SOPHOCLES
ELECTRA

Translated by Ian Johnston
Vancouver Island University
Nanaimo, BC
Canada

This translation, based upon the Greek text of Sir Richard Jebb (1894) and first published on the internet in 2009, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution CC 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.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

In the following text the line numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text, and the line numbers without brackets refer to the English text. Partial lines are normally included with an adjacent partial line in the reckoning. The stage directions and footnotes have been provided 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 helpful translation of and editorial commentary on the Greek text of Electra by Richard Jebb.

BACKGROUND NOTE

Sophocles’ Electra is based on one of the final episodes in the long and bloody history of the royal family of Mycenae, often called the House of Atreus. This part of the longer narrative begins when Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and leader of the Greek expedition against Troy, sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to get favourable winds, so that the Greek fleet could sail from Aulis. After the sacrifice, the winds changed, and the Greek army sailed to Troy, where they remained for ten years.
While Agamemnon was away from Mycenae at Troy, his wife, Clytaemnistra, began an affair with Aegisthus, a cousin of Agamemnon’s. When Agamemnon returned from Troy, the two lovers killed him at a feast celebrating his return. After the murder, Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, was taken away from Mycenae in secret, to protect him. The daughters (Chrysothemis, Iphianassa, and Electra) remained in the royal palace of Mycenae with Aegisthus and Clytaemnistra, who assumed royal power in the city.

Electra’s behaviour towards the royal couple and her constant mourning for her father led Aegisthus and Clytaemnistra to punish her by treating her almost as a servant, but she refused to yield to their wishes and cease grieving for her father. Chrysothemis and Iphianassa, however, accepted the authority of the new rulers.

Sophocles’s play opens outside the royal palace of Mycenae. Orestes has just returned in secret from his years away from home. Other details of the longer narrative of the House of Atreus will be provided in the footnotes in the relevant places.

Sophocles’s *Electra* was first performed in Athens c. 420 BC.
ELECTRA

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PAEDAGOGUS: an old man, tutor to Orestes in earlier days.¹
ORESTES: son of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon.
PYLADES: son of Strophius of Phocus, friend of Orestes.
ELECTRA: daughter of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon.
CHRYSTHEMIS: daughter of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon.
CHORUS: women of Mycenae.²

[The scene is an open space in front of the royal palace in Mycenae. A grove marking the tomb of Agamemnon is in the background. Enter the Paedagogus, Orestes, and Pylades.]

PAEDAGOGUS

Son of Agamemnon, who years ago
was our commanding general at Troy,
now you can view in front of you the place
you have longed to look at all this time.
There is the ancient Argos of your dreams,
the sacred grove where a stinging gadfly
drove Inachus’s daughter mad.³ And there,
Orestes, is the Lycian market place,
named for the wolf-killing god, Apollo,
and on the left is Hera’s famous shrine.
From where we stand here, you must know
that you are looking at gold-rich Mycenae.
There is the home of Pelops’ family,
scene of so much murderous destruction.⁴
It was there, years ago, your blood sister
handed you to me, and I took you away,
right after the slaughter of your father.

¹The word paedagogus means tutor.
²The word CHORUS in the text below indicates speeches delivered by the Chorus Leader, by the entire Chorus, or by a smaller group of Chorus members, as a director of a production of the play will determine.
³Argos, which often designates a specific town, here refers to the territory around Mycenae.
Inachus was a river god. His daughter, Io, was changed into a cow by Zeus to hide the girl (on whom Zeus had amorous designs) from Hera, his divine wife. Hera, suspecting her husband was having an affair and seeking revenge, sent a gadfly with a dreadful sting to persecute Io and drive her out of Argos.
⁴Pelops was the founder of the royal line at Mycenae, and his actions (which are mentioned later) launched a series of catastrophes for the family.
ELECTRA

I saved you and raised you up to manhood, so you could avenge your father’s murder.1 And now, Orestes, and you, too, Pylades, his dearest friend, we must sort out quickly what we intend to do. The sun’s bright rays already are around us, waking up the birds with their clear morning songs, and stars of the dark night have moved away. And so, before anyone comes from the house, we need to talk things over. At this point, we can afford to hesitate no longer. The time has come for us to act.

ORESTES

My friend, the follower I cherish most of all, you give me clear proof of your loyalty towards our house. Just as a well-bred horse does not lose heart in the face of danger, in spite of its old age, but pricks up its ears—that’s how you urge us on and follow us in the foremost ranks. So I will tell you what I have resolved. Pay close attention to what I have to say, and set me straight if in any way I am off the mark.

When I went to the Pythian oracle to find out how I might obtain justice for my father from those who murdered him, Phoebus gave me his reply, as follows: “You must go by yourself, without weapons and without an army, then use deception—let your hand steal a slaughter that is just.”2 That is what we heard the oracle proclaim.

So, when the time is right, you should go inside that house and find out everything that’s going on. Once you know the facts, you can provide us a reliable report.

_____

1Jebb notes that Orestes was born before the Trojan War, which lasted ten years, and that, according to traditional stories, Aegisthus ruled Mycenae for seven years. Therefore, Orestes was about ten years old when he was taken away from his home by the Paedagogus and is now about nineteen or twenty years old.

2The Pythian oracle at Delphi, a shrine to the god Phoebus Apollo, was one of the most famous religious shrines in Greece.
Given your age and how much time has passed, they will not recognize you—your grey hair will not rouse suspicion. You must tell them you are a foreigner. You come from Phocis, sent here by Phanoteus, their greatest ally. Tell them—and swear an oath to this effect—Orestes has died in a fatal accident. He was thrown from his racing chariot at the Pythian games.¹ Make that your story.

We two will start, as Apollo ordered, at my father’s grave, offering libations and locks of hair I cut from my own head. Then we'll come back here, carrying with us that bronze-sided urn which, as you know, we have hidden somewhere in the bushes, so that with a false report we bring them the joyful news: my body is no more—it has already been consumed by fire and reduced to ash. How does that harm me, when with deceitful news of my own death, I shall, in fact, be saved and win great fame? I do not think that what one says is bad if it leads one to success. Before now, I've often known of wise men who have died a false death in some story and who then, once home again, were honoured all the more. With such deceptive words I am quite sure I, too, will survive and shine out like a star down on my enemies. Land of my fathers and all you gods native to this place, welcome me with good fortune on my journey, and you, as well, home of my ancestors, for I come at the urging of the gods to cleanse you in the name of justice. Do not send me from this land dishonoured—let me be master of my possessions and the restorer my family home. I have said enough for now. Go, old man. Tread carefully. Do what you have to do. We two will leave—this moment favour us, and every enterprise men undertake

¹The Pythian games were a major athletic festival held every four years in honour of Apollo at Delphi.
is ruled, above all else, by opportunity.

[As the Paedagogus, Orestes, and Pylades turn to leave, they are stopped by a loud cry from within the house.]

ELECTRA [crying out from inside the house]
Alas, I feel so wretched!

PAEDAGOGUS
Wait, my son!
I think I heard a cry come from the door,
the moaning of a servant girl inside.

ORESTES
Could it be poor Electra? Should we stay
and listen to her cries?

PAEDAGOGUS
No, no.
We must not seek to do anything
before attending to Apollo's orders.
To follow what he said, we should begin
by pouring out libations to your father.
For doing that first will bring us victory
and strength in everything we undertake.

[The Paedagogus exits. Orestes and Pylades leave in a different direction. Electra enters from one of the entrances to the palace.]

ELECTRA
O sacred daylight and the air, two partners
sharing space around this earth as equals,
how often have you heard my mournful songs
or blows I strike against my bloodstained chest,
whenever gloomy night has moved away.
My hateful bed in this long-suffering house
knows how I spend interminable nights,
how much I weep for my ill-fated father.
Bloodthirsty Ares did not strike him down
in that foreign land. It was my mother
and that man who shares her bed, Aegisthus.
They split his head with a murderous axe,
the way woodcutters hack an oak tree down.
No one apart from me sheds tears of pity
for what they did, when you, my father, died in such a sorrowful and shameful way. But I will never cease with my laments and bitter cries, as long as I can see the glittering radiance of the stars or the light of day. Like the nightingale who killed her offspring, I will not give up my cries of grief but shout them out aloud to all those gathered at my father’s door.\textsuperscript{1}

O home of Hades and Persephone, O Hermes, our escort in the world below, O sacred Ara, goddess of revenge, and you, too, sacred daughters of the gods, you Furies, who keep watch for those who die unjustly and for those whose marriage bed is secretly dishonoured, come, help me, bring vengeance for the murder of my father, and send my brother to me.\textsuperscript{2} By myself I am no longer strong enough to bear the load of sorrow weighing me down.  

\textit{[Enter the Chorus of Argive women.]} 

CHORUS

O Electra, child of a most wretched mother, why are you always languishing in grief that never ends, mourning Agamemnon, who years ago was caught in a godless snare by your deceitful mother’s treachery, betrayed by her false hand? If it is lawful for me to curse whoever murdered him, may the one who did it perish!

ELECTRA

You women, noble children of Mycenae, you have come to console me in my grief. This I know,  

\textsuperscript{1}Procne, wife of Tereus, killed her son, Itys, and served him to Tereus for dinner in an act of revenge for Tereus’s brutal rape and mutilation of her sister, Philomela. Procne was then turned into a nightingale who was always grieving for the loss of her child.

\textsuperscript{2}Hermes guided the shades of the dead in Hades. The word \textit{ara} means (among other things) \textit{prayer}, \textit{curse}, or \textit{vow}. It also denotes a personified goddess of destruction and revenge (Ara). The \textit{Furies} (or \textit{Erinyes}) are goddesses of revenge, especially against those who have committed serious crimes against a blood relative.
and I understand what you are doing.
Your kindness has not escaped my notice.
But I have no wish to stop my grieving
or cries of pain for my unhappy father.
O you who share with me in every way
a mutual friendship, let me run wild with grief.
O please, I beg you!

CHORUS

But prayers and weeping
will never bring your father back from Hades,
not from that pool where all men are received.
Instead with hopeless and excessive mourning,
you waste yourself away in constant sorrow.
Such actions offer no relief from troubles.
Why, then, are you so set on suffering?

ELECTRA

Only a foolish child can overlook
the piteous death of her own parent.
My heart prefers the one who always cries
“Itys, Itys,” that bird distraught with grief,
a messenger from Zeus. O Niobe,
all-suffering Niobe, I think of you
as a divinity, weeping forever
in your rocky tomb.¹

CHORUS

Among all mortal beings
you are not the only one, my child,
visited by grief, but you show less restraint
than those inside whose blood and parentage
you share—your sisters Iphianassa
and Chrysothemis—who are still alive,
as is the one who spends his youthful years
secluded and in sorrow, but confident
that one day this famous land of the Mycenians
will welcome him as an illustrious son,

¹The phrase “that bird distraught with grief” is another reference the nightingale (see Footnote 7 above). Niobe was queen of Thebes. The gods punished her for pride, by destroying all her fourteen children. Niobe, overwhelmed with grief, fled to Mount Sipylus in Lydia (now Turkey), where she was turned into stone. The rock, according to ancient traditions, wept tears. Niobe is frequently invoked as a symbol of extreme grief and eternal mourning.
when, with Zeus’s gracious guidance, Orestes will return to Argos.¹

ELECTRA

Ah yes, Orestes—¹⁸⁰
whom I’ve been waiting for with a desire
that never tires, in ceaseless wandering,
childless and unmarried, cheeks bathed with tears,
in this miserable state, carrying
a destiny of pain that never ends,
while he forgets what he has suffered
and what he learns from me. What message
do I get that does not disappoint me?
He always yearns to be here, but even so,
for all his longing, he chooses not to come.²

CHORUS

You must be brave, my child, and do not fear.
For Zeus in heaven is still powerful.
He watches us and governs everything.
Leave that excessive rage of yours to him.
Do not take your anger at your enemies
to an extreme—but do not forget them.
For Time is kind, a god who brings content,
and Agamemnon’s son, who lives in Crisa,
where cattle graze in pastures by the shore,
has not abandoned you—nor has the god
who reigns beside the banks of Acheron.³

ELECTRA

But I have spent most of my life already
in utter hopelessness. I cannot bear it.
I am wasting away. I have no children,

¹Jebb notes that in Sophocles’s version of the story Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra had five children: four daughters (Iphigeneia, Electra, Chrysothemis, and Iphianassa) and one son (Orestes). Iphigenia was killed at Aulis, offered up by her father as a sacrifice to the gods, so that the Greek fleet would receive a favourable wind. Orestes is “secluded” because he has been living in exile. Other versions of the story generally omit Iphianassa or else suggest that she is the same person as Iphigenia.

²This speech indicates that Electra and Orestes have been in contact with each other. She has been sending him messages (presumably about what is happening to her in Mycenae), and he has been telling her how much he wants to return.

³The Acheron is a river in the underworld. The god “who reigns beside the shores of Acheron” is Hades. Jebb notes that some commentators consider the phrase a reference to Agamemnon.
ELECTRA

no loving husband as my champion, 
and, like a despised foreigner, I slave 
in my father’s house in shabby clothes 
and stand to eat at tables with no food.  

[190]

CHORUS

There was a cry of grief at his return, 
a mournful cry, as your father lay there,  
reclining at the banquet, when swift blows 
from a bronze-jawed axe were aimed against him. 
His massacre was planned by treachery, 
the killing performed by lust—those two 
gave fearful birth to a monstrous form, 
divine or mortal, which killed our king.¹ 

[200]

ELECTRA

O how I despise that day—of all days 
that ever dawned I hate that one the most. 
And that night! The overpowering pain 
of that horrific feast! My father witnessed 
the fatal blow from those two killers’ hands— 
the hands that stole my life by treachery 
and ended it forever. May those two 
be punished by great Olympian Zeus 
with suffering to pay for what they did, 
and, after such a crime, may they derive 
no joy from all their regal splendour. 

[210]

CHORUS

Do not say any more. That’s my advice. 
Given the way things are, do you not see 
how by your own actions you plunge yourself, 
to your great shame, in self-inflicted ills? 
You have brought many troubles on yourself 
by always breeding strife in your sad heart. 
You must not let such feelings force you 
into open war with those in power. 

[220]

ELECTRA

My appalling suffering drove me to it. 

¹Jebb observes that the Chorus is not sure whether the murder of Agamemnon is a human or divine action (or both). Given the bloody history of the royal family of Argos, they are not ruling out the possibility that some divine agency may have been at work.
I am well aware of my own feelings. My passions are not something I forget. But in this time of dreadful torment, as long as I still live, I will not stop these frantic cries of grief. O noble friends, what clear-thinking person could believe mere words would be of any help to me? You want to offer me some consolation, but let me be. Leave me alone. My pain will never find relief, nor will my troubles ever cease—for they are infinite, as countless as my cries of mourning.

CHORUS
And yet, out of kindness, I advise you, like a trustworthy mother, do not add more grief to what you face already.

ELECTRA
What limit has been set to what I suffer? Tell me, how it can be a noble act to neglect the dead? What mortal men were ever born with such an attitude? May I never share in such men’s honour, and if I ever live a prosperous life, may I not have a single moment’s ease, if I curb the wings of my shrill sorrows and neglect to honour my own father. For if, when he is dead, a man just lies there, a miserable nothing, merely dust, and his murderers do not pay him back with a just punishment, blood for blood, then let men’s sense of piety and shame completely fade away!

CHORUS
My child, I came here to support your cause and help my own, as well. But if what I advise is incorrect, then your opinion must prevail with us, and we will follow in one group together.

ELECTRA
I feel ashamed, my friends, if my impatience
and my many cries of mournful sorrow
seem to you excessive. Please forgive me.
But my harsh treatment forces that on me.
How could any well-born woman not behave
as I do, when she sees her father wronged?
I see that constantly—day and night—and things are not improving—they’re getting worse!
First, there is my mother, who gave birth to me.
The way she treats me, she has now become truly hateful. Then, here in my own home, I am living with my father’s murderers.
They govern what I do, and from those two I get what I require or do without.
And then imagine how I spend my days, when I observe Aegisthus sitting there, on my father’s throne, and see him wearing the clothes my father wore, or pouring out libations at the hearth—the very place he struck him down, or when I witness the crowning outrage in all this—the killer in my father’s bed beside my mother—if I must call that dreadful woman mother, sleeping with such a man in the same bed! She has become so reckless, she can live with that polluted wretch and have no fear of the avenging Furies. In fact, she seems to laugh at what she’s done, for she has picked the day when, years ago, with her deceit she killed my father, as a day to celebrate with dance and song, and in month-long rituals to those gods who protect her, she offers sacrificial sheep. I observe all this, and in my misery shout out my grief, as I waste away inside this house, crying in sorrow for that profane feast named for my father. I do this alone, for I am not free to indulge my grief as fully as my heart desires. If I try, that woman, that so-called noble lady, keeps scolding me with shameless insults—“You godforsaken, hateful girl, are you

---

1The feast in question is the one Clytaemnestra organizes each year on the anniversary of Agamemnon’s death, a celebration Clytaemnestra has, with grim irony, named after the dead king.
ELECTRA

the only one who has lost a father?
Is there no one else who needs to mourn?
I hope you die a truly wretched death,
and may the gods below never free you
from your present grieving.” With words like that
she keeps abusing me, unless she hears
Orestes might be coming. Then, enraged,
she comes and shouts, “Are you not the one
who did this to me? This is all your fault!
You stole Orestes from me and in secret
sent him away from here. But rest assured—
for doing that you will be justly punished.”
That’s how she snarls at me, and by her side,
encouraging her, is that splendid man,
her husband, impotent in every way,
a blight on all mankind, who fights his wars
with the help of women! But I am dying
from despair, always waiting for the day
Orestes comes and ends my suffering.
He keeps on planning to do something great,
but his delays have shattered all my hopes.
O my friends, when this is our condition,
there is no place for prudence or respect—
in evil times we are forcibly compelled
to act in evil ways.

CHORUS
Tell me this—
while you’ve been speaking to us, has Aegisthus
been nearby, or has he left the house?

ELECTRA
I am sure he’s left. If he were close by,
I would never venture from the house.
At the moment he happens to be gone—
he’s in the country.

CHORUS
Well, if that’s the case,
could I be bold and talk to you more freely?

ELECTRA
He is not here. Speak up. What is it you want?
CHORUS
   All right, I’ll ask you this—what can you tell me
   about your brother? Is he coming soon,
   or will he be delayed? I’d like to know.

ELECTRA
   He says he’ll come. But though he says that,
   he never does what he has promised.

[320]

CHORUS
   But any man is likely to delay
   when undertaking something challenging.

ELECTRA
   When I saved him, I did not hesitate.¹

CHORUS
   Do not fear. He has a noble nature
   and will stand by his friends.

ELECTRA
   I believe that.
   If I did not, I’d not have gone on living.

CHORUS
   We should stop talking. I see Chrysothemis,
   your sister, coming from the palace—
   like you, a daughter born to Agamemnon
   and Clytaemnestra, holding in her hands
   the customary tributes to the dead,
   offerings for those in the world below.

[Chrysothemis enters from the palace attended by a servant.]

CHRYSOTHEMIS
   So you’re out here once again, Electra,
   by the public doorway, telling stories.
   What is it you’re saying to people now?
   In all this time have you not learned to stop
   this vain obsession with your pointless rage?
   I, at least, understand my situation.

¹Electra is referring here to the day she handed Orestes over to the Paedagogus right after
Agamemnon’s murder, thus saving him from Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra.
What’s happening at present makes me sad, so much so, in fact, that if I had the strength, I would speak out, tell people how I feel. But as it is, in these turbulent times, I think it prudent to pull in my sails and not to have them see me as a threat, when there is nothing I can do to harm them. If only you would be like that, as well. Of course, the way you choose to act is just, and my advice is not, but if I wish to live in freedom, then in all I do I must obey the ones with power.

ELECTRA

Yes, but I find it astonishing that you forget your father. You are his daughter, born from him, and yet your sole concern is for your mother. Your advice to me—all of it—consists of things she taught you. None of it expresses what you feel. So make a choice: you can be reckless, or else prudent and forget your friends. Just now you told me, if you had the strength, you’d demonstrate how much you hate those two. And yet when I’m doing everything I can to avenge our father, instead of helping me, you try to turn me from my purpose. Is this not merely adding cowardice to all our other troubles? Tell me this—or else hear it from me—what benefits would I receive if I stopped mourning. I am alive, aren’t I? I live a wretched life, I know, but it is good enough for me. I infuriate those two, and doing that pays honourable tribute to the dead, if those below feel any gratitude. You talk to me of hatred—but your hate is only words. The way you act makes you an ally of the ones who killed our father. I would never let them have their way, not even if they offered me a gift of all those things in which you take such pride. So you can have your finely furnished table and your rich life that swims in luxury.
As for me, the only nourishment I need is not to pain my heart. I do not want those privileges you have—nor would you, if you had any sense. As things stand now, when you could be called daughter of the man who was the noblest father of them all, they ought to call you Clytaemnestra’s child. With such a name, most men would clearly see how vile you are, a woman who abandoned her dead father and her family friends.

CHORUS
In the name of the gods, no words of anger! For each of you has said some useful things—if you, Electra, learned to follow her advice, and she, in turn, could learn to follow yours.

CHRYSTOHTEMIS
Women of Mycenae, I am quite familiar with the way she talks. I would not have said a word about these things, had I not heard that she will soon confront the very worst of all calamities—a looming threat that will suppress her endless wailing.

ELECTRA
Go on—describe this threat to me. If what you say is something worse than how I’m living now, I will not argue with you any further.

CHRYSTOHTEMIS
All right, I’ll tell you everything I know. If you do not end your cries of mourning, those two intend to send you to a place where you will never see the light of day. You will spend your life locked up in prison far away from Argos, and in that room you can sing and celebrate your sorrow. Consider this threat, and do not blame me for what you have to suffer later on. It’s time you started thinking sensibly.
ELECTRA
   Is this really what they plan to do with me?

CHRYSTHEMIS
   Yes it is—once Aegisthus comes back home.

ELECTRA
   If that’s the case, I pray he gets here soon.

CHRYSTHEMIS
   You poor deluded girl, why that prayer? Why seek to harm yourself?

ELECTRA
   I pray that he will come, if he intends to do what you just said.

CHRYSTHEMIS
   So he can make you suffer in some way? Are you insane?

ELECTRA
   So I can get away— as far as possible—from all of you.

CHRYSTHEMIS
   Is there anything at all you care about in how you’re living now?

ELECTRA
   Ah yes, such a splendid and enviable life!

CHRYSTHEMIS
   It could be that, if you had any sense.

ELECTRA
   Do not tell me to betray the ones I love.

CHRYSTHEMIS
   That’s not what I’m saying. I’m telling you that you should yield to those in power.
ELECTRA
So use your flattery on them yourself.
What you advise is not the way I am.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
There is no honour in ruining oneself
through mere stupidity.

ELECTRA
I will fall,
if I must, while honouring my father.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
But I know my father will forgive me
for behaving in this way.

ELECTRA
Those words
are ones that cowards would approve of.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
So I cannot get you to agree with me?

ELECTRA
No, not at all. I hope I am not yet
so empty headed.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Then I’ll be on my way,
off to the place where they have sent me.

ELECTRA
Where are you going? And those offerings—
the ones you’re carrying—who are they for?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Mother sent me out to take libations
and these offerings to our father’s grave.¹

ELECTRA
What are you saying? She’s sending those

¹Jebb notes that offerings were articles of food (e.g., cakes) to be burned at the gravesite. Libations
were liquids poured out over the dead person’s burial site.
for her worst enemy?

CHRYSOTHEMIS  
“The one she murdered”—  
that’s what you’d like to add.

ELECTRA  
What friend of hers  
persuaded her to do it? Whose idea was it?

CHRYSOTHEMIS  
I think it was a vision in the night—  
it frightened her.

ELECTRA  
O my ancestral gods,  
stand by me now at last!

CHRYSOTHEMIS  
Why does her fear  
rouse in you such hope?

ELECTRA  
I will explain that,  
once you have described her vision to me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS  
I don’t know much about it—just a little.

ELECTRA  
Tell me what you know. Some minor details  
have often tripped men up or saved them.

CHRYSOTHEMIS  
They say she saw our father—yours and mine—  
come back to life and with her once again.  
He took the sceptre which he used to bear,  
the one now carried by Aegisthus,  
and fixed it in the ground beside the hearth.¹  
From that sceptre grew a flourishing branch

¹As Jebb notes, Agamemnon could fix the sceptre in the ground because the floor of the room in which the hearth was located was beaten down earth. Alternatively, Agamemnon could have planted the sceptre outside beside the altar of Zeus in the main courtyard of the palace.
which cast a shadow over all Mycenae.
That’s what I heard from someone who was there
as she was talking to the sun about her dream.
That’s all I know, except she sent me out
because she was afraid. And now I beg you,
by all our family gods, take my advice.
Don’t let such thoughtlessness destroy you!
If you reject me now, you’re going to suffer—
and then you’ll come to me and beg for help.

ELECTRA
Dear sister, do not let what you are holding
touch our father’s tomb. Piety and custom
do not permit you to bring burial gifts
to our dead father from his hateful wife
or pour libations. Throw them to the winds,
or hide them in a deep and dusty hole,
where no offering of hers is ever near
our father’s resting place. When she is dead,
let those treasures be there, preserved for her
deep in the earth. If she were not by nature
the most reckless of all women, she would never
have such detestable libations offered
to the man she killed. And consider this—
do you believe the dead man in his grave
will accept such tributes and feel affection
for the woman who dishonoured him in death,
treating him as one might treat an enemy—
with mutilation—and who, to cleanse herself,
wiped the bloodstained axe on her victim’s head.¹
Surely you do not think those offerings
can possibly absolve her of the murder?
That will not happen. Set those gifts aside,
and trim a lock of hair on your own head.
Take some of mine as well. As an offering,
it’s not worth much, but in my wretched state
it’s all I have. Offer him this unwashed hair
and this plain, unembroidered belt of mine.
Kneel down, and beg him to return to us—

¹Mutilating a dead enemy (by cutting off his extremities and placing them under the arms of the corpse) was thought to prevent the spirit of the dead man from taking vengeance for the killing. The Greek does not specify what Clytaemnestra wiped on Agamemnon’s head. Her hands or her weapon seems the most obvious dramatic possibility.
to come in person from beneath the earth,
a welcome help against our enemies.
And pray his son Orestes is alive
and will prevail and trample underfoot
all those who stand against him, so that we,
in days to come, may decorate his grave
with wealthier hands than we have now,
as we offer him these gifts. The way I feel,
it may well be our father played a part
in sending her this terrifying dream.
But even so, dear sister, do as I ask—
perform this service for yourself and me,
and help the mortal man we love the most,
the father we two share, now lying in Hades.

CHORUS [to Chrysothemis]
   The girl has spoken with true piety.
   If you are wise, you’ll act on what she says.

CHRYSTHEMIS
   I intend to. It makes no sense at all,
   when dealing with an action that is just,
   for the two of us to argue. Instead,
   we should be hastening to perform it.
   But, my friends, in the name of the gods,
   when I attempt to carry out this rite,
   you must not say a word. For I know this—
   if my mother hears about this venture,
   I’ll pay a bitter price for what I’ve done.

[Exit Chrysothemis.]

CHORUS
   Unless I am a foolish prophet
   and have no skill in judging things,
   then Justice, who signals her approach,
   is on her way, and in her hands
   she holds the mighty power
   of righteous victory. Yes, my child,
   she will be here soon and will pursue them.
   That sweet-breathing dream I heard about
   a moment ago has given me hope.
   Your father, king of the Greeks,
   does not forget, nor does that axe—
that ancient bronze-jawed double axe, which, in an aching act of treachery, hacked him down and killed him.

And she, too, will be coming here the goddess with many hands and feet, who lurks in ominous ambush—an untiring bronze-shod Fury. That pair was seized by passionate lust for a foul and loveless marriage polluted and stained with murder—an act the laws of Zeus forbid. Because of that, I am quite sure the omen of the dream is good. For we would never see such things without some form of justice done to criminals and those who help them. But if this vision in the night should fail to be fulfilled, then prophecies from fearful dreams and oracles for mortal beings exist no more.

O horseman Pelops long ago, the source of so much sorrow, how you have brought calamity upon this land. For since the day of that despicable, outrageous act, when Myrtilus sank to his final rest beneath the waves, hurled to his death from a golden chariot, this family

---

1 The Furies (or Eriynes) were female goddesses of vengeance, especially for blood crimes against members of the family. They are called bronze-shod because their shoes never wear out in their pursuit of their victims.

2 The phrase “That pair” is a reference to Clytaemnестra and Aegisthus.

3 Pelops, a distance ancestor of the Mycenean royal family, entered a competition in order to win Hippodameia as his wife. The girl's father, Oenomaus, king of Pisa, had promised her to anyone who could beat him in a chariot race. If the suitor failed to win, then he was killed. Pelops convinced the king's charioteer, Myrtilus, to sabotage Oenomaus's chariot by tampering with the wheels. Myrtilus did so, Oenomaus crashed, and Pelops won the race and Hippodameia. Soon afterwards Pelops quarrelled with Myrtilus and threw him into the sea. As he was drowning, Myrtilus uttered a curse against Pelops and all his descendants. This curse is traditionally the initial cause of all the bloody troubles of the royal family in Mycenae. Sophocles here suggests that Myrtilus was thrown from his chariot. The more common account is that Pelops hurled him into the sea. The lines may be conflating the story of Oenomaus, who died in the sea when his chariot wheel came off during the race with Pelops, and the story of Myrtilus.
has always lived with so much pain,  
ever free from pitiless disaster.

[Enter Clytaemnestra attended by a servant.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA
You seem to be wandering out here again  
quite freely, while Aegisthus is away.  
He always stops you loitering outside  
beyond the gates, shaming your family.¹
Since he’s been gone, you hardly notice me,  
and yet time and again you keep complaining  
to many people how arrogant I am—  
I run things in a reckless, unjust way,  
abusing you and those you care about.  
But I am not the one who’s insolent.  
When I insult you, I am just returning  
those insults I so often hear from you.  
You’re always harping on the same excuse—  
I was the one who killed your father.  
Yes, I killed him. I understand that.  
I don’t deny it. But I was not alone,  
for Justice executed him, as well.  
That killing would have had your full support,  
if you’d been thinking straight. Your father—  
the man for whom you’re always grieving—  
was the only Greek who dared to sacrifice  
your own blood, your sister, to appease the gods.²
When he planted her seed he felt no pain  
comparable to the agonies I felt  
when I gave birth to her. Now, tell me this—  
for whose sake did he sacrifice that girl?  
Was it for the Argives?³ Is that your answer?  
But those men had no right to kill my daughter.  
And if he sacrificed my child for Menelaus,  
his brother, should he not pay a penalty  
for that to me? Did not Menelaus have

¹It was (and in many places still is) considered shameful for a family to let a young, unmarried girl walk around in a public place alone.
²The gods told Agamemnon that the Greek fleet would not receive a favourable wind for the fleet, unless he sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia. Agamemnon sacrificed the girl, and the Greeks sailed to Troy.
³The Greek forces at Troy were often called the Argives or the Achaeans, rather than Greeks.
two children? Surely, to be fair, those two should have been offered up instead? After all, their parents were the reason for the voyage.\(^1\) Was Hades’ craving to devour my children greater than his urge to feast on Helen’s?\(^2\) Or had their atrocious father set aside all affection for his children born from me, while he still cared for those of Menelaus? Did that not show he was a wretched father who had no feelings? That’s my view of it, even if you don’t agree with what I’ve said. And the girl who died would speak as I do, if she could find a voice. That’s why, for me, there’s nothing to regret in what I’ve done. You may well find the way I think offensive. If so, make sure, when you are judging others, that what you say about them is the truth, before you lay the blame on someone else.

**ELECTRA**

At least you cannot say on this occasion I was the one who started the abuse and you replied because you were provoked. But with your permission, I would like to speak on behalf of my dead father and my sister and talk about what really happened.

**CLYTAEMNESTRA**

Of course I’ll let you speak. If you talked to me all the time like that, I would not find listening to what you say so painful.

**ELECTRA**

All right then, I will answer what you said. You admit you killed my father. What speech could ever be more shameful than those words, whether what you did was justified or not? \(^{[560]}\) But I will prove to you that when you killed him

---

\(^1\)Menelaus was married to Helen (Clytaemnestra’s sister), who later eloped to Troy with Paris, a Trojan prince. The immediate cause of the war was Menelaus’s desire to get her back. The other Greek warriors joined (some unwillingly) because they had earlier agreed to provide assistance to whichever one of them married Helen.

\(^2\)Hades is the god who rules the underworld.
you did not do it in the name of Justice. No, that vile man who is now your lover persuaded you to do it. Ask Artemis the hunter goddess, why she held in check the winds at Aulis. Was she punishing a wrong someone had done? I will tell you, since it is not right for us to question her.¹

My father—so I’ve heard—was once out hunting in a sacred grove of goddess Artemis, when his footsteps roused a startled deer, a dappled stag with horns. He threw his spear and hit the beast. Then, as it so happened, he uttered a loud boast about the slaughter. Artemis was enraged. She kept the Greeks detained at Aulis, until my father, to compensate her for that creature’s life, sacrificed his daughter. So she was killed. There was no other way to free the army, so it could sail to Troy or go back home. He struggled hard against the god’s demands, resisting what he was compelled to do, but in the end with great reluctance he sacrificed her to preserve his troops, and not for Menelaus. But let’s assume, to adopt your argument, he killed her for his brother’s sake. Is that a reason for you to kill him? What gives you that right? Take care when you establish rules for men you do not bring yourself remorse and pain. For if we were to kill all those who killed, blood for blood, and you were dealt with justly, then surely you would be the first to die. You should consider whether what you say is just a mere excuse. Please tell me this—why do you now live in such a shameful way, committing the most atrocious of all crimes, by sleeping with a guilty murderer?

He first conspired with you to kill my father, and after that you bore his offspring. The ones you had before you pushed aside, legitimate children of a lawful marriage.²

¹Human beings were not in a position to interrogate gods about their motives.
²Some traditional accounts state that Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra had two children.
How can I approve of what you've done?
Are you suggesting that your way of life
is also retribution for your daughter?
If that's what you are saying, it's a disgrace—
marrying an enemy to avenge a child!
There's nothing honourable in such an act.
But there's no point in criticizing you.
You'll only say I'm slandering my mother.
Well, I don't consider you my mother—
you're more my mistress. That's how tiresome
my life is here. You and that man of yours
make everything so miserable for me!
As for your other child, poor Orestes,
who only just escaped your clutches,
he spends his sad life far away in exile.
How many times have you complained I raised him
so he could punish you for what you've done?
Well, you can be sure of this—I would have,
if I'd been strong enough. For that, at least,
you should denounce me, telling everyone
whatever you like—that I'm disloyal,
abusive, and absolutely shameless.
For if I naturally possess the skill
to act like that, then given who you are,
I am a credit to the one who bore me.

CHORUS
I can see she's angry, but is she right?
For I no longer think she even cares
whether she has Justice on her side.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
And how am I supposed to care for her,
when, at her age, she insults her mother?
Does she not strike you as a person
who would do anything and feel no shame?

ELECTRA
It may not look that way, but I do feel shame
That's something you should understand.
I know that what I do is inappropriate,
unsuitable for someone of my age.
But your hostility and what you've done
force me, against my will, to act this way.
ELECTRA

Shameful actions teach us shameful deeds.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
You shameless creature, you talk far too much about how I behave and what I say.

ELECTRA
You’re the one who’s doing the talking, not me—you carry out the act, and what you do translated into words is what I say.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
Now by lady Artemis, you’ll not escape being punished for this insolence of yours, once Aegisthus gets back home!

ELECTRA
You see? You’ve flown into a rage, even though you told me I was free to speak my mind. You don’t know how to listen.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
All right, calm down. Now that I’ve allowed you to speak freely, will you allow me to complete my sacrifice?

ELECTRA
Yes, you may proceed. Make your sacrifice. I urge you to. As for the things I say, you can stop complaining—from now on I will not speak another word.

[Clytaemnestra and her Attendant move to a statue of Apollo standing beside the palace doors. Electra remains on stage but in the background.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA [to her Attendant]
Take up that gift of various fruits, so I may offer prayers to lord Apollo for his deliverance from present fears.

[The Attendant carries the offering over to the statue of Apollo, places it there, and steps away. Clytaemnestra turns to address the statue directly.]
ELECTRA

CLYTAEMNESTRA

O Phoebus, our protector, hear my prayer, although in what I say I must be careful, for those around me are not all my friends, and while this girl is standing close to me I do not think it wise that every detail sees the light of day. She is malicious, and that chattering tongue of hers might sow wild rumours all around the city. But even though I speak so guardedly, hear what I have to say! The vision I saw in that ambiguous dream last night— if it’s an omen favourable to me, O Lycian king, then let it be fulfilled. If not, if that dream is inauspicious, let it recoil on those who wish me harm! If anyone is hatching treasonous schemes to force me from my rich successful life, let them not prevail, but grant instead that I may always live the way I do, in safety, governing the royal throne and palace, home of Atreus’s sons, spending pleasant days with those good friends I have around me now and with my children, the ones who feel no bitterness towards me and bear me no ill will. O Lycian Apollo, be gracious to us. Hear us when we pray, and grant to each of us the things we ask. As for my secret prayers, I will say nothing. You are a god, and I know you hear them, for, as is fitting, all things are perceived by gods who are the children of great Zeus.¹

[Enter the Paedagogus.]

PAEDAGOGUS

Ladies of Mycenae, could you please tell me if this is the palace of lord Aegisthus. I need to be quite sure.

¹Clytaemnестra is not willing, in the presence of Electra, to speak all her prayers aloud. Presumably, those silent prayers have something to do with Orestes.
CHORUS
    Yes, stranger, it is.
    Your assumption is correct.

PAEDAGOGUS
    And would I be correct
to assume this lady is his consort?
    She has such a regal bearing.

CHORUS
    Yes, you would.
The lady standing there is our king’s wife.

PAEDAGOGUS [to Clytaemnestra]
    Greetings to you, my lady. I come here
    from a friend of yours with happy news
    for you and lord Aegisthus.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
    Greetings, stranger.
    I will hear your news. But first I need to know
    the one who sent you.

PAEDAGOGUS
    Phanoteus from Phocis
    asked me to bring you an important message.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
    What message, stranger? Since it’s from a friend,
    I’m sure you will be bearing pleasant news.

PAEDAGOGUS
    My message is brief: Orestes has been killed.

ELECTRA
    O no! No! For me that means disaster!
    I’m ruined! Today my life is over!

CLYTAEMNESTRA
    What was that? What did you say, stranger?
    Don’t listen to her!

PAEDAGOGUS
    What I just said
and now repeat is this—Orestes has been killed.

ELECTRA
This is the end for me! I am no more!

CLYTAEMNESTRA [to Electra]
That’s enough! Keep your feelings to yourself!

[Clytaemnestra turns back to the Paedagogus.]

Stranger, I would like to know the truth—tell me exactly how Orestes died.

PAEDAGOGUS
I was sent to tell you what took place, and I will give you the entire story. Orestes travelled to that famous shrine at Delphi, whose glory all Greeks share, to compete for prizes at the games held there. When he heard the loud cry of the herald for the first event, a foot race, he moved onto the track, a splendid looking youth, who won the admiration of the crowd. He raced once around the track and finished first, winning the honour of a glorious prize. As for his other feats that day, let me say this: I do not know any man who could have matched his strength and skill. And one thing you should know—in every contest which those judges called he won first prize, and all those there agreed he was a fortunate young man each time the heralds shouted out he was an Argive called Orestes, son of Agamemnon, who once commanded Greece’s famous army.¹ That’s how things began for him that day. But when a god decides to harm someone, there’s no escape, not even for the strong. One day soon afterwards at sunrise, Orestes took part in a chariot race, with many others—one was from Achaea,

¹Following the lead of many other translators, I omit line 691 in the Greek, which lists the contests (single lap race, double lap race, and pentathlon). Jebb suggests it is a later interpolation and discusses the difficulties it presents.
one from Sparta, and two from Libya, both very skilled at racing chariots. Orestes was the fifth man in the race with his Thessalian mares. The sixth, with chestnut colts, was from Aetolia, the seventh a driver from Magnesia. An Aenian man, whose team was white, was eighth, and ninth a man from Athens. The tenth and final man was a Boeotian. Special judges chose each starting place by drawing lots, and then the teams moved up to their assigned positions. A trumpet blared, and they raced off, shouting at their horses and brandishing the reins. The entire track was filled with the din of clattering chariots, stirring up the dust. In the mass confusion no one spared the whip, as each man strove to push on and get past his rival’s wheels and the snorting nostrils of his horses. The foaming slobber of the panting teams fell across their backs and chariot wheels. Each time Orestes swung past the turning post he let the trace horse on the right run wide and kept the reins taut on the left-hand side. He came so close he almost grazed his wheels.\textsuperscript{1} So far the chariots had all been running well, but then the Aenian’s hard-mouthed horses lost control and bolted, as they were ending their sixth lap and starting on the seventh, smashing headlong into a Libyan chariot. The pile up caused a number of collisions, as racing teams crashed into one another and broke apart. The racing course at Crisa was full of shattered chariots. Seeing this, the man from Athens, a skilful driver, pulled aside, reining in his horses, to let the mass of chariots behind him rush past and crash into the wreckage.

\footnote{In the chariot race, each competitor drove a four-horse team, two yoked horses in the middle and two trace horses on the outside. The drivers raced a number of laps counter clockwise around a course marked with a pillar at each end (the turning post). A key moment was the turn around the pillar, when a good rider guided his left trace horse as close to the pillar as possible, without having his wheel hit it. That meant that the driver had to keep a tight control on the left-hand trace horse, the one nearest the pillar. The right-hand horse was left to run as hard as it could.}
Orestes was holding back his horses, counting on a fast sprint at the finish. But when he noticed the Athenian was the only chariot left in the race, he raised a cry that pierced his horses’ ears and set out after him. They drew level. As the chariots raced on, first one of them would surge ahead and then the other, the horses straining neck-and-neck to win.

So far poor Orestes had kept his poise, standing balanced in the upright chariot, and moving safely past the turning posts. But then, as his team made the final turn, quite inadvertently he slackened off the left-hand rein and struck the pillar, breaking his axle box. He pitched forward, across the rail, and got tangled in the reins. As he fell down, his team of horses panicked, bolting around the middle of the track. When people saw he’d fallen from his chariot, they cried out with pity that such a youth, who’d achieved so much, was so unlucky. He was dragged along the ground and tossed into the air feet first, until the charioteers with difficulty rounded up his horses and cut him loose, covered in so much blood that even a friend would not have recognized his mangled corpse. They quickly built a pyre and burned the body. Chosen men from Phocis are bringing here in a small urn made of bronze his mighty body, now nothing but ash, so he may have the burial he deserves in his ancestral home. That ends my story.

The words are sad enough, but for those of us who saw it, it was the greatest of all sorrows, the most painful sight that we have ever seen.

CHORUS
Alas! It seems as if the ancient family that rules us has been utterly destroyed!

CLYTAEMNESTRA
O Zeus, should I consider this good news or horrible but of benefit to me?
It’s a bitter feeling—I am so miserable and yet what makes me grieve has saved my life.

PAEDAGOGUS

My lady, why has my speech made you sad?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Motherhood has a mysterious power.
No matter how much he may make her suffer, a woman can never hate the child she bears.

PAEDAGOGUS

Then it seems my journey has been futile.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, no—your trip has not been futile.
How can you say that when you have come bringing me sure proof that he is dead?
His got his life from me, and yet he fled—abandoning the breast that nurtured him and the one who raised him. He became totally estranged from me, an exile.
Once he left Mycenae, he never saw me. He accused me of his father’s murder and often threatened he would take revenge.
At night sweet sleep could never close my eyes, or in the day—each moment made me feel as if I was about to die. But today, my fear of him is gone—and of that girl, who causes me more grief than he does. She lives with me and drinks my lifeblood neat. But now, I think, in spite of all her threats, I’ll spend my days in peace and comfort.

ELECTRA

Alas for me and the agony I feel!
Now I must mourn your death, Orestes, for even though you’re dead, this woman, your mother, still insults you. Is that right?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Not for you—but Orestes is just fine the way he is.
ELECTRA

O Nemesis, goddess of retribution
for those who have just died, listen to her!

CLYTAEMNESTRA
She has heard the prayers she ought to hear
and made the right decision.

ELECTRA
So then insult us!
This is your lucky day.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
You will not stop me now—
you and Orestes.

ELECTRA
No, we are finished.
There’s no way that we can stop you.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [to the Paedagogus]
Well, stranger,
you deserve a fine reward, if your trip here
has brought her noisy chatter to an end.

PAEDAGOGUS
I’ll be on my way, then, if all is well.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
No, no, not yet. That would be unworthy
of me and of the friend who sent you.¹
Do come inside—we’ll leave the girl out here
to howl about the troubles she has had
and what the ones she loves have suffered.

[Clytemnestra and the Paedagogus go into the palace.]

ELECTRA
How did that wretched woman seem to you?
Was she in pain, grieving and weeping bitterly
over her dead son? No, as she left here

¹As an important royal figure, Clytemnestra would be expected to provide appropriate hospitality for a messenger from an ally.
she was laughing! This is the end for me.
Dearest Orestes, your death has finished me,
tearing from my heart whatever hopes
I still had that one day you would come
to avenge our father and my suffering.
But now where can I turn? I am alone,
for you are lost to me, as is my father.
Now I must go back to being a slave
for those I hate the most, those murderers,
who killed my father. Should I do that?
No, from now on I will not live with them.
I will lie down beside these palace gates
and let my life wither away unloved.
If any of those living in the house
finds this offensive, let them kill me.
The killer would be doing me a favour—
my life is pain, and I have no desire
to keep on living anymore.

CHORUS
Where are the thunderbolts of Zeus
or the blazing Sun? What are they doing
if they see these things and keep them hidden?

ELECTRA [screaming and sobbing]
Aaaaiiiii!

CHORUS
My child, why are you crying?

ELECTRA
This is too much!

CHORUS
Do not shout such things.

ELECTRA
You will destroy me!

CHORUS
Destroy you? How?

ELECTRA
If you are offering me hope for those
ELECTRA

who we all know have gone to Hades, you are trampling on me even more, as I drain my life away with grieving.

CHORUS
But I remember lord Amphiaraus snared by a woman’s chain of gold and swallowed up. And now he’s there, beneath the earth . . .

ELECTRA [screaming again]
Aaaaaiiiiii!

CHORUS . . . his mind is still alert, and he rules the dead.¹

ELECTRA
Alas!

CHORUS
Alas, indeed. That deadly lady . . .

ELECTRA [interrupting]
. . . was destroyed.

CHORUS
Yes, she was killed.

ELECTRA
I know, I know. Someone who cared for him appeared and avenged his grieving shade. But I have no such friend. The one I had death swallowed up. And now he’s gone.

¹Amphiaraus, an Argive prophet, was reluctant to join an expedition led by Polyneices, a son of Oedipus, against Thebes. Polyneices bribed Amphiaraus’s wife, Eriphyle, with a golden necklace, and she convinced her husband to join Polyneices. After the Thebans defeated Polyneices, Amphiaraus fled and was swallowed up when the earth was split apart by a thunderbolt. His son Alcmaeon avenged his father by killing Eriphyle. The Chorus offers Amphiaraus as an example of someone who died as a result of his wife’s treachery and greed (i.e., someone like Agamemnon) and who still has a significant existence in the underworld. Electra seizes on the point that the death of Amphiaraus was avenged, whereas Agamemnon’s death has not yet been avenged.
ELECTRA

CHORUS
    Your Fate has destined you for suffering,
you ill-fated unhappy girl!

ELECTRA
    I know that—I know a tide of horror
    surges through my life month after month
    and piles my sorrows up on every side.

CHORUS
    We have watched you as you grieve.

ELECTRA
    Then you must stop consoling me,
    when I no longer . . .

CHORUS
    What are you saying?

ELECTRA
    . . . have any hope—my noble brother
    cannot help me.

CHORUS
    All mortal men must die—
    that’s Nature law.

ELECTRA
    But not like that—
    not like poor Orestes—those thundering hooves
    and he was cut and tangled in the reins!

CHORUS
    His wounds are unimaginable!

ELECTRA
    They are, and he was in a foreign land—
    where my hands could not tend to him.

CHORUS
    Alas!

ELECTRA
    Now he lies hidden away—he has received
no burial and no laments from me. [870]

[Enter Chrysothemis.]

CHRYSTHEMIS
My dear sister, I am so overjoyed,  
I set all modesty aside and ran here.  
I have news for you, wonderful news!  
It will ease your pain and bring release  
from all your former sorrow.

ELECTRA
Where could you find 1050  
anything to help relieve my grief?  
For that there is no cure.

CHRYSTHEMIS
Then let me tell you this—  
Orestes has come back to us! He’s returned—  
as plain as you can see me standing here!

ELECTRA
You poor girl, are you mad? Are you mocking  
my misfortunes and your own? [880]

CHRYSTHEMIS
No, no—I swear  
by my father’s hearth, I am not joking.  
I tell you he is really here among us.

ELECTRA
You’re deluded. Who told you this tale,  
which you’ve accepted far too easily? 1060

CHRYSTHEMIS
No one told me. I saw clear evidence  
with my own eyes. And I believe it.

ELECTRA
You poor wretch, what evidence did you see  
that led you to have faith in such a story?  
What lit the fire of such a fatal hope?
CHRYSOTHEMIS
Now, by the gods, hear what I have to say—
learn what I have seen before you tell me
whether I have lost my mind or not. [890]

ELECTRA
If telling me your story makes you happy,
then go ahead. [900]

CHRYSOTHEMIS
All right, I’ll tell you
everything I saw. When I reached the grave,
our father’s old ancestral tomb, I noticed
that streams of milk had recently been poured.
on the top part of the mound. His burial site
was surrounded by all sorts of flowers.
I was astonished at the sight. I looked around,
in case someone might come too close to me,
but the whole place was absolutely still.
When I saw that, I moved closer to the grave,
and there I noticed, right beside the mound,
a lock of hair—cut off not long ago.
And in that instant a familiar image
rushed into my heart, and I imagined
I was looking at a token of the man
I love the most of all, my dear Orestes.
I took it in my hands and raised it up,
saying nothing that might spoil the moment.
My eyes at once were filled with tears of joy,
and I felt then as I do now, the offerings
had to come from him. Who else would do it,
apart from you and me? And I know this—
I did not make those offerings. Nor did you.
How could you? You are not allowed to go
outside the house without being punished,
not even to worship at the holy shrines.
Our mother’s heart would never prompt her to it,
and she could not have done so unobserved.
No, these offerings are from Orestes.
And so, dear sister, pluck up your courage.
One’s fortune does not always stay the same.
To this point ours has been abominable,
but today perhaps brings us new promise
that many good things lie in store. [910]
ELECTRA

Alas,
you're such a fool! I feel sorry for you. [920]

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What?
Are you not overjoyed to hear my news?

ELECTRA

You have no sense of where on earth you are.
Your mind is wandering in delusions.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

How could I not know what I saw so clearly?

ELECTRA

You poor girl. Orestes cannot save you.
He is dead. There will be no help from him. 1110

CHRYSOTHEMIS

O no! That's dreadful! Where did you hear this?

ELECTRA

From someone who was there when he was killed.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Where is this man? I can't believe it's true!

ELECTRA

He's in the house, enjoying his welcome—
mother finds his company delightful.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

O no! What about the tributes at the grave?
Who put them there? 1130

ELECTRA

Well, it's possible
someone could have placed those offerings
as a memorial to dead Orestes.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

How foolish I was to come hurrying back 1120
full of welcome news. I had no idea how terrible things are. Now I'm here, I find new sorrows have been added to the ones we had before.

ELECTRA

Yes, that's true. But if you follow my advice, you could ease the heavy sorrows now weighing us down.

CHRYSOthemis

How can I bring the dead to life again?

ELECTRA

That's not what I meant. I was not born a fool.

CHRYSOthemis

What do you want? Is it something I can do?

ELECTRA

What I want is for you to have the courage to do what I suggest.

CHRYSOthemis

If it does us good, I will not refuse.

ELECTRA

Just bear in mind there's no success without hard work.

CHRYSOthemis

I know that—I'll do all I can to help you.

ELECTRA

Then listen. Here's what I intend to do. You know we have no friends who can assist us. Hades has taken them away. We two, the only ones still left, are now alone. As long as I still heard he was alive and well, I hoped that one day Orestes would return to avenge the murder of our father. But now he's gone, I look to you for help. I need you to be firm—no holding back—
and work with me, your sister, to kill
our father’s murderer, Aegisthus.
That’s my plan. I will keep nothing secret
from you anymore. How much longer
will you wait around doing nothing?
Where can you look for any real hope?
All you can do now is lament the loss
of your father’s rich estate and feel sad
that after all these years you are unmarried
and have not heard your joyful bridal song.
Do not cling onto the hope that one day
this will happen. No, that man, Aegisthus,
is no fool. He will never let the two of us
have any children. That would pose for him
a real danger. But if you do decide
to follow my advice, first of all,
you will win praises for your piety
from our dead father and our brother.
And afterwards you will be free again,
just as you were free when you were born,
and you will have a marriage you deserve.
For all men’s eyes are drawn to true nobility.
Do you not see how, if you do as I suggest,
you and I will win a glorious reputation?
Every citizen and stranger will look at us
and shower us with praise, saying things like,
“My friends, look at those two sisters. They saved
their father’s home. At the risk of their own lives,
they stood against their powerful enemies
and killed them. They are worthy of our love,
and all of us should show them due respect.
At festivals and when the people gather,
these two should be honoured for their courage.”
That’s how everyone will talk about us,
and then, whether we are alive or dead,
our glory will not fade. So, dear sister,
agree with me. Take up our father’s cause
and our brother’s. Bring my troubles to an end
and your own, as well. Remember this—
for all those born to noble families
living life in shame is a disgrace.

CHORUS
In times like these, foresight is an ally,
for those who listen and for those who speak.

CHRYSTHEMIS [to the Chorus]
Yes, my friends, and if her mind were sound,
she would think carefully before she speaks.
But she has no idea what that means.

[To Electra]

What are you thinking when you arm yourself
in recklessness and call for my support? 1190
Look at you! You’re a woman, not a man—
your strength is no match for your enemies,
and their good fortune grows stronger every day,
while ours declines and soon will disappear. [1000]
Who could ever plot to kill a man like that
and get away with it unharmed? Be careful—
our present lives are difficult enough.
They could get even worse if anyone
hears you talk like that. If we win glory,
there is no help or benefit for us
if we die in disgrace. For death itself
is not the worst. No, wanting to die
is worse when one has no way to do it.
So before we are completely ruined,
and our entire family is destroyed, 1200
I beg you to control your anger.
As for what you said to me, for your sake
I will be silent. It will not harm you.
But now it’s time you acted sensibly.
You are weak, and so you must give way
to those with power.

CHORUS

Listen to her.
The greatest benefits for mortal men
come from using foresight and good sense.

ELECTRA

I knew you would reject what I proposed.
So I must act alone, kill him myself
with my own hands. I will not give up.

[1020]
ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Ah, if only you had shown this courage
when father died. You could have done it then.

ELECTRA
I had the heart to do it, but at the time
my mind was ill-prepared—I could not act.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
That’s the way you should be thinking now.

ELECTRA
I assume from what you’re telling me to do
you will not help me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
No I won’t.
Whoever tries to carry out your scheme
will almost certainly get into trouble.

ELECTRA
I admire the way you are so prudent,
but I despise your cowardice.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I’ll be patient—
one day you will be praising my advice.

ELECTRA
You will never have to hear such words from me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
That’s something for the future to decide.

ELECTRA
Why not leave? You’re no help to me at all.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I could help, but you don’t want to listen.

ELECTRA
Just go—and tell your mother everything!
ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS
  No, I don’t hate you enough to do that.

ELECTRA
  You realize how you dishonour me.¹

CHRYSOTHEMIS
  There’s no dishonour—I’m only thinking of what might help you.

ELECTRA
  Must I then follow what you think is just?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
  When you are reasonable I’ll let you lead us both.

ELECTRA
  It’s terrible for one to speak so well and be so wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
  You’ve just described yourself exactly.

ELECTRA
  What? Do you not think that what I say is just?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
  But there are times when justice does us harm.

ELECTRA
  I have no wish to live by rules like that.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
  If you are going to go ahead with this, you’ll find out I was right.

ELECTRA
  I will do it. The things you say will not prevent me.

¹The dishonour, Jebb explains, comes from Chrysothemis’s rejection of Electra’s appeal to her as a sister.
CHRYSOTHEMIS
Are you sure? You won't reconsider?

ELECTRA
No. There's nothing worse than bad advice.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
You do not seem to hear a word I say.

ELECTRA
I made up my mind some time ago.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Then I will leave, since you cannot accept what I suggest, and I cannot approve of what you're doing.

ELECTRA
Then go inside.
I will not come to you for help again,
not even if that is something you would like.
It's pointless to pursue what is not there.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
If you believe your thinking is correct,
then think that way. But when troubles come,
you'll be praising the advice I gave you.

[Chrysothemis goes into the palace.]

CHORUS
Why, when we observe the birds above
and see how, with sure intelligence,
they provide sustenance to those who gave them life and reared them,
why do we not do the same?
But by the lightning flash of Zeus
and by celestial goddess Themis,
our punishment will not be long delayed.
O Voice that echoes through the earth
to the dead below, shout out, I beg you,
a pitiful cry to the son of Atreus,
to tell him of our joyless shame.
Tell him there is sickness in the home—
strife between his children—two sisters
no longer live in loving harmony.
Abandoned and alone, Electra
in her misery confronts the storm,
always grieving for her father’s fate,
like the ever-plaintive nightingale,
with no concern for death, but ready
to die if she can purge the house
of those two Furies.¹ Could any child
born to a noble father ever be
more faithful to her royal lineage?

No truly noble natures wish
to shame their name and reputation
by living a disgraceful life,
just as you, my child, have chosen
a life of mourning for your family.
You have spurned dishonour
and won double praise—for wisdom
and for being the best of daughters.

I pray you live with wealth and power,
as far above your enemies as now
you are beneath them. For I find you
in distress, but still observing
nature’s most important laws,
and with your piety toward Zeus
winning the greatest praise for virtue.

[Enter Orestes and Pylades.]

ORESTES
Ladies of Mycenae, could you tell us
if we have received correct directions
and are on the right road to our destination?

CHORUS
What do you want? Where is it you wish to go?

¹The word “Furies” is normally associated with the divine agents of blood revenge, but sometimes (as here) it is used to denote the perpetrator of the evil act (i.e., the person the Furies seek to destroy).
ORESTES
For a long time now I have been seeking
the house in which Aegisthus lives.

CHORUS
You’ve reached it.
You cannot fault whoever it was
who told you how to get here.

ORESTES
Well then,
which of you will inform those in the house
that guests they have long been expecting
have arrived?

CHORUS
If it is appropriate
that the closest member of their family
should do it, then this girl will go inside.

ORESTES
Go in, young lady, and make sure they learn
some men from Phocis wish to meet Aegisthus.

ELECTRA
Alas, I am so sad. You bring no proof,
no clear evidence, of stories we have heard—
or do you?

ORESTES
I know nothing of such tales. [1110]
Old Strophius told me to bring a message
about Orestes.

ELECTRA
What is that message, stranger? 1320
O how fear steals over me!

ORESTES
As you can see,
we have come bearing in this small urn
all that remains of the man who died.
ELECTRA
Alas, that makes me feel so wretched!
This is what I feared, and now I see
what you are holding in your hands
there seems evidence that he is dead.

ORESTES
If you are weeping for Orestes’ troubles,
know that this urn contains his ashes.

ELECTRA
O, if that urn really holds Orestes,
then, stranger, in the name of all the gods,
let me hold it in my hands and lament,
weeping for these ashes and for myself,
and for my family, our entire race.

ORESTES [to his attendants]
Bring the ashes here, and give them to her,
whoever she is. She wants to hold them,
not from any feelings of hostility,
but as a blood relative or a friend.

[The attendant comes forward and hands the funeral urn to Electra.]

ELECTRA [taking the ashes]
O memorial of the one I loved
more dearly than all other living men,
remnant of the life of my Orestes!
As I take you back, how you contradict
the hopes I had when I sent you away!
Now, my hands raise up just lifeless ash,
but when I sent you off, away from here,
O my child, how splendid you were then!
How I wish I could have left this life
before these hands of mine took you in secret
and sent you out into a foreign land,
to rescue you from death. You would have died
on the very day our father perished
and shared his tomb.1 But now you have died

1If Electra had not saved Orestes, he would have died, but he would have received full funeral rites
and a proper grave at home. Now, he appears to have died away from home and received no
appropriate rites.
away from home, away from your own land, in lonely exile, far from your sister.
I feel so sad—these loving hands of mine did not bathe or dress your corpse or take the painful burden from the blazing fire, as is required. No. Instead, you poor man, you were cared for by the hands of strangers and returned a small weight in a tiny urn.
Alas for the way I looked after you so long ago, that hard sweet futile work. For you were never then your mother’s love but mine, and there was no one in the house except for me who acted as your nurse. You always called me “sister.” Now you’re dead, and in a single day all that has gone.
You swept in like a destructive whirlwind and carried everything away. Father is gone. And now because of you, I, too, have died, for you have passed away. Our enemies are laughing. Mother, who is no mother, is insane with joy. You often sent me secret messages about her, saying you would come back as an avenger. But now a divine spirit of misfortune, yours and mine, has taken that away and, instead of your beloved shape, has sent me back a useless ghost and ash.
Alas, for me! This pitiful body!
Alas! Alas for dear Orestes, who set out on a dreadful journey. You have finished me, dear brother—yes, destroyed me. So welcome me now into this urn, let my nothingness share your home as well, now that you are nothing, so I can spend my future days with you in the earth below. When you lived above, we shared things equally, and now I long to die and not be parted from your grave. For I see the dead are free from misery.

CHORUS
You were the child of a mortal father, Electra. Remember that. Orestes, too,
ELECTRA

was mortal. So do not grieve too much.
Death is a debt that all of us must pay.

ORESTES
Alas! What can I say? I feel helpless,
lost for words, incapable of speaking.

ELECTRA
What is troubling you? Why did you say that?

ORESTES
Is this the noble body of Electra?

ELECTRA
It is, but in a miserable state.

ORESTES
Your situation seems so desperate!

ELECTRA
Your sigh of pity is surely not for me,
is it, stranger?

ORESTES
You have been abused—
treated without piety or honour.

ELECTRA
That ill treatment you have mentioned, stranger,
is happening to me, not someone else.

ORESTES
Alas for your unmarried, ill-fated life.

ELECTRA
Why, stranger, do you look at me and sigh?

ORESTES
I did not understand my own distress.

ELECTRA
What has been said to make you see this?
ORESTES
   It was observing you in obvious pain.

ELECTRA
   You have not seen much of what I suffer.

ORESTES
   How could there be still more hateful things
to witness than what is happening here?

ELECTRA
   Because I am living with the murderers.

ORESTES
   Whose murderers? This evil you talk about—
   where does it come from?

ELECTRA
   My father’s killers.
   And now I am compelled to be their slave.

ORESTES
   What mortal being has driven you to this—
to the point where you are being compelled.

ELECTRA
   She calls herself my mother, but she bears
   no resemblance at all to any mother.

ORESTES
   What does she do? Does she humiliate you?
   Does she use force?

ELECTRA
   Yes, she uses force,
humiliation, various other things.

ORESTES
   And no one helps you? Or keeps them in check?

ELECTRA
   There is no one. The one I was counting on—
you have just handed me his ashes.
ORESTES
You poor girl, I feel pity seeing you here. 1430

ELECTRA
You are the first who ever pitied me. [1200]

ORESTES
Yes, because I am the only one who came and was sad to see what you are suffering.

ELECTRA
Are you a foreign relative of ours?

ORESTES
I could tell you that if these people here were well disposed to you.

ELECTRA
They are my friends—You'd be speaking to some women I trust.

ORESTES
Then set this urn aside, and you will learn all I have to say.

ELECTRA
No, stranger, by the gods, do not ask me that.

ORESTES
Trust what I say. 1440
You will not be making a mistake.

ELECTRA
No. Please do not take what I most cherish.

ORESTES
You must not keep it.

ELECTRA
How wretched I will feel, Orestes, if I cannot bury you. [1210]
ORESTES
   Speak more auspicious words. It is not right for you to show such grief.

ELECTRA
   How is it not right for me to grieve the death of my own brother?

ORESTES
   It is not right for you to speak this way.

ELECTRA
   So with the dead I have no rights at all?

ORESTES [grasping the urn]
   You do have rights, but not with this man here.

ELECTRA
   If I am holding the ashes of Orestes then I do have rights.

ORESTES [taking the urn]
   These are not his ashes—that is just a story we invented.

ELECTRA
   Then where is the grave of poor Orestes?

ORESTES
   There isn’t one. The living have no grave.

ELECTRA
   What are you saying, young man?

ORESTES
   What I’m telling you is not a lie.

ELECTRA
   So the man is still alive?

ORESTES
   If I am still alive, then he is, too.
ELECTRA

Are you Orestes?

ORESTES

Look at this signet ring.
It was my father’s. It will tell you
if I speak the truth.

ELECTRA

O most blissful day!

ORESTES

Yes, most blissful. I will confirm that!

ELECTRA

O to hear your voice! You have come back?

ORESTES

Yes. You need no one else to tell you that!

ELECTRA

And I am holding you here in my arms?

ORESTES

May you hold me in your arms forever!

ELECTRA

O you female citizens of Argos,
so dear to me, gaze upon Orestes,
who, in a story he made up, was dead
and, thanks to that deception, has been saved.

CHORUS

We see him, my child. What has happened here
makes me rejoice and fills my eyes with tears.

ELECTRA

O you child of the man most dear to me,
offspring of his race, you have just come home,
returned and found the one you longed for.

ORESTES

Yes, I am here. But you must be quiet
and wait.
ELECTRA

What do you mean?

ORESTES

We should not talk, in case someone inside can hear us.

ELECTRA

No! By Artemis, the eternal virgin, I do not think it ever could be right to fear that useless load of women who always stay inside the house.

ORESTES

Take care. Ares, god of warfare, lives in women, too. You know that from your own experience.

ELECTRA

O yes, alas! The evils you describe cannot be hidden or dissolved away. I can never put them from my mind.

ORESTES

My child, I know. But we must think of them when the right moment prompts us, not before.

ELECTRA

For all time to come, each fleeting moment would be appropriate for me to talk with justice about what I have suffered. Only now have my lips been free to speak.

ORESTES

I agree. So you should guard that freedom.

ELECTRA

What should I do?

ORESTES

Do not try to say too much at inappropriate times.
ELECTRA

But when you appear, how could anyone consider it right to stay silent instead of speaking out? For now, against all my expectations, by some miracle I have seen you!

ORESTES
You saw me once the gods urged me to come.¹

ELECTRA
If it was a god who brought you to our home, then you have brought up a divine favour greater than the one I noticed earlier. I see in it the work of heavenly power.²

ORESTES
I do not wish to curb the joy you feel, but I fear it may be overwhelming you.

ELECTRA
After all this time, you made up your mind to undertake this marvellous journey. And now you appear before me and see the catastrophes I face. O do not . . .

ORESTES
What should I not do?

ELECTRA
. . . do not take away the delight I get from seeing your face. Do not take that from me.

ORESTES
If I saw someone else attempt to do that, I would be enraged.

¹Jebb comments that Orestes returned to Argos when he oracle told him to do so (he also observes that a line is probably missing from the manuscript here).
²The earlier favour Electra refers to here may be the bad dream Clytaemnestra had, an event that Electra interprets as a sign that the gods on her side.
ELECTRA
So you agree with me?

ORESTES
Why would I not agree?

ELECTRA
O my friends, that voice—I have heard a voice I had no hopes I’d ever hear again, and when I heard it, I could not stay quiet and hold in check my urge to shout for joy. Poor me! But now I have you. You are here, with that face which is so very dear to me, I’d never forget it, not even in my grief.

ORESTES
You must stop all unnecessary talk. Do not tell me how bad our mother is or how Aegisthus squanders all the goods of our ancestral home—the wealth he wastes or throws away on things that have no use. The time you took to tell me all the details would cost the opportunity we have. Instead of that, you must describe for me the facts that suit our present purposes—how my arrival now enables us to bring our enemies’ laughter to an end, either openly or else by ambush. Once we two have gone inside the house, mother must not learn how you are feeling from your delighted face. You must lament, as if the story we made up was true. When we have triumphed, that will be the time to rejoice and glorify our freedom.

ELECTRA
Brother, rest assured. The way I act in there you will find pleasing, for the joy I feel is not my own—now it comes from you. I do not wish to win some benefit if that might cause you any pain at all, for I would not be acting honourably towards the god who stands beside us. But you can grasp the situation here.
How could you not? You must have heard them say
Aegisthus is away from home, but mother,
she’s inside the house. You need have no fear
she’ll see my face break out into a smile.
My ancient hatred for her is white hot,
and now I’ve seen you, I will never stop
weeping tears of joy. How could I do that,
when in a single day I’ve seen you dead
and then come alive? What you have done
is beyond my comprehension, so much so
that if my father came back to me alive,
I would no longer take that as an omen—
I’d believe the evidence of my eyes.
So now that you’ve returned to me like this,
tell me how to act, as your spirit prompts.
If I had been alone, I would have done
one of two things—saved myself with honour
or else suffered an admirable death.

ORESTES
Quiet! I hear someone’s footsteps in the house—
it’s sounds as if they’re going to come outside.

ELECTRA [to Orestes and Pylades]
Go in, strangers, chiefly because you bring
something no person in this family
could send away or be happy to receive.

[Enter the Paedagogus from the house.]

PAEDOGOGUS
You foolish children, have you lost your wits?
Do you have no regard for your own lives,
or have your minds lost any natural sense?
Don’t you realize you’re not on the edge
of lethal danger but in its very midst?
If I had not been standing by these doors,
keeping watch for ages, what you’re planning
would be inside the house before your bodies.
I’ve taken care of that. So stop this talk
and all these insatiable cries of joy,
and go inside. In moments such as these
delay is dangerous. It’s time to act.
ORESTES
What am I going to find when I go in?

PAIDAGOGUS
It’s fine. It’s clear enough no one in there
is going to recognize you. [1340]

ORESTES
I’m assuming
you gave them the report that I was dead.

PAIDAGOGUS
You are now a man who dwells in Hades.

ORESTES
Does that make them happy? What do they say? 1590

PAIDAGOGUS
I’ll tell you that when all of this is over.
As far as they’re concerned, things favour us,
even in matters which are dishonourable.¹

ELECTRA
Who is this man, brother? For gods’ sake tell me.

ORESTES
Don’t you recognize him?

ELECTRA
No. I have no idea.

ORESTES
Years ago you handed me to someone else.
And now you cannot recognize the man?

ELECTRA
What man? What are you talking about?

ORESTES
I’m talking about the man who secretly,

¹This odd-sounding sentence probably means (according to Jebb) that the situation is
advantageous for the plotters, even in things which they might not consider morally correct (e.g.,
Clytaemnestra’s joy at the reported death of her son).
thanks to your precautions, carried me
to the land of Phocis.

ELECTRA
Is he the one,
the only person I could trust back then
out of so many, when they killed our father?

ORESTES
Yes, he’s the one. But no more questions now.

ELECTRA
What an amazing day! You, the sole saviour
of Agamemnon’s house, how did you get here?
Are you are really the man who rescued me
and my Orestes from our many troubles?
O those dear hands and those beloved feet
that did us such a service! How could you
live with me so long and stay anonymous,
shedding no light at all on what had happened,
and boring me with stories, when you knew
the truth of what was truly sweet to me?
Welcome, father, for in you I seem to see
a father. Welcome! In a single day
I have truly hated and then truly loved you,
more so than any other mortal man.

PAEDAGOGUS
Enough for now, I think. As for the rest,
the stories of what happened in the years
you were apart, there will be lots of time,
many circling nights and days, Electra,
for you to find that out in every detail.

[To Orestes and Pylades]

You two are here now. I advise you both
to seize this opportunity to act.
For Clytaemnestra is all by herself.
For the moment there is no man inside.
But if you hesitate, remember this—
you’ll have to face the other men inside
and those stronger and more skilled in fighting.
ORESTES
  Pylades, the task we have to carry out
does not require us to say a lot.
Instead, we should quickly move inside,
once we have ritually acknowledged
our ancestral gods, who protect these gates.

[Orestes and Pylades go into the house with the Paedagogenos. Electra and the Chorus remain outside.]

ELECTRA
  Lord Apollo, listen to them kindly,
and to me as well. I have often come
to you as a suppliant at your shrine,
carrying in my hands whatever gifts
I could gather. And now, Lycian Apollo,
I pray to you with what I have at hand,
I implore you with this supplication
to be our willing champion in this plan,
reveal to all the price the gods demand
from human beings for their impiety.

[Electra goes into the house.]

CHORUS
  See now how Ares moves ahead,
breathing bloody and unholy strife.
The avengers of those wicked crimes
have just gone in the house, the hounds
that none escape. What my soul dreams
will not hang in suspense for long.

The man who helps the spirits below
has gone with stealthy feet inside
his father’s rich ancestral home,
carrying sharp-honed, bloody death,
with Hermes, goddess Maia’s son,
shrouding his deceit in darkness
and leading him straight to his goal.
No longer will it be delayed.

[Enter Electra from the house.]
ELECTRA

O my dearest friends, in a few moments
the men will have carried out their work.
But you must wait in silence.

CHORUS
How are they?
What are they doing now?

ELECTRA
Clytaemnestra
is decorating the urn for burial,
the two men standing close behind her.

CHORUS
Why have you run outside?

ELECTRA
I want to stand guard
in case Aegisthus comes up to the house
without our knowledge.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [from within the house]
Aaaaiiiii! The palace
has no friends! It’s filled with murderers!

ELECTRA
Someone let out a cry in there! My friends,
did you not hear it?

CHORUS
I heard a scream—
an appalling sound. It made me shudder.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [from inside the house]
Alas, I’m done for. Where are you, Aegisthus?
Where are you?

ELECTRA
Listen! Another scream!

CLYTAEMNESTRA [from inside the house]
My child, my son, have pity on your mother!
ELECTRA

You did not pity him or the father
who produced him.

CHORUS

O this unhappy city
and suffering family, now the fate
that has gripped you every day is dying—
it is coming to an end.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [from inside the house]

I have been stabbed!

Aaiiii . . .

ELECTRA

Strike her twice, if you have the strength!

CLYTAEMNESTRA [from inside the house]

Aaiiii . . . another blow!

ELECTRA

O how I wish
Aegisthus had been stabbed as well!

CHORUS

The curses have come to their conclusion.
Those who were in the earth are now alive,
and in a flood of lethal retribution
those dead long ago are draining blood
from those who slaughtered them.

[Orestes and Pylades enter from the house.]

CHORUS

Here they come, their red hands dripping blood,
a sacrifice to Ares. I cannot fault them.

ELECTRA

Orestes, what’s going on?

ORESTES

Inside the house
things worked out well, if what Apollo’s shrine
prophesied to me is right.
ELECTRA

Is she dead?
Is that wretched woman dead?

ORESTES
You need not fear.
Never again will your mother’s arrogance
dishonour and abuse you.

CHORUS
Be quiet!
I see Aegisthus. He is in plain sight.

ELECTRA
You two, shouldn’t you go back inside? [1430]

ORESTES
Where do you see him?

ELECTRA
He’s moving towards us,
coming from the outskirts of the city
in a cheerful mood . . .

CHORUS
Get into the hallway
as quickly as you can. What you did before
proved successful, so do it once again.

ORESTES
Don’t worry. We’ll finish what we started.

ELECTRA
Do what you mean to do, but quickly.

ORESTES
I’m going.

ELECTRA
I’ll take care of things out here.

[Orestes and Pylades go into the house.]
CHORUS
You might pour a few kind-sounding words
into Aegisthus’ ear—that could be helpful,
blinding him as he hurries to the struggle
where he will find just retribution.

[Enter Aegisthus.]

AEGISTHUS
Can anybody here give me some news
of strangers who have just arrived from Phocis?
There’s a story they have brought us a report
about Orestes dying in some accident,
shipwrecked in his chariot. What about you?
I’m asking you—yes, you—who up to now
have been so reckless. It seems to me this news
concerns you most of all, so you’re the one
who knows the most and thus can best inform me.

ELECTRA
I know the details. How could I not know?
If I did not, I would be a stranger
to the fortunes of a person dear to me.

AEGISTHUS
Where are these strangers then? Tell me.

ELECTRA
Inside.
Their hostess welcomed them with all her heart.

AEGISTHUS
Is it true they’re saying he is dead?

ELECTRA
Yes. And they have not simply told the story,
but have provided evidence, as well.

AEGISTHUS
Can I see this proof clearly for myself?

ELECTRA
You can. But it is not a pleasant sight.
AEGISTHUS

What you have told me fills me with delight—and that’s unusual.

ELECTRA

Then be happy, if occasions like this bring you pleasure.

AEGISTHUS

No more words. I order you to open up the gates, so all Mycenaeans and Argives can see and, if any one of them was stirred by empty hopes that this man would come back, then, by looking at the corpse, he’ll welcome my bit in his mouth. There will be no need for me to punish him and use my force to help him cultivate some common sense.

ELECTRA

I’m prepared to do that. Time has taught me to align my mind with those in power.

[The doors of the palace open, revealing a shroud-covered corpse. Orestes and Pylades are beside it.]

AEGISTHUS

O Zeus, what I see before me is a scene the jealously of the gods has brought about. If Nemesis is here, I will say nothing. Remove the cloth covering his eyes so, as my relative, he may receive appropriate funeral rites from me.

ORESTES

Remove the cloth yourself. It’s up to you, not me, to look upon this body here and offer it some sympathetic words.

AEGISTHUS

That’s good advice. I’ll do just as you say.

[To Electra]

But you should summon Clytaemnestra here,
ELECTRA

if she is in the house.

ORESTES

She is near by.
You need not look for her elsewhere.

[Aegisthus removes the covering from the corpse, revealing the dead body of Clytaemnestra.]

AEGISTHUS [staggering back]

What’s this?
What am I looking at?

ORESTES

Are you afraid?
Do you not recognize her?

AEGISTHUS

This is appalling!
Who are you men whose nets have trapped me?

ORESTES

Do you not see how, for some time now,
you have been discussing living people
in language appropriate for the dead?  1760

AEGISTHUS

Alas, I grasp the meaning of your words.
The man addressing me must be Orestes.

ORESTES

You’re an excellent prophet, but for a while
you were deceived.

AEGISTHUS

I am finished—done for.
But you must allow me a few words.

ELECTRA

No, my brother. For the sake of the gods,
do not let him say anything at all

1Orestes is presumably referring to the earlier speeches of Aegisthus in which he assumed that Orestes had died in the chariot accident.
or to plead at length. When mortal beings are caught out in the midst of evil deeds, how can a man who is about to die get any benefit from a delay? No. Kill him as quickly as you can, then throw the corpse out to be buried by beasts who ought to deal with men like him, far from our sight. That is the only way, as far as I’m concerned, we’ll ever find deliverance from all our ancient grief.

ORESTES [to Aegisthus]
Get inside—and hurry. What’s at issue here is not mere words but rather your own life.

AEGISTHUS
Why take me in the house? If what you’re doing is justified, why do we need darkness? Is your hand not ready for the slaughter?

ORESTES
Do not try to organize what’s happening. Go inside to where you killed my father, so you, too, may perish in that very spot.

AEGISTHUS
Is this house forced to witness all the pain, present and to come, of Pelops’s sons.

ORESTES
Well, yours at least. In what pertains to that I am the finest prophet of them all.

AEGISTHUS
You may well boast about your expertise— your father lacked that skill.

ORESTES

AEGISTHUS
Lead on.
ORESTES
No. You go first.

AEGISTHUS
In case I get away?

ORESTES
No. To prevent you dying in a way you might approve of. I must take great care to make your death something you find bitter. Just punishment should come immediately to those who wish to go beyond the law— they should all die—and then illegal acts would be less frequent than they are.

1800

[Orestes and Aegisthus go into the palace.]

CHORUS
O seed of Atreus, you have emerged from so much suffering! What's happened here is now complete, and you are free at last.

1510

[Electra exits into the palace. The Chorus exits.]