward to shield him — deigning even to lend him his bow and arrows — a hint afterwards borrowed by Euripides.\textsuperscript{2}

4. Pindar

A passage in the 11\textsuperscript{th} Pythian\textsuperscript{3} is occupied with the nemesis which overtook Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. The subject is suggested by the mention of Cirrha, where Thrasydaeus conquered

\begin{center}
... in the rich lands of Pylades, friend of Laconian Orestes; whom, when his father was being murdered, Arsinoe (the nurse) withdrew from under the violent hands — far from the direful cunning — of Clytaemnestra ... And Orestes, a tender child, found a refuge with Strophius, the aged friend of his father, dwelling at the foot of Parnassus: but in the tardy day of wrath he slew his mother, and laid Aegisthus weltering in blood.
\end{center}

In two points Pindar’s sketch of the story is original. It contains the earliest extant notice of the sojourn of Orestes in Phocis; for in the \textit{Odyssey}\textsuperscript{4} Orestes returns home, not from Phocis, but from Athens. Secondly, it is suggested\textsuperscript{5} that Clytaemnestra’s motive for the murder of Agamemnon may have been the immolation of Iphigeneia at Aulis. The \textit{Odyssey}, on the contrary, implies that Clytaemnestra was accessory to the crime solely through her passion for Aegisthus. The story of Iphigeneia’s death

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{Od.} i, 298
\textsuperscript{2} Or. 268, δος μοι κεραυλικα τοξα, δωρα Λοξιου.
\textsuperscript{3} vv. 20-56
\textsuperscript{4} iii, 307
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Pyth.} xi, 35
first appears in Stasinus of Cyprus, an epic poet of the 8th century B.C. It will be seen presently how the motive hinted by Pindar is employed by one of the tragedians. Thus at the beginning of the 5th century B.C. the growth of the mythus is complete. It has been gradually amplified by the accession of new incidents — gradually subtilized by touches palliating the crime and clouding the justice of the revenge — until the simple Homeric Oresteia, the story of a plain duty bravely done, has been complicated into a subject for dramatic analysis.

When we inquire how the two elder tragedians have respectively dealt with one segment of this large subject — with the argument of the Choephoroe and of the Electra — a divergence of mythical creeds is at once evident. Aeschylus follows what we have seen to be the latest and most complex version of the story. Sophocles leans to an Homeric treatment; his Aegisthus, if base and mean, is the leading criminal, whose punishment is the climax of tragic interest; his Orestes, in executing the revenge, does an absolutely good deed. This difference of conception, which necessarily modifies every detail of treatment, was obviously imposed by the fact that the Choephoroe is the second piece of a trilogy, a link in a chain; while the Electra of Sophocles, in accordance with a practice introduced by its author, possesses an independent unity and had apparently neither prelude nor sequel. In the Choephoroe, Aeschylus is only working up towards the climax at last reached in the Eumenides. He is only creating that feud between two conflicting interests — the son’s duty to a dead father and to a living mother — which is finally to be reconciled on the Hill of Ares. Hence it is not the aim of Aeschylus to throw all the guilt into one scale — to represent Clytemnestra as without excuse, or Orestes as the champion of an absolutely righteous cause. Rather he seeks to convey an impression of divided guilt, of contending and almost balanced claims, in such a manner that the spectators shall sympathise with Orestes, yet shall still be capable of suspense as to the ultimate verdict of the Areopagus.

The Aeschylean Clytaemnestra pleads, as the chief motive for her crime, a mother’s anguish for the murder of a daughter. In the elevation of her resentment, in her masculine energy and decision, she stands so high above the Aeschylean Aegisthus, that the old epic motive for her deed, a woman’s love for her paramour, is scarcely permitted to enter our thoughts. On the other hand, Agamemnon in Aeschylus is by no means the stainless victim of whom we hear in Sophocles. He is, indeed, a majestic figure, ο παντοσεμνος, and appeals strongly to heroic sympathies. But he is also one who, by his own actions, has become directly amenable to the παλαιος δριμυς αλαστωρ — that Curse abiding in the house and influencing the fortunes of its guiltless as well as its guilty members, yet always on the watch for such personal conduct as may place any particular individual more directly in its power. Agamemnon falls under the stroke of Clytaemnestra; but close behind, towering above her while she strikes and enveloping the action in its shadow, stands the implacable Erinys.

Again, great pains are taken in the Choephoroe to give the utmost prominence to the relationship of son and mother subsisting between the slayer and the slain; and in the last resort, to make the very most of the appeal to filial piety in arrest of judgment. In Aeschylus, as in Sophocles, a terrible dream impels Clytaemnestra to send

1 Schneid. Einl. z. Electra
offerings to the tomb of Agamemnon; but the difference between the dreams is significant. In Sophocles Clytaemnestra’s dream merely shews her Agamemnon restored to life; he plants his sceptre at the hearth, and it puts forth branches till the whole land is overshadowed. The Aeschylean Clytaemnestra dreams that she had suckled a serpent in the cradle of Orestes, and that her nursling has turned upon her to slay her. It is on hearing this dream that Orestes finally resolves that he will enact such a part (ἐκδρακοντωθεῖς εγώ κτεινὼ νυ) — thus accepting, as the decisive encouragement to his deed, the very illustration which places it in the most odious light. From the opening of the play, the destined avenger is troubled with visitings of conscience and disturbing doubts, against which the express command of Apollo and the clear duty to the dead prevail with the utmost difficulty. It is the evident defect of the Choephoroe as a drama that, through nearly 600 lines, or more than half the entire play, the action is stationary at the same point. Electra and Orestes linger at their father’s grave, invoking his spirit to aid them, dwelling on his wrongs, on the oracle of Apollo, on the dream of Clytaemnestra — seeking in all ways to confirm their shrinking purpose. Schlegel has suggested an apology for this suspension of progress. He says,

It is the stillness of expectation before a storm or earthquake.

This defence appears to us to miss the point. It is true that the catastrophe becomes more tremendous by its reservation to the end of the play. But the chief significance of the long pause before the blow surely lies in the hesitation which it betrays — in the wavering choice between conflicting duties, in the trembling of the balance until argument piled on argument turns the scale. No sooner has the deed been done, than the old doubts start up afresh. When Orestes, at the end of the play, descries the Furies, his conscience at once tells him on what errand they have come. In vain the Chorus attempts to reassure him.

These are no phantoms of evil before me: without doubt these are the patient sleuth-hounds of my mother.

In the Electra of Sophocles there is no trace of the moral agony which convulses the action of the Choephoroe. There is nothing but inflexible resolve — steadfast progress to a righteous end — the expiation of Agamemnon’s death by the death of his murderers. The scope of the play is accurately given in its concluding words:

O seed of Atreus, from how long an ordeal have ye hardly come in freedom, crowned with peace by this day’s effort.

The aim of the poet is to concentrate our sympathies on the cause of Orestes and Electra. Clytaemnestra is no longer allowed to attract a share of compassion as the mother who cannot forget the immolation of her child; she does, indeed, plead that provocation, but the plea is disallowed and refuted with triumphant scorn by Electra. Δολος ἦν φρασας, ἐρος ὁ κτεινας, says the Chorus,

Fraud was the contriver, lust the slayer.

Her ungenerous treatment of Electra is brought into the strongest relief; and when she has thus been debased in the eyes of the spectators, she is slain almost as a

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1 [catches sight of]
παρεργον of the retribution, with slight circumstance or comment. Aegisthus once more, as in the old epic story, comes to the front, and it is his fate which forms the catastrophe of the drama. As regards the agents of the vengeance, on their part there is no trace of faltering. The duty is urged on Orestes by natural feeling, by the common voice of men, by the spirit of his dead father, by Apollo and Zeus. He has been rescued and reared by the faithful servant expressly that he may become πατρι τιμωρος φονου. He is far calmer and more resolute than the Orestes of the Choephoroe, for his whole life has been bound up with the conviction that he is the καθαρης προς θεων φρωμιμενος — the purger of the house with a mission from the Gods. Even the Delphic oracle which, as in Aeschylus, constitutes his patent of revenge, has a different tenor. In the Choephoroe, it denounces the most tremendous penalties on non-performance, as if reluctance on the part of Orestes was to be expected. In the Electra the oracle does not threaten, it merely instructs: assuming the will, it points out the way. Apollo Catharsius, the god of cleansing, is by the same title Destroyer of noxious things; and his influence sheds light over the drama by which the house of the Pelopidae is purged of the inmates who defiled it. The Electra is pervaded by a keen tone of life and vigour, in contrast with the loaded atmosphere, the oppressive stillness of expectancy, which precedes the bursting of the storm in the Choephoroe. It is in perfect keeping with the spirit of the Electra that the first scene opens at break of day, and calls up the sights and sounds of early morning. Throughout the subsequent action, in the clearness of its purpose and in its sanguine energy, there is abundant assurance that “the black night of stars has waned” — that the gloom lit only by doubtful hopes is overpast, and that the powers of light are in the ascendant.

If an attempt to compare the Choephoroe and the Sophoclean Electra has a definite purpose, little is to be gained by placing beside either of them the Electra of Euripides. Works of art are commensurable only when the theories which produced them have a common basis. When Schlegel is at pains to contrast the elaborate homeliness of the Euripidean Electra with the severe grandeur of its rivals, the criticism appears to us unmeaning. Aeschylus and Sophocles, as special types of the same school, may profitably be compared. Euripides was a realist in art; he deliberately sacrificed the ideal grace of tragedy to the hope of a closer human interest; by variety of incident and circumstance, he studied to mingle the tragic and the trivial as they are mingled in a chapter of real life.

The date of the Electra remains unfixed between the years 440 B.C. (the Antigone) and 410 B.C. (the Philoctetes). In vv. 731-34, an allusion has been imagined to the policy of Pericles in the year 433 B.C., when Corinth and Corcyra were rival suitors for the alliance of Athens: but the evidence is too slight, and the attitude imputed to Pericles is not historical.  

Dindorf’s text has been adopted in this edition, a few deviations being noticed where they occur.

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1 See Thuc. i, 32-43: compare Grote, vi. pp. 84 ff.
Dramatis Personae

Electra (Orestes’ sister), played by the Protagonist.

Orestes (son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra) and Clytemnestra, played by the Deuteragonist.

Aegisthus, Chrysothemis (Orestes’ sister), and Paedagogus, played by the Tritagonist.

Chorus of Mycenaean Virgins.

Mute Persons.

Scene

At Mycenae, before the palace of the Pelopidae. It is morning and the new-risen sun is bright. The Paedagogus enters on the left of the spectators, accompanied by the two youths, Orestes and Pylades.

Paedagogus

Son of him who led our hosts at Troy of old, son of Agamemnon! — now thou mayest behold with thine eyes all that thy soul hath desired so long. There is the ancient Argos of thy yearning — that hallowed scene whence the gadfly drove the daughter of Inachus; and there, Orestes, is the Lycean Agora, named from the wolf-slaying god; there, on the left, Hera’s famous temple; and in this place to which we have come, deem that thou seest Mycenae rich in gold, with the house of the Pelopidae there, so often stained with bloodshed; whence I carried thee of yore, from the slaying of thy father, as thy kinswoman, thy sister, charged me; and saved thee, and reared thee up to manhood, to be the avenger of thy murdered sire.

Now, therefore, Orestes, and thou, best of friends, Pylades, our plans must be laid quickly; for lo, already the sun’s bright ray is waking the songs of the birds into clearness, and the dark night of stars is spent. Before, then, anyone comes forth from the house, take counsel; seeing that the time allows not of delay, but is full ripe for deeds.

Orestes

True friend and follower, how well dost thou prove thy loyalty to our house! As a steed of generous race, though old, loses not courage in danger, but pricks his ear, even so thou urgest us forward, and art foremost in our support. I will tell thee, then, what I have determined; listen closely to my words, and correct me, if I miss the mark in aught.

When I went to the Pythian oracle, to learn how I might avenge my father on his murderers, Phoebus gave me the response which thou

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1 Pylades (son of King Strophius of Phocis), and friend of Orestes. Two attendants of Orestes.
2 Handmaid of Clytemnestra.
3 An old man, formerly the Paedagogus or attendant of Orestes.
art now to hear: — that alone, and by stealth, without aid of arms or numbers, I should snatch the righteous vengeance of my hand. Since, then, the god spake to us on this wise, thou must go into yonder house, when opportunity gives thee entrance, and learn all that is passing there, so that thou mayest report to us from sure knowledge. Thine age, and the lapse of time, will prevent them from recognising thee; they will never suspect who thou art, with that silvered hair. Let thy tale be that thou art a Phocian stranger, sent by Phanoteus; for he is the greatest of their allies. Tell them, and confirm it with thine oath, that Orestes hath perished by a fatal chance — hurled at the Pythian games from his rapid chariot; be that the substance of thy story.

We, meanwhile, will first crown my father’s tomb, as the god enjoined, with drink-offerings and the luxuriant tribute of severed hair; then come back, bearing in our hands an urn of shapely bronze — now hidden in the brushwood, as I think thou knowest — so to gladden them with the false tidings that this my body is no more, but has been consumed with fire and turned to ashes. Why should the omen trouble me, when by a feigned death I find life indeed, and win renown? I trow, no word is ill-omened, if fraught with gain. Often ere now have I seen wise men die in vain report; then, when they return home, they are held in more abiding honour: as I trust that from this rumour I also shall emerge in radiant life, and yet shine like a star upon my foes.

O my fatherland, and ye gods of the land, receive me with good fortune in this journey — and ye also, halls of my fathers, for I come with divine mandate to cleanse you righteously; send me not dishonoured from the land, but grant that I may rule over my possessions, and restore my house!

Enough; — be it now thy care, old man, to go and heed thy task; and we twain will go forth; for so occasion bids, chief ruler of every enterprise for men.

Electra within. Ah me, ah me!

Paedagogus Hark, my son — from the doors, methought, came the sound of some handmaid moaning within.

Orestes Can it be the hapless Electra? Shall we stay here, and listen to her laments?

Paedagogus No, no: before all else, let us seek to obey the command of Loxias, and thence make a fair beginning, by pouring libations to thy sire; that brings victory within our grasp, and gives us the mastery in all that we do.

1 [think]
Exit Paedagogus on the spectators' left, Orestes and Pylades the right. Enter Electra from the house. She is meanly clad.

**Electra**

O thou pure sunlight, and thou air, earth's canopy, how often have ye heard the strains of my lament, the wild blows dealt against this bleeding breast, when dark night fails! And my wretched couch in yonder house of woe knows well, ere now, how I keep the watches of the night — how often I bewail my hapless sire; to whom deadly Ares gave not of his gifts in a strange land, but my mother, and her mate Aegisthus, cleft his head with murderous axe, as woodmen fell an oak. And for this no plaint bursts from any lip save mine, when thou, my father, hath died a death so cruel and so piteous!

But never will I cease from dirge and sore lament, while I look on the trembling rays of the bright stars, or on this light of day; but like the nightingale, slayer of her offspring, I will wail without ceasing, and cry aloud to all, here, at the doors of my father.

O home of Hades and Persephone! O Hermes of the shades! potent Curse, and ye, dread daughters of the gods Erinyes — Ye who behold when a life is reft by violence, when a bed is dishonoured by stealth — come, help me, avenge the murder of my sire — and send to me my brother; for I have no more the strength to bear up alone against the load of grief that weighs me down.

As Electra finishes her lament, the Chorus of the women of Mycenae enter. The following lines between Electra and the Chorus are chanted responsively.

**Chorus**

Ah, Electra, child of a wretched mother, why art thou ever pining thus in ceaseless lament for Agamemnon, who long ago was wickedly ensnares by thy false mother's wiles, and betrayed to death by dastardly hand? Perish the author of that deed, if I may utter such prayer!

**Electra**

Ah, noble-hearted maidens, ye have come to soothe my woes. I know and feel it, it escapes me not; but I cannot leave this task undone, or cease from mourning for my hapless sire. Ah, friends whose love responds to mine in every mood, leave me to rave thus — Oh leave me, I entreat you!

**Chorus**

But never by laments or prayers shalt thou recall thy sire from that lake of Hades to which all must pass. Nay, thine is a fatal course of grief, passing ever from due bounds into a cureless sorrow; wherein there is no deliverance from evils. Say, wherefore art thou enamoured of misery?

**Electra**

Foolish is the child who forgets a parent's piteous death. No, dearer to my soul is the mourner that laments for Itys, Itys, evermore, that bird distraught with grief, the messenger of Zeus. Ah, queen of sorrow, Niobe, thee I deem divine — thee, who evermore weeppest in thy rocky tomb!
Chorus  Not to thee alone of mortals, my daughter, hast come any sorrow which thou bearest less calmly than those within, thy kinswomen and sisters, Chrysothemis and Iphianassa, I who still live — as he, too, lives, sorrowing in a secluded youth, yet happy in that this famous realm of Mycenae shall one day welcome him to his heritage, when the kindly guidance of Zeus shall have brought him to this land, Orestes.

Electra  Yes, I wait for him with unwearied longing, as I move on my sad path from day to day, unwed and childless, bathed in tears, bearing that endless doom of woe; but he forgets all that he has suffered and heard. What message comes to me, that is not belied? He is ever yearning to be with us, but, though he yearns, he never resolves.

Chorus  Courage, my daughter, courage; great still in heaven is Zeus, who sees and governs all: leave thy bitter quarrel to him; forget not thy foes, but refrain from excess of wrath against them; for Time is god who makes rough ways smooth. Not heedless is the son of Agamemnon, who dwells by Crisa’s pastoral shore; not heedless is the god who reigns by Acheron.

Electra  Nay, the best part of life hath passed away from me in hopelessness, and I have no strength left; I, who am pining away without children — whom no loving champion shields — but, like some despised alien, I serve in the halls of my father, clad in this mean garb, and standing at a meagre board.

Chorus  Piteous was the voice heard at his return, and piteous, as thy sire lay on the festal couch, when the straight, swift blow was dealt him with the blade of bronze. Guile was the plotter, Lust the slayer, dread parents of a dreadful shape; whether it was mortal that wrought therein, or god.

Electra  O that bitter day, bitter beyond all that have come to me; O that night, O the horrors of that unutterable feast, the ruthless death-strokes that my father saw from the hands of twain, who took my life captive by treachery, who doomed me to woe! May the great god of Olympus give them sufferings in requital, and never may their splendour bring them joy, who have done such deeds!

Chorus  Be advised to say no more; canst thou not see what conduct it is which already plunges thee so cruelly in self-made miseries? Thou hast greatly aggravated thy troubles, ever breeding wars with thy sullen soul; but such strife should not be pushed to a conflict with the strong.

Electra  I have been forced to it — forced by dread causes; I know my own passion, it escapes me not; but, seeing that the causes are so dire, will never curb these frenzied plaints, while life is in me. Who indeed, ye kindly sisterhood, who that thinks aright, would deem that any word of solace could avail me? Forbear, forbear, my comforters!
Such ills must be numbered with those which have no cure; I can never know a respite from my sorrows, or a limit to this wailing.

Chorus

At least it is in love, like a true-hearted mother, that I dissuade thee from adding misery to miseries.

Electra

But what measure is there in my wretchedness? Say, how can it be right to neglect the dead? Was that impiety ever born in mortal? Never may I have praise of such; never when my lot is cast in pleasant places, may I cling to selfish ease, or dishonour my sire by restraining the wings of shrill lamentation!

For if the hapless dead is to lie in dust and nothingness, while the slayers pay not with blood for blood, all regard for man, all fear of heaven, will vanish from the earth.

Chorus Leader

I came, my child, in zeal for thy welfare no less than for mine own; but if I speak not well, then be it as thou wilt; for we will follow thee.

Electra

I am ashamed, my friends, if ye deem me too impatient for my oft complaining; but, since a hard constraint forces me to this, bear with me. How indeed could any woman of noble nature refrain, who saw the calamities of a father’s house, as I see them by day and night continually, not fading, but in the summer of their strength? I, who, first, from the mother that bore me have found bitter enmity; next, in mine own home I dwell with my father’s murderers; they rule over me, and with them it rests to give or to withhold what I need.

And then think what manner of days I pass, when I see Aegisthus sitting on my father’s throne, wearing the robes which he wore, and pouring libations at the hearth where he slew my sire; and when I see the outrage that crowns all, the murderer in our father’s bed at our wretched mother’s side, if mother she should be called, who is his wife; but so hardened is she that she lives with that accursed one, fearing no Erinys; nay, as if exulting in her deeds, having found the day on which she treacherously slew my father of old, she keeps it with dance and song, and month by month sacrifices sheep to the gods who have wrought her deliverance.

But I, hapless one, beholding it, weep and pine in the house, and bewail the unholy feast named after my sire — weep to myself alone; since I may not even indulge my grief to the full measure of my yearning. For this woman, in professions so noble, loudly upbraids me with such taunts as these: ‘Impious and hateful girl, hast thou alone lost a father, and is there no other mourner in the world? An evil doom be thine, and may the gods infernal give thee no riddance from thy present laments.’

Thus she insults; save when any one brings her word that Orestes is coming: then, infuriated, she comes up to me, and cries; — ‘Hast
not thou brought this upon me? Is not this deed thine, who didst steal Orestes from my hands, and privily convey him forth? Yet be sure that thou shalt have thy due reward.’ So she shrieks; and, aiding her, the renowned spouse at her side is vehement in the same strain — that abject dastard, that utter pest, who fights his battles with the help of women. But I, looking ever for Orestes to come and end these woes, languish in my misery. Always intending to strike a blow, he has worn out every hope that I could conceive. In such a case, then, friends, there is no room for moderation or for reverence; in sooth, the stress of ills leaves no choice but to follow evil ways.

Leader
Say, is Aegisthus near while thou speakest thus, or absent from home?

Electra
Absent, certainly; do not think that I should have come to the doors, if he had been near; but just now he is afield.

Leader
Might I converse with thee more freely, if this is so?

Electra
He is not here, so put thy question; what wouldst thou?

Leader
I ask thee, then, what sayest thou of thy brother? Will he come soon, or is he delaying? I fain would know.

Electra
He promises to come; but he never fulfils the promise.

Leader
Yea, a man will pause on the verge of a great work.

Electra
And yet I saved him without pausing.

Leader
Courage; he is too noble to fail his friends.

Electra
I believe it; or I should not have lived so long.

Leader
Say no more now; for I see thy sister coming from the house, Chrysothemis, daughter of the same sire and mother, with sepulchral gifts in her hands, such as are given to those in the world below.

Chrysothemis enters from the palace. She is richly dressed.

Chrysothemis
Why, sister, hast thou come forth once more to declaim thus at the public doors? Why wilt thou not learn with any lapse of time to desist from vain indulgence of idle wrath? Yet this I know — that myself am — grieved at our plight; indeed, could I find the strength, I would show what love I bear them. But now, in these troubled waters, ’tis best, methinks, to shorten sail; I care not to seem active, without the power to hurt. And would that thine own conduct were the same! Nevertheless, right is on the side of thy choice, not of that which I advise; but if I am to live in freedom, our rulers must be obeyed in all things.

Electra
Strange indeed, that thou, the daughter of such a sire as thine, shouldst forget him, and think only of thy mother! All thy admonitions to me have been taught by her; no word is thine own. Then take thy choice — to be imprudent; or prudent, but forgetful of thy
friends: thou, who hast just said that, couldst thou find the strength, thou wouldest show thy hatred of them; yet, when I am doing my utmost to avenge my sire, thou givest no aid, but seest to turn thy sister from her deed.

Does not this crown our miseries with cowardice? For tell me — Or let me tell thee — what I should gain by ceasing from these laments? Do not live? — miserably, I know, yet well enough for me. And I vex them, thus rendering honour to the dead, if pleasure can be felt in that world. But thou, who tellest me of thy hatred, hatest in word alone, while in deeds thou art with the slayers of thy sire. I, then, would never yield to them, though I were promised the gifts which now make thee proud; thine be the richly-spread table and the life of luxury. For me, be it food enough that I do not wound mine own conscience; I covet not such privilege as thine — nor wouldst thou, wert thou wise. But now, when thou mightest be called daughter of the noblest father among men, be called the child of thy mother; so shall thy baseness be most widely seen, in betrayal of thy dead sire and of thy kindred.

Leader

No angry word, I entreat! For both of you there is good in what is urged — if thou, Electra, wouldst learn to profit by her counsel, and she, again, by thine.

Chrysothemis

For my part, friends, I am not wholly unused to her discourse; nor should I have touched upon this theme, had I not heard that she was threatened with a dread doom, which shall restrain her from her long-drawn laments.

Electra

Come, declare it then, this terror! If thou canst tell me of aught worse than my present lot, I will resist no more.

Chrysothemis

Indeed, I will tell thee all that I know. They purpose, if thou wilt not cease from these laments, to send thee where thou shalt never look upon the sunlight, but pass thy days in a dungeon beyond the borders of this land, there to chant thy dreary strain. Bethink thee, then, and do not blame me hereafter, when the blow hath fallen; now is the time to be wise.

Electra

Have they indeed resolved to treat me thus?

Chrysothemis

Assuredly, whenever Aegisthus comes home.

Electra

If that be all, then may he arrive with speed!

Chrysothemis

Misguided one! what dire prayer is this?

Electra

That he may come, if he hath any such intent.

Chrysothemis

That thou mayst suffer — what? Where are thy wits?

Electra

That I may fly as far as may be from you all.

Chrysothemis

But hast thou no care for thy present life?
Electra Aye, my life is marvellously fair.

Chrysothemis It might be, couldst thou only learn prudence.

Electra Do not teach me to betray my friends.

Chrysothemis I do not — but to bend before the strong.

Electra Thine be such flattery: those are not my ways.

Chrysothemis Tis well, however, not to fall by folly.

Electra I will fall, if need be, in the cause of my sire.

Chrysothemis But our father, I know, pardons me for this.

Electra It is for cowards to find peace in such maxims.

Chrysothemis So thou wilt not hearken, and take my counsel?

Electra No, verily; long may be it before I am so foolish.

Chrysothemis Then I will go forth upon mine errand.

Electra And whither goest thou? To whom bearest thou these offerings?

Chrysothemis Our mother sends me with funeral libations for our sire.

Electra How sayest thou? For her deadliest foe?

Chrysothemis Slain by her own hand — so thou wouldest say.

Electra What friend hath persuaded her? Whose wish was this?

Chrysothemis The cause, I think, was some dread vision of the night.

Electra Gods of our house! be ye with me — now at last!

Chrysothemis Dost thou find any encouragement in this terror?

Electra If thou wouldst tell me the vision, then I could answer.

Chrysothemis Nay, I can tell but little of the story.

Electra Tell what thou canst; a little word hath often marred, or made, men's fortunes.

Chrysothemis Tis said that she beheld our sire, restored to the sunlight, at her side once more; then he took the sceptre — Once his own, but now borne by Aegisthus — and planted it at the hearth; and thence a fruitful bough sprang upward, wherewith the whole land of Mycenae was overshadowed. Such was the tale that I heard told by one who was present when she declared her dream to the Sun-god. More than this I know not — save that she sent me by reason of that fear. So by the — gods of our house I beseech thee, hearken to me, and be not ruined by folly! For if thou repel me now, thou wilt come back to seek me in thy trouble.

Electra Nay, dear sister, let none of these things in thy hands touch the tomb; for neither custom nor piety allows thee to dedicate gifts or bring libations to our sire from a hateful wife. No — to the winds
with them or bury them deep in the earth, where none of them shall ever come near his place of rest; but, when she dies, let her find these treasures laid up for her below.

And were she not the most hardened of all women, she would never have sought to pour these offerings of enmity on the grave of him whom she slew. Think now if it is likely that the dead in the tomb should take these honours kindly at her hand, who ruthlessly slew him, like a foeman, and mangled him, and, for ablution, wiped off the blood-stains on his head? Canst thou believe that these things which thou bringest will absolve her of the murder?

It is not possible. No, cast these things aside; give him rather a lock cut from thine own tresses, and on my part, hapless that I am — scant gifts these, but my best — this hair, not glossy with unguents, and this girdle, decked with no rich ornament. Then fall down and pray that he himself may come in kindness from the world below, to aid us against our foes; and that the young Orestes may live to set his foot upon his foes in victorious might, that henceforth we may crown our father’s tomb with wealthier hands than those which grace it now.

I think, indeed, I think that he also had some part in sending her these appalling dreams; still, sister, do this service, to help thyself, and me, and him, that most beloved of all men, who rests in the realm of Hades, thy sire and mine.

Leader

The maiden counsels piously; and thou, friend, wilt do her bidding, if, thou art wise.

Chrysothemis

I will. When a duty is clear, reason forbids that two voices should contend, and claims the hastening of the deed. Only, when I attempt this task, aid me with your silence, I entreat you, my friends; for, should my mother hear of it, methinks I shall yet have cause to rue my venture.

Chrysothemis departs, to take the offerings to Agamemnon’s grave.

Chorus

If I am not an erring seer and one who fails in wisdom, justice, that hath sent the presage, will come, triumphant in her righteous strength — will come ere long, my child, to avenge. There is courage in my heart, through those new tidings of the dream that breathes comfort. Not forgetful is thy sire, the lord of Hellas; not forgetful is the two-edged axe of bronze that struck the blow of old, and slew him with foul cruelty.

The Erinys of untiring feet, who is lurking in her dread ambush, will come, as with the march and with the might of a great host. For wicked ones have been fired with passion that hurried them to a forbidden bed, to accursed bridals, to a marriage stained with guilt of blood. Therefore am I sure that the portent will not fail to bring
woe upon the partners in crime. Verily mortals cannot read the future in fearful dreams or oracles, if this vision of the night find not due fulfilment.

O chariot-race of Pelops long ago, source of many a sorrow, what weary troubles hast thou brought upon this land! For since Myrtilus sank to rest beneath the waves, when a fatal and cruel hand hurled him to destruction out of the golden car, this house was never yet free from misery and violence.

*Clytemnestra enters from the palace.*

**Clytemnestra**

At large once more, it seems, thou rangest — for Aegisthus is not here, who always kept thee at least from passing the gates, to shame thy friends. But now, since he is absent, thou takest no heed of me, though thou hast said of me oft-times, and to many, that I am a bold and lawless tyrant, who insults thee and thine. I am guilty of no insolence; I do but return the taunts that I often hear from thee.

Thy father — this is thy constant pretext — was slain by me. Yes, by me — I know it well; it admits of no denial; for justice slew him, and not I alone — justice, whom it became thee to support, hadst thou been right-minded; seeing that this father of thine, whom thou art ever lamenting, was the one man of the Greeks who had the heart to sacrifice thy sister to the gods — he, the father, who had not shared the mother’s pangs.

Come, tell me now, wherefore, or to please whom, did he sacrifice her? To please the Argives, thou wilt say? Nay, they had no right to slay my daughter. Or if, forsooth, it was to screen his brother Menelaus that he slew my child, was he not to pay me the penalty for that? Had not Menelaus two children, who should in fairness have been taken before my daughter, as sprung from the sire and mother who had caused that voyage? Or had Hades some strange desire to feast on my offspring, rather than on hers? Or had that accursed father lost all tenderness for the children of my womb, while he was tender to the children of Menelaus? Was not that the part of a callous and perverse parent? I think so, though differ from thy judgment; and so would say the dead, if she could speak. For myself, then, I view the past without dismay; but if thou deemest me perverse, see that thine own judgment is just, before thou blame thy neighbour.

**Electra**

This time thou canst not say that I have done anything to provoke such words from thee. But, if thou wilt give me leave, I fain would declare the truth, in the cause alike of my dead sire and of my sister.

**Clytemnestra**

Indeed, thou hast my leave; and didst thou always address me in such a tone, thou wouldst be heard without pain.
Then I will speak. Thou sayest that thou hast slain my father. What word could bring thee deeper shame than that, whether the deed was just or not? But I must tell thee that thy deed was not just; no, thou wert drawn on to it by the wooing of the base man who is now thy spouse.

Ask the huntress Artemis what sin she punished when she stayed the frequent winds at Aulis; or I will tell thee; for we may not learn from her. My father — so I have heard — was once disporting himself in the grove of the goddess, when his footfall startled a dappled and antlered stag; he shot it, and chanced to utter a certain boast concerning its slaughter. Wroth thereat, the daughter of Leto detained the Greeks, that, in quittance for the wild creature’s life, my father should yield up the life of his own child. Thus it befell that she was sacrificed; since the fleet had no other release, homeward or to Troy; and for that cause, under sore constraint and with sore reluctance, at last he slew her — not for the sake of Menelaus.

But grant — for I will take thine own plea — grant that the motive of his deed was to benefit his brother; — was that a reason for his dying by thy hand? Under what law? See that, in making such a law for men, thou make not trouble and remorse for thyself; for, if we are to take blood for blood, thou wouldst be the first to die, didst thou meet with thy desert.

But look if thy pretext is not false. For tell me, if thou wilt, wherefore thou art now doing the most shameless deeds of all — dwelling as wife with that blood — guilty one, who first helped thee to slay my sire, and bearing children to him, while thou hast cast out the earlier-born, the stainless offspring of a stainless marriage. How can I praise these things? Or wilt thou say that this, too, is thy vengeance for thy daughter? Nay, shameful plea, if so thou plead; ’tis not well to wed an enemy for a daughter’s sake.

But indeed I may not even counsel thee — who shrikest that I revile my mother; and truly I think that to me thou art less a mother than mistress; so wretched is the life that I live, ever beset with miseries by thee and by thy partner. And that other, who scarce escaped thy hand, the hapless Orestes, is wearing out his ill-starred days in exile. Often hast thou charged me with rearing him to punish thy crime; and I would have done so, if I could, thou mayst be sure: — for that matter, denounce me to all, as disloyal, if thou wilt, or petulant, or impudent; for if I am accomplished in such ways, methinks I am no unworthy child of thee.

Chorus Leader

I see that she breathes forth anger; but whether justice be with her, for this she seems to care no longer.
Clytemnestra to the Chorus. And what manner of care do I need to use against her, who hath thus insulted a mother, and this at her ripe age? Thinkest thou not that she would go forward to any deed, without shame?

Electra Now be assured that I do feel shame for this, though thou believe it not; I know that my behaviour is unseemly, and becomes me ill. But then the enmity on thy part, and thy treatment, compel me in mine own despite to do thus; for base deeds are taught by base.

Clytemnestra Thou brazen one! Truly I and my sayings and my deeds give thee too much matter for words.

Electra The words are thine, not mine; for thine is the action; and the acts find the utterance.

Clytemnestra Now by our lady Artemis, thou shalt not fail to pay for this boldness, so soon as Aegisthus returns.

Electra Lo, thou art transported by anger, after granting me free speech, and hast no patience to listen.

Clytemnestra Now wilt thou not hush thy clamour, or even suffer me to sacrifice, when I have permitted thee to speak unchecked?

Electra I hinder not — begin thy rites, I pray thee; and blame not my voice, for I shall say no more.

Clytemnestra Raise then, my handmaid, the offerings of many fruits, that I may uplift my prayers to this our king, for deliverance from my present fears. Lend now a gracious ear, O Phoebus our defender, to my words, though they be dark; for I speak not among friends, nor is it meet to unfold my whole thought to the light, while she stands near me, lest with her malice and her garrulous cry she spread some rash rumour throughout the town: but hear me thus, since on this wise I must speak.

That vision which I saw last night in doubtful dreams — if it hath come for my good, grant, Lycean king, that it be fulfilled; but if for harm, then let it recoil upon my foes. And if any are plotting to hurl me by treachery from the high estate which now is mine, permit them not; rather vouch. safe that, still living thus unscathed, I may bear sway over the house of the Atreidae and this realm, sharing prosperous days with the friends who share them now, and with those of my children from whom no enmity or bitterness pursues me.

O Lycean Apollo, graciously hear these prayers, and grant them to us all, even as we ask! For the rest, though I be silent, I deem that thou, a god, must know it; all things, surely, are seen by the sons of Zeus.

*Paedagogus enters.*
Paedagogus  Ladies, might a stranger crave to know if this be the palace of the king Aegisthus?
Leader       It is, sir; thou thyself hast guessed aright.
Paedagogus  And am I right in surmising that this lady is his consort? She is of queenly aspect.
Leader       Assuredly; thou art in the presence of the queen.
Paedagogus  Hail, royal lady! I bring glad tidings to thee and to Aegisthus, from friend.
Clytemnestra I welcome the omen; but I would fain know from thee, first, who may have sent thee.
Paedagogus  Phanoteus the Phocian, on a weighty mission.
Clytemnestra What is it, sir? Tell me: coming from a friend, thou wilt bring, I know, a kindly message.
Paedagogus  Orestes is dead; that is the sum.
Electra      Oh, miserable that I am! I am lost this day!
Clytemnestra What sayest thou, friend, what sayest thou? — listen not to her!
Paedagogus  I said, and say again — Orestes is dead.
Electra      I am lost, hapless one, I am undone!
Clytemnestra to Electra. See thou to thine own concerns. — But do thou, sir, tell me exactly — how did he perish?
Paedagogus  I was sent for that purpose, and will tell thee all. Having gone to the renowned festival, the pride of Greece, for the Delphian games, when he heard the loud summons to the foot-race which was first to be decided, he entered the lists, a brilliant form, a wonder in the eyes of all there; and, having finished his course at the point where it began, he went out with the glorious meed⁴ of victory. To speak briefly, where there is much to tell, I know not the man whose deeds and triumphs have matched his; but one thing thou must know; in all the contests that the judges announced, he bore away the prize; and men deemed him happy, as oft as the herald proclaimed him an Argive, by name Orestes, son of Agamemnon, who once gathered the famous armament of Greece.

Thus far, 'twas well; but, when a god sends harm, not even the strong man can escape. For, on another day, when chariots were to try their speed at sunrise, he entered, with many charioteers. One was an Achaean, one from Sparta, two masters of yoked cars were Libyans; Orestes, driving Thessalian mares, came fifth among them; the sixth from Aetolia, with chestnut colts; a Magnesian was the

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⁴ [reward]
seventh; the eighth, with white horses, was of Aenian stock; the
ninth, from Athens, built of gods; there was a Boeotian too, making
the tenth chariot.

They took their stations where the appointed umpires placed them
by lot and ranged the cars; then, at the sound of the brazen trump,
they started. All shouted to their horses, and shook the reins in
their hands; the whole course was filled with the noise of rattling
chariots; the dust flew upward; and all, in a confused throng, plied
their goads unsparingly, each of them striving to pass the wheels
and the snorting steeds of his rivals; for alike at their backs and at
their rolling wheels the breath of the horses foamed and smote.

Orestes, driving close to the pillar at either end of the course, almost
grazed it with his wheel each time, and, giving rein to the race-horse
on the right, checked the horse on the inner side. Hitherto, all the
chariots had escaped overthrow; but presently the Aenian’s hard-
mouthed colts ran away, and, swerving, as they passed from the
sixth into the seventh round, dashed their foreheads against the
team of the Barcaean. Other mishaps followed the first, shock on
shock and crash on crash, till the whole race-ground of Crisa was
strewn with the wreck of the chariots.

Seeing this, the wary charioteer from Athens drew aside and paused,
allowing the billow of chariots, surging in mid course, to go by. Orestes
was driving last, keeping his horses behind — for his trust was
in the end; but when he saw that the Athenian was alone left in, he
sent a shrill cry ringing through the ears of his swift colts, and gave
chase. Team was brought level with team, and so they raced — first
one man, then the other, showing his head in front of the chariots.

Hitherto the ill-fated Orestes had passed safely through every round,
steadfast in his steadfast car; at last, slackening his left rein while
the horse was turning, unawares he struck the edge of the pillar; he
broke the axle-box in twain; he was thrown over the chariot-rail; he
was caught in the shapely reins; and, as he fell on the ground, his
colts were scattered into the middle of the course.

But when the people saw him fallen from the car, a cry of pity went
up for the youth, who had done such deeds and was meeting such a
doom — now dashed to earth, now tossed feet uppermost to the sky
— till the charioteers, with difficulty checking the career of his hors-
es, loosed him, so covered with blood that no friend who saw it
would have known the hapless corpse. Straightway they burned it
on a pyre; and chosen men of Phocis are bringing in a small urn of
bronze the sad dust of that mighty form, to find due burial in his fa-
therland.

Such is my story — grievous to hear, if words can grieve; but for us,
who beheld, the greatest of sorrows that these eyes have seen.
Leader

Alas, alas! Now, methinks, the stock of our ancient masters hath utterly perished, root and branch.

Clytemnestra

O Zeus, what shall I call these tidings — glad tidings? Or dire, but gainful? 'Tis a bitter lot, when mine own calamities make the safety of my life.

Paedagogus

Why art thou so downcast, lady, at this news?

Clytemnestra

There is a strange power in motherhood; a mother may be wronged, but she never learns to hate her child.

Paedagogus

Then it seems that we have come in vain.

Clytemnestra

Nay, not in vain; how canst thou say ‘in vain,’ when thou hast brought an sure proofs of his death? — His, who sprang from mine own life, yet, forsaking me who had suckled and reared him, became an exile and an alien; and, after he went out of this land, he saw me no more; but, charging me with the murder of his sire, he uttered dread threats against me; so that neither by night nor by day could sweet sleep cover mine eyes, but from moment to moment I lived in fear of death. Now, however — since this day I am rid of terror from him, and from this girl — that worse plague who shared my home, while still she drained my very life-blood — now, methinks, for aught that she can threaten, I shall pass my days in peace.

Electra

Ah, woe is me! Now, indeed, Orestes, thy fortune may be lamented, when it is thus with thee, and thou art mocked by this thy mother! Is it not well?

Clytemnestra

Not with thee; but his state is well.

Electra

Hear, Nemesis of him who hath lately died!

Clytemnestra

She hath heard who should be heard, and hath ordained well.

Electra

Insult us, for this is the time of thy triumph.

Clytemnestra

Then will not Orestes and thou silence me?

Electra

We are silenced; much less should we silence thee.

Clytemnestra

Thy coming, sir, would deserve large recompense, if thou hast hushed her clamorous tongue.

Paedagogus

Then I may take my leave, if all is well.

Clytemnestra

Not so; thy welcome would then be unworthy of me, and of the ally who sent thee. Nay, come thou in; and leave her without, to make loud lament for herself and for her friends.

Clytemnestra and Paedagogus enter the palace.

Electra

How think ye? Was there not grief and anguish there, wondrous weeping and wailing of that miserable mother, for the son who perished by such a fate? Nay, she left us with a laugh! Ah, woe is me! Dearest Orestes, how is my life quenched by thy death! Thou hast
torn away with the from my heart the only hopes which still were mine — that thou wouldst live to return some day, an avenger of thy sire, and of me unhappy. But now — whither shall I turn? I am alone, bereft of thee, as of my father.

Henceforth I must be a slave again among those whom most I hate, my father's murderers. Is it not well with me? But never, at least, henceforward, will I enter the house to dwell with them; nay, at these gates I will lay me down, and here, without a friend, my days shall wither. Therefore, if any in the house be wroth, let them slay me; for 'tis a grace, if I die, but if I live, a pain; I desire life no more.

The following lines between Electra and the Chorus are chanted responsively.

Chorus Where are the thunderbolts of Zeus, or where is the bright Sun, if they look upon these things, and brand them not, but rest?

Electra Woe, woe, ah me, ah me!

Chorus O daughter, why weepest thou?

Electra with hands outstretched to heaven. Alas!

Chorus Utter no rash cry!

Electra Thou wilt break my heart!

Chorus How meanest thou?

Electra If thou suggest a hope concerning those who have surely passed to the realm below, thou wilt trample yet more upon my misery.

Chorus Nay, I know how, ensnared by a woman for a chain of gold, the prince Amphiaras found a grave; and now beneath the earth —

Electra Ah me, ah me!

Chorus — he reigns in fullness of force.

Electra Alas!

Chorus Alas indeed! for the murderess —

Electra Was slain.

Chorus Yea.

Electra I know it, I know it; for a champion arose to avenge the mourning dead; but to me no champion remains; for he who yet was left hath been snatched away.

Chorus Hapless art thou, and hapless is thy lot!

Electra Well know I that, too well — I, whose life is a torrent of woes dread and dark, a torrent that surges through all the months!

Chorus We have seen the course of thy sorrow.

Electra Cease, then, to divert me from it, when no more —
Chorus How sayest thou?

Electra — when no more can I have the comfort of hope from a brother, the seed of the same noble sire.

Chorus For all men it is appointed to die.

Electra What, to die as that ill-starred one died, amid the tramp of racing steeds, entangled in the reins that dragged him?

Chorus Cruel was his doom, beyond thought!

Electra Yea, surely; when in foreign soil, without ministry of my hands —

Chorus Alas!

Electra — he is buried, ungraced by me with sepulture or with tears.

_Chrysothemis enters in excitement._

Chrysothemis Joy wings my feet, dear sister, not careful of seemliness, if I come with speed; for I bring joyful news, to relieve thy long sufferings and sorrows.

Electra And whence couldst thou find help for my woes, whereof no cure can be imagined?

Chrysothemis Orestes is with us — know this from my lips, in living presence, as surely as thou seest me here.

Electra What, art thou mad, poor girl? Art thou laughing at my sorrows, and thine own?

Chrysothemis Nay, by our father's hearth, I speak not in mockery; I tell thee that he is with us indeed.

Electra Ah, woe is me! And from whom hast thou heard this tale, which thou believest so lightly?

Chrysothemis I believe it on mine own knowledge, not on hearsay; I have seen clear proofs.

Electra What hast thou seen, poor girl, to warrant thy belief? Whither, wonder hast thou turned thine eyes, that thou art fevered with this baneful fire?

Chrysothemis Then, for the gods' love, listen, that thou mayest know my story, before deciding whether I am sane or foolish.

Electra Speak on, then, if thou findest pleasure in speaking.

Chrysothemis Well, thou shalt hear all that I have seen. When I came to our father's ancient tomb, I saw that streams of milk had lately flowed from the top of the mound, and that his sepulchre was encircled with garlands of all flowers that blow. I was astonished at the sight, and peered about, lest haply some one should be close to my side. But when I perceived that all the place was in stillness, I crept near-
er to the tomb; and on the mound’s edge I saw a lock of hair, freshly severed.

And the moment that I saw it, ah me, a familiar image rushed upon my soul, telling me that there I beheld a token of him whom most I love, Orestes. Then I took it in my hands, and uttered no ill-omened word, but the tears of joy straightway filled mine eyes. And I know well, as knew then, that this fair tribute has come from none but him. Whose part else was that, save mine and thine? And I did it not, I know — nor thou; how shouldst thou? — when thou canst not leave this house, even to worship the gods, but at thy peril. Nor, again, does our mother’s heart incline to do such deeds, nor could she have so done without our knowledge.

No, these offerings are from Orestes! Come, dear sister, courage! No mortal life is attended by a changeless fortune. Ours was once gloomy; but this day, perchance, will seal the promise of much good.

Electra
Alas for thy folly! How I have been pitying thee!

Chrysothemis
What, are not my tidings welcome?

Electra
Thou knowest not whither or into what dreams thou wanderest.

Chrysothemis
Should I not know what mine own eyes have seen?

Electra
He is dead, poor girl; and thy hopes in that deliverer are gone: look not to him.

Chrysothemis
Woe, woe is me! From whom hast thou heard this?

Electra
From the man who was present when he perished.

Chrysothemis
And where is he? Wonder steals over my mind.

Electra
He is within, a guest not unpleasing to our mother.

Chrysothemis
Ah, woe is me! Whose, then, can have been those ample offerings to our father’s tomb?

Electra
Most likely, I think, some one brought those gifts in memory of the dead Orestes.

Chrysothemis
Oh, hapless that I am! And I was bringing such news in joyous haste, ignorant, it seems, how dire was our plight; but now that I have come, I find fresh sorrows added to the old!

Electra
So stands thy case; yet, if thou wilt hearken to me, thou wilt lighten the load of our present trouble.

Chrysothemis
Can I ever raise the dead to life?

Electra
I meant not that; I am not so foolish.

Chrysothemis
What biddest thou, then, for which my strength avails?

Electra
That thou be brave in doing what I enjoin.
Chrysothemis: Nay, if any good can be done, I will not refuse,

Electra: Remember, nothing succeeds without toil.

Chrysothemis: I know it, and will share thy burden with all my power.

Electra: Hear, then, how I am resolved to act. As for the support of friends, thou thyself must know that we have none; Hades hath taken our friends away, and we two are left alone. I, so long as I heard that my brother still lived and prospered, had hopes that he would yet come to avenge the murder of our sire. But now that he is no more, I look next to thee, not to flinch from aiding me thy sister to slay our father’s murderer, Aegisthus: — I must have no secret from thee more.

How long art thou to wait inactive? What hope is left standing, to which thine eyes can turn? Thou hast to complain that thou art robbed of thy father’s heritage; thou hast to mourn that thus far thy life is fading without nuptial song or wedded love. Nay, and do not hope that such joys will ever be thine; Aegisthus is not so ill-advised as ever to permit that children should spring from thee or me for his own sure destruction. But if thou wilt follow my counsels, first thou wilt win praise of piety from our dead sire below, and from our brother too; next, thou shalt be called free henceforth, as thou wert born, and shalt find worthy bridals; for noble natures draw the gaze of all.

Then seest thou not what fair fame thou wilt win for thyself and for me, by hearkening to my word? What citizen or stranger, when he sees us, will not greet us with praises such as these? — ‘Behold these two sisters, my friends, who saved their father’s house; who, when their foes were firmly planted of yore, took their lives in their hands and stood forth as avengers of blood! Worthy of love are these twain, worthy of reverence from all; at festivals, and wherever the folk are assembled, let these be honoured of all men for their prowess.’ Thus will every one speak of us, so that in life and in death our glory shall not fail.

Come, dear sister, hearken! Work with thy sire, share the burden of thy brother, win rest from woes for me and for thyself — mindful of this, that an ignoble life brings shame upon the noble.

Chorus Leader: In such case as this, forethought is helpful for those who speak and those who hear.

Chrysothemis: Yea, and before she spake, my friends, were she blest with a sound mind, she would have remembered caution, as she doth not remember it.

Now whither canst thou have turned thine eyes, that thou art arm- ing thyself with such rashness, and calling me to aid thee? Seest thou not, thou art a woman, not a man, and no match for thine adversaries in strength? And their fortunate prospers day by day, while
ours is ebbing and coming to nought. Who, then, plotting to vanquish a foe so strong, shall escape without suffering deadly scathe? See that we change not our evil plight to worse, if any one hears these words. It brings us no relief or benefit, if, after winning fair fame, we die an ignominious death; for mere death is not the bitterest, but rather when one who wants to die cannot obtain even that boon.

Nay, I beseech thee, before we are utterly destroyed, and leave our house desolate, restrain thy rage! I will take care that thy words remain secret and harmless; and learn thou the prudence, at last though late, of yielding, when so helpless, to thy rulers.

Leader
Hearken; there is no better gain for mortals to win than foresight and a prudent mind.

Electra
Thou hast said nothing unlooked-for; I well knew that thou wouldst reject what I proffered. Well! I must do this deed with mine own hand, and alone; for assuredly I will not leave it void.

Chrysothemis
Alas! Would thou hadst been so purposed on the day of our father’s death! What mightst thou not have wrought?

Electra
My nature was the same then, but my mind less ripe.

Chrysothemis
Strive to keep such a mind through all thy life.

Electra
These counsels mean that thou wilt not share my deed.

Chrysothemis
No; for the venture is likely to bring disaster.

Electra
I admire thy prudence; thy cowardice I hate.

Chrysothemis
I will listen not less calmly when thou praise me.

Electra
Never fear to suffer that from me.

Chrysothemis
Time enough in the future to decide that.

Electra
Begone; there is no power to help in thee.

Chrysothemis
Not so; but in thee, no mind to learn.

Electra
Go, declare all this to thy mother!

Chrysothemis
But, again, I do not hate thee with such a hate.

Electra
Yet know at least to what dishonour thou bringest me.

Chrysothemis
Dishonour, no! I am only thinking of thy good.

Electra
Am I bound, then, to follow thy rule of right?

Chrysothemis
When thou art wise, then thou shalt be our guide.

Electra
Sad, that one who speaks so well should speak amiss!

Chrysothemis
Thou hast well described the fault to which thou cleavest.

Electra
How? Dost thou not think that I speak with justice?
Chrysothemis: But sometimes justice itself is fraught with harm.

Electra: I care not to live by such a law.

Chrysothemis: Well, if thou must do this, thou wilt praise me yet.

Electra: And do it I will, no whit dismayed by thee.

Chrysothemis: Is this so indeed? Wilt thou not change thy counsels?

Electra: No, for nothing is more hateful than bad counsel.

Chrysothemis: Thou seemest to agree with nothing that I urge.

Electra: My resolve is not new, but long since fixed.

Chrysothemis: Then I will go; thou canst not be brought to approve my words, nor to commend thy conduct.

Electra: Nay, go within; never will I follow thee, however much thou mayst desire it; it were great folly even to attempt an idle quest.

Chrysothemis: Nay, if thou art wise in thine own eyes, be such wisdom thine; by and by, when thou standest in evil plight, thou wilt praise my words.

Chrysothemis goes into the palace.

Chorus: When we see the birds of the air, with sure instinct, careful to nourish those who give them life and nurture, why do not we pay these debts in like measure? Nay, by the lightning — flash of Zeus, by Themis throned in heaven, it is not long till sin brings sorrow.

Voice that comest to the dead beneath the earth, send a piteous cry, I pray thee, to the son of Atreus in that world, a joyless message of dishonour; tell him that the fortunes of his house are now distempered; while, among his children, strife of sister with sister hath broken the harmony of loving days. Electra, forsaken, braves the storm alone; she bewails alway, hapless one, her father's fate, like the nightingale unwearied in lament; she recks not of death, but is ready to leave the sunlight, could she but quell the two Furies of her house. Who shall match such noble child of noble sire?

No generous soul deigns, by a base life, to cloud a fair repute, and leave a name inglorious; as thou, too, O my daughter, hast chosen to mourn all thy days with those that mourn, and hast spurned dishonour, that thou mightest win at once a twofold praise, as wise, and as the best of daughters.

May I yet see thy life raised in might and wealth above thy foes, even as now it is humbled beneath their hand! For I have found thee in no prosperous estate; and yet, for observance of nature’s highest laws, winning the noblest renown, by thy piety towards Zeus.

Orestes enters with Pylades and two attendants, one of them carrying a funeral urn.
Orestes

Ladies, have we been directed aright, and are we on the right path to our goal?

Chorus Leader

And what seekest thou? With what desire hast thou come?

Orestes

I have been searching for the home of Aegisthus.

Leader

Well, thou hast found it; and thy guide is blameless.

Orestes

Which of you, then, will tell those within that our company, long desired, hath arrived?

Leader

This maiden — if the nearest should announce it.

Orestes

I pray thee, mistress, make it known in the house that certain men of Phocis seek Aegisthus.

Electra

Ah, woe is me! Surely ye are not bringing the visible proofs of that rumour which we heard?

Orestes

I know nothing of thy 'rumour'; but the aged Strophius charged me with tidings of Orestes.

Electra

What are they, sir? Ah, how I thrill with fear!

Orestes

He is dead; and in a small urn, as thou seest, we bring the scanty relics home.

Electra

Ah me unhappy! There, at last, before mine eyes, I see that woful, burden in your hands.

Orestes

If thy tears are for aught which Orestes hath suffered, know that yonder vessel holds his dust.

Electra

Ah, sir, allow me, then, I implore thee, if this urn indeed contains him, to take it in my hands — that I may weep and wail, not for these ashes alone, but for myself and for all our house therewith!

Orestes

to the attendants. Bring it and give it her, whoe’er she be; for she who begs this boon must be one who wished him no evil, but a friend, or haply a kinswoman in blood.

The urn is placed in Electra’s hands.

Electra

Ah, memorial of him whom I loved best on earth! Ah, Orestes, whose life hath no relic left save this — how far from the hopes with which I sent thee forth is the manner in which I receive thee back! Now I carry thy poor dust in my hands; but thou wert radiant, my child, when I sped the forth from home! Would that I had yielded up my breath, ere, with these hands, I stole thee away, and sent thee to a strange land, and rescued thee from death; that so thou mightest have been stricken down on that self-same day, and had thy portion in the tomb of thy sire!

But now, an exile from home and fatherland, thou hast perished miserably, far from thy sister; woe is me, these loving hands have not washed or decked thy corpse, nor taken up, as was meet, their
sad burden from the flaming pyre. No! at the hands of strangers, hapless one, thou hast had those rites, and so art come to us, a little dust in a narrow urn.

Ah, woe is me for my nursing long ago, so vain, that I oft bestowed on thee with loving toil! For thou wast never thy mother’s darling so much as mine; nor was any in the house thy nurse but I; and by thee I was ever called ‘sister.’ But now all this hath vanished in a day, with thy death; like a whirlwind, thou hast swept away with thee. Our father is gone; I am dead in regard to thee; thou thyself hast perished: our foes exult; that mother, who is none, is mad with joy — she of whom thou didst oft send me secret messages, thy heralds, saying that thou thyself wouldst appear as an avenger. But our evil fortune, thine and mine, hath reft all that away, and hath sent thee forth unto me thus — no more the form that I loved so well, but ashes and an idle shade.

Ah me, ah me! O piteous dust! Alas, thou dear one, sent on a dire journey, how hast undone me — undone me indeed, O brother mine!

Therefore take me to this thy home, me who am as nothing, to thy nothingness, that I may dwell with thee henceforth below; for when thou wert on earth, we shared alike; and now I fain would die, that I may not be parted from thee in the grave. For I see that the dead have rest from pain.

**Leader**

Bethink thee, Electra, thou art the child of mortal sire, and mortal was Orestes; therefore grieve not too much. This is a debt which all of us must pay.

**Orestes**

Alas, what shall I say? What words can serve me at this pass? I can restrain my lips no longer!

**Electra**

What hath troubled thee? Why didst thou say that?

**Orestes**

Is this the form of the illustrious Electra that I behold?

**Electra**

It is; and very grievous is her plight.

**Orestes**

Alas, then, for this miserable fortune!

**Electra**

Surely, sir, thy lament is not for me?

**Orestes**

O form cruelly, godlessly misused!

**Electra**

Those ill-omened words, sir, fit no one better than me.

**Orestes**

Alas for thy life, unwedded and all unblest!

**Electra**

Why this steadfast gaze, stranger, and these laments?

**Orestes**

How ignorant was I, then, of mine own sorrows!

**Electra**

By what that hath been said hast thou perceived this?

**Orestes**

By seeing thy sufferings, so many and so great.
Electra

And yet thou seest but a few of my woes.

Orestes

Could any be more painful to behold?

Electra

This, that I share the dwelling of the murderers.

Orestes

Whose murderers? Where lies the guilt at which thou hintest?

Electra

My father’s; — and then I am their slave perforce.

Orestes

Who is it that subjects thee to this constraint?

Electra

A mother — in name, but no mother in her deeds.

Orestes

How doth she oppress thee? With violence or with hardship?

Electra

With violence, and hardships, and all manner of ill.

Orestes

And is there none to succour, or to hinder?

Electra

None. I had one; and thou hast shown me his ashes.

Orestes

Hapless girl, how this sight hath stirred my pity!

Electra

Know, then, that thou art the first who ever pitied me.

Orestes

No other visitor hath ever shared thy pain.

Electra

Surely thou art not some unknown kinsman?

Orestes

I would answer, if these were friends who hear us.

Electra

Oh, they are friends; thou canst speak without mistrust.

Orestes

Give up this urn, then, and thou shalt be told all.

Electra

Nay, I beseech thee be not so cruel to me, sir!

Orestes

Do as I say, and never fear to do amiss.

Electra

I conjure thee, rob me not of my chief treasure!

Orestes

Thou must not keep it.

Electra

Ah woe is me for thee, Orestes, if I am not to give thee burial

Orestes

Hush! — no such word! — Thou hast no right to lament.

Electra

No right to lament for my dead brother?

Orestes

It is not meet for thee to speak of him thus.

Electra

Am I so dishonoured of the dead?

Orestes

Dishonoured of none: — but this is not thy part.

Electra

Yes, if these are the ashes of Orestes that I hold.

Orestes

They are not; a fiction dothed them with his name.

He gently takes the urn from her.

Electra

And where is that unhappy one’s tomb?

Orestes

There is none; the living have no tomb.
Electra
What sayest thou, boy?
Orestes
Nothing that is not true.
Electra
The man is alive?
Orestes
If there be life in me.
Electra
What? Art thou he?
Orestes
Look at this signet, once our father's, and judge if I speak truth.
Electra
O blissful day!
Orestes
Blissful, in very deed!
Electra
Is this thy voice?
Orestes
Let no other voice reply.
Electra
Do I hold thee in my arms?
Orestes
As mayest thou hold me always!
Electra
Ah, dear friends and fellow-citizens, behold Orestes here, who was feigned dead, and now, by that feigning hath come safely home!
Leader
We see him, daughter; and for this happy fortune a tear of joy trickles from our eyes.

The following lines between Orestes and Electra are chanted responsively.

Electra
Offspring of him whom I loved best, thou hast come even now, thou hast come, and found and seen her whom thy heart desired!
Orestes
I am with thee; — but keep silence for a while.
Electra
What meanest thou?
Orestes
'Tis better to be silent, lest some one within should hear.
Electra
Nay, by ever-virgin Artemis, I will never stoop to fear women, stay-at-homes, vain burdens of the ground!
Orestes
Yet remember that in women, too, dwells the spirit of battle; thou hast had good proof of that, I ween.¹
Electra
Alas! ah me! Thou hast reminded me of my sorrow, one which, from its nature, cannot be veiled, cannot be done away with, cannot forget!
Orestes
I know this also; but when occasion prompts, then will be the moment to recall those deeds.
Electra
Each moment of all time, as it comes, would be meet occasion for these my just complaints; scarcely now have I had my lips set free.
Orestes
I grant it; therefore guard thy freedom.

¹ [suppose]
Electra
What must I do?

Orestes
When the season serves not, do not wish to speak too much.

Electra
Nay, who could fitly exchange speech for such silence, when thou hast appeared? For now I have seen thy face, beyond all thought and hope!

Orestes
Thou sawest it, when the gods moved me to come . . .

Electra
Thou hast told me of a grace above the first, if a god hath indeed brought thee to our house; I acknowledge therein the work of heaven.

Orestes
I am loth, indeed, to curb thy gladness, but yet this excess of joy moves my fear.

Electra
O thou who, after many a year, hast deigned thus to gladden mine eyes by thy return, do not, now that thou hast seen me in all my woe —

Orestes
What is thy prayer?

Electra
— do not rob me of the comfort of thy face; do not force me to forego it!

Orestes
I should be wroth, indeed, if I saw another attempt it.

Electra
My prayer is granted?

Orestes
Canst thou doubt?

Electra
Ah, friends, I heard a voice that I could never have hoped to hear; nor could I have restrained my emotion in silence, and without cry, when I heard it. Ah me! But now I have thee; thou art come to me with the light of that dear countenance, which never, even in sorrow, could I forget.

The chant is concluded.

Orestes
Spare all superfluous words; tell me not of our mother’s wickedness, or how Aegisthus drains the wealth of our father’s house by lavish luxury or aimless waste; for the story would not suffer thee to keep due limit. Tell me rather that which will serve our present need — where we must show ourselves, or wait in ambush, that this our coming may confound the triumph of our foes. And look that our mother read not thy secret in thy radiant face, when we twain have advanced into the house, but make lament, as for the feigned disaster; for when we have prospered, then there will be leisure to rejoice and exult in freedom.

Electra
Nay, brother, as it pleaseth thee, so shall be my conduct also; for all my joy is a gift from thee, and not mine own. Nor would I consent to
win great good for myself at the cost of the least pain to thee; for so should I ill serve the divine power that befriens us now. But thou knowest how matters stand here, I doubt not: thou must have beard that Aegisthus is from home, but our mother within; — and fear not that she will ever see my face lit up with smiles; for mine old hatred of her hath sunk into my heart; and, since I have beheld thee, for very joy I shall never cease to weep. How indeed should I cease, who have seen thee come home this day, first as dead, and then in life? Strangely hast thou wrought on me; so that, if my father should return alive, I should no longer doubt my senses, but should believe that I saw him. Now, therefore, that thou hast come to me so wondrously, command me as thou wilt; for, had I been alone, I should have achieved one of two things — a noble deliverance, or a noble death.

Orestes

Thou hadst best be silent; for I hear some one within preparing to go forth.

Electra

to Orestes and Pylades. Enter, sirs; especially as ye bring that which no one could repulse from these doors, though he receive it without joy.

Paedagogus enters from the palace.

Paedagogus

Foolish and senseless children! Are ye weary of your lives, or was there no wit born in you, that ye see not how ye stand, not on the brink, but in the very midst of deadly perils? Nay, had I not kept watch this long while at these doors, your plans would have been in the house before yourselves; but, as it is, my care shielded you from that. Now have done with this long discourse, these insatiate cries of joy, and pass within; for in such deeds delay is evil, and 'tis well to make an end.

Orestes

What, then, will be my prospects when I enter?

Paedagogus

Good; for thou art secured from recognition.

Orestes

Thou hast reported me, I presume, as dead?

Paedagogus

Know that here thou art numbered with the shades.

Orestes

Do they rejoice, then, at these tidings? Or what say they?

Paedagogus

I will tell thee at the end; meanwhile, all is well for us on their party — even that which is not well.

Electra

Who is this, brother? I pray thee, tell me.

Orestes

Dost thou not perceive?

Electra

I cannot guess.

Orestes

Knowest thou not the man to whose hands thou gavest me once?

Electra

What man? How sayest thou?
Orestes

By whose hands, through thy forethought, I was secretly conveyed forth to Phocian soil.

Electra

Is this he in whom, alone of many, I found a true ally of old, when our sire was slain?

Orestes

’Tis he; question me no further.

Electra

O joyous day! O sole preserver of Agamemnon’s house, how hast thou come? Art thou he indeed, who didst save my brother and myself from many sorrows? O dearest hands; O messenger whose feet were kindly servants! How couldst thou be with me so long, and remain unknown, nor give a ray of light, but afflict me by fables, while possessed of truths most sweet? Hail, father — for ’tis a father that I seem to behold! All hail — and know that I have hated thee, and loved thee, in one day, as never man before!

Paedagogus

Enough, methinks; as for the story of the past, many are the circling nights, and days as many, which shall show it thee, Electra, in its fullness.

To Orestes and Pylades.

But this is my counsel to you twain, who stand there — now is the time to act; now Clytemnestra is alone — no man is now within: but, if ye pause, consider that ye will have to fight, not with the inmates alone, but with other foes more numerous and better skilled.

Orestes

Pylades, this our task seems no longer to crave many words, but rather that we should enter the house forthwith — first adoring the shrines of my father’s gods, who keep these gates.

Electra

O King Apollo! graciously hear them, and hear me besides, who so oft have come before thine altar with such gifts as my devout hand could bring! And now, O Lycean Apollo, with such vows as I can make, I pray thee, I supplicate, I implore, grant us thy benignant aid in these designs, and show men how impiety is rewarded by the gods!

Electra enters the palace.

Chorus

Behold how Ares moves onward, breathing deadly vengeance, against which none may strive! Even now the pursuers of dark guilt have passed beneath yon roof, the hounds which none may flee. Therefore the vision of my soul shall not long tarry in suspense. The champion of the spirits infernal is ushered with stealthy feet into the house, the ancestral palace of his sire, bearing keen-edged death in his hands; and Hermes, son of Maia, who hath shrouded the guile in darkness, leads him forward, even to the end, and delays no more.

Electra enters from the palace.
Electra: Ah, dearest friends, in a moment the men will do the deed; — but wait in silence.

Chorus: How is it? — what do they now?

Electra: She is decking the urn for burial, and those two stand close to her

Chorus: And why hast thou sped forth?

Electra: To guard against Aegisthus entering before we are aware.

Clytemnestra: within. Alas! Woe for the house forsaken of friends and filled with murderers!

Electra: A cry goes up within: — hear ye not, friends?

Chorus: I heard, ah me, sounds dire to hear, and shuddered!

Clytemnestra: within. O hapless that I am! — Aegisthus, where, where art thou?

Electra: Hark, once more a voice resounds!

Clytemnestra: within. My son, my son, have pity on thy mother!

Electra: Thou hadst none for him, nor for the father that begat him.

Chorus: Ill-fated realm and race, now the fate that hath pursued thee day by day is dying — is dying!

Clytemnestra: within. Oh, I am smitten!

Electra: Smite, if thou canst, once more!

Clytemnestra: within. Ah, woe is me again!

Electra: Would that the woe were for Aegisthus too!

Chorus: The curses are at work; the buried live; blood flows for blood, drained from the slayers by those who died of yore.

*Orestes and Pylades enter from the palace.*

Behold, they come! That red hand reeks with sacrifice to Ares; nor can I blame the deed.

Electra: Orestes, how fare ye?

Orestes: All is well within the house, if Apollo’s oracle spake well.

Electra: The guilty one is dead?

Orestes: Fear no more that thy proud mother will ever put thee to dishonour.

Chorus: Cease; for I see Aegisthus full in view.

Electra: Rash boys, back, back!

Orestes: Where see ye the man?

Electra: Yonder, at our mercy, be advances from the suburb, full of joy.

Chorus: Make with all speed for the vestibule; that, as your first task prospered, so this again may prosper now.
Orestes  Fear not — we will perform it.
Electra  Haste, then, whither thou wouldst.
Orestes  See, I am gone.
Electra  I will look to matters here.

_Orestes and Pylades go back into the palace._

**Chorus**  'Twere well to soothe his ear with some few words of seeming gentleness, that he may rush blindly upon the struggle with his doom.

_Aegisthus enters._

**Aegisthus**  Which of you can tell me, where are those Phocian strangers, who, 'tis said, have brought us tidings of Orestes slain in the wreck of his chariot? Thee, thee I ask, yes, thee, in former days so bold — for me-thinks it touches thee most nearly; thou best must know, and best canst tell.

**Electra**  I know assuredly; else were I a stranger to the fortune of my nearest kinsfolk.

**Aegisthus**  Where then may be the strangers? Tell me.

**Electra**  Within; they have found a way to the heart of their hostess.

**Aegisthus**  Have they in truth reported him dead?

**Electra**  Nay, not reported only; they have shown him.

**Aegisthus**  Can I, then, see the corpse with mine own eyes?

**Electra**  Thou canst, indeed; and 'tis no enviable sight.

**Aegisthus**  Indeed, thou hast given me a joyful greeting, beyond thy wont.

**Electra**  Joy be thine, if in these things thou findest joy.

**Aegisthus**  Silence, I say, and throw wide the gates, for all Mycenaeans and Argives to behold; that, if any of them were once buoyed on empty hopes from this man, now, seeing him dead, they may receive my curb, instead of waiting till my chastisement make them wise per-force!

**Electra**  No loyalty is lacking on my part; time hath taught me the prudence of concord with the stronger.

_The central doors of the palace are thrown open and a shrouded corpse is disclosed. Orestes and Pylades stand near it._

**Aegisthus**  O Zeus, I behold that which hath not fallen save by the doom of jealous Heaven; but, if Nemesis attend that word, be it unsaid! Take all the covering from the face, that kinship, at least, may receive the tribute of lament from me also.

**Orestes**  Lift the veil thyself; not my part this, but thine, to look upon these relics, and to greet them kindly.
Aegisthus  
‘Tis good counsel, and I will follow it. —

To Electra.

But thou — call [for] me Clytemnestra, if she is within.

Orestes  
Lo, she is near thee: turn not thine eyes elsewhere.

Aegisthus removes the face-cloth from the corpse.

Orestes  
Why so scared? Is the face so strange?

Aegisthus  
Who are the men into whose mid toils I have fallen, hapless that I am?

Orestes  
Nay, hast thou not discovered ere now that the dead, as thou mis-callest them, are living?

Aegisthus  
Alas, I read the riddle: this can be none but Orestes who speaks to me!

Orestes  
And, though so good a prophet, thou wast deceived so long?

Aegisthus  
Oh lost, undone! Yet suffer me to say one word . . .

Electra  
In heaven’s name, my brother, suffer him not to speak further, or to plead at length! When mortals are in the meshes of fate, how can such respite avail one who is to die? No — slay him forthwith, and cast his corpse to the creatures from whom such as he should have burial, far from our sight! To me, nothing but this can make amends for the woes of the past.

Orestes  
Go in, and quickly; the issue here is not of words, but of thy life.

Aegisthus  
Why take me into the house? If this deed be fair, what need of darkness? Why is thy hand not prompt to strike?

Orestes  
Dictate not, but go where thou didst slay my father, that in the same place thou mayest die.

Aegisthus  
The skill thou vauntest belonged not to thy sire.

Orestes  
Thou bandiest words, and our going is delayed. Move forward!

Aegisthus  
Lead thou.

Orestes  
Thou must go first.

Aegisthus  
Lest I escape thee?

Orestes  
No, but that thou mayest not choose how to die; I must not spare thee any bitterness of death. And well it were if this judgment came
straightway upon all who dealt in lawless deeds, even the judgment of the sword: so should not wickedness abound.

*Orestes and Pylades drive Aegisthus into the palace.*

**Chorus**

O house of Atreus, through how many sufferings hast thou come forth at last in freedom, crowned with good by this day’s enterprise!
The Electra of Euripides

Translated by Edward Philip Coleridge

Translator’s Preface

In preparing the following translation of the plays of Euripides I have followed the text of Paley as it stands in the “Cambridge Greek and Latin Texts” series, 1869. Similarly, too, the order of the plays conforms to his arrangement.

Without going into lengthy details for my choice of this text, I may briefly mention a few reasons for having selected it. First, there is the accessibility of this edition; secondly, its very general use to-day by the mass of English readers, in preference to the once popular Poetae Scenici of W. Dindorf; and thirdly, its superiority in many respects to all previous editions of the complete body of plays, due partly to its greater fidelity to the MSS. readings, partly to the more metrical arrangements of choral passages.

In some ways, perhaps, the adoption of a particular text saves the translator much trouble by precluding him from straying far afield into the region of textual emendation; but, at the same time, it not unfrequently forces him into direct opposition to his own opinion, if he consents to follow it without any deviation and to yield implicit obedience to its authority.

At the risk of incurring the chance of inconsistency, I have, though as a rule adhering rigidly to Paley’s text, occasionally allowed myself the liberty of following the emendations of other scholars, where for the sake of clearness or on grounds of probability, there seemed fair reasons for so doing; but in every such case attention is called to the divergence in a footnote, and the actual Greek words of the variant text are quoted.

Into the question of MSS. authority I do not here venture to digress at any length. The majority of English readers probably take small interest in such investigations; while the few who do pursue them further, will naturally have good critical editions within reach, and in these a full discussion of this subject more usefully finds a place. Those, however, who, without making a special study of the MSS., wish to see shortly on what authority any particular play of our poet rests, cannot perhaps do better than read the few remarks offered by Mr. Gow on this subject in his excellent volume, entitled, Companion to School Classics. From his concise summary and from Paley’s more exhaustive essay in Vol. III of his large annotated edition of Euripides, I

1 To his 2 vols. Plays of Euripides.

2 Macmillan, 1888.
extract the following very brief account of the Euripidean MSS., omitting all superfluous details:

(1) Nine plays are found complete in MS. Vaticanus (12th century), and in several other MSS. in part, viz. — Hecuba, Orestes, Phoenissae, Medea, Hippolytus, Alcestis, Andromache, Troadades, Rhesus.

(2) Seven others rest on the authority of two MSS. only, the Palatinus in the Vatican and Florentinus 2 (both 14th century), viz. — Heracleidae, Supplices, Ion, Bacchae, Iphigenia in Tauris, Iphigenia in Aulide, Cyclops.

(3) Three plays, Helena, Hercules Furens, and Electra are found only in Florentinus 2.

Another point requiring explanation, perhaps, is my treatment of corrupt passages. Only those who have set themselves carefully to examine the text of an ancient classic, more especially that of a Greek dramatist, can be fully aware of the difficulties that beset the student from first to last. The ravages of time, the ignorance of copyists, the more dangerous officiousness of grammarians, the perverted ingenuity of successive editors infected with the pernicious “cacoethes emendandi,” have all contributed in the course of many centuries to render the task of arriving at the genuine text an almost hopeless one.

Wrote Paley, in the preface to his third volume of Euripides,

The whole question of the present state of our classical texts is one demanding a most careful and lengthened inquiry. If we cannot have them perfect, which is not to be hoped for, we must make up our minds to choose between adhering to the authority of the best existing MSS., or freely admitting the conjectural restorations of eminent critics, or we must adopt a cautious mean between the two, which consists in correcting obvious errors, to the rejection of all purely speculative or only plausible alterations.

It is this last method which Paley himself adopts; and, agreeing cordially as I do with his strictures on unwarrantable tampering with the text, I have endeavoured as far as possible, to follow his guidance through the tortuous mazes of textual corruption; with this reservation, however, that, as my purpose is a twofold one, being as much to enable readers unfamiliar with the Greek to understand the dramatist’s meaning as to produce a faithful version of the original, I have, in dealing with passages avowedly corrupt, preferred to adopt provisionally an intelligible emendation to leaving an awkward break in the sense. At the same time, from a textual critic’s point of view, Paley’s remark is unquestionably true, “passages really corrupt should be marked as avowedly corrupt, not patched up and almost rewritten.”

On the other hand, it is by no means certain at times, whether, in the attempt to follow the supposed genuine reading, an editor has not rushed to another extreme and

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1 [Martin Luther discoursing, in the presence of the Prince Elector of Saxony and other Princes, of the many sorts and differences of wicked persons, said: “Colax, Sycophanta, Cacoethes; these sins and blasphemies are almost alike the one to the other, only that they go one after another, as a man going up the stairs and steps ascends from one to another.”]
committed an error, pleasantly described by a recent reviewer as “translating unintelligible Greek into unintelligible English and going on his way rejoicing.”

Absit omen!¹

As regards the addition of notes to this translation, the few that are given have, for the sake of the reader’s convenience, been appended as footnotes, to avoid the necessity of referring continually to an appendix. They are of two kinds, dealing firstly, with variant readings and proposed emendations, and secondly, with obscure allusions; the former being by far the more numerous class.

Euripides is an author, about whom and whose writings so much has been written that a mass of notes is not only unnecessary, but apt to distract and weary the reader, who presumably wishes to know not what a commentator but what the author says and thinks. Still as there is occasionally an allusion, the elucidation of which is necessary to a full understanding of the context, a few explanatory notes have been added.

The adoption of Paley’s edition as a textus receptus,² has to some extent obviated the need of calling attention on every occasion to variations from the MSS., for that which he has admitted I have in the majority of instances tacitly followed; wherever I have diverged from him I have noted the fact and cited my authority for so doing; and occasionally, when unintelligible or corrupt passages occurred, more than one of the numerous emendations offered have been quoted.

There has been, and still is, in Germany, a large school of critics, who settle textual difficulties by a method only praiseworthy for its extreme simplicity; they at once pronounce spurious whatever appears to them hard to understand, and so relieve Euripides of a host of more or less time-honoured “cruces.” Against such a charming plan for elucidating his author Paley resolutely sets his face, and, it may be, goes a little too far in the opposite direction in his sturdy conservatism and retention of passages almost certainly spurious or interpolated.

I do not feel called upon, in the capacity of translator, to discuss the genuineness of any of the plays attributed to the poet. Where single lines have been called in question by Paley or Nauck, by Dindorf or Kirchhoff, I have generally noticed their objections, without, however, absolutely omitting the lines. But when the genuineness of large portions of plays is at stake, as in the case of the conclusion of the Phoenissae or of frequent passages in the Iphigenia in Aulide, to say nothing of the entire Rhesus, I have not made any allusion to the voluminous controversies that have been carried on over them.

In alluding briefly to editions of Euripides, other than that of Paley, I cannot sufficiently express my debt to the critical apparatus prefixed to Vol. I of the Teubner edition,³ which I have consulted throughout; as well as to the critical notes appended to Hartung’s edition, an edition one might employ with still greater advantage, were it not so full of his own daring and not unfrequently capricious corrections; to Jerram’s

¹ [May omen be absent, may what is said not come true.]
² [received text]
³ Euripidis Tragoediae ex recensione Augusti Nauckii, Editio tertia. Lipsiae, 1887
useful little volumes in the Clarendon Press series, the value of which is immensely enhanced by the addition of brief critical notes on the most important variant readings; and lastly, to several editions of separate plays, amongst which for English scholars, Sandys’ edition of the Bacchae ranks facile princeps as a book which every student of Euripides will value and appreciate; to the careful but somewhat laboured works of Pflugk and Klotz, a few only of whose volumes I have read through; and lastly, to Verrall’s edition of the Medea, and Mahaffy’s edition of the Hippolytus, both of which works are full of interesting suggestions, although, like Hartung’s, they seem to admit too many variations into the text. What Paley has called the “subjectivity” of the editor is almost too conspicuous; so that, what with rewriting in the one case and re-arranging in the other, the originals are, as it were, old friends appearing with new faces. For a fuller account of the numerous modern editions of separate plays reference may be usefully made to Professor Mayor’s Guide to the Choice of Classical Books. Of the older editions of Euripides, Paley gives a brief account in his introduction to Vol. III, cited above, from which and from the article on Euripides in Dr. Smith’s large Biographical Dictionary, I extract a short résumé:

1 Editio princeps of Euripides, containing the Medea, Hippolytus, Alcestis, Andromache, probably edited by J. Lascaris, and printed by De Alopa, at Florence, towards the end of 15th century.

2 Aldus published 18 plays, omitting the Electra, at Venice, 1503.


10 The Fragments by Wagner. Wratislaw, 1844.

Of separate plays there have been almost countless editions; but here it must suffice to mention a few of the more famous editors: e.g., Porson, Elmsley, Valckenaer, Monk, Pflugk, Hermann, etc., etc.

The only complete translation in English of any note, actually known to me, is an old one in verse by Michael Wodhull. In the author’s preface to this work, an exhaustive account of previous attempts in the same field is given, which is not without interest as showing the critical stand-point of that age.

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1 [easily the first]
2 New edition by George Bell and Sons.
In more recent times we have had Robert Browning’s *Balaustion*, a beautiful poem in itself, and almost a verbatim translation of the *Alcestis*; while not a few scholars of modern days have shown their keen appreciation of the beauties of Euripides by presenting the world with verse translations of portions of his works.

In conclusion, if it is necessary to say anything on the vexed question of translations in general, one might perhaps defend them against their traducers on the ground that, when, as now, the whole world is bent on being examined in every branch of knowledge, time becomes an object of vital importance, and, if only to save this, translations have a distinct value. There are many who wish to know the contents of the ancient classics without being put to the trouble of studying them closely in the original language; indeed, the number of those who will have leisure in the future to study these great masterpieces is only too likely to become even smaller than now as the pressure of examinations and the range of prescribed subjects becomes daily larger; if, then, a translation can, in however an imperfect way, serve to keep alive an admiration for the models of antiquity, it will not have been undertaken in vain.

The form that any translation should assume is a point on which few persons hold identically the same opinion. It is a matter for individual taste. As far as I am concerned, this knotty point has been decided for me by my publishers, who have therefore saved me the trouble of weighing conflicting claims.

A prose version having been essayed, I have endeavoured to produce one, which should combine, as far as the different idioms of the two languages permit, an accurate rendering of the Greek text with some elegance of expression. How far the execution falls short of the conception I am only too painfully conscious. To be literal and at the same time literary is a high goal to aim at; and it is to be feared that in all attempts of this kind, the *amari aliquid*¹ will rise both for reader and writer. Still it will not be wholly in vain, if by means of a translation, imperfect as this will doubtless appear to many more competent to produce one than the present writer, anything is contributed to the wider study of one concerning whom a brother poet and dramatist once wrote:

>... a poet whom Socrates called his friend, whom Aristotle lauded, whom Menander admired, and for whom Sophocles and the city of Athens put on mourning on hearing of his death, must certainly have been something.

**A short memoir of Euripides**

As with so many other authors of classical antiquity, considerable obscurity veils the details of Euripides’ life; nor is it easy in the case of a dramatist, to gather from chance utterances, spoken in character, the real sentiments of the writer on any particular subject.

It is true that, apart from the numerous unfounded scandals and legends which invariably surround any person of eminence, certain broad facts regarding his life stand out with tolerable clearness; but, for the rest, we are thrown back upon conjec-

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¹ [somewhat bitter]

² Quoted from Goethe by John Addington Symonds in his *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 1st series, p. 242.
ture based upon the weak evidence of later writers or the gossip and undisguised malice of contemporary opponents.

Taking, first, the few details which are regarded as tolerably certain, we are informed that he was born in B.C. 480, on the very day of the battle of Salamis, and in the island itself, though others place his birth five years earlier. His parents must have been wealthy people, and not improbably of some rank, for their son was not only able to attend the expensive lectures of Prodicus, Anaxagoras, and other famous sophists and teachers of the day, but also held in his youth certain offices, for which none but the nobly born seem to have been eligible. As for the scandalous attacks and ribald jests of the comic poets of the period regarding his mother and her antecedents, the evidence of their having any foundation in fact is so very slight that we may dismiss them without serious consideration. The legend, for instance, which makes the poet’s mother a seller of herbs and not a very honest woman either, no doubt served Aristophanes for many a good joke at his enemy’s expense; but it should be borne in mind that this brilliant caricaturist’s avowed object was to deprecate Euripides, and he certainly was not very careful what use he made of current scandal and perverted truth, so long as he could raise a laugh and amuse his audience. Similarly, too, the stories which make Euripides a man of dissolute habits, given up to vice and pursuing it throughout his life till it led him to a violent end, will be found, on examination, to rest on the flimsiest evidence, and probably originated in the prurient imagination of his numerous enemies or of readers who either misunderstood their author or too rashly inferred that they had found a key to his character in some isolated passage, considered without reference to its context.

Passing to better authenticated facts, it is recorded that the poet’s father had him trained with extreme care to contend in the footrace at Olympia, but that after winning two prizes at less important games, he was rejected at Olympia on account of some technical difficulty connected with his age. From his own bitter remarks on the subject of athletes and their habits in some interesting fragments of a play, entitled Autolycus, we may fairly infer that he carried away no very pleasant memories of that epoch in his life. Further, we learn that he applied himself to painting and sculpture, in the first of which arts he must have attained considerable proficiency, for pictures of his were exhibited at Megara many years after his death, and there are frequent allusions in his plays pointing to an intimate and appreciative acquaintance with this subject.

He was twice married, each time, it is said, unhappily; some indeed have gone so far as to refer the constant diatribes and sneers in his plays against women to his own personal experiences, forgetting perhaps, in their eagerness to advance this theory, that the poet has quite as frequently drawn female characters of almost ideal tenderness, devotion, and beauty. Of the three sons born to him, the youngest, called after his father, produced his last plays, and was himself also a dramatist by profession.

Late in life Euripides retired from Athens to Magnesia, and finally accepted the invitation of Archelaus, King of Macedon, to his court, then a home for men of letters and savants of all kinds. Here his genius speedily advanced him to royal favour, and it is even said that he was called in to give his advice at the monarch’s council-table. Possibly the distinction, with which he was treated, excited the jealousy of rival court
poets, for there is a story current that he met his death from the bites of dogs set upon him by his enemies as he was going to keep an assignation. This wild story no doubt may have arisen from a confusion between the poet and the plot of his last play, *The Bacchae*, in which Pentheus is torn to pieces by infuriated women. But it is interesting both as showing the sort of calumny with which vulgar scandal will assail the great, and also as pointing to the state of feeling which must have existed for such an idle tale to originate at all. On his death in B.C. 406, he was buried with great pomp at Pella, the Macedonian capital, in spite of the request of his countrymen that his remains might be sent to Athens.

Such are the few meagre details we are able to collect from reliable authorities of the poet’s life. From his own writings and from somewhat doubtful sources a little more has been conjecturally assumed. Thus we are told, with great probability, that he was the friend of Pericles, of Socrates, and Alcibiades, and that his friendship with the two latter caused him to leave his native city rather than risk the chance of incurring the odium and unpopularity which eventually brought them to their deaths. Legend, busy on this point as on others, has set down his retirement into Magnesia to the irritation caused him by the merciless satire of Aristophanes on the poet’s unhappy experiences of married life, and it is unfortunately only too likely that one who could make capital out of the death of the man he disliked, would not hesitate to pour out his venomous abuse on domestic scenes which modern decency prefers to regard as sacred.

Born, as Euripides was, some time between B.C. 490 and 480, and dying in B.C. 406, his life comprised the whole brilliant period of Athenian supremacy. Thus he would have witnessed the successive steps by which Athens attained in a short time a pinnacle of material prosperity and artistic glory never reached before or after by any other state in Hellas; he would have admired the masterly organization of the Delian Confederacy, have shared in the varied splendours and triumphs of the age of Pericles, rejoiced at the victories of Cimon, watched the successful schemes of Athenian colonization, and followed with attentive eye the many phases of that long and disastrous war, which brought such suffering on his countrymen, and finally left his city ruined and humbled at the feet of Sparta. Amongst the circle of his acquaintance he might have counted poets, painters, sculptors, historians, and philosophers, whose productions are still the wonder of the world and the despair of modern imitators.

Indeed, to know any one character of that great period thoroughly it is necessary to know something of them all, and only in this way can one hope to find the right starting-point for a proper appreciation of this many-sided poet, and to see how far he influenced and how far he was influenced by his environment.

Euripides produced his first play, the *Peliades*, in B.C. 455, a year after the death of Aeschylus; it obtained the third prize, but considering the poet’s age and the rivals he probably had to meet, this is no evidence of inferior work. Having once started it is probable that he brought out tetralogies at regular intervals, till in B.C. 441 he attained the coveted distinction and won the first prize, but the names of his plays on this occasion have not been identified. Thrice again was he proclaimed victor, on the last occasion with plays that appeared after his death. This small measure of imme-
diate success may at first sight appear strange, for we know that he was a prolific writer, some seventy-five or even ninety-two plays being attributed to him.

But the reason is not really far to seek. He was not the advocate of any party; for though he was inclined towards a war-like policy, and entertained a lively hatred of Sparta and things Spartan, yet he was equally ready to point out to Athens her mistakes and the inevitable consequences of her follies. Such a man was not likely to please the judges of his day, who almost inevitably must have been influenced by party considerations; and so others, who abstained from politics altogether in their compositions, or consistently supported one side, stepped in to carry off the prize which “the great outsider,” as Mahaffy so aptly calls him, must often on his merits and in accordance with the judgment of posterity have better deserved. Nor, again, was Euripides, strictly speaking, a public man, that is, in the sense of keeping himself before the people; doubtless he was well versed in all that went on around him, as indeed is abundantly proved by his writings; but he did not mix much with his fellows in the way, for example, that his friend Socrates did; his mind was more purely speculative; the quiet of his study was therefore more congenial to him than the noise of the market-place, and the silent perusal of his books than the wordy warfare of the law-courts.

In all the great social problems of the day he took a deep interest, and passages abound in his plays proving how thoroughly he had mastered some of them and how far in advance of his age he had gone in his efforts to arrive at the solution of others. The treatment of slaves, the relations of women towards the other sex, the popular theology, new discoveries in science, these are only a few of the questions which occupied his thoughts and attracted his cosmopolitan sympathies.

Living, as he did, in the age of the Sophists, an age of daring speculation and unbounded scepticism, when old beliefs were giving way to new theories, it is not strange that Euripides was affected by the movement, and that the influence of sophist teaching is everywhere discernible in his pages. In no writer of the period is the spirit of this new learning more clearly mirrored; never before were conventional methods treated with such scant respect; and this it is which roused the apprehensions of the more conservative Aristophanes, and threw him into such violent opposition to this new-fangled poet — opposition, which, after all, was doomed to fall powerless before overmastering genius.

A certain melancholy pervades all the poetry of Euripides. Whether, as some say, he was naturally morose, or whether his experiences soured his disposition, we have no means of deciding now. The ceaseless rancour of malevolent foes, the despair that at length drags down a man who is persistently and purposely misunderstood, the fate of his best friends, the sad contrast of the closing years of the Peloponnesian War to its early promise, his own domestic troubles — all these causes may well have succeeded in inspiring him with that gloomy view of life which is reflected so deeply in his writings.

To enter into any examination of the exaggerated attacks made on the poet by his detractors, ancient and modern, would be too long a subject in so brief a memoir, even had it not been already most ably treated by Professor Mahaffy in his little vol-
ume on Euripides; two remarks from which I take the liberty of quoting. Speaking of the atheism laid to Euripides’ charge, he says:

The only declared atheist in his extant plays is the brutal and ignorant Cyclops, whose coarse and sensual unbelief is surely intended for a keen satire on such vulgarity in speculation.

In another passage, after discussing the rival views that have prevailed about our poet, and the anomalies and contradictions of his character which make it so easy to blame, so hard to understand his many-sidedness, he concludes:

We must combine all these portraits with their contradictions to obtain an adequate idea of that infinitely various, unequal, suggestive mind, which was at the same time practically shrewd and mystically vague, clear in expression but doubtful in thought, morose in intercourse and yet a profound lover of mankind, drawing ideal women and yet perpetually sneering at the sex, doubting the gods and yet reverencing their providence, above his age and yet not above it, stooping to the interests of the moment and yet missing the reward of momentary fame, despairing of future life and yet revolving problems which owe all their interest to the very fact that they are perpetual.

Euripides is the last of the Greek tragedians properly so called. Says Macaulay,

The sure sign of the general decline of an art is the frequent occurrence, not of deformity, but of misplaced beauty.

How hard this criticism hits Euripides must be obvious to all who are familiar with his choral odes. Many of the most beautiful of these have no direct connection with the plot of the play in which they occur; they might be introduced with equal propriety elsewhere; they are exquisite hymns, and, as such, often recommend a poor play; but they are irrelevant and out of place.

In spite, however, of all that was said and written against him, the great fact remains that he was by far the most popular of all the tragedians. He appealed directly to men’s hearts; as Aristotle said of him, he represented men as they are, not as they ought to be; and if he thereby lost in dignity, he yet gained by being able to extend a wider sympathy to the sufferings of his fellow-men. And this no doubt will explain much that has been most bitterly blamed in his method; it is said that he vulgarized tragedy, bringing it down to the level of melodrama with his excessive love of pathos, his reliance on striking scenery and novelties in music to create an effect, his rhetorical subtlety and exaggerated patriotism; but an unerring insight had taught how he could best reach his audience, and this was enough for him. The sentiment expressed by Terence many years later might very well have issued from the lips of Euripides:

_Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto._

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1. [i.e., I am a human being; I consider nothing that is human alien to me. From _Heauton Timorumenos_.]
Dramatis Personae

Peasant of Mycenae, husband of Electra.
Electra, daughter of Agamemnon.
Orestes, son of Agamemnon.
Pylades, a mute, friend of Orestes.
Chorus of Argive country women.
Clytemnestra, widow of Agamemnon.
Old man, formerly servant of Agamemnon.
Message.
The Dioscuroi.

Scene

Before the hut of the peasant, in the country on the borders of Argolis. It is just before sunrise. The peasant is discovered alone.

Peasant

O Argos, ancient land, and streams of Inachus, whence on a day king Agamemnon sailed to the realm of Troy, carrying his warriors aboard a thousand ships; and after he had slain Priam who was reigning in Ilium and captured the famous city of Dardanus, he came hither to Argos and has set up high on the temple-walls many a trophy, spoil of the barbarians. Though all went well with him in Troy, yet was he slain in his own palace by the guile of his wife Clytemnestra and the hand of Aegisthus, son of Thyestes. So he died and left behind him the ancient sceptre of Tantalus, and Aegisthus reigns in his stead, with the daughter of Tyndareus, Agamemnon’s queen, to wife. Now as for those whom he left in his halls, when he sailed to Troy, his son Orestes and his tender daughter Electra — the boy Orestes, as he was like to be slain by Aegisthus, his sire’s old foster-father secretly removed to the land of Phocis and gave to Strophius to bring up, but the maid Electra abode in her father’s house, and soon as she had budded into maidenhood, came all the princes of Hellas asking her hand in marriage. But Aegisthus kept her at home for fear she might bear a son to some chieftain who would avenge Agamemnon, nor would he betroth her unto any. But when e’en thus there seemed some room for fear that she might bear some noble lord a child by stealth and Aegisthus was minded to slay her, her mother, though she had a cruel heart, yet rescued the maiden from his hand. For she could find excuses₁ for having slain her husband, but she feared the hatred she would incur for her children’s murder. Wherefore Aegisthus devised this scheme: on Agamemnon’s son who had escaped his realm by flight he set a price to

₁ Because he had slain her daughter Iphigenia, and brought home a rival, Cassandra.
be paid to any who should slay him, while he gave Electra to me in marriage, whose ancestors were citizens of Mycenae. It is not that I blame myself for; my family was noble enough, though certainly impoverished, and so my good birth suffers. By making for her this weak alliance he thought he would have little to fear. For if some man of high position had married her, he might have revived the vengeance for Agamemnon’s murder, which now is sleeping; in which case Aegisthus would have paid the penalty. But Cypris is my witness that I have ever respected her maidenhood; she is still as though unwed. Unworthy as I am, honour forbids that I should so affront the daughter of a better man. Yea, and I am sorry for Orestes, hapless youth, who is called my kinsman, to think that he should ever return to Argos and behold his sister’s wretched marriage. And whoso counts me but a fool for leaving a tender maid untouched when I have her in my house, to him I say, he measures purity by the vicious standard of his own soul, a standard like his own.

Electra enters from the hut, carrying a water pitcher on her head. She is meanly clad.

Electra

O sable night, nurse of the golden stars! beneath thy pall I go to fetch water from the brook with my pitcher poised upon my head, not indeed because I am forced to this necessity, but that to the gods I may display the affronts Aegisthus puts upon me, and to the wide firmament pour out my lamentation for my sire. For my own mother, the baleful daughter of Tyndareus, hath cast me forth from her house to gratify her lord; for since she hath borne other children to Aegisthus she puts me and Orestes on one side at home.

Peasant

Oh! why, poor maiden, dost thou toil so hard on my behalf, thou that aforetime wert reared so daintily? why canst thou not forego thy labour, as I bid thee?

Electra

As a god’s I count thy kindness to me, for in my distress thou hast never made a mock at me. ’Tis rare fortune when mortals find such healing balm for their cruel wounds as ’tis my lot to find in thee. Wherefore I ought, though thou forbid me, to lighten thy labours, as far as my strength allows, and share all burdens with thee to ease thy load. Thou hast enough to do abroad; ’tis only right that I should keep thy house in order. For when the toiler cometh to his home from the field, it is pleasant to find all comfortable in the house.

Peasant

If such thy pleasure, go thy way; for, after all, the spring is no great distance from my house. And at break of day I will drive my steers to my glebe and sow my crop. For no idler, though he has the gods’ names ever on his lips, can gather a livelihood without hard work.

Electra and the Peasant go out. A moment later, Orestes and Pylades enter.

Orestes

Ah Pylades, I put thee first ’mongst men for thy love, thy loyalty and friendliness to me; for thou alone of all my friends wouldst still hon-
our poor Orestes, in spite of the grievous plight whereto I am reduced by Aegisthus, who with my accursed mother’s aid slew my sire. I am come from Apollo’s mystic shrine to the soil of Argos, without the knowledge of any, to avenge my father’s death upon his murderers. Last night went unto his tomb and wept thereon, cutting off my hair as an offering and pouring o’er the grave the blood of a sheep for sacrifice, unmarked by those who lord it o’er this land. And now though I enter not the walled town, yet by coming to the borders of the land I combine two objects; I can escape to another country if any spy me out and recognize me, and at the same time seek my sister, for I am told she is a maid no longer but is married and living here, that I may meet her, and, after enlisting her aid in the deed of blood, learn for certain what is happening in the town. Let us now, since dawn is uplifting her radiant eye, step aside from this path. For maybe some labouring man or serving maid will come in sight, of whom we may inquire whether it is here that my sister hath her home. Lo! yonder I see a servant bearing a full pitcher of water on her shaven head; let us sit down and make inquiry of this bond-maid, if haply we may glean some tidings of the matter which brought us hither, Pylades.

*They retire a little, as Electra returns from the spring.*

**Electra**

*chanting.* Bestir thy lagging feet, ‘tis high time; on, on o’er thy path of tears! ah misery! I am Agamemnon’s daughter, she whom Clytemnestra, hateful child of Tyndareus, bare; hapless Electra is the name my countrymen call me. Ah me! for my cruel lot, my hateful existence! O my father Agamemnon! in Hades art thou laid, butchered by thy wife and Aegisthus. Come, raise with me that dirge once more; uplift the woful strain that brings relief.

On, on o’er thy path of tears! ah misery! And thou, poor brother, in what city and house art thou a slave, leaving thy suffering sister behind in the halls of our fathers to drain the cup of bitterness? Oh! come, great Zeus, to set me free from this life of sorrow, and to avenge my sire in the blood of his foes, bringing the wanderer home to Argos.

Take this pitcher from my head, put it down, that I may wake betimes, while it is yet night, my lamentation for my sire, my doleful chant, my dirge of death, for thee, my father in thy grave, which day by day I do rehearse, rending my skin with my nails, and smiting on my shaven head in mourning for thy death. Woe, woe! rend the cheek; like a swan with clear loud note beside the brimming river calling to its parent dear that lies a-dying in the meshes of the crafty net, so I bewail thee, my hapless sire,

After that last fatal bath of thine laid out most piteously in death. Oh I the horror of that axe which hacked thee so cruelly, my sire I
oh! the bitter thought that prompted thy return from Troy! With no garlands or victor’s crowns did thy wife welcome thee, but with his two-edged sword she made thee the sad sport of Aegisthus and kept her treacherous paramour.

The Chorus of the Argive Country Women enter. The following lines between Electra and the Chorus are sung responsively.

**Chorus**

O Electra, daughter of Agamemnon, to thy rustic cot I come, for a messenger hath arrived, a highlander from Mycenae, one who lives on milk, announcing that the Argives are proclaiming a sacrifice for the third day from now, and all our maidens are to go to Hera’s temple.

**Electra**

Kind friends, my heart is not set on festivity, nor do necklaces of gold cause any flutter in my sorrowing bosom, nor will I stand up with the maidens of Argos to beat my foot in the mazy dance. Tears have been my meat day and night; ah misery! See my unkempt hair, my tattered dress; are they fit for a princess, a daughter of Agamemnon, or for Troy which once thought of my father as its captor?

**Chorus**

Mighty is the goddess; so come, and borrow of me broaded robes for apparel and jewels of gold that add a further grace to beauty’s charms. Dost think to triumph o’er thy foes by tears, if thou honour not the gods? ’Tis not by lamentation but by pious prayers to heaved that thou, my daughter, wilt make fortune smile on thee.

**Electra**

No god hearkens to the voice of lost Electra, or heeds the sacrifices offered by my father long ago. Ah woe for the dead! woe for the living wanderer, who dwelleth in some foreign land, an outcast and vagabond at a menial board, sprung though he is of a famous sire! Myself, too, in a poor man’s hut do dwell, wasting my soul with grief, an exile from my father’s halls, here by the scarred hill-side; while my mother is wedded to a new husband in a marriage stained by blood.

**Chorus Leader**

Many a woe to Hellas and thy house did Helen, thy mother’s sister, cause.

**Electra**

_catching sight of Orestes and Pylades._ Ha! Friends, I break off my lament; yonder are strangers just leaving the place of ambush where they were couching, and making for the house. We must seek to escape the villains by flying, thou along the path and I into my cottage.

**Orestes**

Stay, poor maid; fear no violence from me.

**Electra**

O Phoebus Apollo I beseech thee spare my life.

**Orestes**

Give me the lives of others more my foes than thou!

**Electra**

Begone! touch me not! thou hast no right to.

**Orestes**

There is none I have a better right to touch.

**Electra**

How is it then thou waylayest me, sword in hand, near my house?
Orestes

Wait and hear, and thou wilt soon agree with me.

Electra

Here I stand; I am in thy power in any case, since thou art the stronger.

Orestes

I am come to thee with news of thy brother.

Electra

O best of friends! is he alive or dead?

Orestes

Alive; I would fain give thee my good news first.

Electra

God bless thee! in return for thy welcome tidings.

Orestes

I am prepared to share that blessing between us.

Electra

In what land is my poor brother spending his dreary exile?

Orestes

His ruined life does not conform to the customs of any one city.

Electra

Surely he does not want for daily bread?

Orestes

Bread he has, but an exile is a helpless man at best.

Electra

What is this message thou hast brought from him?

Orestes

He asks, “Art thou alive? and if so, How art thou faring?”

Electra

Well, first thou seest how haggard I am grown.

Orestes

So wasted with sorrow that I weep for thee.

Electra

Next mark my head, shorn and shaven like a Scythian’s.

Orestes

Thy brother’s fate and father’s death no doubt disturb thee.

Electra

Yes, alas! for what have I more dear than these?

Orestes

Ah! and what dost thou suppose is dearer to thy brother?

Electra

He is far away, not here to show his love to me.

Orestes

Wherefore art thou living here far from the city?

Electra

I am wedded, sir; a fatal match!

Orestes

Alas! for thy brother; I pity him. Is thy husband of Mycenae?

Electra

He is not the man to whom my father ever thought of betrothing me.

Orestes

Tell me all, that I may report it to thy brother.

Electra

I live apart from my husband in this house.

Orestes

The only fit inmate would be a hind or herd.

Electra

Poor he is, yet he displays a generous consideration for me.

Orestes

Why, what is this consideration that attaches to thy husband?

Electra

He has never presumed to claim from me a husband’s rights.

Orestes

Is he under a vow of chastity? or does he disdain thee?

Electra

He thought he had no right to flout my ancestry.

Orestes

How was it he was not overjoyed at winning such a bride?
Electra

He does not recognize the right of him who disposed of my hand.

Orestes

I understand; he was afraid of the vengeance of Orestes hereafter.

Electra

There was that fear, but he was a virtuous man as well.

Orestes

Ah! a noble nature this! He deserves kind treatment.

Electra

Yes, if ever the wanderer return.

Orestes

But did thy own mother give in to this?

Electra

'Tis her husband, not her children that a woman loves, sir stranger.

Orestes

Wherefore did Aegisthus put this affront on thee?

Electra

His design in giving me to such a husband was to weaken my offspring.

Orestes

To prevent thee bearing sons, I suppose, who should punish him?

Electra

That was his plan; God grant I may avenge me on him for it!

Orestes

Does thy mother's husband know that thou art yet a maid?

Electra

He does not; our silence robs him of that knowledge.

Orestes

Are these women friends of thine, who overhear our talk?

Electra

They are, and they will keep our conversation perfectly secret.

Orestes

What could Orestes do in this matter, if he did return?

Electra

Canst thou ask? Shame on thee for that! Is not this the time for action?

Orestes

But suppose he comes, how could he slay his father's murderers?

Electra

By boldly meting out the same fate that his father had meted out to him by his foes.

Orestes

Wouldst thou be brave enough to help him slay his mother?

Electra

Aye, with the self-same axe that drank my father's blood.

Orestes

Am I to tell him this, and that thy purpose firmly holds?

Electra

Once I have shed my mother's blood o'er his, then welcome death!

Orestes

Ah! would Orestes were standing near to hear that!

Electra

I should not know him, sir, if I saw him.

Orestes

No wonder; you were both children when you parted.

Electra

There is only one of my friends would recognize him.

Orestes

The man maybe who is said to have snatched him away from being murdered?

Electra

Yes, the old servant who tended my father's childhood long ago.

Orestes

Did thy father's corpse obtain burial?
Electra

Such burial as it was, after his body had been flung forth from the palace.

Orestes

O God! how awful is thy story! Yes, there is a feeling, arising even from another’s distress, that wrings the human heart. Say on, that when know the loveless tale, which yet I needs must hear, I may carry it to thy brother. For pity, though it has no place in ignorant natures, is inborn in the wise; still it may cause trouble to find excessive cleverness amongst the wise.

I too am stirred by the same desire as the stranger. For dwelling so far from the city I know nothing of its ills, and I should like to hear about them now myself.

Electra

I will tell you, if I may; and surely I may tell a friend about my own and my father’s grievous misfortunes. Now since thou movest me to speak, I entreat thee, sir, tell Orestes of our sorrows; first, describe the dress I wear, the load of squalor that oppresses me, the hovel I inhabit after my royal home; tell him how hard I have to work at weaving clothes myself or else go barely clad and do without; how I carry home on my head water from the brook; no part have I in holy festival, no place amid the dance; a maiden still I turn from married dames and from Castor too, to whom they betrothed me before he joined the heavenly host, for I was his kinswoman. Meantime my mother, ’mid the spoils of Troy, is seated on her throne, and at her foot-stool slaves from Asia stand and wait, captives of my father’s spear, whose Trojan robes are fastened with brooches of gold. And there on the wall my father’s blood still leaves a deep dark stain, while his murderer mounts the dead man’s car and fareth forth, proudly grasping in his blood-stained hands the sceptre with which Agamemnon would marshal the sons of Hellas. Dishonoured lies his grave; naught as yet hath it received of drink outpoured or myrtle-spray, but bare of ornament his tomb is left. Yea, and ’tis said that noble hero who is wedded to my mother, in his drunken fits, doth leap upon the grave, and pelt with stones my father’s monument, boldly gibing at us on this wise, “Where is thy son Orestes? Is he ever coming in his glory to defend thy tomb?” Thus is Orestes flouted behind his back. Oh! tell him this, kind sir, I pray thee. And there be many calling him to come — I am but their mouthpiece — these suppliant hands, this tongue, my broken heart, my shaven head, and his own father too. For ’tis shameful that the sire should have destroyed Troy’s race and the son yet prove too weak to pit himself against one foe unto the death, albeit he has youth and better blood as well.

Chorus

Lo! here is thy husband hurrying homeward, his labour done.

Peasant entering and catching sight of strangers talking to Electra. Ha! who are these strangers I see at my door? And why are they come hither to my rus-
tic gate? can they want my help? for 'tis unseemly for a woman to stand talking with young men.

Electra

Dear husband, be not suspicious of me. For thou shalt hear the truth; these strangers have come to bring me news of Orestes. Good sirs, pardon him those words.

Peasant

What say they? is that hero yet alive and in the light of day?

Electra

He is; at least they say so, and I believe them.

Peasant

Surely then he hath some memory of his father and thy wrongs?

Electra

These are things to hope for; a man in exile is helpless.

Peasant

What message have they brought from Orestes?

Electra

He sent them to spy out my evil case.

Peasant

Well, they only see a part of it, though maybe thou art telling them the rest.

Electra

They know all; there is nothing further they need ask.

Peasant

Long ere this then shouldst thou have thrown open our doors to them. Enter, sirs; for in return for your good tidings, shall ye find such cheer as my house affords. Ho! servants, take their baggage within; make no excuses, for ye are friends sent by one I love; and poor though I am, yet will I never show meanness in my habits.

Orestes

'Fore heaven! is this the man who is helping thee to frustrate thy marriage, because he will not shame Orestes?

Electra

This is he whom they call my husband, woe is me!

Orestes

Ah! there is no sure mark to recognize a man's worth; for human nature hath in it an element of confusion. For I have seen ere now the son of noble sire prove himself a worthless knave, and virtuous children sprung from evil parents; likewise dearth in a rich man's spirit, and in a poor man's frame a mighty soul. By what standard then shall we rightly judge these things? By wealth? An evil test to use. By poverty then? Nay, poverty suffers from this, that it teaches a man to play the villain from necessity. To martial prowess must I turn? But who could pronounce who is the valiant man merely from the look of his spear? Better is it to leave these matters to themselves without troubling. For here is a man of no account in Argos, with no family reputation to boast, one of the common herd, proved a very hero. A truce to your folly! ye self-deceivers, swollen with idle fancies; learn to judge men by their converse, and by their habits decide who are noble. Such are they who rule aright both states and families; while those forms of flesh, devoid of intellect, are but figure-heads in the market-place. The strong arm, again, no more than the weak awaits the battle-shock, for this depends on natural courage. Well! absent or present, Agamemnon's son, whose business
brings us here, deserves this of us, so let us accept a lodging in this house. Calling to his servants. Ho! sirrabs, go within. A humble host, who does his best, in preference to a wealthy man for me! And so I thankfully accept this peasant’s proffered welcome, though I could have preferred that thy brother were conducting me to share his fortune in his halls. Maybe he yet will come; for the oracles of Loxias are sure, but to man’s divining “Farewell” say I.

Orestes, Pylades, and their attendants go into the hut.

Leader Electra, I feel a warmer glow of joy suffuse my heart than ever heretofore; perchance our fortune, moving on at last, will find a happy resting-place.

Electra O reckless man, why didst thou welcome strangers like these, so far beyond thy station, knowing the poverty of thy house?

Peasant Why? if they are really as noble as they seem, surely they will be equally content with rich or humble fare.

Electra Well, since thou hast made this error, poor man as thou art, go to my father’s kind old foster-sire; on the bank of the river Tanaus, the boundary ’twixt Argos and the land of Sparta, he tends his flocks, an outcast from the city; bid him come hither to our house and some provision for the strangers’ entertainment. Glad will he be, and will offer thanks to heaven to hear that the child, whom once he saved, is yet alive. I shall get nothing from my mother from my ancestral halls; for we should rue our message, were she to learn, unnatural wretch! that Orestes liveth.

Peasant I will take this message to the old man, if it seem good to thee; but get thee in at once and there make ready. A woman, when she chooses, can find dainties in plenty to garnish a feast. Besides, there is quite enough in the house to satisfy them with food for one day at least. ’Tis in such cases, when I come to muse thereon, that I discern the mighty power of wealth, whether to give to strangers, or to expend in curing the body when it falls sick; but our daily food is a small matter; for all of us, rich as well as poor, are in like case, as soon as we are satisfied.

The Peasant departs as Electra enters the hut.

Chorus Ye famous ships, that on a day were brought to land at Troy by those countless oars, what time ye led the Nereids’ dance, where the dolphin music-loving rolled and gambolled round your dusky prows, escorting Achilles, nimble son of Thetis, when he went with Agamemnon to the banks of Trojan Simois;

When Nereids left Euboea’s strand, bringing from Hephaestus’ golden forge the harness he had fashioned for that warrior’s use; him long they sought o’er Pelion and Ossa’s spurs, ranging the sacred glens and the peaks of Nymphaea, where his knightly sire was train-
ing up a light for Hellas, even the sea-born son of Thetis, a warrior swift to help the sons of Atreus.

One that came from Ilium, and set foot in the haven of Nauplia, told me that on the circle of thy far-famed targe, ¹ O son of Thetis, was wrought this blazon, a terror to the Phrygians; on the rim of the buckler Perseus with winged sandals, was bearing in his hand across the main the Gorgon's head, just severed by the aid of Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, that rural god whom Maia bore;

While in the centre of the shield the sun's bright orb flashed light on the backs of his winged coursers; there too was the heavenly choir of stars, Pleiades and Hyades, to dazzle Hector's eyes and make him flee; and upon his gold-forged helm were sphinxes, bearing in their talons the prey of which the minstrels sing; ² on his breast-plate was lioness breathing flame, her eye upon Peirene's steed, ³ in eagerness to rend it. There too in murderous fray four-footed steeds were prancing, while o'er their backs uprose dark clouds of dust. But he ⁴ who led these warriors stout, was slain by wedding thee, malignant child of Tyndareus! Wherefore shall the gods of heaven one day send thee to thy doom, and I shall yet live to see the sword at thy throat, drinking its crimson tide.

The Old Man, the former servant of Agamemnon, enters. Electra presently appears at the door of the hut.

Old Man
Where is the young princess, my mistress, Agamemnon's daughter, whom I nursed in days gone by? Oh! how steep is the approach to this house, a hard climb for these old wasted feet of mine! Still, to reach such friends as these, I must drag my bent old back and tottering knees up it. Ah, daughter! — for I see thee now at thy door — lo! I have brought the this tender lamb from my own flock, having taken it from its dam, with garlands too and cheese straight from the press, and this flask of choice old wine with fragrant bouquet; 'tis small perhaps, but pour a cup thereof into some weaker drink, and it is a luscious draught. Let some one carry these gifts into the house for the guests; for I would fain wipe from my eyes the rising tears on this tattered cloak.

Electra
Why stands the tear-drop in thine eye, old friend? Is it that my sorrows have been recalled to thee after an interval? or art thou bewailing the sad exile of Orestes, and my father's fate, whom thou didst once fondle in thy arms, in vain, alas! for thee and for thy friends?

Old Man
Ah yes! in vain; but still I could not bear to leave him thus; and so I added this to my journey that I sought his grave, and, falling there-

¹ [light shield or buckler]
² i.e., carrying of a man.
³ The Chimaera is glaring up at Pegasus, the winged horse of Bellerophon.
⁴ Understanding Agamemnon's murder by Clytemnestra.
upon, wept o’er its desolation; then did I open the wine-skin, my gift to thy guests, and poured a libation, and set myrtle-sprigs round the tomb. And lo! upon the grave itself I saw a black ram had been offered, and there was blood, not long poured forth, and severed locks of auburn hair. Much I wondered, my daughter, who had dared approach the tomb; certainly ’twas no Argive. Nay, thy brother may perchance have come by stealth, and going thither have done honour to his father’s wretched grave. Look at the hair, compare it with thy own, to see if the colour of these cut locks is the same; for children in whose veins runs the same father’s blood have a close resemblance in many features.

Electra

Old sir, thy words are unworthy of a wise man, if thou thinkest my own brave brother would have come to this land by stealth for fear of Aegisthus. In the next place, how should our hair correspond? His is the hair of a gallant youth trained up in manly sports, mine a woman’s curled and combed; nay, that is a hopeless clue. Besides, thou couldst find many, whose hair is of the same colour, albeit not sprung from the same blood. No, maybe ’twas some stranger cut off his hair in pity at his tomb, or one that came to spy this land privily.

Old Man

Put thy foot in the print of his shoe and mark whether it correspond with thine, my child.

Electra

How should the foot make any impression on stony ground? and if it did, the foot of brother and sister would not be the same in size, for man’s is the larger.

Old Man

Hast thou no mark, in case thy brother should come, whereby to recognize the weaving of thy loom, the robe wherein I snatched him from death that day?

Electra

Dost thou forget I was still a babe when Orestes left the country? and even if I had woven him a robe, how should he, a mere child then, be wearing the same now, unless our clothes and bodies grow together?

Old Man

Where are these guests? I fain would question them face to face about thy brother.

Electra

There they are, in haste to leave the house.

Old Man

Well born, it seems, but that may be a sham; for there be plenty such prove knaves. Still I give them greeting.

Orestes

All hail, father! To which of thy friends, Electra, does this old relic of mortality belong?

Electra

This is he who nursed my sire, sir stranger.

Orestes

What! do I behold him who removed thy brother out of harm’s way?

Electra

Behold the man who saved his life; if, that is, he liveth still.
Ha! why does he look so hard at me, as if he were examining the bright device on silver coin? Is he finding in me a likeness to some other?

Maybe he is glad to see in thee a companion of Orestes.

A man I love full well. But why is he walking round me?

I, too, am watching his movements with amaze, sir stranger.

My honoured mistress, my daughter Electra, return thanks to heaven —

For past or present favours? which?

That thou hast found a treasured prize, which God is now revealing.

Hear me invoke the gods. But what dost thou mean, old man?

Behold before thee, my child, thy nearest and dearest.

I have long feared thou wert not in thy sound senses

Not in my sound senses, because I see thy brother?

What mean’s thou, aged friend, by these astounding words?

That I see Orestes, Agamemnon’s son, before me.

What mark dost see that I can trust?

A scar along his brow, where he fell and cut himself one day in his father’s home when chasing a fawn with thee.

Is it possible? True; I see the mark of the fall.

Dost hesitate then to embrace thy own dear brother?

No! not any longer, old friend; for my soul is convinced by the tokens thou showest. O my brother, thou art come at last, and I embrace thee, little as I ever thought to.

And thee to my bosom at last I press.

I never thought that it would happen.

All hope in me was also dead.

Art thou really he?

Aye, thy one and only champion, if I can but safely draw to shore the cast I mean to throw; and I feel sure I shall; else must we cease to believe in gods, if wrong is to triumph o’er right.

At last, at last appears thy radiant dawn, O happy day! and as beacon to the city hast thou revealed the wanderer, who, long ago, poor boy! was exiled from his father’s halls. Now, lady, comes our turn for victory, ushered in by some god. Raise hand and voice in prayer, beseech the gods that good fortune may attend thy brother’s entry to the city.
Orestes

Enough! sweet though the rapture of this greeting be, I must wait and return it hereafter. Do thou, old friend so timely met, tell me how I am to avenge me on my father’s murderer, and on my mother, the partner in his guilty marriage. Have I still in Argos any band of kindly friends? or am I, like my fortunes, bankrupt altogether? With whom am I to league myself? by night or day shall I advance? point out a road for me to take against these foes of mine.

Old Man

My son, thou hast no friend now in thy hour of adversity. No! that is a piece of rare good luck, to find another share thy fortunes alike for better and for worse. Thou art of every friend completely reft, all hope is gone from thee; be sure of what I tell thee; on thy own arm and fortune art thou wholly thrown to win thy father’s home and thy city.

Orestes

What must I do to compass this result?

Old Man

Slay Thyestes’ son and thy mother.

Orestes

I came to win that victor’s crown, but how can I attain it?

Old Man

Thou wouldst never achieve it if thou didst enter the walls.

Orestes

Are they manned with guards and armed sentinels?

Old Man

Aye truly; for he is afraid of thee, and cannot sleep secure.

Orestes

Well then, do thou next propose a scheme, old friend.

Old Man

Hear me a moment; an idea has just occurred to me.

Orestes

May thy counsel prove good, and my perception keen!

Old Man

I saw Aegisthus, as I was slowly pacing hither —

Orestes

I welcome thy words. Where was he?

Old Man

Not far from these fields, at his stables.

Orestes

What was he doing? I see a gleam of hope after our helplessness.

Old Man

I thought he was preparing a feast for the Nymphs.

Orestes

In return for the bringing up of children or in anticipation of a birth?

Old Man

All I know is this, he was preparing to sacrifice oxen.

Orestes

How many were with him? or was he alone with his servants?

Old Man

There was no Argive there; only a band of his own followers.

Orestes

Is it possible that any of them will recognize me, old man?

Old Man

They are only servants, and they have never even seen thee.

Orestes

Will they support me, if I prevail?

Old Man

Yes, that is the way of slaves, luckily for thee.

Orestes

On what pretext can I approach him?
Old Man  Go to some place where he will see thee as he sacrifices.
Orestes  His estate is close to the road then, I suppose.
Old Man  Yes, and when he sees thee there, he will invite thee to the feast.
Orestes  So help me God! He shall rue his invitation.
Old Man  After that, form thy own plan according to circumstances.
Orestes  Good advice! But my mother, where is she?
Old Man  At Argos; but she will yet join her husband for the feast.
Orestes  Why did she not come forth with him?
Old Man  From fear of the citizens’ reproach she stayed behind.
Orestes  I understand; she knows that the city suspects her.
Old Man  Just so; her wickedness makes her hated.
Orestes  How shall I slay her and him together?
Electra  Mine be the preparation of my mother’s slaying!
Orestes  Well, as for the other, fortune will favour us.
Electra  Our old friend here must help us both.
Old Man  Aye, that will I; but what is thy scheme for slaying thy mother?
Electra  Go, old man, and tell Clytemnestra from me that I have given birth to a son.
Old Man  Some time ago, or quite recently?
Electra  Ten days ago, which are the days of my purification.
Old Man  Suppose it done; but how doth this help towards slaying thy mother?
Electra  She will come, when she hears of my confinement.
Old Man  What! dost think she cares aught for thee, my child?
Electra  Oh yes! she will weep no doubt over my child’s low rank.
Old Man  Perhaps she may; but go back again to the point.
Electra  Her death is certain, if she comes.
Old Man  In that case, let her come right up to the door of the house.
Electra  Why then it were a little thing to turn her steps into the road to Hades’ halls.
Old Man  Oh! to see this one day, then die!
Electra  First of all, old friend, act as my brother’s guide.
Old Man  To the place where Aegisthus is now sacrificing to the gods?
Electra  Then go, find my mother and give her my message.
Old Man  Aye, that I will, so that she shall think the very words are thine.

Electra  to Orestes. Thy work begins at once; thou hast drawn the first lot in the tragedy.

Orestes  I will go, if some one will show me the way.

Old Man  I will myself conduct thee nothing loth.

Orestes  O Zeus, god of my fathers, vanquisher of my foes, have pity on us, for a piteous lot has ours been.

Electra  Oh! have pity on thy own descendants.

Orestes  O Hera, mistress of Mycenae’s altars, grant us the victory, if we are asking what is right.

Electra  Yes, grant us vengeance on them for our father’s death.

Orestes  Thou too, my father, sent to the land of shades by wicked hands, and Earth, the queen of all, to whom I spread my suppliant palms, up and champion thy dear children. Come with all the dead to aid, all they who helped thee break the Phrygians’ power, and all who hate ungodly crime. Dost hear me, father, victim of my mother’s rage?

Electra  Sure am I he heareth all; but ’tis time to part. For this cause too I bid thee strike Aegisthus down, because, if thou fall in the struggle and perish, I also die; no longer number me amongst the living; for I will stab myself with a two-edged sword. And now will I go indoors and make all ready there, for, if there come good news from thee, my house shall ring with women’s cries of joy; but, if thou art slain, a different scene must then ensue. These are my instructions to thee.

Orestes  I know my lesson well.

Orestes, Pylades, the Old Man, and attendants depart.

Electra  Then show thyself a man. And you, my friends, signal to me by cries the certain issue of this fray. Myself will keep the sword ready in my grasp, for I will never accept defeat, and yield my body to my enemies to insult.

Electra goes into the hut.

Chorus  Still the story finds a place in time-honoured legends, how on day Pan, the steward of husbandry, came breathing dulcet music on his jointed pipe, and brought with him from its tender dam on Argive hills, a beauteous lamb with fleece of gold; then stood a herald high upon the rock and cried aloud, “Away to the place of assembly, ye

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1 The story was that Atreus and Thyestes, the sons of Pelops, being rival claimants to the throne of Mycenae, agreed that whichever should be able to exhibit some portent should be king. Now Atreus found a golden lamb among his flocks, and would have exhibited, but Thyestes, by guilty collusion with his brother’s wife Aerope, cheated him and produced the lamb as his. Accordingly he received the kingdom; but Atreus avenged himself by drowning his wife, and by killing the children of Thyestes and serving them up as food to their father, whom he then slew. Whereat Zeus reversed the whole order of nature, to make men suffer for these crimes.
folk of Mycenae! to behold the strange and awful sight vouchsafed to our blest rulers.” Anon the dancers did obeisance to the family of Atreus;

The altar-steps of beaten gold were draped; and through that Argive town the altars blazed with fire; sweetly rose the lute’s clear note, the handmaid of the Muse’s song; and ballads fair were written on the golden lamb, saying that Thyestes had the luck; for he won the guilty love of the wife of Atreus, and carried off to his house the strange creature, and then coming before the assembled folk he declared to them that he had in his house that horned beast with fleece of gold.

In the self-same hour it was that Zeus changed the radiant courses of the stars, the light of the sun, and the joyous face of dawn, and drove his car athwart the western sky with fervent heat from heaven’s fires, while northward fled the rain-clouds, and Ammon’s strand grew parched and faint and void of dew, when it was robbed of heaven’s genial showers.

'Tis said, though I can scarce believe it, the sun turned round his glowing throne of gold, to vex the sons of men by this change because of the quarrel amongst them. Still, tales of horror have their use in making men regard the gods; of whom thou hadst no thought, when thou slewest thy husband, thou mother of this noble pair.

Chorus Leader Hark! my friends, did ye hear that noise, like to the rumbling of an earthquake, or am I the dupe of idle fancy? Hark! hark! once more that wind-borne sound swells loudly on mine ear. Electra! mistress mine! come forth from the house!

Electra rushing out. What is it, good friends? how goes the day with us?

Leader I hear the cries of dying men; no more I know.

Electra I heard them too, far off, but still distinct.

Leader Yes, the sound came stealing from afar, but yet 'twas clear.

Electra Was it the groan of an Argive, or of my friends?

Leader I know not; for the cries are all confused.

Electra That word of thine is my death-warrant; why do I delay?

Leader Stay, till thou learn thy fate for certain.

Electra No, no; we are vanquished; where are our messengers?

Leader They will come in time; to slay a king is no light task.

*A messenger enters in haste.*
Messenger

All hail! ye victors, maidens of Mycenae, to all Orestes’ friends his triumph I announce; Aegisthus, the murderer of Agamemnon, lies weltering where he fell; return thanks to heaven.

Electra

Who art thou? What proof dost thou give of this?

Messenger

Look at me, dost thou not recognize thy brother’s servant?

Electra

O best of friends! ’twas fear that prevented me from recognizing thee; now I know thee well. What sayst thou? Is my father’s hateful murderer slain?

Leader

Ye gods, and justice, whose eye is on all, at last art thou come.

Electra

I fain would learn the way and means my brother took to slay Thyestes’ son.

Messenger

After we had set out from this house, we struck into the broad high-road, and came to the place where was the far-famed King of Mycenae. Now he was walking in a garden well-watered, culling a wreath of tender myrtle-sprays for his head, and when he saw us, he called out, “All hail! strangers; who are ye? whence come ye? from what country?” To him Orestes answered, “We are from Thessaly, on our way to Alpheus’ banks to sacrifice to Olympian Zeus.” When Aegisthus heard that, he said, “Ye must be my guests to-day, and share the feast, for I am even now sacrificing to the Nymphs; and by rising with tomorrow’s light ye will be just as far upon your journey; now let us go within.” Therewith he caught us by the hand and led us by the way; refuse we could not; and when we were come to the house, he gave command: “Bring water for my guests to wash forthwith, that they may stand around the altar near the laver.” But Orestes answered, “’Twas but now we purified ourselves and washed us clean in water from the river. So if we strangers are to join your citizens in sacrifice, we are ready, King Aegisthus, and will not refuse.” So ended they their private conference. Meantime the servants, that composed their master’s bodyguard, laid aside their weapons, and one and all were busied at their tasks. Some brought the bowl to catch the blood, others took up baskets, while others kindled fire and set cauldrons round about the altars, and the whole house rang. Then did thy mother’s husband take the barley for sprinkling, and began casting it upon the hearth with these words, “Ye Nymphs, who dwell among the rocks, grant that I may often sacrifice with my wife, the daughter of Tyndareus, within my halls, as happily as now, and ruin seize my foes!” (whereby he meant Orestes and thyself.) But my master, lowering his voice, offered a different prayer, that he might regain his father’s house. Next Aegisthus took from basket a long straight knife, and cutting off some of the calf’s hair, laid it with his right hand on the sacred fire, and then cut its throat when the servants had lifted it upon their shoulders, and thus addressed thy
brother; “Men declare that amongst the Thessalians this is counted honourable, to cut up a bull neatly and to manage steeds. So take the knife, sir stranger, and show us if rumour speaks true about the Thessalians.” Thereon Orestes seized the Dorian knife of tempered steel and cast from his shoulders his graceful buckled robe; then choosing Pylades to help him in his task, he made the servants withdraw, and catching the calf by the hoof, proceeded to lay bare its white flesh, with arm outstretched, and he flayed the hide quicker than a runner ever finishes the two laps of the horses’ race-course; next he laid the belly open, and Aegisthus took the entrails in his hands and carefully examined them. Now the liver had no lobe, while the portal vein leading to the gall-bladder portended dangerous attack on him who was observing it. Dark grows Aegisthus’ brow, but my master asks, “Why so despondent, good sir?” Said he, “I fear treachery from a stranger. Agamemnon’s son of all men most I hate, and he hates my house.” But Orestes cried, “What! fear treachery from an exile! thou the ruler of the city? Ho! take this Doric knife away and bring me a Thessalian cleaver, that we by sacrificial feast may learn the will of heaven; let me cleave the breastbone.” And he took the axe and cut it through. Now Aegisthus was examining the entrails, separating them in his hands, and as he was bending down, thy brother rose on tiptoe and smote him on the spine, severing the bones of his back; and his body gave one convulsive shudder from head to foot and writhed in the death-agony. No sooner did his servants see it, than they rushed to arms, a host to fight with two; yet did Pylades and Orestes of their valiancy meet them with brandished spears. Then cried Orestes, “I am no foe that come against this city and my own servants, but I have avenged me on the murderer of my sire, I, ill-starred Orestes. Slay me not, my father’s former thralls!” They, when they heard him speak, restrained their spears, and an old man, who had been in the family many a long year, recognized him. Forthwith they crown thy brother with a wreath, and utter shouts of joy. And lo! he is coming to show thee the head, not the Gorgon’s, but the head of thy hated foe Aegisthus; his death today has paid in blood a bitter debt of blood.

**Chorus**

Dear mistress, now with step as light as fawn join in the dance; lift high the nimble foot and be glad. Victory crowns thy brother; he hath won a fairer wreath than ever victor gained beside the streams of Alpheus; so raise a fair hymn to victory, the while I dance.

**Electra**

O light of day! O bright careering sun! O earth! and night erewhile my only day; now may I open my eyes in freedom, for Aegisthus is dead, my father’s murderer. Come friends, let me bring out whate’er my house contains to deck his head and wreath with crowns my conquering brother’s brow.
Chorus

Bring forth thy garlands for his head, and we will lead the dance the Muses love. Now shall the royal line, dear to us in days gone by, resume its sway o’er the realm, having laid low the usurper as he deserves. So let the shout go up, whose notes are those of joy.

Electra

Hail! glorious victor, Orestes, son of a sire who won the day ’neath Ilium’s walls, accept this wreath to bind about the tresses of thy hair. Not in vain hast thou run thy course unto the goal and reached thy home again; no! but thou hast slain thy foe, Aegisthus, the murderer of our father. Thou too, O Pylades, trusty squire, whose training shows thy father’s sterling worth, receive a garland from my hand, for thou no less than he hast a share in this emprise; and so I pray, good luck be thine for ever!

Orestes

First recognize the gods, Electra, as being the authors of our fortune, and then praise me their minister and fate’s. Yea, I come from having slain Aegisthus in very deed, no mere pretence; and to make thee the more certain of this, I am bringing thee his corpse, which, if thou wilt, expose for beasts to rend, or set it upon a stake for birds, the children of the air, to prey upon; for now is he thy slave, once called thy lord and master.

Electra

I am ashamed to utter my wishes.

Orestes

What is it? speak out, for thou art through the gates of fear.

Electra

I am ashamed to flout the dead, for fear some spite assail me.

Orestes

No one would blame thee for this.

Electra

Our folk are hard to please, and love to blame.

Orestes

Speak all thy mind, sister; for we entered on this feud with him on terms admitting not of truce.

Electra

Enough! Turning to the corpse of Aegisthus. With which of thy iniquities shall I begin my recital? With which shall I end it? To which allot a middle place? And yet I never ceased, as each day dawned, to rehearse the story I would tell thee to thy face, if ever I were freed from my old terrors; and now I am; so I will pay thee back with the abuse I fain had uttered to thee when alive. Thou wert my ruin, making me and my brother orphans, though we had never injured thee, and thou didst make a shameful marriage with my mother, having slain her lord who led the host of Hellas, though thyself didst never go to Troy. Such was thy folly, thou didst never dream that my mother would prove thy curse when thou didst marry her, though thou wert wronging my father’s honour. Know this; whoso defiles his neighbour’s wife, and afterward is forced to take her to himself, is a wretched wight, if he supposes she will be chaste as his wife, though she sinned against her former lord. Thine was a life most miserable, though thou didst pretend ’twas otherwise; well thou knewest how
guilty thy marriage was, and my mother knew she had a villain for husband. Sinners both ye took each other’s lot, she thy fortune, thou her curse. While everywhere in Argos thou wouldst hear such phrases as, “that woman’s husband,” never “that man’s wife.” Yet ’tis shameful for the wife and not the man to rule the house; wherefore I loathe those children, who are called in the city not the sons of the man, their father, but of their mother. For if a man makes a great match above his rank, there is no talk of the husband but only of the wife. Herein lay thy grievous error, due to ignorance; thou thoughtest thyself some one, relying on thy wealth, but this is naught save to stay with us a space. ’Tis nature that stands fast, not wealth. For it, if it abide unchanged, exalts man’s horn; but riches dishonestly acquired and in the hands of fools, soon take their flight, their blossom quickly shed. As for thy sins with women, I pass them by, ’tis not for maiden’s lips to mention them, but I will shrewdly hint thereat. And then thy arrogance! because forsooth thou hadst a palace and some looks to boast. May I never have a husband with a girl’s face, but one that bears him like a man! For the children of these latter cling to a life of arms, while those, who are so fair to see, do only serve to grace the dance. Away from me!

*Spurning the corpse with her foot. Time has shown thy villainy, little as thou reckest of the forfeit thou hast paid for it. Let none suppose, though he have run the first stage of his course with joy, that he will get the better of justice, till he ha
t have reached the goal and ended his career.*

**Chorus Leader** Terrible alike his crime and your revenge; for mighty is the power of justice.

**Orestes** ’Tis well. Carry his body within the house and hide it, sirrahs, that when my mother comes, she may not see his corpse before she is smitten herself.

*Pylades and the attendants take the body into the hut.*

**Electra** Hold! let us strike out another scheme.

**Orestes** How now? Are those allies from Mycenae whom I see?

**Electra** No, ’tis my mother, that bare me.

**Orestes** Full into the net she is rushing, oh, bravely!

**Electra** See how proudly she rides in her chariot and fine robes!

**Orestes** What must we do to our mother? Slay her?

**Electra** What! has pity seized thee at sight of her?

**Orestes** O God! how can I slay her that bare and suckled me?

**Electra** Slay her as she slew thy father and mine.

**Orestes** O Phoebus, how foolish was thy oracle —

**Electra** Where Apollo errs, who shall be wise?
Orestes

In bidding me commit this crime — my mother's murder!

Electra

How canst thou be hurt by avenging thy father?

Orestes

Though pure before, I now shall carry into exile the stain of a mother's blood.

Electra

Still, if thou avenge not thy father, thou wilt fail in thy duty.

Orestes

And if I slay my mother, I must pay the penalty to her.

Electra

And so must thou to him, if thou resign the avenging of our father.

Orestes

Surely it was a fiend in the likeness of the god that ordered this!

Electra

Seated on the holy tripod? I think not so.

Orestes

I cannot believe this oracle was meant.

Electra

Turn not coward! Cast not thy manliness away!

Orestes

Am I to devise the same crafty scheme for her?

Electra

The self-same death thou didst mete out to her lord Aegisthus.

Orestes

I will go in; 'tis an awful task I undertake; an awful deed I have to do; still if it is Heaven's will, be it so; I loathe and yet I love the enterprise.

As Orestes withdraws into the hut, Clytemnestra enters in a chariot. Her attendants are hand-maidens attired in gorgeous apparel.

Chorus

Hail! Queen of Argos, daughter of Tyndareus, sister of those two noble sons of Zeus, who dwell in the flame-lit firmament amid the stars, whose guerdon high it is to save the sailor tossing on the sea. All hail! because of thy wealth and high prosperity, I do thee homage as I do the blessed gods. Now is the time, great queen, for us to pay our court unto thy fortunes.

Clytemnestra

Alight from the car, ye Trojan maids, and take my hand that I may step down from the chariot. With Trojan spoils the temples of the gods are decked, but I have obtained these maidens as a special gift from Troy, in return for my lost daughter, a trifling boon doubt, but still an ornament to my house.

Electra

And may not I, mother, take that highly-favoured hand of thine? I am a slave like them, an exile from my father's halls in this miserable abode.

Clytemnestra

See, my servants are here; trouble not on my account.

Electra

Why, thou didst make me thy prisoner by robbing me of my home; like these I became a captive when my home was taken, an orphan all forlorn.

Clytemnestra

True; but thy father plotted so wickedly against those of his own kin whom least of all he should have treated so. ¹ Speak I must; albeit,

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¹ i.e., Iphigenia, whom he sacrificed.
when woman gets an evil reputation, there is a feeling of bitterness against all she says; unfairly indeed in my case, for it were only fair to hate after learning the circumstances, and seeing if the object deserves it; otherwise, why hate at all? Now Tyndareus bestowed me on thy father not that I or any children I might bear should be slain. Yet he went and took my daughter from our house to the fleet at Aulis, persuading me that Achilles was to wed her; and there he held her o’er the pyre, and cut Iphigenia’s snowy throat. Had he slain her to save his city from capture, or to benefit his house, or to preserve his other children, a sacrifice of one for many, could have pardoned him. But, as it was, his reasons for murdering my child were these: the wantonness of Helen and her husband’s folly in not punishing the traitress. Still, wronged as I was, my rage had not burst forth for this, nor would I have slain my lord, had he not returned to me with that frenzied maiden and made her his mistress, keeping at once two brides beneath the same roof. Women maybe are given to folly, I do not deny it; this granted, when a husband goes astray and sets aside his own true wife, she fain will follow his example and find another love; and then in our case hot abuse is heard, while the men, who are to blame for this, escape without a word. Again, suppose Menelaus had been secretly snatched from his home, should I have had to kill Orestes to save Menelaus, my sister’s husband? How would thy father have endured this? Was he then to escape death for slaying what was mine, while I was to suffer at his hands? I slew him, turning, as my only course, to his enemies. For which of all thy father’s friends would have joined me in his murder? Speak all that is in thy heart, and prove against me with all free speech, that thy father’s death was not deserved.

Electra

Justly urged! but thy justice is not free from shame;¹ for in all things should every woman of sense yield to her husband. Whoso thinketh otherwise comes not within the scope of what I say. Remember, mother, those last words of thine, allowing me free utterance before thee.

Clytemnestra

Daughter, far from refusing it, I grant it again.

Electra

Thou wilt not, when thou hearest, wreak thy vengeance on me?

Clytemnestra

No, indeed; I shall welcome thy opinion.

Electra

Then will I speak, and this shall be the prelude of my speech: Ah, mother mine! would thou hadst had a better heart; for though thy beauty and Helen’s win you praises well deserved, yet are ye akin in nature, pair of wantons, unworthy of Castor. She was carried off, ‘tis true, but her fall was voluntary: and thou hast slain the bravest soul in Hellas, excusing thyself on the ground that thou didst kill a hus-

¹ *i.e.*, it is a disgrace for a woman to insist too much on her strict rights.
band to avenge a daughter; the world does not know thee so well as I do, thou who before ever thy daughter’s death was decided, yea, soon as thy lord had started from his home, wert combing thy golden tresses at thy mirror. That wife who, when her lord is gone from home, sets to beautifying herself, strike off from virtue’s list; for she has no need to carry her beauty abroad, save she is seeking some mischief. Of all the wives in Hellas thou wert the only one I know who wert overjoyed when Troy’s star was in the ascendant, while, if it set, thy brow was clouded, since thou hadst no wish that Agamemnon should return from Troy. And yet thou couldst have played a virtuous part to thy own glory. The husband thou hadst was no whit inferior to Aegisthus, for he it was whom Hellas chose to be her captain. And when thy sister Helen wrought that deed of shame, thou couldst have won thyself great glory, for vice is a warning and calls attention to virtue. If, as thou allegest, my father slew thy daughter, what is the wrong I and my brother have done thee? How was it thou didst not bestow on us our father’s halls after thy husband’s death, instead of bartering them to buy a paramour? Again, thy husband is not exiled for thy son’s sake, nor is he slain to avenge my death, although by him this life is quenched twice as much as e’er my sister’s was; so if murder is to succeed murder in requital, I and thy son Orestes must slay thee to avenge our father; if that was just, why so is this. Whoso fixes his gaze on wealth or noble birth and weds a wicked woman, is a fool; better is a humble partner in his home, if she be virtuous, than a proud one.

**Chorus Leader** Chance rules the marriages of women; some I see turn out well, others ill amongst mankind.

**Clytemnestra** Daughter, ’twas ever thy nature to love thy father. This too one finds; some sons cling to their father, others have a deeper affection for their mother. I will forgive thee, for myself am not so exceeding glad at the deed that I have done, my child. But thou — why thus unwashed and clad in foul attire, now that the days of thy lying-in are accomplished? Ah me, for my sorry schemes! I have goaded my husband into anger more than e’er I should have done.

**Electra** Thy sorrow comes too late; the hour of remedy has gone from thee; my father is dead. Yet why not recall that exile, thy own wandering son?

**Clytemnestra** I am afraid; ’tis my interest, not his that I regard. For they say he is wroth for his father’s murder.

**Electra** Why, then, dost thou encourage thy husband’s bitterness against us?

**Clytemnestra** ’Tis his way; thou too hast a stubborn nature.

**Electra** Because I am grieved; yet will I check my spirit.
Clytemnestra  I promise then he shall no longer oppress thee.

Electra  From living in my home he grows too proud.

Clytemnestra  Now there! 'tis thou that art fanning the quarrel into new life.

Electra  I say no more; my dread of him is even what it is.

Clytemnestra  Peace! Enough of this. Why didst thou summon me, my child?

Electra  Thou hast heard, I suppose, of my confinement; for this I pray thee, [since I know not how], offer the customary sacrifice [on the tenth day after birth], for I am a novice herein, never having had a child before.

Clytemnestra  This is work for another, even for her who delivered thee.

Electra  I was all alone in my travail and at the babe’s birth.

Clytemnestra  Dost live so far from neighbours?

Electra  No one cares to make the poor his friends.

Clytemnestra  Well, I will go to offer to the gods a sacrifice for the child’s completion of the days; and when I have done thee this service, I will seek the field where my husband is sacrificing to the Nymphs. Take this chariot hence, my servants, and tie the horses to the stalls; and when ye think that I have finished my offering to the gods, attend me, for I must likewise pleasure my lord.

She goes into the hut.

Electra  Enter our humble cottage; but, prithee,¹ take care that my smoke grimed walls soil not thy robes; now wilt thou offer to the gods a fitting sacrifice. There stands the basket ready, and the knife is sharpened, the same that slew the bull, by whose side thou soon wilt lie a corpse; and thou shalt be his bride in Hades’ halls whose wife thou wast on earth. This is the boon I will grant thee, while thou shalt pay me for my father’s blood.

Electra follows Clytemnestra into the hut.

Chorus  Misery is changing sides; the breeze veers round, and now blows fair upon my house. The day is past when my chief fell murdered in his bath, and the roof and the very stones of the walls rang with this his cry: “O cruel wife, why art thou murdering me on my return to my dear country after ten long years?”

The tide is turning, and justice² that pursues the faithless wife is drawing within its grasp the murderess, who slew her hapless lord, when he came home at last to these towering Cyclopean walls — aye, with her own hand she smote him with the sharpened steel,

¹ [Archaic English interjection formed from a corruption of the phrase “pray thee,” which was initially an exclamation of contempt used to indicate a subject’s triviality.]

² δικα διαδρομου λεχους, i.e., vengeance for affections that transfer themselves so easily to another; but the phrase is obscure and possibly corrupt. Hartung reads λαχους.
herself the axe uplifting. Unhappy husband! whate’er the curse that possessed that wretched woman. Like a lioness of the hills that rangeth through the woodland for her prey, she wrought the deed.

**Clytemnestra** within. O my children, by Heaven I pray ye spare your mother.

**Chorus** Dost hear her cries within the house?

**Clytemnestra** chanting. I too bewail thee, dying by thy children’s hands. God deals out His justice in His good time. A cruel fate is thine, unhappy one; yet didst thou sin in murdering thy lord.

*Orestes and Electra come out of the hut, followed by attendants who are carrying the two corpses. The following lines between Electra, Orestes, and the Chorus are chanted.*

But lo! from the house they come, dabbled in their mother’s fresh-spilt gore, their triumph proving the piteous butchery. There is not nor ever has been a race more wretched than the line of Tantalus.

**Orestes** O Earth, and Zeus whose eye is over all! behold this foul deed of blood, these two corpses lying here that I have slain in vengeance for my sufferings.¹

**Electra** Tears are all too weak for this, brother; and I am the guilty cause. Ah, woe is me! How hot my fury burned against the mother that bare me!

**Orestes** Alas! for thy lot, O mother mine! A piteous, piteous doom, aye, worse than that, hast thou incurred at children’s hands! Yet justly hast thou paid forfeit for our father’s blood. Ah, Phoebus! thine was the voice that praised this vengeance; thou it is that hast brought these hideous scenes to light, and caused this deed of blood. To what city can I go henceforth? what friend, what man of any piety will bear the sight of a mother’s murderer like me?

**Electra** Ah me! alas! and whither can I go? What share have I henceforth in dance or marriage rite? What husband will accept me as his bride?

**Orestes** Again thy fancy changes with the wind; for now thou thinkest aright, though not so formerly; an awful deed didst thou urge thy brother against his will to commit, dear sister. Oh! didst thou see how the poor victim threw open her robe and showed her bosom as smote her, sinking on her knees, poor wretch? My heart melted within me.

**Electra** Full well I know the agony through which thou didst pass at hearing thy own mother’s bitter cry.

¹ Two verses have been lost here.
Orestes
Ah yes! she laid her band upon my chin, and cried aloud, “My child, I entreat thee!” and she clung about my neck, so that I let fall the sword.

Electra
O my poor mother! How didst thou endure to see her breathe her last before thy eyes?

Orestes
I threw my mantle o’er them and began the sacrifice by plunging the sword into my mother’s throat.

Electra
Yet ’twas I that urged thee on, yea, and likewise grasped the steel. Oh! I have done an awful deed.

Orestes
Oh! take and hide our mother’s corpse beneath a pall, and close her gaping wound.

Turning to the corpse.

Ah! thy murderers were thine own children.

Electra
covering the corpse. There! thou corpse both loved and loathed; still o’er thee I cast robe, to end the grievous troubles of our house.

Chorus
See! where o’er the roof-top spirits are appearing, or gods maybe from heaven, for this is not a road that mortals tread. Why come they thus where mortal eyes can see them clearly?

The Dioscuroi appear from above.

Dioscuroi
Hearken, son of Agamemnon. We, the twin sons of Zeus, thy mother’s sisters, call thee, even Castor and his brother Polydeuces. ’Tis but now we have reached Argos after stilling the fury of the sea for mariners, having seen the slaying of our sister, thy mother. She hath received her just reward, but thine is no righteous act, and Phoebus — but no! he is my king, my lips are sealed — is Phoebus still, albeit the oracle he gave thee was no great proof of his wisdom. But we must acquiesce herein. Henceforth must thou follow what Zeus and destiny ordain for thee. On Pylades bestow Electra for his wife to take unto his home; do thou leave Argos, for after thy mother’s murder thou mayst not set foot in the city. And those grim goddesses of doom, that glare like savage hounds, will drive thee mad and chase thee to and fro; but go thou to Athens and make thy prayer to the holy image of Pallas, for she will close their fierce serpent’s mouths, so that they touch thee not, holding o’er thy head her aegis with the Gorgon’s head. A hill there is, to Ares sacred, where first the gods in conclave sat to decide the law of blood, in the day that savage Ares slew Halirrothius, son of the ocean-king, in anger for the violence he offered to his daughter’s honour; from that time all decisions given there are most holy and have heaven’s sanction. There must thou have this murder tried; and if equal votes are given, they shall save thee from death in the decision, for Loxias will

The Eumenides.
take the blame upon himself, since it was his oracle that advised thy mother's murder. And this shall be the law for all posterity; in every trial the accused shall win his case if the votes are equal. Then shall those dread goddesses, stricken with grief at this, vanish into a cleft of the earth close to the hill, revered by men henceforth as a place for holy oracles; whilst thou must settle in a city of Arcadia on the banks of the river Alpheus near the shrine of Lycaean Apollo, and the city shall be called after thy name. To thee I say this. As for the corpse of Aegisthus, the citizens of Argos must give it burial; but Menelaus, who has just arrived at Nauplia from the sack of Troy, shall bury thy mother, Helen helping him; for she hath come from her sojourn in Egypt in the halls of Proteus, and hath never been to Troy; but Zeus, to stir up strife and bloodshed in the world, sent forth a phantom of Helen to Ilium. Now let Pylades take his maiden wife and bear her to his home in Achaea; also he must conduct thy so-called kinsman\(^1\) to the land of Phocis, and there reward him well. But go thyself along the narrow Isthmus, and seek Cecropia's happy home. For once thou hast fulfilled the doom appointed for this murder, thou shalt be blest and free from all thy troubles.

The remaining lines of the play are chanted.

Chorus

Ye sons of Zeus, may we draw near to speak with you?

Dioscuroi

Ye may, since ye are not polluted by this murder.

Orestes

May I too share your converse, of Tyndareus?

Dioscuroi

Thou too! for to Phoebus will I ascribe this deed of blood.

Chorus

How was it that ye, the brothers of the murdered woman, gods too, did not ward the doom-goddesses from her roof?

Dioscuroi

'Twas fate that brought resistless doom to her, and that thoughtless oracle that Phoebus gave.

Electra

But why did the god, and wherefore did his oracles make me my mother’s murderer?

Dioscuroi

A share in the deed, a share in its doom; one ancestral curse hath ruined both of you.

Orestes

Ah, sister mine! at last I see thee again only to be robbed in moment of thy dear love; I must leave thee, and by thee be left.

Dioscuroi

Hers are a husband and a home; her only suffering this, that she is quitting Argos.

Orestes

Yet what could call forth deeper grief than exile from one’s fatherland? I must leave my father’s house, and at a stranger’s bar he sentenced for my mother’s blood.

\(^{1}\) i.e., the peasant to whom Electra had been given.
Dioscuroi  Be of good cheer; go to the holy town of Pallas; keep a stout heart only.

Electra  O my brother, best and dearest! clasp me to thy breast; for now is the curse of our mother’s blood cutting us off from the home of our fathers.

Orestes  Throw thy arms in close embrace about me. Oh! weep as o’er my grave when I am dead.

Dioscuroi  Ah me, that bitter cry makes even gods shudder to hear. Yea, for in my breast and in every heavenly being’s dwells pity for the sorrows of mankind.

Orestes  Never to see thee more!

Electra  Never again to stand within thy sight!

Orestes  This is my last good-bye to thee.

Electra  Farewell, farewell, my city! and ye my fellow-countrywomen, long farewell to you!

Orestes  Art thou going already, truest of thy sex?

Electra  I go, the tear-drop dimming my tender eyes.

Orestes  Go, Pylades, and be happy; take and wed Electra.

Dioscuroi  Their only thoughts will be their marriage; but haste thee to Athens, seeking to escape these hounds of hell, for they are on thy track in fearful wise, swart monsters, with snakes for hands, who reap a harvest of man’s agony. But we twain must haste away o’er the Sicilian main to save the seaman’s ship. Yet as we fly through heaven’s expanse we help not the wicked; but whoso in his life loves piety and justice, all such we free from troublous toils and save. Wherefore let no man be minded to act unjustly, or with men foresworn set sail; such the warning I, a god, to mortals give.

The Dioscuroi vanish.

Chorus  Farewell! truly that mortal’s is a happy lot, who can thus fare, unafflicted by any calamity.¹

¹ [Calamity has been changed to woe in later editions.]