Electra

SOPHOCLES

c. 497–406 BC

Electra

Ἠλέκτρα

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Electra · Sophocles (c. 497–406 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Years ago King Agamemnon came home from Troy and was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, who now rule Mycenae. His daughter Electra has never stopped mourning him, or hating them. Her one hope is her brother Orestes, smuggled away as a child, who she believes will come back to take revenge.

Orestes has in fact come back, with a plan: his old tutor will announce that Orestes is dead. The trick works on everyone, including Electra, and the heart of the play is her grief and then her resolve—quarrels with her cautious sister Chrysothemis and her mother, a desperate decision to act alone, and one of the most moving recognition scenes in Greek drama.

The same story was dramatized by Aeschylus and Euripides, but Sophocles' version, probably from the 410s BC, keeps the spotlight on Electra herself: a portrait of a woman worn down by grief and humiliation who refuses to give in.

Electra

Before the palace of the house of Atreus at Mycenae, at dawn. Orestes returns in secret to avenge his father, and Electra waits.

PROLOGUE

Orestes, his old Tutor and Pylades arrive and plan a trick; Electra mourns her father at dawn.

TUTOR [1] Son of Agamemnon, who once commanded the army at Troy, now you can see with your own eyes what you've always longed for. Here is the ancient Argos you yearned for, the sacred grove of Inachus' daughter, whom the gadfly drove mad. And this, Orestes, is the Lycean marketplace of the wolf-killing god; and here on the left is Hera's famous temple. As for the place we've come to, you can say you're looking at Mycenae, rich in gold, and at this house of the line of Pelops, rich in death. It was from here, after your father was murdered, that I once took you from the hands of your sister, your own blood. I carried you off and saved you and raised you to this age, to avenge your father's murder.[1] [15] So now, Orestes, and you, Pylades, dearest of our hosts, we have to decide quickly what to do. The sun's bright light is already waking the birds' clear morning songs, and the black night of the stars has gone. So before anyone comes out of the house, put your heads together. We've reached the point

1 Io, daughter of the river-god Inachus, was turned into a cow and driven across the world by a gadfly. The "wolf-killing god" is Apollo Lyceus.

where there's no more time for hesitating. It's the moment for action.[2]

ORESTES [23] Dearest of servants, what clear signs you give me of how good you've been to us! A well-bred horse, even when it's old, doesn't lose its spirit in danger but pricks up its ears. In just the same way you urge us on and follow among the first yourself. So I'll explain what we've decided. Listen sharply to what I say, and if I miss the mark anywhere, set me right. When I went to the Pythian oracle to learn how I might win justice for my father from the men who murdered him, Phoebus gave me an answer you'll hear in a moment:[3] [36] that I should go myself, with no shields and no army, and by trickery steal the slaughter my hand is owed in justice. Since that's the oracle we heard, you go into this house when the chance lets you in, and find out everything that's going on, so that you can bring us clear news. With your age and all these years, they'll never recognize you; with that gray hair they won't suspect you. Use this story: that you're a stranger, come from Phanoteus, a man of Phocis. He happens to be their most important ally. [47] And tell them, adding an oath, that Orestes is dead by a fate he couldn't escape: that he was thrown from his speeding chariot at the Pythian Games. Let that be the story.

[51] Meanwhile we'll go to my father's tomb, as the god commanded, and honor it first with libations and locks of hair cut from our heads. Then we'll come back again, carrying in our hands the bronze-sided urn that, as you know, is hidden somewhere in the bushes. That way we can deceive them with our story and bring them the welcome news that my body is gone, already burned and turned to ash. Why should it hurt me to die in word if in deed I survive and win glory? In my view, no word that brings profit is bad. [62] I've often seen even wise men falsely reported dead; then, when they come home again, they're honored all the more. So I'm confident that I too will come out of

2 Pylades is the son of Strophius of Phocis, in whose house Orestes was raised.
3 Phoebus is Apollo, whose oracle was at Delphi, also called Pytho.

this rumor alive and shine on my enemies like a star. Land of my fathers, and gods of this place, receive me with good fortune on this journey. And you, house of my fathers: I come as your purifier, in justice, sent by the gods. Don't send me away from this land dishonored, but make me master of its wealth and restorer of the house. [73] That's what I have to say. Now, old man, go and see to your task. We two will be on our way. It's time, and the right time is the greatest master of everything men undertake.

ELECTRA [77] Oh! Oh, how wretched I am!

TUTOR [78] Wait—I thought I heard one of the servant women inside the door, moaning, son.

ORESTES [80] Could that be unhappy Electra? Do you want us to stay here and listen to her wailing?

TUTOR [82] Certainly not. Let's not try to do anything before we've carried out Loxias' orders. We start with those, pouring offerings for your father. That's what will bring us victory and mastery in what we do.[4]

4 Loxias is a cult title of Apollo, the god of the Delphic oracle.

ELECTRA

86 Pure light,
and air, sharer with earth of an equal portion,
how many songs of lament
you have heard from me,
how many blows struck at my bleeding breast,
whenever dark night gives way.
And my hateful bed in this house of pain
already knows my all-night vigils,
how I lament my wretched father,
whom bloody Ares never made his guest
in a foreign land;
no, my mother and her bedfellow
Aegisthus split his head
with a murderous axe,
the way woodcutters split an oak.
And no pity for this comes from anyone
but me, Father,
though you died so cruelly, so pitiably.

But no, I will not
stop my laments and my hateful wailing
as long as I look on the stars' bright flashing
and look on this daylight;
like a nightingale who killed her young
I will cry out my wailing
here before my father's doors for all to hear.
House of Hades and Persephone,
Hermes of the world below, and holy Curse,
and you, revered Furies, children of the gods,
who watch those who die unjustly,
who watch those whose marriage beds are stolen,
come, help me, avenge
our father's murder,
and send my brother to me.
Alone I no longer have the strength
to bear the weight of grief that pulls against me.[5]

PARODOS

The women of Mycenae urge Electra to restrain her grief, and she refuses to stop mourning.

CHORUS

Child, Electra, child
of a most wretched mother, why do you always
waste away like this in endless lament
for Agamemnon, caught long ago
in the godless snares of your treacherous mother,
betrayed by a vile hand?
May whoever did this perish,
if it is right for me to say so.

5 In myth Procne killed her son Itys and was turned into a nightingale, forever mourning him.

ELECTRA

Daughters of noble fathers,
you've come to comfort me in my troubles.
I know, I understand all this, nothing escapes me;
but I won't give this up,
I won't stop mourning my unhappy father.
You who repay me with friendship of every kind,
let me wander in my grief like this—/ ah, ah, I beg you.

CHORUS

But you will never raise your father
from the marsh of Hades that receives us all,
not with wailing, not with prayers.
Leaving moderation behind for grief past all remedy,
forever lamenting, you are destroying yourself,
in troubles from which there is no release.
Why do you long for what is so hard to bear?

ELECTRA

Foolish is the one who forgets
parents who died pitiably.
No, my heart is one with the grieving bird
who cries for Itys, always Itys,
the frantic bird, Zeus' messenger.
Oh, all-suffering Niobe, I count you a goddess,
you who in your tomb of stone
weep forever.[6]

6 Niobe, whose children were killed by Apollo and Artemis, was turned to stone and weeps forever.

CHORUS

153 Not to you alone, child,
of all mortals has grief come,
that you should go so far beyond those indoors,
your kin from the same father, of the same blood:
see how Chrysothemis lives, and Iphianassa,
and he who grieves through a youth spent in hiding,
and yet is blessed—he whom the famous
land of Mycenae will one day
welcome, nobly born,
when he comes to this land with Zeus' kindly guidance:
Orestes.[7]

ELECTRA

164 Yes, him I wait for tirelessly,
childless, miserable, unmarried, I go on and on,
soaked in tears,
bearing my endless doom of troubles.
But he forgets
what he suffered and what he learned.
What message ever reaches me
that isn't proved false?
He is always longing to come,
but longing, he doesn't see fit to appear.

7 Chrysothemis and Iphianassa are Electra's sisters; Iphianassa is not the sacrificed Iphigenia.

CHORUS

Take heart, child, take heart.
Zeus is still great in heaven,
who watches over all things and rules them.
Leave to him your anger that grieves too much;
don't rage too far against those you hate, and don't forget them.
Time is a god who makes things easy.
For the son of Agamemnon,
who lives by Crisa's shore where the cattle graze,
is not heedless,
nor is the god who reigns beside Acheron.[8]

ELECTRA

But most of my life has already gone by
without hope, and I can't hold out any longer.
I waste away without children,
with no man who loves me to stand by me;
like some lowly foreigner
I serve in my father's rooms,
dressed in shabby clothes like these,
and I stand by tables that are bare.

CHORUS

Pitiful was the cry at his homecoming,
pitiful on your father's couch,
when the blow of the axe's bronze jaws
was launched straight at him.
Deceit planned it, desire killed him;
together they dreadfully bred
a dreadful shape, whether it was a god
or a mortal who did this.

8 Crisa lies near Delphi in Phocis, where Orestes is living; Acheron is a river of the underworld, where Hades rules.

ELECTRA

That day, more hateful to me
than any day that ever came!
That night, the monstrous horror
of that unspeakable feast,
when my father saw shameful death
from two hands,
the hands that seized my life and betrayed it,
the hands that destroyed me!
May the great god of Olympus
give them sufferings in retribution,
and may they never enjoy their splendor
after doing such deeds.

CHORUS

Take care not to say any more.
Don't you understand how, from where you stand now,
you are falling into ruin of your own making,
so miserably?
You have piled up far more trouble for yourself,
forever breeding wars
in your sullen soul. But with those in power
there's no picking a fight.

ELECTRA

Terrible things forced me to it, terrible things.
I know it, my anger doesn't escape me.
But even among terrible things I won't hold back
this ruin of mine
as long as life is in me.
Dear friends, from whom could I ever
hear a fitting word,
from whom with any sense of what is right?
Let me be, let me be, you who would comfort me.
These troubles will be called past all release,
and I will never rest from my sorrows
or my laments without number.

CHORUS

Still, I speak out of kindness,
like a mother you can trust:
don't breed ruin upon ruin.

ELECTRA

And what limit can there be to misery? Tell me,
how can it be right to neglect the dead?
In what human being was that ever born?
May I never be honored by such people,
and if I have any blessing,
may I never live with it at ease,
clipping the wings
of my shrill wailing
and so dishonoring my father.
For if the dead man, earth and nothing,
is to lie there in his misery,
and they don't pay in turn
the justice of death for death,
then shame is gone,
and all reverence among mortals.

FIRST EPISODE

Electra describes her life; Chrysothemis brings offerings their mother sent after a frightening dream.

CHORUS [251] Child, I came here out of concern for you and for myself as well. If what I say isn't right, have it your way; we'll follow you.

ELECTRA [254] Women, I'm ashamed if you think I take things too hard with all my laments. But I'm forced to do this; forgive me. How could any woman of noble birth not do what I'm doing, when she sees the sufferings of her father's house? And I see them day and night, always growing rather than fading. First of all, things between me and my mother, the woman who gave birth to me, have turned into the bitterest hatred. Then I live in my own house with my father's murderers. They rule me, and it's up to them whether I get anything or go without. [266] And then what kind of days do you think I spend, when I see Aegisthus sitting on my father's throne, when I see him wearing the very clothes my father wore and pouring libations at the hearth where he killed him? And when I see the crowning outrage of all: the murderer in my father's bed with my wretched mother—if I should call her mother, the woman who sleeps with him. She's so brazen that she lives with that polluted man and fears no Fury at all. No—as if she were laughing at what she did, she has marked the day on which she killed my father by treachery, and on that day every month she holds dances and sacrifices sheep to the gods who saved her.

[282] And I see it, and in my misery I weep in the house, and waste away, and wail over the wretched feast named after my father—alone, to myself. I'm not even allowed to cry as much as my heart would like. For this woman, so noble in her talk, shouts abuse at me like this: "You godforsaken, hateful thing, are you the only one whose father has died? Is no one else in the world in mourning? May you die a miserable death, and may the gods below never free you from the wailing you're doing now!"

293 That's how she insults me—except when she hears from someone that Orestes is coming. Then she comes up to me in a frenzy and screams: "Isn't this your fault? Isn't this your doing—you who stole Orestes out of my hands and smuggled him away? Well, you can be sure you'll pay the punishment you deserve." That's how she barks, and beside her that famous bridegroom of hers eggs her on in the same way, that complete coward, that walking disaster, who fights his battles with women's help. And I, forever waiting for Orestes to come and put an end to this, am dying in my misery. 305 He's always about to do something, and so he has destroyed every hope I had and every hope I might have had. In a situation like this, friends, there's no room for being sensible or reverent. When you're surrounded by evil, you're forced to practice evil too.

CHORUS 310 Tell me, is Aegisthus nearby while you're saying this to us, or has he left the house?

ELECTRA 312 He's gone, of course. Don't imagine I'd be wandering outside if he were near. As it is, he happens to be out in the country.

CHORUS 314 Then could I talk with you more freely, if that's how things are?

ELECTRA 316 He's away now, so ask. What would you like to know?

CHORUS 317 All right, I'm asking. What do you say about your brother—is he coming, or putting it off? I want to know.

ELECTRA 319 He says he is. But for all his saying, he does nothing he says.

CHORUS 320 A man undertaking something great tends to hold back.

ELECTRA 321 Well, I didn't hold back when I saved him.

CHORUS 322 Take heart. He's noble by nature; he'll stand by his own.

ELECTRA 323 I believe it. Otherwise I wouldn't have lived this long.

CHORUS [324] Say nothing more now. I see your sister coming out of the house, born of the same father and the same mother—Chrysothemis—carrying grave offerings in her hands, the kind that are customary for the dead below.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [328] What's this you're saying now, sister, coming out here to the doorway to say it? Even after all this time, won't you learn not to indulge your useless anger in empty gestures? Look, I know this much about myself too: I'm pained by the way things are, so much that if I had the strength, I'd show them what I think of them. But as it is, I think it's best in hard times to sail with lowered sails, and not to look as if I'm doing something when I can do no real harm. I want you to do the same. And yet justice lies not where I say, but where you judge. Still, if I'm to live free, I have to obey those in power in everything.

ELECTRA [341] It's shocking that you, the daughter of the father you were born to, should forget him and care for your mother. All these lectures you give me were taught you by her; you say nothing of your own. So choose one or the other: either you have no sense, or, having sense, you've forgotten your own flesh and blood. You just said that if you had the strength, you'd show how you hate them. Yet when I do everything to avenge our father, you don't help, and you try to turn me aside from doing it. [351] Doesn't that add cowardice to our miseries? Teach me—or learn from me—what I'd gain by ending these laments. Am I not alive? Badly, I know, but well enough for me. And I hurt them, and so I pay honor to the dead, if anything pleases them down there. But you, who hate them, hate them in word, while in deed you live with our father's murderers. [359] As for me, I would never give in to them, not even if someone offered me the gifts you now pride yourself on. Let the rich table be laid for you, and let life overflow around you. My only nourishment, let it be this: not to wound my own self. I have no wish to win your privileges—and neither would you, if you had any sense. As it is, when you could be called the daughter of the finest of all fathers, go ahead

and be called your mother's. That way most people will see how vile you are, betraying your dead father and your own flesh and blood.

CHORUS [369] No anger, for the gods' sake! There's something to be gained from what both of you say, if you would learn to take her advice, and she in turn yours.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [372] Women, I'm more or less used to her speeches. I wouldn't even have brought it up if I hadn't heard that a very great evil is coming her way, one that will put a stop to her long laments.

ELECTRA [376] Go on, then, tell me this dreadful thing. If you can tell me of something worse than what I have now, I won't argue any more.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [378] Well, I'll tell you everything I know. If you don't stop these laments, they intend to send you somewhere you'll never see the light of the sun again. You'll live in a chamber roofed over beneath the earth, outside this land, singing of your troubles. So think it over, and don't blame me later when you've suffered for it. Now is the time to show some sense.

ELECTRA [385] So they've really decided to do this to me?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [386] Yes—as soon as Aegisthus comes home.

ELECTRA [387] Then as far as that goes, let him come soon!

CHRYSOTHEMIS [388] What are you praying for, you poor thing?

ELECTRA [389] That he should come, if he means to do any of this.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [390] So that you can suffer what? Have you lost your wits?

ELECTRA [391] So that I can get as far away from all of you as possible.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [392] Have you no thought for the life you have now?

ELECTRA [393] Oh yes, my life is so fine, it's a marvel.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [394] It would be, if you knew how to be sensible.

ELECTRA [395] Don't teach me to betray my own.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [396] I'm not teaching you that. I'm teaching you to give way to those in power.

ELECTRA [397] You fawn on them, then. What you describe isn't my way.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [398] Still, it's a fine thing not to fall through foolishness.

ELECTRA [399] If I must fall, I'll fall avenging my father.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [400] But Father, I know, will forgive us for all this.

ELECTRA [401] That's the kind of talk cowards applaud.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [402] Won't you be persuaded, then, and agree with me?

ELECTRA [403] Certainly not. May I never be that empty of sense.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [404] Then I'll go on my way, where I was sent.

ELECTRA [405] Where are you going? Who are these burnt offerings for?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [406] Mother is sending me to pour libations on Father's tomb.

ELECTRA [407] What did you say? To the man she hated most in the world?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [408] The man she killed with her own hands—that's what you want to say.

ELECTRA [409] Which of her friends talked her into this? Whose idea was it?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [410] Some terror in the night, I think.

ELECTRA [411] Gods of our fathers, stand with us—now, at last!

CHRYSOTHEMIS [412] Does her fear give you some hope?

ELECTRA [413] Tell me the dream, and then I could say.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [414] I don't know enough to tell you more than a little.

ELECTRA [415] Tell me that little, then. Small words have often brought people down before now, and set them up again.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [417] The story is that she saw our father—yours and mine—keeping company with her a second time, come back into the light. Then he took the scepter he once carried himself, and Aegisthus carries now, and planted it at the hearth. And from it sprang up a flourishing branch that cast its shade over the whole land of Mycenae. That's what I heard from someone who was there when she told her dream to the Sun. More than that I don't know, except that she's sending me because of this fear. So I beg you, by the gods of our family, listen to me, and don't fall through foolishness. If you push me away now, you'll come looking for me again when you're in trouble.

ELECTRA [431] No, my dear—don't put any of what you're holding on the tomb. It isn't lawful, it isn't right in the gods' eyes, for you to set up offerings from a hateful woman or bring libations to our father. Throw them to the winds, or bury them deep in the dust, where none of it will ever come near our father's resting place. Let them be kept safe below for her, as treasures, for when she dies. [439] If she weren't the most brazen woman ever born, she would never have tried to crown the man she killed with these hostile libations. Just think: do you suppose the dead man in his grave will take these honors kindly from her—from her, who killed him without honor, mutilated him like an enemy, and wiped her bloodstains off on his head to wash herself clean? You don't really think these offerings will free her from the murder? [448] They can't. Let them go. Instead, cut the tips of the locks from your head, and from mine too—poor me, it's little, but it's all I have—and give him this hair, though it shines with no oil, and my sash, which has no finery on it. Kneel and pray that he come up from the earth, kindly, to help us against our enemies; and that his son Orestes may live to get the upper hand and trample his enemies underfoot, so that from now on we may crown his grave with richer hands than the gifts we bring today. [459] I think—yes, I think he had a part in sending

her these dreams that are so terrible to see. All the same, sister, do this service, to help yourself and me and the one we love most of all people, our father, who lies in Hades, father to us both.

CHORUS 464 The girl speaks with reverence. And you, my dear, if you have any sense, will do it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS 466 I will. When something is right, there's no reason for two people to argue over it; one should hurry to do it. But while I'm attempting this, my friends, for the gods' sake, keep silent. If my mother finds out, I think I'll come to find this venture bitter.

FIRST STASIMON

The chorus predict that Justice and the Fury will come, and recall the curse on Pelops' line.

CHORUS

472 Unless I am a prophet out of my wits
and wanting in wise judgment,
Justice, who sent this omen ahead,
will come, bearing just power in her hands;
she will come after them, child, before much time has passed.
Courage steals into me
since I heard just now
of these sweet-breathing dreams.
For the lord of the Greeks who fathered you never forgets,
nor does the ancient axe, bronze-beaten, double-edged,
that cut him down in the foulest outrage.

487 She will come, with many feet and many hands,
she who lies hidden in dreadful ambush,
the bronze-footed Fury.
For a bed that was no bed, a wedding no wedding—
the lust for a blood-defiled marriage—
came upon those who had no right to it.
So I am sure
that never, never will this portent
come to us and spare
those who did the deed and those who helped.
Truly there are no prophecies for mortals
in dreadful dreams or in oracles
if this vision of the night does not come true.

503 Chariot race of Pelops long ago,
full of toil,
how sorrowful you were
for this land!
For ever since Myrtilus sank to sleep
in the sea,
hurled root and all
from the golden chariot
in wretched outrage,
never yet
has toil-laden outrage
left this house.[9]

SECOND EPISODE

Electra and Clytemnestra argue over Agamemnon's murder; the Tutor reports Orestes' death in a chariot race.

CLYTEMNESTRA 516 So you're roaming loose again, it seems, since Aegisthus isn't here. He always kept you from going outside and shaming your family, at least. But now that he's away,

9 Pelops won his bride by bribing the charioteer Myrtilus to wreck her father's chariot, then threw Myrtilus into the sea; his dying curse fell on Pelops' descendants.

you pay no attention to me. And yet you've told many people, many times, that I'm insolent and rule beyond what's just, outraging you and yours. I'm not guilty of outrage. I speak ill of you because I hear ill from you so often. [525] Your father—nothing else—is always your pretext: that he died at my hands. At my hands, yes; I know that well, I can't deny it. For Justice took him, not I alone, and you ought to have helped her, if you had any sense. Because this father of yours, whom you're forever mourning, alone of all the Greeks had the heart to sacrifice your sister to the gods—though he didn't suffer the pain I did; he only sowed her, while I gave birth to her. Well then, tell me this: for whose sake did he sacrifice her? For the Argives', will you say? [536] But they had no right to kill my daughter. Or will you say he killed my child for his brother Menelaus? Then wasn't he bound to pay me for it? Didn't Menelaus have two children, who should have died rather than she—children of the very father and mother this voyage was made for? Or did Hades have some special craving to feast on my children rather than hers? Or had that damned father lost all love for the children I bore him, but still felt it for Menelaus'? [546] Aren't these the marks of a thoughtless, wicked father? I think so, even if you disagree; and the dead girl would say so too, if she found a voice. For my part, then, I'm not troubled by what's been done. If you think I'm wrong-headed, get your own judgment straight before you blame others.

ELECTRA [552] This time, at least, you can't say I started something hurtful and then heard this from you. But if you'll allow me, I would speak properly on behalf of the dead man, and of my sister too.

CLYTEMNESTRA [556] Of course I allow it. If you always began your speeches like this, you wouldn't be so painful to listen to.

ELECTRA [558] Then here I go. You say you killed our father. What could be more shameful to say than that, whether it was just or not? But I'll tell you that you didn't kill him justly: you were dragged into it by the persuasion of a bad man, the one you live with now. Ask Artemis the huntress what she was punishing

when she held back all those winds at Aulis—or I'll tell you, since it isn't lawful to learn it from her. My father, as I've heard, was once amusing himself in the goddess's grove, and his footsteps startled a dappled, antlered stag. He shot it, and as he killed it he happened to let fall some boast.[10] 570 Angered at this, Leto's daughter held the Achaeans back, until my father should sacrifice his own daughter in return for the beast. That's how her sacrifice came about: there was no other release for the army, either homeward or to Troy. So under great pressure, resisting hard, he sacrificed her at last—and not for Menelaus' sake. But even if—I'll put your case too—he did it wanting to help him, should he have died at your hands for that? By what law? 580 Be careful that in laying down this law for people, you're not laying down grief and regret for yourself. If we are to kill one person in return for another, you'd be the first to die, if you got justice. No—watch that you're not putting forward a pretext that doesn't exist. Tell me, if you will, why you are now doing the most shameful thing of all: sleeping with the murderer you helped destroy my father with, and having children by him, while the children you had before, reverent and born of reverent parents, you've driven out. 591 How could I approve of that? Or will you say this too is retribution for your daughter? It's shameful if you do say it; it isn't right to marry your enemies for a daughter's sake. But no—one can't even give you advice, since you let your tongue loose in every way, saying we abuse our mother. I, for one, think of you as no less a slave-owner to us than a mother. I live a miserable life, always surrounded by a host of troubles from you and your partner. 601 And the other one, abroad, who barely escaped your hand, poor Orestes, is wearing out an unhappy life. You've often accused me of raising him to be your avenger—and I would, if I had the strength, be sure of that. For that matter, proclaim me to all the world as wicked, or loudmouthed, or full of shamelessness, whatever you like. If I have a talent for such things, I'm hardly a disgrace to your nature.

10 Aulis was the harbor in Boeotia where the Greek fleet gathered before sailing to Troy.

CHORUS 610 I see her breathing rage. But whether justice is on her side—I no longer see her giving any thought to that.

CLYTEMNESTRA 612 And what thought do I need to give to her, when she has outraged her own mother like this, and at her age? Don't you think she'd go to any length, without shame?

ELECTRA 616 You can be sure I am ashamed of it, even if you don't think so. I understand that what I do is out of season and unbecoming to me. But your hostility and your deeds force me to it. Shameful things are learned from shameful ones.

CLYTEMNESTRA 622 You shameless creature! So it's I, my words and my deeds, that make you say far too much?

ELECTRA 624 You're the one saying it, not I. You do the deeds, and deeds find their own words.

CLYTEMNESTRA 626 By our lady Artemis, you won't escape paying for this insolence once Aegisthus comes.

ELECTRA 628 You see? You fly into a rage, after giving me leave to say what I liked. You don't know how to listen.

CLYTEMNESTRA 630 Won't you let me sacrifice in peace, without your noise, now that I've let you say everything?

ELECTRA 632 I let you, I urge you: sacrifice. Don't blame my mouth. I won't say another word.

CLYTEMNESTRA 634 You there, attending me, lift up the offerings of every fruit, so that I may raise my prayers to this lord here, to free me from the fears I have now. Hear now, Phoebus, our protector, my hidden words. I'm not speaking among friends, and it isn't fitting to unfold everything to the light while she stands near me, or she'll spread empty rumors through the whole city with her spite and her ready tongue. So hear me this way; this is how I'll speak.[11] 644 The visions I saw this night, in double-edged dreams—if they've appeared for good, Lycean lord, grant that they come true; if for harm, turn them back on my enemies. And if anyone is plotting by trickery to throw me

11 An image of Apollo stands before the palace door.

out of the wealth I have, don't allow it. Let me always live like this, unharmed, ruling the house of Atreus and this scepter, sharing my days with the loved ones I live with now, prospering, and with those of my children who bear me no ill will or bitter grief. [655] Hear these things graciously, Lycean Apollo, and grant them to all of us, as we ask. All the rest, though I keep silent, I believe you know, since you are a god. It's natural that the children of Zeus see everything.

TUTOR [660] Ladies, I'm a stranger here. How can I find out for sure whether this is the house of Aegisthus, the king?

CHORUS [662] It is, stranger. You've guessed right yourself.

TUTOR [663] And am I right in guessing that this is his wife? She has a royal look.

CHORUS [665] Quite right. Here she is.

TUTOR [666] Greetings, my lady. I've come with pleasant news from a friend, for you and for Aegisthus too.

CLYTEMNESTRA [668] I welcome the omen of your words. But first of all I want to know who sent you.

TUTOR [670] Phanoteus the Phocian, on a matter of great importance.

CLYTEMNESTRA [671] What matter, stranger? Tell me. Coming from a friend, I'm sure you'll bring friendly words.

TUTOR [673] Orestes is dead. That's all of it, in a word.

ELECTRA [674] Oh, no, I'm wretched—this day has destroyed me.

CLYTEMNESTRA [675] What are you saying, stranger, what? Don't listen to her.

TUTOR [676] Orestes is dead—I say it now, as I said it before.

ELECTRA [677] I'm lost, I'm wretched, I'm nothing anymore.

CLYTEMNESTRA [678] You mind your own business. And you, stranger, tell me the truth: how did he die?

TUTOR [680] That's what I was sent for, and I'll tell you everything. He went to the great festival that is the glory of Greece, for the

contests at Delphi. When he heard the herald's ringing voice announce the footrace, which was the first event, he stepped in, radiant, the wonder of everyone there. He ran the course from start to finish and came away with victory, the prize all men honor. To tell you a little out of so much: I've never known a man to match his feats and triumphs. 690 Just know this one thing: in every event the judges announced, he carried off the victor's prize, and was hailed as blessed, proclaimed an Argive, by name Orestes, son of Agamemnon, who once mustered the famous army of Greece. So much for that. But when some god means harm, not even a strong man can escape. On another day, at sunrise, when the swift contest of the horses was held, he entered along with many charioteers. 701 One was an Achaean, one from Sparta, two were Libyans, masters of yoked chariots; and he among them, with Thessalian mares, was the fifth. Sixth came one from Aetolia with chestnut colts; seventh, a man from Magnesia; eighth, with white horses, an Aenianian by birth; ninth, one from Athens, the city the gods built; and another, a Boeotian, made the tenth chariot. 709 They took their places where the appointed judges had drawn their lots and set the chariots in line, and at the blast of the bronze trumpet they shot away. All at once they shouted to their horses and shook the reins in their hands. The whole course filled with the clatter of rattling chariots; the dust flew up. Bunched together, they spared no goad, each trying to get past the others' wheel hubs and snorting horses. All around, the horses' breath fell foaming on the drivers' backs and the turning wheels. 720 He kept close in under the turning post every time, grazing it with his hub, and giving the right-hand trace horse its head, he held back the inside one. At first all the chariots stayed upright. But then the Aenianian's hard-mouthed colts bolted, and as they came round from the turn, finishing the sixth lap and starting the seventh, they smashed head-on into the Barcaean chariot. From that one mishap, one driver crashed into another and went down, and

the whole plain of Crisa was filled with the shipwreck of chariots.[12]

731 The skilled driver from Athens saw it, pulled out to the side and reined in, letting the surge of horses churning in the middle go by. Orestes was driving last, holding his colts back, trusting to the finish. But when he saw the Athenian was the only one left, he sent a shrill cry ringing through his swift colts' ears and gave chase. The two of them drove with their teams level, first one, then the other, pushing his head out in front. 741 Through all the other laps the poor boy had stood safe and upright in an upright chariot. Then, slackening his left rein as his horse made the turn, he struck the edge of the post without realizing it. He snapped the axle at the hub and was thrown over the chariot rail, tangled in the leather reins; and as he fell to the ground, his colts scattered across the middle of the track. 749 When the crowd saw him thrown from the chariot, they cried out for the young man—after such feats, what a disaster was his lot—dragged along the ground, now flinging his legs up to the sky, until the charioteers, barely stopping his runaway horses, cut him loose, so bloody that none of his own people, had they seen it, would have known his wretched body. They burned him on a pyre at once, and men of Phocis, chosen for the task, are bringing that great body, now a little bronze urn of pitiful ashes, so that he may have his share of a grave in his father's land. 761 That's how it was. Painful to hear told; but for those of us who saw it, the worst of all the disasters I have ever seen.

CHORUS 764 Ah, ah. So the whole house of our masters of old has been destroyed, it seems, root and all.

CLYTEMNESTRA 766 Zeus, what am I to call this? Good fortune? Or terrible, but to my profit? It's a painful thing, to save my life through my own misfortunes.

TUTOR 769 Why are you so downcast at this news, my lady?

12 Barca was a Greek city in Libya; Crisa is the plain below Delphi where the chariot races were run.

CLYTEMNESTRA [770] Giving birth is a strange and powerful thing. Even when a mother is badly treated, she can't come to hate the children she bore.

TUTOR [772] Then it seems I've come for nothing.

CLYTEMNESTRA [773] No, not for nothing. How could you call it for nothing, when you've come to me with sure proof of his death? He was born of my own life, yet he broke away from my breast and my care and lived in exile in a foreign land. Once he'd left this country he never saw me again. He accused me of his father's murder and threatened to do terrible things. [780] So neither by night nor by day could sweet sleep cover me. Each passing hour kept me living like a woman about to die. But now —since today I'm free of fear, both of her and of him; she was the greater harm, living under my roof, forever drinking the undiluted blood of my life—now, I think, as far as her threats go, I'll pass my days in peace.

ELECTRA [788] Oh, no, poor me! Now I can truly wail over your fate, Orestes, when even in this state you're insulted by this mother of yours. Isn't that fine?

CLYTEMNESTRA [791] Not for you. But for him, just as he is, it's fine.

ELECTRA [792] Hear her, Nemesis of the one who's just died![13]

CLYTEMNESTRA [793] She's heard what she should, and she's settled it well.

ELECTRA [794] Go on, gloat. Fortune happens to be on your side now.

CLYTEMNESTRA [795] So Orestes and you won't be putting a stop to it, will you?

ELECTRA [796] We're the ones who've been stopped—far from stopping you.

13 Nemesis is the goddess of retribution, who punishes arrogance and wrongs done to the dead.

CLYTEMNESTRA [797] Stranger, you'd deserve a rich reward if you've put a stop to her endless shouting.

TUTOR [799] Then I may as well go, if all is well.

CLYTEMNESTRA [800] Not at all. That would be treatment unworthy of me, and of the friend who sent you on your way. No, come inside. Leave her out here to shout about her own troubles and her loved ones'.

ELECTRA [804] Did she look to you like a woman in pain and anguish, the wretch, weeping terribly and wailing over her son who's died like this? No—she's gone off laughing. Oh, poor me. Orestes, my dearest, how you've destroyed me by dying! You've gone, and torn from my heart the only hopes I still had left: that someday you'd come back alive to avenge our father, and me in my misery. Where am I to go now? [813] I'm alone, robbed of you and of my father. Now I must be a slave again, among the people I hate most in the world, my father's murderers. Isn't that fine for me? No—from now on I will not go in and live with them. I'll throw myself down here by the gate, with no one to love me, and let my life wither away. So if any of those inside resent it, let them kill me. It will be a kindness if they kill me, and a pain if I live. I have no desire for life.

SECOND STASIMON

Electra and the chorus lament together; she rejects every hope now that Orestes is dead.

CHORUS

[823] Where are the thunderbolts of Zeus,
where is the blazing Sun,
if they look on this
and calmly keep it hidden?

ELECTRA [826] Ah, ah! Oh, no!

CHORUS [827] Child, why are you weeping?

ELECTRA [828] Ah!

CHORUS 830 Don't cry out anything too bold.

ELECTRA 831 You'll destroy me.

CHORUS 832 How?

ELECTRA

833 If you hold out hope
for those who have plainly gone
down to Hades,
you'll trample all the harder
on me as I waste away.

CHORUS

836 I know that lord Amphiaraus
was hidden away by a woman's
gold-linked snare; and now beneath the earth—[14]

ELECTRA 840 Ah, ah! Oh!

CHORUS 841 —he reigns, his soul alive and whole.

ELECTRA 842 Ah!

CHORUS 843 Ah, yes. For that deadly woman—

ELECTRA 844 —was struck down.

CHORUS 845 Yes.

ELECTRA

846 I know, I know. An avenger came forward
for the one they mourned.
But I have no one left:
the one I still had
is gone, snatched away.

CHORUS 849 Poor girl, your lot is cruel.

14 Amphiaraus, a seer, was betrayed by his wife Eriphyle for a golden necklace and swallowed by the earth at Thebes; he lived on below as an oracle, and their son Alcmaeon avenged him.

ELECTRA

I know it, too well I know it,
in a life swept along, month after month,
by a flood of dreadful, hateful things.

CHORUS We have seen what you lament.

ELECTRA Then don't try any more / to lead me on, to where no—

CHORUS What do you mean?

ELECTRA —no comfort is left from hopes / in a nobly born brother of my own blood.

CHORUS Death is the lot of every mortal.

ELECTRA

What, and to meet it like that,
like him, poor man, in a race of pounding hooves,
caught in the cut reins dragging him?

CHORUS A cruel ruin past all foreseeing.

ELECTRA Of course it was—if, a stranger far from home, / with no hands of mine to tend him—

CHORUS Oh, no!

ELECTRA

—he lies hidden away,
given no burial
and no wailing from us.

THIRD EPISODE

Chrysothemis reports a lock of hair on the tomb; Electra resolves to kill Aegisthus herself.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Dearest, I'm so happy I've come running here, all decorum forgotten. I bring you joy, and relief from the troubles you had before and groaned over.

ELECTRA [875] And where would you find help for my sorrows, when there's no cure for them in sight?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [877] Orestes is here with us—take it from me—as plainly as you see me.

ELECTRA [879] Have you gone mad, you poor thing? Are you laughing at your own troubles and at mine?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [881] By our father's hearth, I'm not saying it to mock you. I'm telling you he's here with us.

ELECTRA [883] Oh, poor me. Who told you this story, that you believe it so completely?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [885] I believe it on my own evidence, no one else's. I saw clear signs.

ELECTRA [887] What proof have you got, poor thing? What did you see that's set you burning with this fever no one can cure?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [889] For the gods' sake, listen. Then, once you've heard me out, you can call me sensible or foolish.

ELECTRA [891] Well, go on, if you take any pleasure in talking.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [892] All right, I'll tell you everything I saw. When I came to our father's ancient tomb, I saw streams of milk freshly poured from the top of the mound, and our father's resting place ringed all round with every kind of flower there is. I was amazed when I saw it, and I looked around in case someone was close by. When I saw the whole place was quiet, I crept nearer the tomb. And at the edge of the mound I saw a lock of hair, newly cut. The moment I saw it—poor me—a familiar image struck my soul: I was looking at a token of Orestes, dearest of all people on earth. [905] I picked it up in my hands, and I kept from any ill-omened word, but at once my eyes filled with tears of joy. And now, just as then, I'm certain this offering came from no one but him. Who else would care about it, apart from you and me? And I didn't do it, I know that, and neither did you—how could you? You can't even leave this house to go to the gods without paying for it in tears. And as for our mother, it's not her way to do things like that, and if she did, she wouldn't have gone

unnoticed. [915] No, these offerings at the tomb are Orestes'. So cheer up, dear. The same god doesn't always stand beside the same people. Ours was a hateful one before; but today, perhaps, will set the seal on many good things.

ELECTRA [920] Ah—how I've pitied your foolishness all along!

CHRYSOTHEMIS [921] What's wrong? Isn't this something to be glad about?

ELECTRA [922] You don't know where in the world you're going, or where in your mind.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [923] How could I not know what I saw with my own eyes?

ELECTRA [924] He's dead, poor thing. Any rescue you hoped for from him is gone. Don't look to him.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [926] Oh, no, poor me! Who told you that?

ELECTRA [927] A man who was right there when he died.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [928] And where is he? I can hardly believe it.

ELECTRA [929] In the house—a welcome guest, and far from unwelcome to Mother.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [930] Oh, no, poor me! Then whose were all those offerings at our father's tomb?

ELECTRA [932] I'd say most likely someone put them there as memorials to Orestes, now that he's dead.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [934] How unlucky I am! And I came rushing here so happily with my news, not knowing what ruin we were in. And now that I'm here, I find the troubles we had before, and new ones too.

ELECTRA [938] That's how things stand for you. But if you listen to me, you'll lift the weight of the misery we're in now.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [940] What, am I going to raise the dead?

ELECTRA [941] That's not what I meant. I'm not such a fool.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [942] Then what are you asking that I'm able to do?

ELECTRA 943 To have the courage to do what I'm going to urge.

CHRYSOTHEMIS 944 Well, if there's any good in it, I won't refuse.

ELECTRA 945 Look—nothing succeeds without hard work.

CHRYSOTHEMIS 946 I see. I'll help with all the strength I have.

ELECTRA 947 Then listen to what I've decided to do. You know yourself, I think, that we have no loved ones by our side. Hades has taken them and robbed us, and we two are left alone. As long as I still heard that our brother was alive and thriving, I had hopes that he'd come someday to avenge our father's murder. But now that he's gone, I'm looking to you. Don't shrink from killing, with me, your sister, the man whose own hand murdered our father—Aegisthus. There's no reason for me to hide anything from you anymore. 958 How long will you sit back and wait? What hope still standing is left for you to look to? You have every reason to groan at being robbed of our father's wealth, and every reason to grieve at growing old, all this time, unmarried, with no wedding song. And don't go hoping you'll ever have those things. Aegisthus isn't so foolish as to let children of yours or mine ever be born—that would mean certain disaster for him. But if you follow my plan, first you'll win praise for your reverence from our dead father below, and from our brother too. 970 Then you'll be called free from now on, just as you were born, and you'll find a marriage worthy of you; everyone likes to look to what's noble. And don't you see how much glory you'll win for yourself and for me if you do what I say? What citizen or stranger who sees us won't greet us with praise like this: "Look at these two sisters, friends. They saved their father's house. When their enemies stood firm in power, they gave no thought to their own lives and took the killing into their hands. These two we should love, these two we should all revere; at festivals and whenever the whole city gathers, all of us should honor these two for their courage." 984 That's what everyone will say about us, so that in life and in death our fame will never fail. Please, dear, do as I say. Take up our father's cause, share the struggle with our brother, set me free from these

troubles, and set yourself free. Know this: for those born noble, to live shamefully is a shame.

CHORUS [990] In matters like these, forethought is an ally to the one who speaks and the one who listens.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [992] And before she said a word, women, if she'd had any sense she'd have held on to caution—which she isn't doing. What in the world are you looking to, that you arm yourself with such daring and call on me to help you? Don't you see? You were born a woman, not a man, and your hand is weaker than your enemies'. Their fortune flourishes day by day, while ours is ebbing away and coming to nothing. [1001] So who could plot to take down a man like that and get clear of ruin unharmed? Watch out, or, faring badly as we are, we'll bring worse trouble on ourselves if anyone hears what you've been saying. It does us no good, no help at all, to win a fine name and then die in disgrace. Death isn't the worst thing. The worst is when someone longs to die and can't even have that. No, I beg you, before we're utterly destroyed and our family wiped out, hold back your anger. I'll keep what you've said unspoken and unfulfilled. As for you, have some sense—at last, after all this time—and since you have no strength, give way to those in power.

CHORUS [1015] Listen to her. There's no gain people can win that's better than forethought and a wise mind.

ELECTRA [1017] You've said nothing I didn't expect. I knew perfectly well you'd throw away what I offered. Well then, I must do this deed with my own hand, alone. I won't leave it undone.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1021] Ah! I wish you'd had this kind of resolve when our father was being killed. You'd have accomplished everything.

ELECTRA [1023] I had the nature then. It was my mind that was weaker.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1024] Then try to keep your mind like that for the rest of your life.

ELECTRA [1025] You're lecturing me like this because you won't help.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1026] Yes—whoever tries such things is likely to come to grief.

ELECTRA [1027] I envy your good sense; I hate your cowardice.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1028] I'll put up with hearing that—as I will when you praise me.

ELECTRA [1029] Well, that you'll never get from me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1030] There's a long time ahead to judge that.

ELECTRA [1031] Go away. There's no help in you.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1032] There is. But there's no learning in you.

ELECTRA [1033] Go and tell all this to your mother.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1034] No—I don't hate you that much.

ELECTRA [1035] Then at least understand what dishonor you're leading me into.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1036] Not dishonor. I'm looking out for you.

ELECTRA [1037] So I'm supposed to follow your idea of what's just?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1038] When you're thinking straight, then you can lead us both.

ELECTRA [1039] It's terrible to speak so well and be so wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1040] You've described exactly the fault you're wedded to.

ELECTRA [1041] What? Don't you think what I'm saying is just?

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1042] There are times when even justice does harm.

ELECTRA [1043] I don't want to live by those laws.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1044] Well, if you do this, you'll come round to praising me.

ELECTRA [1045] Oh, I'll do it, and you won't scare me off.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1046] Do you really mean it? You won't think again?

ELECTRA [1047] Nothing is more hateful than a bad plan.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1048] You don't seem to take in a word I say.

ELECTRA [1049] I made up my mind long ago, not just now.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1050] Then I'll go. You can't bring yourself to approve of my words, and I can't approve of your ways.

ELECTRA [1052] Go on in. I'll never follow you—not even if you want it desperately. It's sheer folly to chase after empty things.

CHRYSOTHEMIS [1055] Well, if you think you're being sensible, go on thinking that way. When you're already deep in trouble, you'll praise my words.

THIRD STASIMON

The chorus praise Electra's loyalty to her father and pray that she will triumph.

CHORUS

[1060] Why, when we see the birds above,
so wise, taking care to feed
those who gave them life
and those from whom they've had good,
do we not pay that debt in equal measure?
But by the lightning of Zeus
and Themis enthroned in heaven,
not for long will they go unpunished.
Voice that travels down to mortals under the earth,
cry out for me a pitiful cry
to the house of Atreus below,
carrying joyless news
of disgrace:[15]

15 Themis is the goddess of right and established order, who sits beside Zeus.

that their house is sick now,
and between their children the strife of two
is no longer softened
in a loving life together.
Betrayed, alone, Electra
is tossed on the storm,
forever mourning her father, poor girl,
like the nightingale who grieves without end,
with no thought for death,
ready to leave the light behind,
if only she can bring down the double Fury.
Who could be born so worthy of her father?[16]

For no one who is noble
would choose to shame his good name
by living a base life, without a name,
child, my child.
So you too have chosen
a life of endless tears, shared with your own,
taking up arms against what is shameful,
to win two prizes in one word:
to be called wise, and the best of daughters.

May you live as high above your enemies
in power and wealth
as you now live beneath their hand.
For I have found you
walking in no happy fortune,
and yet in the greatest laws
that ever grew among us
winning the highest prize
through your reverence toward Zeus.

16 The "double Fury" is the pair of avenging spirits on whom Electra's hatred is fixed: Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

FOURTH EPISODE

Orestes hands Electra the urn; after her lament he reveals himself, and the Tutor hurries them inside.

ORESTES 1097 Tell me, women: were we given the right directions? Is this the right road to where we want to go?

CHORUS 1100 What are you looking for? What brings you here?

ORESTES 1101 I've been asking for a while now where Aegisthus lives.

CHORUS 1102 Well, you've come to the right place, and whoever directed you can't be faulted.

ORESTES 1103 Then which of you would tell the people inside that we've come, the two of us together, a visit they've been longing for?

CHORUS 1105 She will, if the announcement should come from the nearest of kin.

ORESTES 1106 Go in, then, lady, and let them know that some men from Phocis are looking for Aegisthus—

ELECTRA 1108 Oh, no, no. You're not bringing clear proof of the rumor we heard, are you?

ORESTES 1110 I don't know about your rumor. But old Strophius told me to bring news about Orestes.[17]

ELECTRA 1112 What is it, stranger? Fear is creeping over me.

ORESTES 1113 He is dead. We're bringing the little that's left of him in a small urn, as you can see.

ELECTRA 1115 Oh, how wretched I am! So that's it, plain to see now: the burden there in your hands, it seems.

ORESTES 1117 If you weep at all for what has happened to Orestes, know that this vessel holds his body.

17 Strophius, king of Phocis, is the ally with whom the young Orestes was sent to be raised.

ELECTRA [1119] Stranger, for the gods' sake, if this urn really holds him, let me take it in my hands, so that I can weep and mourn with these ashes for myself and for our whole house together.

ORESTES [1123] Bring it to her, whoever she is, and give it to her. She isn't asking for it as someone who hated him. She must be one of his loved ones, or his own flesh and blood.

ELECTRA [1126] You are all that's left to remember the soul of Orestes by, dearest of all people to me. How far from the hopes I sent you out with is the way I've received you back! Now I hold you in my hands, and you are nothing. But you were shining, my boy, when I sent you from this house. I wish I had left this life before I stole you away with these hands, rescued you from murder, and sent you off to a foreign land. Then you would have died that day and lain here, sharing your father's tomb. [1136] But as it is, you died miserably, far from home, an exile in another land, without your sister. And I, unhappy as I am, didn't wash you and lay you out with loving hands, or gather from the blazing fire, as was only right, that pitiful weight. No: tended by strangers' hands, poor boy, you come back to me a little weight in a little urn. Oh, how wretched I am! All my nursing long ago, gone for nothing, all the care I gave you so often, a labor that was sweet. You were never your mother's darling more than mine. It wasn't the servants of the house who nursed you. I did. And it was always me you called "sister." [1149] Now all of that has vanished in a single day, dead with you. You've swept everything up like a whirlwind and gone. Our father is gone. I am dead along with you. You yourself are dead and gone. Our enemies are laughing. Our mother, who is no mother, is mad with joy. So often you sent me secret word that you would come yourself to take revenge on her. But your unlucky fate, and mine, has snatched all that away, and sent you back to me like this: instead of the form I loved, ashes and a useless shadow.

[1160] Oh, no, no. Pitiful body. Ah, ah. Oh, sent on the most terrible of journeys, oh, no, no, my dearest, how you have destroyed me! Yes, you have destroyed me, my own dear brother. So

take me into this house of yours, nothing into nothing, so that I may live with you below for the rest of time. When you were up here, I shared everything equally with you, and now I long to die and not be shut out of your grave. For I don't see the dead in any pain.

CHORUS 1171 Remember, Electra, your father was mortal, and Orestes was mortal. So don't grieve too much. This is a debt all of us have to pay.

ORESTES 1174 Ah, ah. What shall I say? Where can I turn, when I have no words? I can't control my tongue any longer.

ELECTRA 1176 What has hurt you? Why do you say that?

ORESTES 1177 Is this you, the famous Electra I see?

ELECTRA 1178 It is, and in a very sorry state.

ORESTES 1179 Oh, no. Then what a wretched misfortune this is.

ELECTRA 1180 Surely, stranger, you're not grieving like this over me?

ORESTES 1181 Oh, body so shamefully, so godlessly wasted!

ELECTRA 1182 Those ill-omened words are about me, stranger, and no one else.

ORESTES 1183 Ah, the life you've had, unmarried and ill-fated—

ELECTRA 1184 Why ever do you look at me like that, stranger, and groan?

ORESTES 1185 So I knew nothing of my own troubles after all.

ELECTRA 1186 What did we say that made you see that?

ORESTES 1187 Seeing you so marked by so many sufferings.

ELECTRA 1188 And yet you're seeing only a few of my troubles.

ORESTES 1189 How could there be any more hateful to see than these?

ELECTRA 1190 Because I live under the same roof as the murderers—

ORESTES 1191 Whose murderers? What evil are you hinting at?

ELECTRA 1192 My father's. And on top of that I'm their slave, by force.

ORESTES 1193 Who on earth forces you into this?

ELECTRA 1194 She's called my mother. She's nothing like a mother.

ORESTES 1195 Doing what? Using her hands, or making your life a misery?

ELECTRA 1196 Her hands, and misery, and every kind of cruelty.

ORESTES 1197 And there's no one here to help you, no one to stop it?

ELECTRA 1198 No. The one I had, you've set before me as ashes.

ORESTES 1199 Poor girl, how I've pitied you, watching you all this while.

ELECTRA 1200 Then you should know you're the only person who has ever pitied me.

ORESTES 1201 Because I'm the only one who has come here suffering the same pain as you.

ELECTRA 1202 You're not some relative of ours, come from somewhere?

ORESTES 1203 I'd tell you, if these women here are on our side.

ELECTRA 1204 They are on our side. You'll be speaking to women you can trust.

ORESTES 1205 Let go of this urn now, so you can learn the whole truth.

ELECTRA 1206 No, by the gods, don't do this to me, stranger!

ORESTES 1207 Do as I say and you'll never go wrong.

ELECTRA 1208 No, I beg you by your beard, don't take away what I love most!

ORESTES 1209 I won't let you keep it.

ELECTRA Oh, Orestes, how wretched I am for you, if I'm to be robbed of burying you!

ORESTES [1211] Hush, no words of ill omen. You have no right to mourn.

ELECTRA [1212] How have I no right to mourn my dead brother?

ORESTES [1213] It isn't proper for you to speak of him like that.

ELECTRA [1214] Have I so little claim on the dead?

ORESTES [1215] You have a claim on everyone. But this isn't yours.

ELECTRA [1216] Not if it's Orestes' body I'm holding?

ORESTES [1217] It isn't Orestes', except as a story has dressed it up.

ELECTRA [1218] Then where is that poor boy's grave?

ORESTES [1219] There is none. The living have no grave.

ELECTRA [1220] What did you say, child?

ORESTES Nothing I'm saying is a lie.

ELECTRA [1221] He's alive, then?

ORESTES If I am.

ELECTRA [1222] You—you're him?

ORESTES Look at this seal of our father's, and see for yourself whether I'm telling the truth.[18]

ELECTRA [1224] Oh, dearest light!

ORESTES Dearest. I agree.

ELECTRA [1225] That voice—you've come?

ORESTES No need to hear it from anyone else now.

ELECTRA [1226] Do I have you in my arms?

ORESTES And may you always have me from now on.

ELECTRA [1227] My dearest friends, women of this city, look: here is Orestes, dead by a trick, and now by a trick saved!

CHORUS [1230] We see him, child, and at this turn of fortune a tear of joy runs from my eyes.

18 A signet ring, used to seal documents and property, which identified its owner and could pass from father to son.

ELECTRA

Oh, son,
son of the man I loved most,
you've come at last,
you've found, you've come, you've seen the ones you longed for.

ORESTES We're here. But keep quiet and wait.

ELECTRA What's wrong?

ORESTES Better to keep quiet, in case someone inside hears.

ELECTRA

No, by Artemis, forever untamed,
I'll never think it worth my fear,
that useless burden indoors,
those women, always there.

ORESTES Remember, though, that Ares lives in women too. You know that well enough, I think, from experience.

ELECTRA

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, no, no!
You have touched our sorrow,
open as a cloudless sky, never to be undone,
never to be forgotten,
the evil that is ours.

ORESTES I know all that, child. But when the moment calls for it, that's when we must remember those deeds.

ELECTRA

Every moment,
every moment that comes
would be the right one to speak of this, and justly,
for only now, and barely, is my mouth set free.

ORESTES I agree. So take care to keep it that way.

ELECTRA By doing what?

ORESTES 1259 When it isn't the moment, don't choose to talk at length.

ELECTRA

Now that you have appeared,
who could rightly trade
words for silence like this?
For now I have seen you,
beyond words, beyond hope.

ORESTES 1264 You saw me when the gods urged me to come ...

ELECTRA

You speak of a joy
greater still than the one before,
if a god has brought you
to our house:
I count it the work of heaven.

ORESTES 1271 On the one hand I hate to hold back your joy. On the other I'm afraid you're being carried away by pleasure.

ELECTRA

Oh, you who after so long
have chosen the dearest road
and come to me like this,
now that you see me so full of suffering, do not—

ORESTES 1276 Do not what?

ELECTRA

—do not rob me,
do not make me let go
of the joy of your face.

ORESTES 1279 I'd be very angry if I saw anyone else try.

ELECTRA 1280 You agree?

ORESTES 1281 Of course.

ELECTRA

My friends, I heard a voice
I would never have hoped to hear.
Hearing it, I could not have held back what I felt,
without a word, without a cry,
miserable as I am. But now I have you.
You have come to me
with the face I love most,
the face I could never forget, even in my sorrows.

ORESTES Leave out the words we don't need. Don't tell me how cruel our mother is, or how Aegisthus is draining our father's wealth from the house, ladling some out, pouring some away, scattering the rest for nothing. Talking would cost you the moment we have. Tell me what fits the present moment: where we should show ourselves or hide on this mission of ours, to stop our enemies' laughter. And see to it that our mother doesn't read it in your beaming face when the two of us go into the house. Groan, as if over the ruin that was falsely reported. When we've succeeded, then there'll be time to rejoice and laugh freely.

ELECTRA Brother, whatever pleases you will please me too. The joys I have, I got from you; they aren't my own. I wouldn't accept a great gain for myself if it meant hurting you even a little. That would be a poor way to serve the power that is with us now. You know how things stand here, of course: you've heard that Aegisthus isn't at home, but our mother is in the house. Don't ever fear that she'll see my face lit up with a smile. An old hatred has sunk deep into me, and now that I've seen you, I'll never stop weeping for joy. How could I stop, when on this one journey I've seen you both dead and alive? You've done things to me I never could have foreseen. If my father came back to me alive, I wouldn't think it a portent any more; I'd believe my eyes. So since you've come to us by such a road, take the lead yourself, as your heart tells you. Alone, I wouldn't have

failed in one of two things: either I would have saved myself nobly, or nobly died.

ORESTES [1322] Quiet, I tell you. I hear someone inside coming out.

ELECTRA [1323] Go in, strangers, all the more since what you bring is something no one would turn away from the house, and no one would be glad to receive.

TUTOR [1326] You utter fools, out of your wits! Don't you care about your lives any more? Or were you born without any sense, that you don't see you're not on the edge of the worst danger but right in the middle of it? If I hadn't been standing guard at this door all this time, your plans would have been inside the house before your bodies. As it is, I've taken care to prevent that. Now have done with long speeches and these endless shouts of joy, and go inside. In things like this, delay is dangerous; the moment has come to get it over with.

ORESTES [1339] So how do things stand for me when I go in?

TUTOR [1340] Well. You have this in your favor: nobody will know you.

ORESTES [1341] You've reported me dead, it seems.

TUTOR [1342] Here, believe me, you're one of the dead in Hades.

ORESTES [1343] Are they glad of it, then? What are they saying?

TUTOR [1344] I'll tell you when it's over. As things stand, all is well with them, even what isn't well.

ELECTRA [1346] Who is this, brother? For the gods' sake, tell me.

ORESTES [1347] Don't you understand?

ELECTRA I can't even guess.

ORESTES [1348] Don't you know whose hands you once put me into?

ELECTRA [1349] Whose? What are you saying?

ORESTES The man whose hands, thanks to your foresight, smuggled me away to the land of Phocis.

ELECTRA 1351 Is this him, the one man out of many I found faithful when our father was murdered?

ORESTES 1353 That's him. Don't press me with more questions.

ELECTRA 1354 Oh, dearest light! The only savior of Agamemnon's house, how did you come? Are you really the one who saved him and me from so much suffering? Oh, dearest hands! And feet that have done such sweet service! How could you be with me so long and keep yourself hidden, and not show yourself, but destroy me with words, when you had deeds that were sweetest of all to me? Welcome, Father, for it's my father I seem to see. Welcome. And know that in a single day I've hated you and loved you more than anyone alive.

TUTOR 1364 I think that's enough. As for the story of what happened in between, many nights and as many days are coming round that will make it all clear to you, Electra. But I tell you two, standing here: now is the time to act. Now Clytemnestra is alone. Now there's no man inside. If you hold back, reckon that you'll be fighting these and others, more of them and cleverer.

ORESTES 1372 Pylades, this is no longer a job for long speeches. We must go in as fast as we can, once we've bowed to the images of my father's gods, all who dwell here at the gates.

ELECTRA 1376 Lord Apollo, hear them graciously, and hear me too, who have so often stood before you with a begging hand, offering what I had. Now, Lycean Apollo, with what I have, I ask you, I fall before you, I beg you: be our willing helper in these plans, and show mankind what wages the gods pay for irreverence.

FOURTH STASIMON

The chorus sing of the avengers entering the house, guided by Hermes.

CHORUS

1384 Look where Ares moves forward,
breathing blood that no one can fight.
Just now they have passed under the roof of the house,
the hounds no one escapes,
hunting down wicked crimes.
So the dream my mind has held hanging
will not wait long now.

1391 For the champion of the dead below
is led with stealthy step into the house,
into his father's seat of ancient wealth,
freshly whetted bloodshed in his hands.
And Maia's son, Hermes, leads him on,
hiding the trick in darkness,
right to the end, and waits no longer.[19]

EXODOS

Orestes kills Clytemnestra inside, then traps Aegisthus and leads him in to die.

ELECTRA 1397 My dearest friends, the men will finish the deed any moment. Just wait in silence.

CHORUS 1399 How so? What are they doing now?

ELECTRA 1400 She's dressing the urn for burial, and the two of them are standing close beside her.

CHORUS 1402 And you—why have you rushed out?

ELECTRA To keep watch, so Aegisthus doesn't get in without our knowing.

19 Hermes, son of Maia, is the god of stealth and trickery, and the guide of the dead.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1404] Ah, ah! Oh, house, empty of loved ones and full of killers!

ELECTRA [1406] Someone's crying out inside. Don't you hear, my friends?

CHORUS [1407] I heard what should never be heard, / poor me, and I shudder.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1408] Oh, no, no! Aegisthus, where are you?

ELECTRA [1409] Listen, someone's shouting again.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1410] My child, my child, have pity on your mother!

ELECTRA [1411] But you had no pity for him, or for the father who fathered him.

CHORUS

[1413] City! Unhappy race! Now
the doom that hounded you day after day
is dying, dying.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1415] Oh, no, I'm struck!

ELECTRA [1416] Strike twice, if you have the strength!

CLYTEMNESTRA [1417] Oh, no, again!

ELECTRA [1418] If only Aegisthus were getting it too!

CHORUS

[1419] The curses are at work.
Those who lie beneath the earth are alive.
For the long dead are drawing off
the killers' blood
in a stream that flows back on them.

[1422] And here they are. His red hand drips with sacrifice to Ares, and I can't find fault.

ELECTRA [1424] Orestes, how did it go?

ORESTES In the house, all is well, if Apollo prophesied well.

ELECTRA [1426] Is she dead, the wretched woman?

ORESTES [1427] Don't be afraid any more that your mother's arrogance will ever dishonor you.

CHORUS [1429] Stop! I can see Aegisthus, right there in plain sight.

ELECTRA [1430] Back inside, both of you!

ORESTES [1431] Where do you see the man?

ELECTRA [1432] He's on his way to us from the outskirts of town, full of glee ...

CHORUS

[1434] Into the doorway, as fast as you can,
now! You handled the first one well;
now do it again.

ORESTES [1436] Don't worry. We'll finish it.

ELECTRA [1437] Then hurry where you mean to go.

ORESTES [1438] I'm already gone.

ELECTRA I'll take care of things here.

CHORUS

[1439] It would help to murmur a few words
gently into this man's ear,
so he rushes blindly
into his hidden contest with justice.

AEGISTHUS [1442] Which of you knows where the strangers from Phocis are? They say they've brought us word that Orestes lost his life, wrecked among the horses. You, I'm asking you, yes, you, who used to be so bold. I think it matters most to you, and you'd know best what to tell me.

ELECTRA [1448] I know. How could I not? Otherwise I'd be a stranger to what has happened to the one I love most.

AEGISTHUS [1450] So where would the strangers be? Tell me.

ELECTRA [1451] Inside. They've found a kind hostess.

AEGISTHUS [1452] And did they really report that he's dead?

ELECTRA [1453] No, they've shown him too, not just in words.

AEGISTHUS [1454] Then he's here, so I can see for myself?

ELECTRA [1455] He's here all right, and not a sight to envy.

AEGISTHUS [1456] You've given me a great deal of joy. That's not like you.

ELECTRA [1457] Enjoy it, if this turns out to be a joy for you.

AEGISTHUS [1458] Silence! I order the doors thrown open for all the Mycenaeans and Argives to see. If any of them was once lifted up by empty hopes in this man, let him see his corpse now and take my bridle, and not wait to meet me as his punisher and have sense forced into him.

ELECTRA [1464] My part is done already. Time has taught me sense, enough to go along with those who are stronger.

AEGISTHUS [1466] Zeus! I see a sight that has not come about without the gods' envy. But if that word calls down retribution, I don't say it. Take the whole covering from the face, so that our kinsman may have his lament from me as well.

ORESTES [1470] Lift it yourself. It isn't for me but for you to look at this and speak to it lovingly.

AEGISTHUS [1472] Good advice; I'll take it. And you, if Clytemnestra is anywhere in the house, call her for me.

ORESTES [1474] She's right beside you. Don't look anywhere else.

AEGISTHUS [1475] Oh, no, what am I looking at?

ORESTES [1476] Who frightens you? Who is it you don't recognize?

AEGISTHUS [1477] Whose nets have I fallen into, poor wretch that I am?

ORESTES [1478] Didn't you realize long ago that you've been talking to the living as if they were dead?

AEGISTHUS [1480] Oh, no, I understand you. There's no way this can be anyone but Orestes speaking to me.

ORESTES [1482] Such a fine prophet, and you were wrong so long.

AEGISTHUS [1483] Then I'm finished, wretch that I am. But let me say just a few words.

ELECTRA [1484] Don't let him say another word, brother, for the gods' sake, or drag out the talk. When men are steeped in wrongdoing, what does a man about to die gain from a little time? Kill him as fast as you can, and once he's dead, throw him out to such buriers as he deserves, out of our sight. That alone could set me free from all I've suffered so long.

ORESTES [1491] Get inside, quickly. This contest isn't about words now. It's about your life.

AEGISTHUS [1493] Why take me into the house? If this deed is so fine, why does it need darkness? Why aren't you ready to kill me here?

ORESTES [1495] Don't give orders. Go where you killed my father, so you can die in the same place.

AEGISTHUS [1497] Must this house really witness all the troubles of the line of Pelops, now and to come?

ORESTES [1499] Yours, at any rate. In that I'm a first-rate prophet for you.

AEGISTHUS [1500] That skill you boast of isn't one you got from your father.

ORESTES [1501] You answer back a great deal, and our walk is getting slower. Move.

AEGISTHUS [1502] Lead the way.

ORESTES You have to go first.

AEGISTHUS [1503] So I won't escape you?

ORESTES No: so you won't die the way you'd like. I have to make sure it's bitter for you. And this should be the punishment, straight away, for everyone who wants to act above the laws: death. Then there wouldn't be much wickedness.

CHORUS

Seed of Atreus, after so much suffering
you have come out at last, barely, into freedom,
made whole by this day's onslaught.