

Euripides Electra

Translated
by
Ian Johnston
Vancouver Island University

This translation was first published on the internet and by Richer Resources Publications (ISBN 978-1-63464-040-4; LCCN 9781634640404) in 2015. It has undergone minor revisions since. A dual language (Greek-English) text was published by Faenum Publishing in 2015.

This document is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution CC by 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) and thus, provided the source is acknowledged, it may be (a) downloaded and distributed, in whole or in part, without permission and without charge and (b) freely edited and adapted to suit the particular needs of the person using it (e.g., for a dramatic production).

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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

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

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help of M. J. Cropp's commentary on the play (Aris & Phillips, 1988).

A COMMENT ON THE MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Tyndareus, king of Sparta, and his wife, Leda, had four children: twin brothers Castor and Pollux (or Polydeuces) and twin sisters Clytaemnestra and Helen.

ELECTRA

However, Zeus was the father of Pollux and Helen, Tyndareus the father of the Castor and Clytaemnestra. When Castor was killed, Zeus allowed Pollux to share his immortality (which he possessed as a son of Zeus) with his dead brother, so that the two of them could alternate between Hades and Olympus. The brothers, called the Dioscuri ("sons of Zeus") then became two stars in the night sky (the Gemini), an important help for those navigating at sea.

When Helen, daughter of Tyndareus and wife of Menelaus, was abducted by Paris and taken to Troy, Agamemnon, husband of Clytaemnestra, brother of Menelaus, and king of Mycenae, gathered a fleet to sail to Troy. However, before the Greek fleet could get a favourable wind, the gods insisted Agamemnon had to sacrifice his eldest daughter, Iphigeneia. He did so, and the expedition sailed. Ten years later, Agamemnon returned home victorious but was immediately murdered by Aegisthus, his wife's lover and collaborator (and a cousin of Orestes). Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra took over power in Mycenae. Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, had earlier been sent away from Mycenae. Electra, Orestes's sister, remained in Mycenae and was treated badly by her mother and Aegisthus.

Mycenae is the name of the city ruled by Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra. Argos is the name of the land in which the city is located. The inhabitants are called Mycenaeans or Argives. The names are often used interchangeably.

Euripides's *Electra* was first performed in Athens c. 420 BC.

ELECTRA

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PEASANT: a poor farmer in the countryside
ELECTRA: daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.
ORESTES: son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra.
PYLADES: a friend of Orestes.
CHORUS: Argive country women.¹
OLD MAN: an old servant of Agamemnon's.
MESSENGER: one of Orestes's servants.
CLYTAEMNESTRA: mother of Orestes and Electra.
DIOSCOURI : Castor and Polydeuces, twin brothers of Clytaemnestra.
SERVANTS: attendants for Orestes, Pylades, and Clytaemnestra.

[The scene is set in the countryside of Argos, in front of the Peasant's hut. It is just before dawn.]

PEASANT

O this ancient land, these streams of Inachus,
the place from where king Agamemnon once
set out with a thousand ships on his campaign
and sailed away to the land of Troy.
He killed king Priam, who ruled in Ilion
and seized the famous town of Dardanus.²
Then he returned home, back here to Argos,
and set up in high temples piles of loot
from those barbarians. Yes, over there
things went well for him. But then he was killed 10
in his own home by the hand of Aegisthus,
Thyestes' son, thanks to the treachery [10]
of his own wife, Clytaemnestra. So he died,
leaving behind Tantalus' ancient sceptre.³
Aegisthus rules this country now. He wed
Tyndareus' daughter, the dead king's wife.
As for those he left at home behind him
when he sailed to Troy, his son Orestes
and his daughter, too, Electra—well, now,
Aegisthus was about to kill Orestes, 20

¹Note that speeches assigned to the Chorus may be delivered by the entire Chorus, part of the Chorus, or the Chorus Leader, and sometimes a single choral speech or song may be divided up among different members of the Chorus, as a director of a production will determine.

²Ilion is an alternative name for Troy, and Dardanus is the name of a famous ancestor of Priam, king of Troy. Hence, the Trojans were often called Dardanians

³Tantalus was the legendary founder of the royal family of Argos, called the Pelopids after Tantalus's son Pelops. Tantalus was Agamemnon's and Menelaus's great-great-grandfather.

ELECTRA

but an old servant of his father's took him
and handed him to Strophius to bring up
in the land of Phocis. But Electra
stayed on in her father's house. When she reached
her young maturity, the suitors came, [20]
the foremost ones throughout the land of Greece,
seeking marriage. Aegisthus was afraid
she'd bear a child to some important man
who then might seek revenge for Agamemnon.
So he would not give her to a bridegroom, 30
but kept her in his home. Even this choice
filled him with fear, in case she might give birth
to a noble child in secret. So he planned
to kill her. But though she has a savage heart,
her mother saved her from Aegisthus' hands.
She'd an excuse for murdering her husband,
but she feared that if she killed her children [30]
she'd be totally disgraced.¹ And that's why
Aegisthus came up with the following scheme—
he offered gold to anyone who'd kill 40
Agamemnon's son, who'd left the country
as an exile, and he gave Electra
to me to be my wife. My ancestors
were from Mycenae, so in this matter
at least I have no need to feel ashamed.
My family was a good one but not rich,
and that destroys one's noble ancestry.
He gave her to a man who had no power.
In that way his fear could be diminished.
If some important fellow married her, 50 [40]
he might have woken up the sleeping blood
of Agamemnon, and then, at some point,
justice would have come to seek Aegisthus.
But I've never had sex with the girl in bed—
and Cypris knows I'm right in this—and so
Electra's still a virgin.² I'd be ashamed
to take the daughter of a wealthy man
and violate the girl, when I'm not born
her equal. As for unfortunate Orestes,

¹Clytaemnestra's excuse for killing Agamemnon (as we learn later in the play) is the fact that he sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia in order to enable the Argive fleet to sail to Troy.

²Cypris is a common name for Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love. The name comes from the goddess's frequent association with Cyprus.

ELECTRA

who's now, according to what people say, 60
a relative of mine, I'm sorry for him,
if he should ever return to Argos
and see his sister's demeaning marriage.
Any man who says I'm just an idiot [50]
to bring a young girl here into my home
and then not touch her should know he's a fool
who measures wisdom by a worthless standard.

[Electra enters from the hut. She is carrying a water jug on her head.]

ELECTRA

O pitch black night, nurse of golden stars,
I walk through you towards the river stream,
carrying this jug balanced on my head. 70
This is not work I am compelled to do,
but I will manifest to all the gods
Aegisthus' insolence, and I will send
into this great sky my sorrowing cries
out to my father. For my own mother, [60]
that murderous daughter of Tyndareus,
in her desire to please her husband,
has cast me from my home. With Aegisthus
she's had other children and considers
Orestes and myself of no account 80
inside her house.

PEASANT

You poor wretched girl,
why do you help me doing work like this,
carrying out these chores? In earlier days,
you were nobly raised. Why do you not stop,
especially when I keep saying this to you?

ELECTRA

You're kind to me, and I consider you
the equal of the gods in that. For now,
when I'm in trouble, you don't demean me.
When human beings discover someone there
to soothe their miseries, as I have you, 90 [70]
then Fate is doing something good to them.
So I should help you carry out the work
and give you some relief, to the extent
my strength permits, without you asking me,

ELECTRA

so you can bear the load more easily.
There's work enough for you to do outside.
I should take care of things within the house.
It's nice when someone working out of doors
comes back inside and finds things organized.

PEASANT

Well, if you think you should do it, then go. 100
The spring is no great distance from the house.
Once daylight comes, I'll drive the oxen out,
go to the farmlands, and then sow the fields.
No matter how much he may mention gods, [80]
without hard work a lazy man can never
gather up all the things he needs to live.

[Electra leaves for the spring, and the Peasant goes back into the house. Enter Orestes and Pylades, with two servants.]

ORESTES

Among all men, Pylades, I think of you
as a loving host, foremost in my trust.¹
For you're the only one of all my friends
who has dealt honourably with Orestes, 110
as I've been coping with these wretched things
I've had to put up with from Aegisthus,
who killed my father . . . he and my mother,
that destructive woman. I've come here,
from god's mysterious shrine to Argive lands,
to avenge the killing of my father,
by murdering the ones who butchered him.
Last night I visited my father's tomb, [90]
where I wept and started sacrificing
by cutting off a lock of hair. And then, 120
on the altar I made an offering of blood
from a sheep I slaughtered. But the tyrants
who control this land don't know I'm here.
I've not set foot within the city walls.
No. I've come to these fields near the border
for two reasons which act on me as one—
so I may run off to a different land
if someone sees me and knows who I am
and to find my sister, who's living here,

¹Pylades was the son of Strophius, king of Phocis, and a cousin of Orestes.

ELECTRA

so they say, joined in marriage to a man, 130
no virgin any more. I could meet her, [100]
make her my accomplice in the murder,
and in this way get clear information
about what's happening inside the walls.
But now that Dawn is raising her bright eyes,
let's move aside to some place off the path.
We'll see a ploughman or some servant woman
and ask them if my sister lives near here.
In fact, I can see a household servant—
her shaven head is carrying a water jug.¹ 140
Let's sit and ask this female slave some questions, [110]
Pylades, and see if we can get some word
about the business which has brought us here.

[Orestes and Pylades move back. Electra enters, returning from the spring. She does not see them at first and starts to go through her ritual of mourning.]

ELECTRA

You must step quickly now—
it's time to move—keep going,
lamenting as you go.
Alas for me! Yes, for me!
I am Agamemnon's child,
born from Clytaemnestra,
Tyndareus' hateful daughter. 150
Miserable Electra—that's the name
the citizens have given me.
Alas, alas! My wretched work, [120]
this way of life that I detest!
O my father, Agamemnon,
you now lie in Hades, murdered
by Aegisthus and your wife.

Come now, raise the same lament,
seize the joy of prolonged weeping.

You must step quickly now— 160
it's time to move—keep going,
lamenting as you go.
Alas for me! Yes, for me!
O my poor brother, in what town, [130]

¹The shaven head may be a token of mourning or a sign of Electra's low status now or both.

ELECTRA

to what household have you wandered,
abandoning your abject sister
to such painful circumstance
in her paternal home? Come to me,
in my unhappy wretchedness.
Be my deliverer from pain— 170
O Zeus, Zeus—
be an avenger for my father,
and the hateful shedding of his blood,
once you set your roaming foot in Argos.

Take this water pitcher from my head [140]
and set it down, so I may wail
my night laments, cries for my father,
wild shrieks, a song of death,
your death, my father. For you
beneath the earth, I cry out 180
chants of sorrow—day after day
I keep up this constant grieving,
tearing my dear skin with nails,
hands beating my shaven head—
all this because you're dead.

Ah yes, mutilate your face, [150]
and, just as a swan sings out
beside the streaming river,
crying to its beloved father
who died ensnared within the web 190
of a deceitful net, so I cry out
for you, unhappy father,
your body soaking in that final bath,
your most pitiful couch of death.¹

Alas for me . . . alas for me!
That bitter axe that hacked you, [160]
father, the bitter scheme
of your return from Troy!
Your wife never welcomed you
with a victor's crown or garland. 200
No. Instead she gave you up
to that disgraceful mutilation

¹Agamemnon was killed in his bath, trapped under his cloak, as if under a hunting net.

ELECTRA

by Aegisthus' two-edged sword
and got herself a treacherous mate.

[Enter the Chorus of Argive women.]

CHORUS

O Electra, daughter of Agamemnon,
I've come here to your rural dwelling place
to tell you a milk-drinking man has come,
one of those who walk the mountains.
He's travelled from Mycenae [170]
and says the Argives have proclaimed 210
a sacrifice two days from now,
and every young bride has to go
to Hera's shrine in the procession.

ELECTRA

My sad heart is beating fast, my friends,
but not for festive ornaments
or necklaces made out of gold.
I won't stand with the Argive girls
in choruses or beat my foot
as I whirl in the dance. [180]
I pass my nights in tears— 220
in my unhappiness my care
day after day is with my tears.
See if this filthy hair and tattered clothes
suit Agamemnon's royal child
or Troy, which bears the memory
of how my father seized the place.

CHORUS

The goddess is great. So come, [190]
borrow thick woven clothes from me
and put them on, with gold as well,
graceful ornaments—to favour me. 230
Do you think that with your tears
you can control your enemies
if you have no respect for gods?
My child, you'll find yourself a gentler life
by honouring the gods with prayers,
and not with sorrowful laments.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

The gods pay no attention to the cries
of this ill-fated girl or to the murder
of my father all that time ago. [200]
Alas for that slaughtered man 240
and for the wanderer still alive
dwelling somewhere in a foreign land,
a wretched vagabond at a slave's hearth,
son of such a celebrated father.
And I am living in a peasant's home,
wasting my soul up on the mountain tops,
in exile from my father's house. [210]
My mother, married to another man,
lives in a bed stained with his blood.

CHORUS

Your mother's sister, Helen, brought such grief 250
to the Greeks and to your house, as well.

[Orestes and Pylades begin to move forward. Electra catches sight of them.]

ELECTRA

Alas, women, I must end my lamentation.
Some strangers lurking behind the altar
near the house are moving out of hiding.
Let's be off—run from these trouble makers.
You take the path, and I'll go in the house.

ORESTES

Stay here, poor girl! Don't fear my hand. [220]

ELECTRA

O Phoebus Apollo, I entreat you—
do not let me die!

ORESTES

And grant that I cut down
others I hate much more than you.

ELECTRA

Leave now! 260
Don't put your hands on those you should not touch.

ELECTRA

ORESTES

There's no one I have more right to touch.

ELECTRA

Then why wait beside my house in ambush,
with your sword drawn?

ORESTES

Stay here and listen.
Soon you will agree with me.

ELECTRA

I'll stand here.
I'm yours, anyway, since you're the stronger.

ORESTES

I've come to bring you news about your brother.

ELECTRA

Dearest of friends—is he alive or dead?

ORESTES

Alive. I'd like you to have good news first. [230]

ELECTRA

My you find happiness as your reward
for those most welcome words. 270

ORESTES

That's a blessing
I'd like to give to both of us together.

ELECTRA

My unhappy brother—in what country
does he spend his wretched exile?

ORESTES

He drifts around,
not settling for a single city's customs.

ELECTRA

He's not lacking what he needs each day?

ELECTRA

ORESTES

No, that he has. But a man in exile
is truly powerless.

ELECTRA

What's the message
you've come here to bring from him?

ORESTES

I'm here
to see if you're alive and, if you are,
what your life is like. 280

ELECTRA

Surely you can see,
first of all, how my body's shrivelled?

ORESTES

So worn with pain it makes me pity you. [240]

ELECTRA

And my hair cut off, shorn with a razor?

ORESTES

Perhaps your dead father and your brother
are tearing at you.

ELECTRA

Alas! Who is there
whom I love more than those two men?

ORESTES

Ah yes, and what do you think you are
to your own brother?

ELECTRA

He is not here,
and so not present as my friend.

ORESTES

Why live here,
so distant from the city? 290

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

I'm married—
it's a deadly state.

ORESTES

I pity your brother.
Did you marry someone from Mycenae?

ELECTRA

No one my father ever hoped to give me.

ORESTES

Tell me. I'll listen and inform your brother. [250]

ELECTRA

I live in his house, far from the city.

ORESTES

This is a house fit for a ditch digger
or some herdsman.

ELECTRA

He's poor but decent,
and he respects me.

ORESTES

Your husband's respect—
what does that mean?

ELECTRA

Never once has he dared
to fondle me in bed. 300

ORESTES

Does he hold back
from some religious scruple, or does he think
you are not worthy of him?

ELECTRA

No. He believes
it is not right to insult my ancestors.

ELECTRA

ORESTES

But how could he not be overjoyed
at making such a marriage?

ELECTRA

Well, stranger,
he thinks the person who gave me away
had no right to do it.

ORESTES

I understand. [260]
He fears that someday he'll be punished
by Orestes.

ELECTRA

He is afraid of that, 310
but he's a virtuous man, as well.

ORESTES

Ah yes,
you've been talking of a noble man
who must be treated well.

ELECTRA

Yes, if the man
who's far away from here right now comes back.

ORESTES

And your mother, the one who bore you,
how did she take this?

ELECTRA

Women give their love
to their husbands, stranger, not their children.

ORESTES

Why did Aegisthus shame you in this way?

ELECTRA

By giving me to such a man, he made sure
any children I bore would have no power. 320

ELECTRA

ORESTES

Clearly so that you would not have children
who could take revenge?

ELECTRA

Yes, that's his plan.
I hope he'll have to pay me back for that!

ORESTES

You're a virgin—does your mother's husband know? [270]

ELECTRA

No. We hide that from him with our silence.

ORESTES

These women listening to what we're saying
are friends of yours?

ELECTRA

Yes. They'll keep well concealed
my words and yours.

ORESTES

If he came to Argos
what could Orestes do in all of this?

ELECTRA

You have to ask? What a shameful question! 330
Isn't now a crucial time?

ORESTES

If he comes,
how should he kill his father's murderers?

ELECTRA

By daring what my father's enemies
dared do to him.

ORESTES

And would you dare
to help him kill your mother?

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Yes, I would—
with the very axe that killed our father!

ORESTES

Shall I tell him this? Are you quite certain? [280]

ELECTRA

Once I've shed my mother's blood, let me die!

ORESTES

Ah, if only Orestes were close by
and could hear this!

ELECTRA

Stranger, if I saw him, 340
I would not know him.

ORESTES

That's not surprising.
When he went away, you were so young.

ELECTRA

Only one of my friends would recognize him.

ORESTES

The man they say saved him from being killed
by stealing him away?

ELECTRA

Yes. An old man—
my father's servant long ago.

ORESTES

Your father—
when he died, did he get a burial tomb?

ELECTRA

Once he'd been thrown out of the house,
he found what he could find.

ORESTES

Alas! Those words of yours . . . [290]
Awareness of pain, even of a stranger, 350

ELECTRA

gnaws away at men. But you must tell me.
Once I have listened, I can tell your brother
the unhappy story he has to hear.
Those with no knowledge cannot sympathize,
for only those who know feel pity. Still,
knowing too much can put the wise at risk.

CHORUS

My heart's desires are the same as his.
Out here, far from the city, I don't know
the troubles there. Now I want to hear them.

ELECTRA

I will speak out, if that's acceptable— 360 [300]
for it's appropriate to talk with friends
about the burden of my situation
and my father's. And I beg you, stranger,
since you're the one who prompted me to speak,
tell Orestes of our troubles, mine and his.
First of all, there's the sort of clothes I wear,
kept here in a stall, weighed down with filth.
Then there's the kind of house I'm living in,
now I've been thrown out of my royal home.
I have to work hard at the loom myself 370
to make my clothes or else I'd have to go
wearing nothing at all, just do without,
bringing water from the springs all by myself,
with no share in the ritual festivals, [310]
no place in the dance. Since I'm a virgin,
I keep married women at a distance.
I felt shamed by Castor, who courted me,
his relative, before he joined the gods.
Meanwhile my mother sits there on her throne,
with loot from Phrygia and Asian slaves, 380
my father's plunder, standing by her chair,
their Trojan dresses pinned with golden brooches.¹
My father's blood still stains the palace walls—
it's rotted black—while the man who killed him
climbs in my father's chariot and drives out, [320]
proud to brandish in his blood-stained hands
the very sceptre that my father used

¹Phrygia is a region in Asia Minor near Troy. The terms Phrygian and Trojan are often used interchangeably.

ELECTRA

to command the Greeks. Agamemnon's grave
has not been honoured. It's had no libations,
no myrtle branch—its altar is unadorned. 390
And this splendid husband of my mother,
so they say, when he's soaking wet with drink,
jumps on the grave and starts throwing pebbles
at the stone memorial to my father,
and dares to cry out words like this against us:
"Where's your son Orestes? Is he present [330]
to act with honour and defend your tomb?"
And so Orestes in his absence is insulted.
So I beg you, stranger, take back this news.
Many are summoning him—I speak for them— 400
my hands and tongue, my grief-stricken heart,
my shaven head, and Agamemnon, too.
It would be disgraceful if his father
could destroy the Phrygians and yet he,
one against one, could not destroy a man,
when he is young and from a nobler father.

[Enter the Peasant, returning from the fields.]

CHORUS

Look! I see someone—I mean your husband.
He's left his work. He's coming to the house. [340]

PEASANT

Hold on. Who are these strangers I see there
by the door? And why have they come here, 410
to a farmer's gate? What do they want from me?
It's shameful for a woman to be standing
with young men.

ELECTRA

My dear friend, don't suspect me.
You'll hear what's going on. These strangers
have come here from Orestes—they're messengers
with news for me. But forgive him, strangers,
for those words he said.

PEASANT

What are they saying?
Is the man still gazing at the sunlight?

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

That's what they say, and I believe their news. [350]

PEASANT

Does he still recall your father's troubles
and your own? 420

ELECTRA

We can hope about those things,
but a man in exile has no power.

PEASANT

What message from Orestes did they bring
when they came here?

ELECTRA

He sent them out as spies
to look into my troubles.

PEASANT

They're seeing some,
and I suppose you're telling them the rest.

ELECTRA

There's very little they don't know about.

PEASANT

Surely we should have opened up our doors
long before this point.

[The Peasant turns to Orestes and Pylades.]

Go inside the house.
In exchange for your good news, you'll find
all the hospitality my house affords. 430
You servants, take the stuff inside the house. [360]
Do not refuse me—you are friends of ours
and you've come from someone who's a friend.
Even if I'm poor, I will not behave
like someone with an ill-bred character.

ORESTES *[to Electra]*

By the gods, is this the man pretending

ELECTRA

to be married because he does not wish
to bring dishonour to Orestes?

ELECTRA

He is—

he's the one who in my miserable state
they call my husband. 440

ORESTES

Well, nothing is precise
when it comes to how a man is valued—
men's natures are confusing. Before this,
I've seen a man worth nothing, yet he had [370]
a noble father; I've known evil parents
with outstanding children, seen famine
in a rich man's mind and a great spirit
in a poor man's body. So how can we
sort out these things and judge correctly?
By riches? That would be a wretched test. 450
By those who have nothing? But poverty
is a disease. Through need it teaches men
to act in evil ways. So should I turn
to warfare? But when facing hostile spears,
who can testify which men are virtuous?
Best to dismiss such things, leave them to chance.
This man is not great among the Argives,
nor puffed up by his family's reputation.
He's one of the crowd, yet has proved himself
an excellent man. So stop your foolishness, 460
those of you who keep wandering around
full of misguided ways of measuring worth.
Why not judge how valuable men are
by their behaviour and their company?
Men like this one govern homes and cities well,
while those with muscles and with vacant minds
are mere decorations in the market place.
In fights with spears the strong arm holds its ground
no better than the weak one does—such things
depend upon man's nature and his courage. 470 [390]
But because the man who is both absent
and yet present here is worthy of it—
I mean Agamemnon's son, for whose sake
we have come—let us accept the lodging
in this home. You slaves, go inside the house.

ELECTRA

May a poor but willing man act as my host
rather than a man with wealth. I applaud
how this one has received me in his home,
although I would have preferred your brother
might welcome me into a prosperous
and successful house. But perhaps he'll come. 480
I place no trust in human prophecies,
but the oracles of Loxias are strong.¹ [400]

[Pylades, Orestes, and their servants go into the house.]

CHORUS

Now, Electra, our hearts are warm with joy—
more than they have been before. Your fortunes
may perhaps advance, although that's difficult,
and end up resting in a better place.

ELECTRA *[to the Peasant]*

Reckless man, you know how poor your house is—
why did you offer your hospitality
to people so much greater than yourself? 490

PEASANT

What's wrong? If they're as well bred as they seem,
won't they be just as happy with small men
as with the great?

ELECTRA

Well, you are one of the small.
But since you've now committed this mistake,
go to that dear old servant of my father's.
He's been expelled from town and tends his flocks
by the Tanaus river, which cuts a line [410]
between lands of Argos and of Sparta.
Tell him this—now these people have arrived,
he must come and provide our guests some food. 500
He'll be happy to do that and to offer
prayers up to the gods when he finds out
the child he rescued once is still alive.
From my mother and my ancestral home

¹Loxias is another name for Apollo, the god whose shrine Orestes consults before coming to Argos (as he mentions at line 115 above). We do not know the text of the oracle (although we later learn it encouraged him to commit the revenge murders), and Electra is, one assumes, at this point ignorant of Orestes's visit to the shrine.

ELECTRA

we'd get nothing—we'd bring them bitter news
if that cruel-hearted woman were to learn
Orestes is still living.

PEASANT

All right then,
I'll take that message to the old man, [420]
if that's what you think. But you should go
inside the house as soon as possible 510
to get things ready there. If she wants to,
surely a woman can find many things
to make into a meal. Within the house
there's still enough to fill them up with food
for at least one day. It's at times like this,
when I have no idea how to manage,
I think of the great power money has
for giving things to strangers and paying
to save someone whenever he falls sick.
The meals we need each day don't come to much, 520
for all men, once they have eaten their fill,
feel much the same, whether rich or poor. [430]

[The Peasant and Electra move into the house, leaving the Chorus alone on stage.]

CHORUS

You famous ships which once sailed off to Troy
to the beat of countless oars,
leading Nereïds in their dance,
while flute-loving dolphins leapt
and rolled around your dark-nosed prows,
accompanying Achilles, Thetis' son,
whose feet had such a nimble spring,
and Agamemnon, too, off to Troy, 530 [440]
to the banks of the river Simois.¹

Leaving Euboea's headland points,
Nereïds carried from Hephaestus' forge
his labours on the golden shield and armour,
up to Pelion, along the wooded slopes
of sacred Ossa, where the nymphs keep watch,
and searched those maidens out,

¹Nereïds, daughters of the minor sea god Nereus, were nymphs of the sea. Achilles's divine mother, Thetis, was a nereïd.

in places the old horseman trained
 sea-dwelling Thetis' son [450]
 to be a shining light for Hellas, 540
 and swift runner for the sons of Atreus.¹

I heard from a man who'd come from Troy
 and reached the harbour in Nauplia
 that on the circle of your splendid shield,
 O son of Thetis, were these images,
 so terrifying to the Phrygians—
 on the rim around the edge
 was Perseus in his flying sandals [460]
 holding up above the sea
 the Gorgon's head and severed throat, 550
 accompanied by Zeus's messenger
 Hermes, Maia's country child.²

In the centre of the shield
 the circle of the sun blazed out
 with his team of winged horses.
 Dancing stars shone in the heavens,
 the Pleiades and Hyades,
 a fearful sight for Hector's eyes.
 On the helmet made of hammered gold [470]
 sphinxes in their talons clutched 560
 their prey seduced by song,
 and on the breastplate breathing fire
 a lioness with claws raced away
 eyeing the young horse of Pirene.³

And on his murderous sword
 four horses galloped—above their backs

¹These lines refer to the centaur Chiron, half man and half horse, who in the region described educated Achilles and other heroes. Pelion and Ossa are two famous mountains. Hephaestus is the god who made Achilles's divine armour. These lines appear to suggest that Nereïds carried the divine armour made by Hephaestus to Achilles before he set off to Troy and that at the time he was still being educated by Chiron in the mountains.

²Perseus was the hero who killed Medusa, the most ferocious of the Gorgons (her face turned men to stone). Hermes, divine son of Zeus and Maia, assisted Perseus in the exploit. He is called a "country child" because he is associated with farming and hunting.

³This is a reference to the monster Chimaera, a fire-breathing lioness with a goat's body and head growing out of its back. The "young horse of Pirene" is a reference to Pegasus, the winged horse ridden by the hero Bellerophon, who killed the Chimaera. The mention of Hector is a reminder that he had to face Achilles's shield in his final and fatal encounter with Achilles (described in Book 22 of the *Iliad*).

ELECTRA

rose billowing black clouds of dust.
Evil-minded daughter of Tyndareus, [480]
your bed mate killed the king
of spear-bearing warriors like these. 570
And for that death the heavenly gods
will one day pay you back with death.¹
Yes, one day I will see your blood,
death spurts pulsing from your throat,
sliced through by a sword of iron.

[Enter the Old Man. Electra comes out of the house during his speech.]

OLD MAN

So where is she? Where is my young lady,
my mistress—daughter of the man I raised,
king Agamemnon? How steep this path is [490]
to where she lives for a decrepit old man 580
going up this hill on foot! Still, they're my friends,
so I must drag myself with my bent back
and tottering legs up here. O my daughter,
now I can see you there before the house.
I've come bringing here from my own livestock
a newborn lamb taken from its mother,
garlands, cheeses I've lifted from the press,
and this ancient treasure from Dionysus—
it smells so rich! There's not much of it,
but still it's sweet to add a cup of this
to a weaker drink. Let someone take these 590
inside the house and give them to the guests. [500]
I want to use some cloth or piece of clothing
to wipe my eyes—they are full of tears.

ELECTRA

Why are your eyes so soaking wet, old man?
Am I reminding you of our troubles
after all this time? Or are you grieving
about Orestes in his wretched exile
and about my father, whom you once held
in your arms and raised. But that care of yours
was no help to you or to your family.

¹The phrase “evil minded daughter of Tyndareus” is a reference to Clytaemnestra.

ELECTRA

OLD MAN

That's right— 600
it didn't help us. But still, there's one thing
I could not bear, so I went to his tomb,
a detour on the road. I was alone, [510]
so I lay down and wept. I opened up
the sack of wine I'm bringing for the guests,
poured a libation, and spread out there
some myrtle sprigs around the monument.
But then I saw an offering on the altar,
a black-fleeced sheep—there was blood as well,
shed not long before, and some sliced off curls, 610
locks of yellow hair. My child, I wondered
what man would ever dare approach that tomb.
It surely wasn't any man from Argos.
Perhaps your brother has come back somehow,
in secret, and as he came, paid tribute
to his father's grave. You should examine [520]
the lock of hair, set it against your own—
see if the colour of the severed curls
matches your own. Those sharing common blood
from the same father will by nature have 620
many features which are very much alike.

ELECTRA

What you've said, old man, does not make much sense,
if you think my brother, a courageous man,
would sneak into this country in secret
because he is fearful of Aegisthus.
And how can two locks of hair look alike,
when one comes from a well-bred man and grew
in wrestling schools, whereas the other one
was shaped by woman's combing? That's unlikely.
Old man, you could find hair which looked alike [530]
on many people whose family blood
is not the same at all.

OLD MAN

Then stand in the footprint,
my child, and see if the impression there
is the same size as your foot.

ELECTRA

How could a foot

ELECTRA

this ancient remnant of a man—to whom
among your friends does he belong?

ELECTRA

Stranger,
this man is the one who raised my father.

ORESTES

What are you saying? Is this the man
who stole away your brother?

660

ELECTRA

He's the one
who rescued him, if he's still alive.

ORESTES

Wait!
Why is he inspecting me, as if checking
some clear mark stamped on a piece of silver?
Is he comparing me with someone else?

ELECTRA

It could be he's happy looking at you
as someone who's a comrade of Orestes.

[560]

ORESTES

Well, yes, Orestes is a friend of mine,
but why's he going in circles round me?

ELECTRA

Stranger, as I watch him, I'm surprised as well.

670

OLD MAN

O my daughter Electra, my lady—
pray to the gods.

ELECTRA

What should I pray for,
something here or something far away?

OLD MAN

To get yourself a treasure which you love,
something the god is making manifest.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Watch this then. I'm summoning the gods.
Is that what you mean, old man?

OLD MAN

Now, my child,
look at this man, the one you love the most.

ELECTRA

I've been watching you a long time now
to see if your mind is working as it should. 680

OLD MAN

I'm not thinking straight if I see your brother?

ELECTRA

What are you talking about, old man, 570
making such an unexpected claim?

OLD MAN

I'm looking at Orestes, Agamemnon's son.

ELECTRA

What mark do you see which will convince me?

OLD MAN

A scar along his eyebrow. He fell one day
and drew blood. He was on his father's land
chasing down a fawn with you.

ELECTRA

What are you saying?
I do see the mark left by that fall. . . .

OLD MAN

Then why delay
embracing the one you love the most? 690

ELECTRA

No. I'll no longer hesitate—my heart
has been won over by that scar of yours.

[Electra moves over to Orestes and they embrace.]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

You've appeared at last. I'm holding you . . .
beyond my hopes.

ORESTES

After all this time,
I'm embracing you.

ELECTRA

I never expected this. [580]

ORESTES

This was something I, too, could not hope for.

ELECTRA

Are you really him?

ORESTES

Yes. Your sole ally.
If in my net I can catch the prey I'm after . . .
But I'm confident. For if wrongful acts
triumph over justice, then no longer
should we put any of our faith in gods. 700

CHORUS

You've come, ah, you've come,
this day we've waited for all these years.
You've shone out and lit a beacon
for the city, the man who long ago
went out in exile from his father's house
to roam around in misery.
Now a god, my friend, some god [590]
brings victory. Lift up your hands,
lift up your words, send prayers 710
up to the gods for your success,
good fortune for your brother,
as he goes in the city.

ORESTES

Well, I've had the loving joys of welcome.
In time I'll give them back to you again.
You, old man, you've come at a good time.
Tell me this—what should I do to repay
my father's murderer and my mother,

ELECTRA

his partner in this sacrilegious marriage? 720 [600]
Do I have any friends who'll help in Argos?
Or are they all gone, just like my fortune?
Who can I make my ally? Do we meet
during daylight or at night? What pathway
do I take to fight against my enemies?

OLD MAN

My child, when times are bad one has no friends.
It's a rare benefit to find someone
who'll share with you the good times and the bad.
But since, as far as your friends can see,
you and the foundations of your house 730
have been destroyed completely, you've left them
no hope at all. So give me your attention—
you should realize that all you really have [610]
to win back your father's home and city
are your own two hands and some good fortune.

ORESTES

What then should I do to succeed in this?

OLD MAN

Kill Thyestes' son and your own mother.

ORESTES

That's the crown of victory I'm after.
But how am I to get my hands on it?

OLD MAN

Well, even if you wanted to attempt it, 740
don't go inside the walls.

ORESTES

Is he well supplied
with bodyguards and regular spearmen?

OLD MAN

Yes, he is.
He's afraid of you and does not sleep well.

ORESTES

Well, old man, you must give me some advice
about what happens next.

ELECTRA

OLD MAN

Then you should listen—
an idea has just occurred to me.

ORESTES

I hope you have come up with something good [620]
which I can understand.

OLD MAN

On my way here
I saw Aegisthus.

ORESTES

I'm listening to you.
Where was he?

OLD MAN

In the fields close to his stables. 750

ORESTES

What was he doing? I can see some hope
emerging from our desperate situation.

OLD MAN

He was setting up a banquet for the nymphs—
that's what it seemed to me.

ORESTES

But was it
for a child he's raising or for some new birth?¹

OLD MAN

I only know one thing—there was an ox.
He was preparing it for sacrifice.

ORESTES

How many men did he have there with him?
Or was he by himself with his attendants?

OLD MAN

No Argives, only a group of servants. 760

¹The nymphs, minor country goddesses, were associated with physical health, including at childbirth and during childhood.

ELECTRA

ORESTES

Old man, is there anybody with him
who will recognize me if he sees us?

[630]

OLD MAN

No.
They are slaves who've never set eyes on you.

ORESTES

If we prevail, will they be on our side?

OLD MAN

Yes. That's what slaves are like. You're lucky.

ORESTES

How do I get close to him?

OLD MAN

You should walk
where he can see you as he sacrifices.

ORESTES

So apparently his fields are by the road?

OLD MAN

Yes. When he catches sight of you from there,
he'll summon you to join the feast.

ORESTES

With god's will,
I'll make a bitter fellow banqueter.

770

OLD MAN

From then on you must sort things out yourself,
whatever happens.

ORESTES

That's excellent advice.
What about my mother? Where is she?

[640]

OLD MAN

In Argos. She'll join her husband at the feast.

ELECTRA

ORESTES

Why did my mother not leave with her husband?

OLD MAN

She stayed behind because she was afraid
the citizens would criticize her.

ORESTES

I see.

She knows the city is suspicious of her.

OLD MAN

That's right. People hate a profane woman.

780

ORESTES

How do I kill them both at the same time?

ELECTRA

I'll set up mother's murder on my own.

ORESTES

Good fortune will bring us success in this.

ELECTRA

Let the old man give both of us some help.

OLD MAN

All right. But how will you devise a way
to kill your mother?

[650]

ELECTRA

Old man, you must go
and report this news to Clytaemnestra—
say I have given birth—and to a son.

OLD MAN

Born some time ago or in the last few days?

ELECTRA

Before my lying in, ten days ago.¹

790

¹The "lying in," Cropp notes, was a period immediately after childbirth in which the mother was kept in seclusion to avoid contamination.

ELECTRA

OLD MAN

How does this advance your mother's murder?

ELECTRA

When she finds out I've been through birthing pains,
she'll come here.

OLD MAN

Why would she do that? My child,
do you think she cares for you?

ELECTRA

Yes. And she'll weep
because my child is born so common.

OLD MAN

Perhaps.
But come back to the point of what you're saying.

ELECTRA

If she comes, then it's clear that she will die. [660]

OLD MAN

So she comes to your house, right to the door. . . .

ELECTRA

Well, it won't take much for her to turn aside
and go to Hades, will it?

OLD MAN

Once I see that, 800
then let me die!

ELECTRA

But first of all, old man,
you must lead my brother

OLD MAN

. . . to where Aegisthus
is now offering gods his sacrifice.

ELECTRA

Then go to my mother. Tell her my news.

ELECTRA

OLD MAN

I'll do it so the very words will seem
as if they came from your own mouth.

ELECTRA *[to Orestes]*

Now it's up to you. You've drawn first lot
in this bloody slaughter.

ORESTES

Then I'll be off,
if someone will conduct me to the road.

OLD MAN

I'll be happy to take you there myself.

810 [670]

[Orestes, Electra, Pylades, and the Old Man pause to make a brief prayer together.]

ORESTES

O Father Zeus, scatter my enemies.

ELECTRA

Pity us—we've suffered pitifully.

OLD MAN

Yes, have pity on them, your descendants.

ELECTRA

And Hera, who rules Mycenae's altars.

ORESTES

Give us victory, if what we seek is just.

OLD MAN

Yes, give them justice to avenge their father.

ORESTES

You, too, father, living beneath the earth
through an unholy slaughter.

ELECTRA

And lady Earth,
to whom I stretch my hands.

ELECTRA

OLD MAN

Defend these two.
Defend these children whom you love the most. 820

ORESTES

Come now, bringing all the dead as allies. [680]

ELECTRA

Those who in that war and by your side
destroyed the Phrygians.

OLD MAN

And all those
who hate the sacrilegious and profane.

ELECTRA

Are you listening, those of you who suffered
such terrors at the hand of my own mother?

OLD MAN

Your father hears it all, I know. Time to go.

ELECTRA *[to Orestes]*

He knows everything. You must be a man.¹
And I'll tell you this—Aegisthus has to die.
If in the struggle with him you fall dead, 830
then I die as well. Do not think of me
as still alive. I'll take my two-edged sword
and slice into my heart. I'll go inside
and get things ready. If you send good news [690]
the whole house will ring with cries of triumph.
But if you die, things will be different.
These are my words to you.

ORESTES

I understand.

[Orestes, Pylades, the Old Man, and the attendants leave. Electra turns to face the Chorus.]

¹There is some confusion and argument about the allocation and position of this line, which in the Greek comes after this speech of Electra's and is divided between Orestes and Electra. I have followed Cropp's suggestion and given the entire line to Electra at the beginning of her speech to Orestes.

But then, at that very moment,
 Zeus changed the paths
 of all the shining stars,
 the radiant glory of the sun,
 and dawn's bright shining face. [730]
 Across the western reaches of the sky
 he drove hot flames from heaven.
 Rain clouds moved up to the north, 880
 so Ammon's lands were dry—
 all withered up, deprived by Zeus
 of his most lovely showers of rain.¹

People speak about these tales,
 but in such things my faith is small—
 that the sun's hot throne of gold [740]
 turned round to punish human beings
 in a cause involving mortal men.
 But tales which terrify mankind
 are profitable and serve the gods. 890
 But you were not concerned with them
 the day you killed your husband,
 you sister of such glorious brothers.²

Wait! Hold on! Did you hear a shout, my friends?
 Or has some vain notion overtaken me,
 like Zeus's rumbling underneath the ground?
 Look, breezes are stirring—that's a sign.
 My lady, come out of the house! Electra! [750]

[Electra comes out of the house.]

¹Thyestes and Atreus were brothers. Intending to offer a sacrifice to the goddess Artemis, Atreus searched his flock for the finest lamb and discovered one with a golden fleece. Since he did not wish to sacrifice such a rare treasure, he gave the animal to his wife, Aerope, for safe keeping. She, however, gave it to Thyestes, her secret lover. Thyestes and Atreus then agreed that whoever had the lamb would be king of Mycenae. Thyestes produced the lamb and became king. He said he would give back the throne if the sun moved backwards in the sky. Zeus brought about that cosmic event, and Atreus regained the kingship. At that point he banished Thyestes. Once he learned of the affair between his wife and Thyestes, Atreus took his revenge by killing Thyestes's sons and serving them up as food to their father at a banquet (ostensibly a feast to celebrate the reconciliation of the two brothers). Thyestes then raped his own daughter Pelopia in order to produce a child who would avenge the horrific banquet. That child was Aegisthus, the killer of Agamemnon. Euripides does not dwell on the details of the Thyestean Feast. The phrase "Ammon's land" is a reference to North Africa, where Ammon's shrine was located.

²Clytaemnestra's "glorious brothers" are Castor and Polydeuces.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Who are you? How can I trust what you've just said?

MESSENGER

Don't you know me by sight—your brother's servant?

ELECTRA

You best of friends! I was too full of fear
to recognize your face. But now I know you. 920
What are you saying? Has that hateful man,
my father's murderer, been killed?

MESSENGER

He's dead. [770]
I've given you the same report twice now.
Obviously you like the sound of it.

ELECTRA

O you gods, and all-seeing Justice,
you've come at last. How did Orestes kill
Thyestes' son? What was the murder like?
I want to know.

MESSENGER

After we'd left this house,
we walked along the two-tracked wagon path
to where Mycenae's famous king might be. 930
He happened to be walking in his garden,
a well-watered place, cutting soft myrtle shoots
to place in his own hair. When he saw us,
he called out, "Greetings, strangers. Who are you? [780]
Where are you from? What country is your home?"
Orestes said, "We are from Thessaly,
on our way to the Alpheus river,
to offer sacrifice to Olympian Zeus."
After hearing that, Aegisthus answered,
"You must be my guests, share this feast with us. 940
It so happens I'm now offering an ox,
sacrificing to the nymphs. If you get up
at dawn tomorrow, you'll be no worse off.
So come, let's go inside the house." Saying this,
he took our arms and led us off the road,
insisting that we must not turn him down.
Once we were inside the house, he said, [790]

ELECTRA

“Let someone bring in water right away,
so these guests can stand around the altar
by the basin where they purify their hands.” 950
But Orestes said, “We’ve just cleansed ourselves
in pure water from a flowing river.
If strangers must join with the citizens
in making sacrifice, then, Aegisthus,
we are ready and will not refuse, my lord.”
Those were the words they spoke in public.
The slaves guarding their master with their spears
set them aside, and then all lent a hand
to do the work, some bringing in the bowl [800]
to catch the blood, others fetching baskets, 960
still others kindling fire and setting basins
around the hearth. The whole house echoed.
Then your mother’s consort took barley grain
and sprinkled it across the altar, saying
“Nymphs of the rocks, may I and my wife,
Tyndareus’s daughter, in our home
offer frequent sacrifice, enjoying success,
as we do now, and may my enemies
always fail”—he meant Orestes and yourself.
My master prayed for quite the opposite, 970
not saying the words aloud, so he might win
his ancestral home. Then from a basket [810]
Aegisthus took a sacrificial knife,
sliced off some of the calf’s hair and set it
with his right hand on the sacred fire.
When servants raised the calf up on their shoulders,
he slit its throat and spoke out to your brother,
“People claim this about men from Thessaly—
they’re among the best at butchering bulls
as well as taming horses. So, stranger, 980
take this knife and demonstrate to us
if that report about Thessalians is true.”
Orestes gripped the well-made Dorian knife,
tossed from his shoulders his fine-looking cloak, [820]
and chose Pylades to help him in the work.
Pushing slaves aside, he took the calf’s hoof,
and, stretching out his arms, cut open
the beast’s white flesh and then stripped off the hide
faster than any runner could complete
two circuits on a track for racing horses. 990
He opened up the flanks, and Aegisthus

picked up the sacred entrails in his hands
 to examine them. But on the liver
 the lobe was missing. There were signs of damage
 which the man inspecting them could see
 close to the gall bladder and the entry vein.
 Aegisthus was upset. My master asked, [830]
 “Why are you disturbed?” “Stranger,” he replied,
 “what I truly fear is foreign treachery.
 Most of all I hate Agamemnon’s son, 1000
 an enemy of my house.” My master said,
 “Do you really fear an exile’s trickery,
 you, lord of the city? Let someone bring me
 a Phthian axe to replace this Doric knife
 so I can split apart the breast bone
 and we can feast upon the inner organs.”
 He took the axe and struck. Then Aegisthus
 picked up and separated out the innards
 and peered at them. As he was bending down,
 your brother, standing on tiptoe, hit him 1010 [840]
 on the spine and sliced through his vertebrae.
 His whole body went into convulsions,
 shaking up and down, and he kept screaming.
 He was dying in his blood, a brutal death.
 The servants saw and rushed to get their spears
 for a fight of many men against just two.
 But Pylades and Orestes stood there,
 brandishing their weapons with great courage.
 Then my master cried, “I have not come here
 as an enemy, not to the city 1020
 or my servants, but to avenge myself
 on the man who butchered my own father.
 I am unfortunate Orestes. You men, [850]
 old servants of my father, do not kill me.”
 After the servants heard Orestes’ words,
 they pulled back their spears. Then an old man
 who’d been a long time in the household
 recognized him. At once they placed a wreath
 on your brother’s head, shouting and rejoicing,
 and he’s coming here carrying a head 1030
 to show it to you—not the Gorgon’s head,
 but from the person you so hate, Aegisthus,
 the slaughtered man, who has just paid
 his bitter debt for murderous bloodshed.

ELECTRA

[The Messenger leaves.]

CHORUS

O my friend, set your feet to dancing,
leaping with joy up to heaven, like a deer. [860]
Your brother has emerged triumphant,
and now he's won himself a crown,
in a contest surpassing those
which happen by Alpheus' streams. 1040
Come, as I perform my dance,
sing out a song of glorious victory.

ELECTRA

O light! O blazing chariot of the sun!
O earth and darkness I gazed at before!
I've freedom now to open up my eyes—
Aegisthus, who killed my father, is gone.
Come, my friends, let us bring out [870]
whatever I keep stored up in the house
as adornments for my brother's hair.
I'll make a crown for his victorious head. 1050

CHORUS

Bring on your decorations for his brow,
and we'll keep up the dance the Muses love.
Now those dear kings we had before
will rule this land of ours with justice.
They've cast down those who broke our laws.
So let our joyous harmonies ring out!

[Orestes and Pylades enter with their attendants, who are carrying the body of Aegisthus.]

ELECTRA

O Orestes, you glorious conqueror, [880]
born from a father who was a conqueror
in the war at Troy. Take these ribbons
for your locks of hair. You've come back home, 1060
and your race around the stadium track
has not been in vain. You've killed Aegisthus,
the man who killed our father, yours and mine,
our enemy. And you, who stood by him,
Pylades, reared by a pious father,
receive this garland from my hand. For you

ELECTRA

were equal with Orestes in this fight.
I hope I see you always prospering.

ORESTES

First of all, Electra, you must believe [890]
the gods were leaders in what's happened here. 1070
Then praise me as a servant of the gods
and circumstance. I have returned back home
and killed Aegisthus, not in word but deed.
To underscore the truth of what I've said,
I've carried here the dead man's corpse for you.
If it's what you want, lay him out as prey
for carrion beasts or impale him on a stake,
a prize for birds, those children of the sky.
In earlier days he was called your master,
and now he is your slave.

ELECTRA

I feel ashamed, 1080 [900]
but nonetheless I wish to speak.

ORESTES

What is it?
Speak up. There's nothing you need to fear.

ELECTRA

I'm afraid to insult the dead—someone
might heap reproaches on me.

ORESTES

But no one
would blame you in the slightest.

ELECTRA

Still, the city
is hard to please and loves to criticize.

ORESTES

Speak, sister, if you wish to say something.
We are his enemies—there are no rules
in our relationship with him.

ELECTRA [*to the corpse of Aegisthus*]

Well, then,

ELECTRA

how shall I first begin to speak about 1090
 the evil you have done? Where do I end?
 What words shall I use for the central part?
 It's true that in the dawn I never stopped
 rehearsing what I wished to say to you,
 right to your face, if I were ever free
 from my old fears. Well, now I am free. [910]
 So I will pay you back, abusing you
 the way I wanted to when you were living.
 You ruined me, taking away from me
 and from this man here our dear father, 1100
 although we had not done you any wrong.
 You made a shameful marriage with my mother,
 then killed her husband, who was commander
 of all the Greeks. You never went to Troy.
 And you were so idiotic you believed
 that with my mother you would get a wife
 who was not evil, though she was betraying [920]
 my father's bed. But you must know this—
 when any man corrupts another's wife,
 having sex with her in secret, and then 1110
 is compelled to take her as his wife,
 such a man is foolish if he believes
 that, though she was not virtuous before,
 she will be now with him. You were living
 a miserable life, although it seemed
 as if the way you lived was not so bad.
 You knew well you'd made a profane marriage.
 My mother realized she had in you
 a sacrilegious man. You are both evil,
 and so you both acquired each other's traits. 1120
 She shares your wickedness, and you share hers.
 You heard these words from all the Argives— [930]
 "That woman's husband," not "that man's wife."
 And this is truly shameful—when the wife
 controls the home rather than the husband.
 I hate those offspring whom the city calls
 children of their mother instead of saying
 sons of their father. Still, when any man
 makes a distinguished marriage well above
 his station, no one ever talks of him, 1130
 but only of his wife. But most of all,
 you were so ignorant you were deceived
 in claiming to be someone because your strength

ELECTRA

was in your wealth. But that's not worth a thing— [940]
its presence is short lived. What stays secure
is not possessions but one's nature, which stands
beside you and takes away your troubles.
But when riches live with fools unjustly,
they bloom a little while, then flee the house.
As for the women you had, I will not speak— 1140
a virgin should not talk about such things.
I will simply hint at them in passing.
You were disgusting, with your royal home
and your seductive looks. May I never have
a husband with the face of a young girl,
but one who has the look of a real man.
His children hold onto a life of war. [950]
You pretty ones are only ornaments
to decorate the dancing choruses.
So get out of here, and stay ignorant 1150
how you were found in time and punished.
And let no man committing wicked acts
believe that if he runs the first leg well,
he is defeating justice, not before
he moves across the finish line and ends
the last lap in his life.

CHORUS

What this man's done
is dreadful, and he's paid a dreadful price
to you and to Orestes. For Justice
possesses an enormous power.

ELECTRA

Well, you servants must remove the body
and hide it inside, somewhere in the dark, 1160 [960]
so that when my mother comes over here
she will not see his corpse before she's killed.

[Pylades and the attendants take Aegisthus's body into the house.]

ORESTES *[looking off stage]*

Wait a moment. Here is something else
we need to deal with.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

What? Are those men I see
reinforcements coming from Mycenae?

ORESTES

No. That's the mother who gave birth to me.

ELECTRA

How convenient—right into our net.
She looks so impressive in that carriage,
such fine clothes.

ORESTES

What are we going to do?
Kill our mother?

ELECTRA

You're not overcome with pity
now you're seeing our mother in the flesh? 1170

ORESTES

Ah, how can I murder her? She bore me.
She raised me.

ELECTRA

Just as she killed our father,
yours and mine. [970]

ORESTES

O Phoebus Apollo,
that prophecy of yours was foolish!

ELECTRA

Where Apollo is a fool, what men are wise?

ORESTES

You instructed me to kill my mother,
but killing her is wrong.

ELECTRA

On the other hand,
if you're avenging your own father,
how can you be harmed?

ELECTRA

ORESTES

I'll be prosecuted
for slaughtering my mother. Before now
I've been free of all impiety. 1180

ELECTRA

But if you refuse to defend your father,
you're a guilty man.

ORESTES

But my mother?
If I kill her, how will I be punished?

ELECTRA

What will happen to you if you give up
avenging your own father?

ORESTES

Could it have been
a demon in the likeness of a god
who spoke to me?

ELECTRA

Sitting on the sacred tripod?
I don't think so. [980]

ORESTES

I cannot believe
this prophecy was good. 1190

ELECTRA

You must be a man!
Don't give way to cowardice. Set for her
the same trap you used to kill her husband,
when you destroyed Aegisthus.

ORESTES

I'll go in.
I'm on the verge of a horrendous act,
something truly dreadful. Well, so be it,
if gods approve of this. And yet, for me
the contest is not sweet at all, but bitter.

[Orestes goes into the house. Clytaemnestra arrives in a chariot with attendants.]

ELECTRA

CHORUS

Greetings lady, child of Tyndareus,
queen of this country of the Argives, 1200
sister of those noble twins, [990]
Zeus's sons, who live in heaven
among the fiery constellations
and have the honourable task
of saving mortals from the roaring waves.¹
Welcome! I worship you
no less than I revere the gods
for your great wealth and happiness.
My queen, welcome. Now is the time
for us to attend to your good fortunes. 1210

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Get down from the carriage, women of Troy,
and take my hand, so I, too, may step down
out of this chariot. The houses of the gods [1000]
may be adorned with Phrygian trophies,
but I obtained these female slaves from Troy,
the finest in the land, as ornaments
within my household, small compensation
for the child I lost.²

ELECTRA

Mother, is it all right
for me to take that blessed hand of yours,
given I live in this decrepit house, 1220
just like a slave, now I have been cast out
of my paternal home?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

The slaves are here.
Do not exert yourself on my behalf.

ELECTRA

Why not? After all, I'm a captive, too,
and sent away from home. Like these women,

¹This is another reference to Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux). The twins occupied a position among the stars (we call them the Gemini), and hence were an aid to navigation. Here Euripides calls them both sons of Zeus, although Castor is usually considered a mortal child of Tyndareus.

²This is a reference to Clytaemnestra's daughter Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed at the start of the Trojan expedition in order to persuade the gods to change the winds.

ELECTRA

I was taken when my house was seized [1010]
and left without a father.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Well, your father
brought that about with plots against the ones
he should have loved the most, his own family.
I'll describe it to you, though when a woman
gets an evil name, her tongue grows bitter, 1230
and that's regrettable, it seems to me.
But you should learn the facts of what's gone on
and then despise it, if it's worth your hate.
If not, why hate at all? Now, Tyndareus
gave me to your father, not intending
that I or any children I might bear
should die. But that man, when he left his home, [1020]
convinced my daughter to accompany him,
by promising a marriage with Achilles, 1240
and took her to the anchored fleet at Aulis.¹
There he had Iphigeneia stretched out
and slit her pale white throat above the fire.
If he'd killed one girl for the sake of many,
to protect the city from being taken,
or to help his house, or save his family,
I'd have pardoned him. But he killed my child
because of Helen's lust, because the man
who'd taken her as wife had no idea
how to keep his treacherous mate controlled.² 1250
For all of that, although I had been wronged, [1030]
I'd not have grown enraged or killed my husband.
But he came back to me with some mad girl—
possessed by gods—and put her in his bed,
so he could have two brides in the same house.³
Women are foolish. I'll concede the point.
But given that, when a husband goes astray,
rejecting his domestic bed, his wife

¹Aulis was the agreed meeting point for the great naval expedition to Troy. Agamemnon persuaded Clytaemnestra to let Iphigeneia come to Aulis by lying about a marriage to Achilles.

²Helen was married to Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother. She was ran off with Paris, a prince of Troy, and went back to Troy with him, thus launching the Trojan War. Agamemnon was the commander of the army sent to get Helen back.

³The young girl was Cassandra, daughter of Priam, king of Troy, given as a war prize to Agamemnon.

ELECTRA

may well wish to follow his example
and find another man to love. And then 1260
the blame makes us notorious—the men
who caused it all are never criticized. [1040]
If someone had carried Menelaus
away from home in secret, should I then
have killed Orestes to save Menelaus,
my sister's husband? How would your father
have put up with that? So is it not right
for him to die? He slaughtered my own child.
I would have kept on suffering at his hands.
I killed him. The road lay open to me, 1270
and so I turned towards his enemies.
After all, which one of your father's friends
would have joined me to commit the murder?
Speak up, if you wish, and answer frankly.
In what way was your father's death unjust? [1050]

CHORUS

There's justice in your words, but that justice
is disgraceful. If she has any sense,
a woman should give way in everything
to her own husband. Those who disagree
are not, in my view, worth considering. 1280

ELECTRA

Bear in mind, mother, the last thing you said,
offering me the chance to be frank with you.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Yes, my child. And I won't take that back.
I'll repeat it now.

ELECTRA

You'll hear me out, mother,
and won't punish me?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, I won't do that,
not if I'm giving pleasure to your heart.

ELECTRA

Then I'll speak, starting with an opening comment. [1060]
O mother, I do wish you had more sense.

ELECTRA

Your beauty brings you praise that's well deserved—
 the same is true for Helen—but you two 1290
 were born twin sisters, both very silly,
 quite unworthy of your brother Castor.
 She was willing to be carried off and ruined,
 and you destroyed the finest man in Greece.
 Since people do not know you as I do,
 you used the excuse you killed your husband
 for your child. But before it was decided
 that your daughter would be sacrificed, [1070]
 no sooner had your husband left his home,
 than you were fixing your fine locks of hair 1300
 seated at your mirror, and any wife
 who primps her beauty when her husband's gone,
 you can scratch her off the list as worthless.
 There's no call for her to show her pretty face
 outside the home, unless she's seeking mischief.
 Of all the women in Greece, I believe
 you were the only one who felt happy
 whenever Trojan fortunes were successful
 and whose eyes would frown whenever they got worse,
 because it was your hope that Agamemnon 1310
 would not get back from Troy. But nonetheless,
 you could have stayed a truly virtuous woman. [1080]
 The husband you had was in no way worse
 than that Aegisthus, and he'd been chosen
 by the Greeks themselves to lead the army.
 When your sister Helen did what she did,
 you had an opportunity to gain
 great glory for yourself, since bad conduct
 sets a standard for our noble actions
 and makes them something everyone can see. 1320
 But even if, as you now claim, our father
 killed your daughter, how have you been wronged
 by me and by my brother? Why is it,
 once you'd killed your husband, you did not give
 our father's home to us, but filled your bed
 with someone else's goods and for a price [1090]
 bought yourself a marriage? And why is it
 this husband has not been made an exile
 for banishing your son? Why is he not dead
 instead of me? The way I'm living now 1330
 has killed me twice as often as my sister.
 If justice says that murder pays for murder,

ELECTRA

your son Orestes and I must kill you
to avenge our father. If your act was just,
then this one must be, too. Any man
who marries a degenerate woman
in order to get wealth and noble birth
is foolish. A virtuous, humble marriage
is better for the home than something grand.

CHORUS

Marrying women is a matter of chance.
Some, I notice, work out well, others badly.¹

1340 [1100]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My child, it was always in your nature
to love your father. That's how things turn out.
Some are their fathers' children, while others
love their mothers much more than their fathers.
I forgive you. I don't get much delight,
my child, from what I've done. But why are you
so dirty and dressed in such filthy clothes?
You've just been confined and given birth.²
Alas, my schemes have made me miserable!
I urged my anger on against my husband
more than I should have done.

1350

[1110]

ELECTRA

Well, it's too late now
to moan about it. There's no remedy.
My father's dead. But why don't you bring back
your wandering son, who is still an exile?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I'm too afraid. I worry about myself,
not him. And he is angry, so people say,
about the murder of his father.

ELECTRA

Why let your husband be so cruel to me?

¹These lines of pithy moralizing at the end of Electra's speech and in this speech by the Chorus sound out of place here. Some editors have removed them as a later addition to the text.

²Some editors find these two and half lines a very odd change of subject for Clytaemnestra, who is now dwelling on her own sorrow. Cropp moves them to the opening of Clytaemnestra's speech at 1380 below, where they do seem more appropriate.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

No one wants poor people as their friends.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Well, I'll go and make the gods a sacrifice
for the full term of the child. When I'm done
carrying out this favour for you, I'll leave,
off to the field where my husband's making
an offering to the nymphs. You servants,
take this team away. Put them in the pens.
When you think I've finished sacrificing
to the gods, stand ready. I must satisfy
my husband's wishes, too.

1380

ELECTRA

Enter this poor home.

For my sake take care the soot-stained walls
don't stain your clothes. You can offer the gods
the sacrifice that is now due.

[1140]

[Clytaemnestra goes into the house.]

And now

the basket is ready, the knife is keen,
the one which killed the bull you'll lie beside
when you're struck down. In the home of Hades
you'll be wife to the man you slept beside
while you were alive. I am doing you
this favour, and you are offering me
full retribution for my father.

1390

[Electra goes into the house.]

CHORUS

Evils are repaid. Winds of fortune
for this house are veering round.
Back then my leader, my very own,
fell slaughtered in his bath.
Roof and stone walls of the house
resounded, echoing his cries—
“You vicious woman, why kill me
now I've come to my dear land
after ten harvest seasons?”

1400

[1150]

ELECTRA

The flow of justice has reversed itself
and brings to judgment for adultery
the killer of her unhappy husband
once he finally returned back home, 1410
to the towering Cyclopean walls.

With her own hand she murdered him,
the sharpened edge of a keen axe
gripped in her fists. Poor sad husband!
What evils overtook this wretched woman? [1160]
She did it like a mountain lion
prowling through a woodland meadow.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*from inside the house*]
By the gods, children, don't kill your mother!

CHORUS
Do you hear that cry from inside the house?

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*screaming from inside*]
Aiii . . . my god . . . aiii . . . not me . . . 1420

CHORUS
I moan, too, as her children strike her down.
The god indeed dispenses justice,
whenever it may come.
You've suffered horribly, sad lady, [1170]
but you performed unholy acts
against your husband.

[*Orestes, Pylades, Electra, and Attendants emerge slowly from the house with the
bodies of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra.*]

CHORUS
But here they come, moving from the house,
stained with fresh-spilled blood from their own mother,
a trophy, proof of their harsh sacrifice.
There is no house, not now or in the past, 1430
more pitiable than the race of Tantalus.

ORESTES
O Earth and Zeus, who sees all mortal men,
look on these abominable bloody acts
and these two corpses lying on the ground, [1180]

ELECTRA

struck down by my hand, repayment
for everything I have had to suffer.

ELECTRA

Too much cause to weep, my brother,
and I have made this happen.
In my desperation, my fiery rage
burned on against my mother,
the one who bore me, her daughter.

1440

CHORUS

Alas for fortune, your sad destiny,
a mother who has given birth
to pain beyond enduring,
bearing wretched misery and more
from your own children, and yet it's just—
you've paid for murdering their father.

[1190]

ORESTES

Alas, Phoebus, that justice you sang of
had an obscure tone, but the pain you caused
was clear enough—you've given me
an exile's fate, far from these Greek lands.
To what other city can I go?
What host, what man with reverence
will look at me, who killed my mother?

1450

ELECTRA

Alas, alas for me! Where do I go?
To what wedding or what choral dance?
What husband takes me to a bridal bed?

[1200]

CHORUS

Your spirit is shifting back once more,
changing with the breeze. Your thoughts
are pious now, although profane before.
You've done dreadful things, my friend,
to your reluctant brother.

1460

ORESTES

Did you see that desperate woman,
how she threw her robe aside
and bared her breasts for slaughter?
Alas for me! The limbs which gave me birth

ELECTRA

collapsing and falling to the ground.
And her hair, I . . .

CHORUS

I understand. [1210]
You had to go through torments,
hearing your mother's screams, 1470
the one who bore you.

ORESTES

She stretched her hand toward my chin
and cried, "My son, I beg you."
She clung onto my face—
the sword fell from my hands.

CHORUS

Poor lady! How could you dare
to watch your murdered mother
breathe her last before your eyes. [1220]

ORESTES

I threw my cloak over my eyes,
then sacrificed her with the sword. 1480
I shoved it in my mother's neck.

ELECTRA

I was encouraging you, as well—
my hand was on the sword.

CHORUS

You have inflicted suffering
of the most dreadful kind.

ORESTES

Take this robe, hide our mother's limbs.
Close up her wounds. You gave birth
to your own murderers.

ELECTRA [*covering Clytaemnestra's corpse*]

There, with this cloak I'm covering up
one who was loved and yet not loved. [1230]
1490

CHORUS

An end to the great troubles of this house.

ELECTRA

[*Castor and Polydeuces, the Dioscouri, appear above the building on the stage.*]

CHORUS

But there above the roof beams of the house
something's coming. Spirits or gods from heaven?
That path does not belong to mortal men.
Why are they coming into human view?

CASTOR [*from the top of the house*]

Son of Agamemnon, you must listen.
The twin sons of Zeus are calling you,
Castor and his brother Polydeuces, [1240]
your mother's brothers. We've just reached Argos,
after calming down a roaring storm at sea, 1500
a dreadful threat to ships, and witnessing
the murder of our sister and your mother.
She's had justice, but you've not acted justly.
As for Phoebus Apollo, I'll say nothing.
He is my master. Although he's wise,
the oracle you heard from him was not.
You must accept these things and later on
act on what Fate and Zeus have set for you.
Give Electra to Pylades as his wife
to take back home. You must leave Argos. 1510 [1250]
It's not right for you, who killed your mother,
to set foot in the city. The Keres,
those fearful dog-faced goddesses of death,
will hound you everywhere, a wanderer
in a mad fit. You must go to Athens
and embrace Athena's sacred image.¹
She'll guard you from their dreadful writhing snakes
and stop them touching you, by holding up
her shield with the Gorgon's face above your head.
There's a place there—the hill of Ares—where gods 1520
first gathered to cast their votes on bloodshed,
when savage Ares slaughtered Halirrothius, [1260]
son of the god who rules the sea, enraged
at the unholy raping of his daughter.²

¹The Keres are the children of Night, death spirits who prey on living human beings. Although they are different from the Furies (who chase down those who have committed murder in the family), here their function seems quite similar.

²Ares, son of Zeus and god of war, killed Poseidon's son, Halirrothius, over the attempted rape of Ares's daughter, Alcippe. Ares was put on trial on Olympus and acquitted by the gods.

That hill is where decisions made by vote
 are most secure and sacred to the gods.
 Here you must stand on trial for murder.
 The process will result in equal votes,
 so you'll be saved from death, for Apollo
 will take responsibility himself, 1530
 since his shrine advised your mother's murder.
 This law will be established from then on—
 those accused will always be acquitted
 if votes are equal. Struck by the pain of this, [1270]
 those fearful goddesses will then sink down
 into a chasm right beside the hill,
 a reverend and holy shrine for men.
 You must establish an Arcadian city
 by Alpheus' streams, near the sacred shrine
 of Lycaean Apollo, and that city 1540
 will bear your name. Those are my instructions.
 As for Aegisthus' corpse, the citizens
 in Argos here will place it in a grave.
 But in your mother's case, Menelaus,
 who has just reached Nauplia, a long time [1280]
 after overpowering the lands of Troy,
 will bury her, with Helen's help. She's come
 from Proteus's home, leaving Egypt.
 She never went to Troy. It was Zeus's wish
 to stir up war and bloodshed among men. 1550
 So he sent Helen's image off to Troy.¹
 Since Pylades now has got a virgin wife,
 let him go home and leave Achaean land,
 with the man they call your brother-in-law
 to the land of Phocis. He must make him
 a very wealthy man.² But as for you,
 you must leave along the narrow Isthmus
 and go to the blessed hill of Cecrops.³

¹In Homer's account (in the *Odyssey*) Menelaus and Helen take a long time to get home from Troy, being blown off course and spending a few years in Egypt. Proteus is the Old Man of the Sea, who helps Menelaus in Egypt. The story of Helen's being detained in Egypt on her way to Troy and never going to the city at all is not in Homer's epic, but was known before Euripides makes use of it here.

²The "man they call your brother-in-law" is the peasant who has been pretending to be a genuine husband to Electra.

³The Isthmus is the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land joining the Peloponnese (where Argos is situated) with the main part of Greece. Cecrops is the mythical first king and founder of Athens. The Cecropian Hill is a reference to the Acropolis in Athens.

ELECTRA

Once you're completed your appointed fate
for doing the murder, you'll find happiness
and be released from troubles.

[1290]
1560

CHORUS

O sons of Zeus, are we permitted
to come near and speak to you?

CASTOR

That is allowed—you are not defiled
by the murder committed here.

ELECTRA

And me, sons of Tyndareus,
may I talk to you, as well?

CASTOR

You may. I blame Apollo
for this murderous act.

CHORUS

How is that you two gods,
brothers of this murdered woman,
did not keep death's goddesses
far from her home?

1570
[1300]

CASTOR

Destiny and Fate brought what must be—
and Apollo's unwise utterance.

ELECTRA

What Apollo and what prophecies
ordained that I must be
my mother's murderer?

CASTOR

You worked together
and shared a single fate.
One ancestral curse
has crushed you both.

1580

ORESTES

After such a lengthy time
I've seen you, my sister,

ELECTRA

and immediately must lose
your love, abandoning you,
as you abandon me. [1310]

CASTOR

She has a home and husband
and will not suffer undue grief,
except she leaves this Argive state. 1590

ELECTRA

What else brings one more pain
than moving out beyond the limits
of one's native land?

ORESTES

But I'll go from my father's house,
then undergo a trial by strangers
for murdering my mother.

CASTOR

Be brave. You'll reach
the sacred city of Athena. [1320]
Just keep enduring all.

ELECTRA

Hold me, my dearest brother,
your breast against my breast. 1600
The curses of a slaughtered mother
divide us from our father's home.

ORESTES

Throw your arms around me.
Give me a close embrace.
Then mourn for me as if I'd died
and you were at my burial mound.

CASTOR

Alas, alas! You've said things
dreadful even for the gods to hear.
I and those in heaven have pity
for mortals who endure so much. 1610 [1330]

ORESTES

I'll not see you anymore.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

I'll not come into your sight.

ORESTES

These are the final words
I'll ever say to you.

ELECTRA

Farewell, my city! A long farewell
to you my fellow countrywomen!

ORESTES

Are you going already,
my most faithful sister?

ELECTRA

Yes, I am leaving now
my soft eyes wet with tears.

1620

ORESTES

Farewell, Pylades. Be happy.
Go and get married to Electra.

[1340]

CASTOR

The marriage will be their concern.
You leave for Athens to escape these hounds,
with their dark skins and hands made up of snakes.
They're on a dreadful hunt to chase you down
and bring you harvests of horrific pain.
We two are off to the Sicilian sea.
We'll hurry there to rescue ships in need.
As we pass through the flat expanse of air,
we bring no help to those who've been defiled.
We do protect the men whose way of life
reveres what's just and holy, releasing them
from overbearing hardships. Let no one
wish to act unjustly or get on board
with men who break their oaths. It's as a god
that I address these words to mortal men.

1630

[1350]

[Castor and Polydeuces disappear. Orestes leaves the stage. Electra and Pylades move off in a different direction. The attendants go with them.]

ELECTRA

CHORUS

Farewell. Any mortal who can indeed live well
without being ground down by misfortune,
that man will find his happiness.

1640

[The Chorus carries the bodies back into the house.]