

ORESTES

Electra:

There's nothing so frightful to undergo
Or to describe, no god-delivered woe,
But that it's borne by all humanity.
The blessed Tantalus – his misery
I do not taunt him for – the son, it's said,
Of Zeus, quails at the rock above his head
Up the air, because he had displayed
The flaw to partake of the banquet laid
Out by the gods, though he was mortal. He
Was grandfather to Atreus, whose destiny 10
Lachesis wove, a cruel web of strife
In which he wrecked his brother Thyestes' life.
Why should I tell this hideous tale once more?
He slew Thyestes' children: then their gore
And flesh he served him as a meal. This man
Begot King Agamemnon (lesser than
His fame was he!) and Menelaus who
Wed hated Helen. Agamemnon, too,
Was wed – to one who was notorious
In Greece, Queen Clytaemnestra, who bore us 20
Three girls, Chrysothemis, Iphigeneia and me:
A son, Orestes ends the progeny
Of our accursed mother, she who'd wed
King Agamemnon, she who left him dead,
Choked with a robe. The reason, though, a maid
May not disclose but leave it in the shade

For all the world to guess at. I don't need
 To charge Apollo with an evil deed,
 Though he had told Orestes he must kill
 His mother, something few approved of. Still 30
 He had obeyed the god. I had a share
 In this, as far as women can. Now there
 Lies poor Orestes, with some malady
 That's wasting him away in lethargy
 In fits of frenzy with his mother's blood.
 I am afraid to name that sisterhood
 Of goddesses who cause such fears as these.
 However... Well, it's the Eumenides!
 It's been six days now since his mother's frame
 Has been committed to the cleansing flame. 40
 He's had no food nor washed himself since then;
 Wrapped in a cloak we find him weeping when
 He has his lucid moments and is free
 Of fever, while at other moments he
 Bounds headlong from his couch, just like a steed
 Loosed from the yoke. Now Argos has decreed
 That nobody will give us sanctuary
 Or talk to us. Today, too, by decree
 There'll be a vote whether we should be slain
 With stones or steel. However, it is plain 50
 We have one hope. For from the Trojan land
 Menelaus is back, anchored along the strand
 With his whole fleet after unceasingly
 Wandering through the seas. But Helen, she
 Who's called Lady of Sorrows, was conveyed

Hither, though she must linger till the shade
Of night lest parents of dead warriors may
See her and stone her if she's seen by day.
She's weeping for her sister and the woes
Her kin have borne, though she has some repose 60
From grief – Hermione, brought back here from Troy
Into my mother's keeping, still brings joy
To her. I'm watching here until I see
Menelaus come – if no security
We find from him, the anchor that we'll ride
Will be a feeble one: we'll be denied
All help. A wretched house, lacking all aid!

Helen:

Luckless Electra, for so long a maid,
How is your poor Orestes now he's slain
His mother? Though addressing you, no stain 70
Do I incur, referring, as I do,
The sin to Phoebus. Yet I truly rue
My sister Clytaemnestra's death, whom I
Have never seen since I was driven by
A god-sent frenzy causing me to go
To Troy, but now I must bewail our woe.

Electra:

Why should I speak of that which I can see?
Beside his mother's body, sleeplessly
I sit. From him I barely hear a breath
He looks just like a man who's met his death. 80
It's no surprise how much he's suffering. I
Do not blame him – I'm only sitting by

His side. You're blessed, and Menelaus, too.

Helen:

How long has he lain here?

Electra:

Ever since he slew

His mother.

Helen:

Poor man! What a death she died!

Electra:

And it has caused my brother to subside

In grief.

Helen:

Hear me a while.

Electra:

As much as I

Can do so with the care of sitting by

My brother.

Helen:

Seek my sister's tomb for me.

Will you?

Electra:

What reason could I possibly

Have to do that?

Helen:

To take a lock of hair

And a libation.

Electra:

Isn't that the care

90

Of one who loved her?

Helen:

I'm afraid to be

Identified in Argos.

Electra:

Certainly

A late remorse for one who in disgrace

Left home.

Helen:

It is a truth I have to face,

But that's unkind of you.

Electra:

This shame you've said

You feel in Argos – what is it?

Helen:

I dread

To meet the fathers still residing here

Of those who died at Troy.

Electra:

A cogent fear!

100

For you're notorious throughout the land.

Helen:

Then grant this boon for me.

Electra:

I could not stand

To see her tomb.

Helen:

To send a servant, though,

Would cause more shame.

Electra:

Then let your daughter go.

Helen:

Young maidens seen in public? That's not right.

Electra:

But she, by doing this, could thus requite

Her aunt for all her care.

Electra:

Ah, yes, I see.

You've spoken well and have persuaded me.

Hermione, my child, come out and bear

These libations and this ringlet of hair. 110

This honey, milk and wine pour all around

Queen Clytaemnestra's tomb, stand on the mound

And say, "Your sister Helen sends you these,

Her gifts. She dares not come herself for she's

Afraid of the Argive mob." And tell her, too,

To think well of me and my spouse and you,

And these two whom the gods have crushed. I'll pay

In full whatever funeral gifts there may

Be due from me. My child, go rapidly,

Do what I told you, then return to me. 120

Electra:

Ah, beauty brings distress to all those who

Don't have it but a joy to those who do.

Did you not see how she cut off her hair?

Just at the very ends to keep her fair.

She hasn't changed. [to Helen] Oh, you've caused the downfall

Of me and of my brother and of all

Of Greece. May the gods hate you! Ah I see

My friends once more – they're coming back to me

To chant along with me their song of woe.

They'll wake my brother – then my tears will flow 130

To see his frenzy. [to the Chorus] Dearest friends, please mind

That you keep quiet. Though I know how kind

You are, please do not rouse him.

Chorus:

As you say,

We'll make no sound.

Electra:

I beg you, further away

From him!

Chorus:

There, I obey.

Electra:

I pray, my dear,

Be like the reed-pipe.

Chorus:

Yes, I will. Now hear

How soft my voice is!

Electra:

Yes. Come now and tell

Me why you're here. For now he's sleeping well.

Chorus:

What's happened?

Electra:

He still breathes. His moaning, though,

Is feeble.

Chorus:

What is that you say? Such woe!

140

Electra:

If you disturb him from his peaceful rest,

You'll kill the poor man.

Chorus:

Ah, how he's distressed

Through god-inspired sins.

Electra:

Ah, misery!

Phoebus unjustly gave out his decree

To kill my mother.

Chorus:

Oh, look here, look here!

He stirs beneath his robe.

Electra:

Alas, I fear

You've roused him from his sleep.

Chorus:

No, I believe

That he is sleeping still.

Electra:

You'll have to leave.

Go back and cease this noise!

Chorus:

He sleeps.

Electra:

You're right.

Giver of sleep to mortals, Lady Night,

150

Come up from Erebus and wing your way

To Agamemnon's palace. For dismay
And misery have left us lost. There, there!
That noise again! Be still, and be aware
To keep your voices low. Keep far away
From where he sleeps and let him rest!

Chorus:

But say

How this will end.

Electra:

What else but death? For he

Has no desire for food.

Chorus:

His destiny

Is clear, then.

Electra:

Phoebus offered us to death

When Clytaemnestra was choked of her breath 160

By his decree.

Chorus:

Justly.

Electra:

But not well done.

You killed and were killed, mother – your own son

And daughter, too, for we're as good as dead.

I've spent my days in dripping tears, unwed,

Childless. I've lived my life in misery.

Chorus:

You're nearer him, Electra. Try and see

If he is dead indeed – his feebleness

Scares me.

Orestes (waking):

Oh my, the sweet attractiveness

Of sleep! You cure one's ills. I had much need

Of you, and sweetly here you came indeed. 170

You are the queenly banisher of woes,

A wise goddess, invoked by all of those

Who've suffered. Where've I been? Why am I here?

My memory is gone, nothing is clear.

Electra:

My dearest one, How glad I was to see

You falling fast asleep! Do you want me

To take you in my arms?

Orestes:

I surely do,

And from my mouth and eyes I beg of you

To wipe away the foam.

Electra:

There! Oh, how sweet

This service is! I can't refuse to treat

My brother thus.

Orestes:

Your side to mine, please brace

My body and, I beg you, from my face

Brush all this tangled hair, for now I see

But dimly.

Electra:

Such a look of savagery

You have, so long unwashed!

Orestes:

Put me upon

The couch once more. For once my fever's gone,

I'm weak.

Electra:

His couch is welcome – troublesome

But necessary.

Orestes:

Ah, Electra, come

And prop me up again! Turn me around!

I'm helpless, hard to please.

Electra:

Step on the ground 190

At last! The change should please you.

Orestes:

Yes, a show

Of health is better than the truth we know.

Electra:

While you can clearly think, listen to me!

Orestes:

You've news to tell? You show me charity

If it is good. But if your tidings veer

To bad, I've borne enough.

Electra:

Your uncle's here,

Moored in the harbour.

Orestes:

What is that you say?

Has Menelaus come to shed a ray

Of light on us? Part of our family,

Will he repay our father for all he 200

Has done for him?

Electra:

Accept my words – he's come,

And he's brought Helen, too, from Ilium.

Orestes:

If he'd returned alone, I would delight,

But he has brought his wife, an evil blight.

Electra:

Oh, yes! For Tyndareus begot a race

Of daughters who are known for their disgrace.

Orestes:

Differ from them! You've the ability –

In words and in your sensitivity.

Electra:

Ah, brother, now your eye is growing wild

And you grow mad again, though you were mild 210

A moment past.

Orestes:

O mother, hear my plea!

Don't shake those maidens' snaky hair at me.

Their bloodshot eyes! For here they are, close by.

They're leaping on me.

Electra:

Ah, poor sufferer, lie

Quite still upon your bed! Although you stare,

You stare at nothing, for there's nothing there.

Orestes:

Her blood. I blame Apollo, for he said 240

I should commit a sin, exhorting me

With words, not deeds. I maintain certainly,

If I had asked my father face-to-face

If I should slay my mother (here he'd place

His hand upon my beard), he'd have declared

Most vigorously that she should be spared

A sword pierced in her throat causing a stream

Of blood to flow, for he could not redeem

His life, while I would live in great disgrace

For such a sin. Sister, unveil your face! 250

Cease weeping, though we grieve! Whenever you see

Me give way to despair, your role will be

To soothe the terrors that distort my brain.

When you're in grief, then *I'll* relieve *your* pain.

To help a friend is noble. Go inside,

My poor Electra! Lie down and subside

In sleep! Eat! Bathe! If you should leave or fall

In sickness nursing me, then I've lost all.

You are my one ally, for, as you see,

The rest have gone and thus deserted me. 260

Electra:

I will not leave. With you I'll live and die:

If you should die, what, being a maid, shall I

Then do? Escape alone? Still, if you say

That it is right, I'll do so. But, I pray,

Lie down upon your bed! Pay no great heed

To terrors and alarm, because you need

Your rest. For even if you are not ill

But just imagine that you are, yet still

It will confuse and sap you.

Chorus:

Rapidly

You Furies fly to hold a revelry 270

But not of Bacchic rites. No, on you wing

To celebrate men's tears and sorrowing,

You black avengers, darting though the air,

Exacting murder's penance. Hear my prayer –

Allow Orestes never to recall

His frenzy! Ah, these toils after your fall

When you heard Phoebus in his sanctuary

In Delphi at the earth's profundity!

What piteous, deadly struggling is here!

The vengeful fiend piles on tear after tear. 280

Your mother's blood is driving you insane.

Wealth's not safe among men. The pain, the pain!

Some heavenly power will shake it to and fro

Like a swift vessel's sail and make it flow

In waves of grief as in the deadly sea.

What other more than Tantalus' family,

God-born, may be revered? Menelaus comes here,

And by his splendour it is very clear

That he's one of the Tantalids. [enter Menelaus] All hail,

You who once with a thousand ships set sail 290

To Asia! Fortune's your companion,

For with divine assistance you have done

All you had prayed for.

Menelaus:

I feel great delight,
Now I've returned from Ilium, at the sight
Of you, my home. And yet I sorrow, too –
I've seen no other house more bound than you
In wretchedness. I learned my brother's fate –
Struck down by Clytemnestra – as of late
I tried to dock at Malea, for I heard
The truthful prophet Glaucus give us word 300
Of it. Before us all, to me he said:

"Your brother, Menelaus, now lies dead.
Plunged in a fatal bath, he lost his life,
The last that he'll be given by his wife."
When I had reached the port of Nauplion,
While Helen was about to carry on
Hither before me, I felt such delight
As I anticipated holding tight
Orestes and his mother. I'd thought they
Were well, but then I heard the sailor say 310
That he had murdered her. Ladies, tell me
Where the assassin is – you should know he
Was tiny when I left to go to Troy
And so I would not recognize the boy.

Orestes:
I'm he. I'll tell you of my suffering.
But first I clasp your knees while offering
My prayer to you, although I don't possess
The ceremonial bough, in my distress.
Save me! You're just in time.

Menelaus:

What's this I see?

A living corpse?

Orestes:

That's right – my misery 320

Has killed me, though I still look on the light.

Menelaus:

Your unkempt hair makes you a savage sight.

Orestes;

And yet it is my deeds that torture me

And not my looks.

Menelaus:

Your eyes glare dreadfully,

Although they're dry.

Orestes:

Uncle, my body's dead.

My name is all I have.

Menelaus:

This sight! This dread!

I'd not expected this.

Orestes:

A matricide

Is what I am!

Menelaus:

Indeed, but cast aside 330

Your words! For evils should infrequently

Be spoken.

Orestes:

Aright. But the deity

Taunts me.

Menelaus:

What ails you?

Orestes:

It's my sense of right.

I've done a wicked deed, a dreadful blight.

Menelaus:

Be plain! Wisdom is shown in clarity.

Orestes:

Sorrow especially has ruined me.

Menelaus:

Yes, she is fierce, but you'll find resolution.

Orestes:

And fits of frenzy and the retribution

For what I did.

Menelaus:

What day did this commence?

Orestes:

It was the very day when I went hence 340

To build poor Mother's tomb.

Menelaus:

Inside or by

The pyre?

Orestes:

By night I tarried so that I

Could gather up her bones.

Menelaus:

Did you have aid

From anyone?

Orestes:

Pylades, whom I'd made
My partner in the deed.

Menelaus:

And you are ill
With phantom shapes. What sort?

Orestes:

I see them still –
Three maidens, black as night.

Menelaus:

I know those three
But will not name them.

Orestes:

Yes, for certainly
They are revered. Not mentioning their name,
You're wise.

Menelaus:

Are these the ones who're driving you?

Orestes:

The pain!

Menelaus:

It's not surprising that those who 350
Have acted wickedly should suffer so.

Orestes:

But I've a way to rally from this woe.

Menelaus:

It is not wise to think of suicide.

Orestes:

Apollo, though, made me a matricide.

Menelaus:

Not knowing, it would seem, morality.

Orestes:

We're the gods' slaves, whatever they may be.

Menelaus:

Is not Apollo, then, assisting you?

Orestes:

He will in time, for that's what deities do.

Menelaus:

When did your mother die?

Orestes:

Six days ago:

You may observe the pyre's still aglow. 360

Menelaus:

Vengeance comes soon.

Orestes:

Although I'm a true friend,

I am not wise.

Menelaus:

But does your father lend

You aid for your revenge?

Orestes:

No – his delay

I call inaction.

Menelaus:

What do people say

About you now?

Orestes:

No-one will speak to me –

Such is the scope of their hostility.

Menelaus:

Are you not duly purified?

Orestes:

Oh no,

For I am shut out everywhere I go.

Menelaus:

What citizens would oust you?

Orestes:

Oeax, he

Who blames my father for his enmity 370

Of Troy.

Menelaus:

For Palamedes' death it's you

Who's punished.

Orestes:

But I'd not a thing to do

With that. Three reasons led to my downfall.

Menelaus:

Aegisthus' comrades, possibly?

Orestes:

They call

Me names and Argos listens!

Menelaus:

Will they, though,

Give you your father's sceptre?

Orestes:

Surely no,

Since they won't let me live.

Menelaus:

Then can you say

What plan they have?

Orestes:

They hold a vote today.

Menelaus:

Exile? Death?

Orestes:

Stoning.

Menelaus:

Why not run away

And flee across the border?

Orestes:

Uncle, they 380

Have me hemmed in by soldiers.

Menelaus:

Mercenary

Or Argive troops?

Orestes:

It's all the citizenry.

Menelaus:

Poor wretched man, at the extremes of woe!

Orestes:

With you I've hopes to break free from it, though.

With wretched friends share your prosperity!

Don't keep it for yourself exclusively!

Partake of troubles in your turn! Repay

My father's graciousness to those who may

Have claim upon you. For friends who forsake

Those in adversity are surely fake. 390

Chorus:

Here's Tyndareus, the Spartan, struggling
With aged step, black-robed and sorrowing
For Clytaemnestra.

Orestes:

Ah, I'm lost! For see -

Here's Tyndareus whom I particularly
Dare not approach due to my wickedness.
He nursed me once with many a fond caress.
He and his wife would cuddle me constantly,
And both no less than the Dioscuri
Revered me. What a grim return I made
To them! Would I could find a place to shade 400
My face from him! What cloud can I now strew
Before me to escape the old man's view? [enter Tyndareus]

Tyndareus:

Where is he? As I poured out to my dead
Daughter my offering, I heard it said
That Menelaus and his wife were here,
Safe home again and after many a year.
Take me to Menelaus, for I ache
To see my son-in-law once more and shake
His hand.

Menelaus:

All hail, old man, the mortal who
Shared Zeus's bed!

Tyndareus:

All hail, my friend, to you! 410

It's evil not to know what's yet to be.

There is that matricide, eyes venomously
Flashing! My hatred for him is white-hot.
You're speaking to that godless wretch??

Menelaus:

Why not?

I loved his father.

Tyndareus:

He's his son?

Menelaus:

That's so.

He should be honoured if he suffers woe.

Tyndareus:

You've been in Barbary so long that you
Have transformed into a barbarian, too.

Menelaus:

Respecting kinsmen is the Grecian way.

Tyndareus:

One must respect the law, though.

Menelaus:

Wise folk say 440

Necessity enslaves.

Tyndareus:

You think that's true?

Well, I do not.

Tyndareus:

Oh yes, I see that you
Are angry. Old age lacks clear-sightedness.

Menelaus:

What does an argument on foolishness

Have aught to do with him? If good and bad
Are clear to everyone, whoever had
More folly than this man? He never weighed
The scales of justice in this case and paid
No heed to Grecian law. When the king died,
A victim of my daughter's homicide, 430
A sin that's such a hateful thing to me,
He should have brought a holy penalty
To court and banished her. Thus moderation
Would have been gained instead of devastation,
The law observed, and piety as well.
But as it has turned out, the villain fell
Just like his mother. Though she was indeed
Wicked as he believed she was, his deed
Made him more wicked. This, then, I would learn –
If a man's wife should kill him and, in turn, 440
His son kills her and the avenger's son,
To cleanse this sin, commits another one,
When will it end? Well, our forefathers had
It right on such occasions – they forbade
A man with blood upon his hands to show
Himself to anyone but bade him go
Into exile, and then they purified
The man and thus curtailed the endless tide
Of killing by revenge. My daughter who
Killed her own spouse I hate – all women, too, 450
Who are ungodly. Helen, too, your wife,
I would not praise nor ever in my life
Speak to her. Indeed I don't envy you,

Who went to Troy across the ocean due
To that foul slut. The law, though, I'll defend
With all my might that I may put an end
To ruinous murder. [to Orestes] You, what did you feel
When your own mother to you made appeal,
Baring her breast? I did not even see
The awful deed yet weep unhappily 460
From my old eyes. One thing with what I say
Accords – the gods hate you and you will pay
Atonement with your frenzy and your fear.
Why is it requisite that I should hear
From other witnesses what I can see
Myself? Therefore, listen attentively –
Do not oppose the gods! No, do not try
To aid this man! Abandon him to die,
Stoned by the citizens! And do not tread
On Spartan land! My daughter, sir, is dead, 470
And rightly, but it should not have been he
Who murdered her. I've lived unhappily
Through what my daughters did, but for the rest
Of my long life I'd say I have been blessed.

Chorus:

Hail to those lucky in their progeny,
Unhindered by all notoriety!

Orestes:

To speak before your face, old man, I fear:
Because of what I've done to you it's clear
You're grieving. I am godless – that I know –
Because I caused my mother's death, although, 480

Since I avenged my father, I'm *not* thus.
Let there be conversation between us.
Your old age I respect, and so right there
I'll end my tale. I honour your grey hair.
What ought I to have done? Now set one thing
Against another – first, it was the king
Who fathered me, my mother gave me birth,
Just a seed is planted in the earth.
No child is born without its father's seed:
By reason of this thinking I took heed 490
To honour him who fathered me, not her
Who brought me up. Ah, now your daughter, sir –
I am ashamed to call her mother – wed
Another, coming to an unchaste bed.
Aegisthus was his name, and him I slew;
I had to sacrifice my mother, too.
It was a dreadful crime, I must concede,
But I felt forced to do that awful deed
To avenge my father's death. But do I yet
Deserve a death by stoning, as you threat? 500
Well, pay attention to the benefit
I've given Greece. If women saw it fit
To slay their husbands, seeking sympathy
From their own children, they would easily
Do just that. But this custom I have brought
To an end by my foul crime (for crime you thought
It was). I hated her, and now she's dead,
And justly. She was false to the man she'd wed
When he led troops to Troy, and after she

Was found out, on herself no penalty 510

Did she impose. No, she contrived to slay

My father. It is not the time to say

One word about the gods when championing

A murder. If I should be pardoning

My mother's deed by silence, what would he,

The king, my father, then have done to me?

Wouldn't I have seen him in his hate convey

Furies to torture me in my dismay?

Or are there goddesses to proffer aid

To her while he, languishing in the shade 520

Of a deeper wrong, has none? I'm overthrown

By you old man – yes, you! – because you own

A wicked child who slew the king. You see,

Telemachus didn't kill Penelope,

Because she didn't wed spouse after spouse –

Instead she stayed untainted in her house.

In the earth's navel Phoebus lives, where he

Utters unerring prophecies which we

Obey – hence came my crime. Therefore I pray,

Since he's the guilty one, *him* you should slay. 530

But can he not atone for the pollution?

What can be done, then? What is the solution?

Where can I flee if he won't rescue me?

For, after all, he gave out his decree.

Don't say that we did not have every right

To do the deed, but it's become a blight

On us. Wise marriages bring happiness.

But foolish ones are bound to bring distress.

Chorus:

When women interfere in men's affairs,
The consequence is always full of cares. 540

Tyndareus:

Since you lash out, suppressing not a thing,
And answer me in turn by rankling
My heart, you'll make it easier for me
To have you killed as I come here to see
My daughter's grave adorned. And I'll pick out
A band of Argives who will set about
Forcing Argos to accept the penalty
Of stoning for the two of you. But she
Deserves death even more than you. Why so?
She loathed her mother for she'd often go 550
To you to tell you some insulting tale
Or other, causing you to further rail
Against her – tales about the dreams the king
Had dreamt and tales of her philandering.
May this be loathed by all the gods below,
As here above! These tales set all aglow
With non-Hephaestian fire. Now I tell you,
Menelaus, what I am about to do:
If you consider my hostility
As well as our consanguineity 560
Of some account, do not prevent this man
From being stoned to death - for it's the plan
Of the gods - or leave this land. Keep this in mind!
Don't choose ungodly friends, but rather bind
Yourself to righteous men! Lead me away,

Servants!

Orestes:

Yes, leave this house! For then I may

Not be disturbed by senile chatter. Go!

Menelaus:

Why do you pace to and fro?

Menelaus:

Leave me alone! For I am mystified

And don't know where to turn.

Orestes:

Do not decide 570

Right now, but hear what I have got to say

And *then* decide.

Menelaus:

Well said! Say on, I pray!

Sometimes it's better to stay silent while

Somebody else explains the matter.

Orestes:

I'll

Speak now. A lengthy statement can excel

A short one, making it more plain as well.

Menelaus, give me nothing, but repay

My father. Of possessions I don't say

A thing. But if from death you set me free

You'll save the gift that's most priceless to me. 580

I've sinned, but now I think it only right

That you transgress a little to requite

That sin, for Agamemnon, too, did wrong

In sailing off to Ilium with a throng

Of Greeks that he might find a remedy
For Helen's sin. Thus you owe this to me.
For he had battled hard beside your shield
In his fraternal piety on the field
Of battle so that you might be once more
United with your wife. Repay me for 590
That labour! And, therefore, for just one day
(Not ten years!) make an effort! Be my stay!
As for Iphigeneia, do not kill
Hermione, for in my present ill
You then should have advantage over me
And I must pardon it. But set us free.
Electra has long kept her maidenhead:
Thus there will be no heir once I am dead.
Impossible, you say. But friends indeed
Are friends when times are tough. So, then, what need 600
Have we of friends when we are blessed with good
By Heaven? None at all, for the gods would
Suffice. You love your wife, we all agree,
And I'm not saying this in flattery.
I beg you in her name. I undergo
Such grief, yet I must suffer all this woe
Since for my kin I am soliciting.
Imagine that my father's listening
Within his grave and utters what I say –
Oh, how it chokes me with tears of dismay! 610
My safety is desired by everyone,
Not only me. And now my plea is done.
Chorus:

Though I am just a woman, hear my plea

For those in need – you’ve the ability.

Menelaus:

Orestes, I’ve a deep regard for you

And wish to help you. It’s a duty, too,

To aid one’s relatives in all their woes

By dying or by slaughtering their foes,

If Heaven allows. Would that were granted me!

But since I have been wandering wearily, 620

I have few friends who still look on the light.

We’d never crush the Argives in a fight.

With soothing speeches maybe we’d succeed,

For hefty undertakings always need

Hefty efforts. For otherwise why fuss?

When a people’s fury becomes vigorous,

It’s hard to quench. But if you mitigate

Your hold upon it and capitulate

A little, waiting cautiously to see

Your opportunity, they’d possibly 630

Be pacified, and if they wholly wane,

Whatever you should want you may obtain

With ease. Pity they have, hot temper, too,

Which is a priceless quality if you

Observe it closely. I’ll try to induce

The city and the old man Tyndareus

To moderate their views. You’ll find a ship

Whose sails have been too tightly hauled will dip,

But when let go it rights itself once more.

Excessive eagerness the gods abhor, 640

As do the citizens. I don't deny
That I must save you but it should be by
Wisdom, not force against a stronger foe.
I'd not succeed thus, as you maybe know.
For it's not easy single-handedly
To triumph over all your misery.
I never would have tried to mitigate
Argos, and yet I must, because to Fate
The wise must answer. [exit Menelaus]
Orestes:

Hah! You led a force
To Troy to bring a woman back, of course, 650
But otherwise you're useless. Friends in need
Can't count on you. You turn your back and speed
Away, spurning your brother. After all,
Father, in your distress you could not call
On friends. I am betrayed, for I can't see
How I may sidestep the death penalty
Now that this man, my final hope, has fled.
But here I see Pylades who has sped
From Phocis. Ah, this is a pleasant sight,
A man who can be trusted in my plight, 660
The best of friends – a better sight to see
Than calm to sailors in adversity. [enter Pylades]

Pylades:
I hurried through the city, having seen
The citizens assembling, all keen
To kill you and your sister here and now.
What's happening? How is it with you? How

Are you, my dearest comrade?

Orestes:

I will tell

You in the briefest way - I am in Hell.

Pylades:

As your comrade, I must fall with you, then.

Orestes:

Menelaus has turned out the worst of men 670

To us.

Pylades:

An evil woman naturally

Will drive her husband to iniquity.

Orestes:

He has no more repaid me than if he

Had never come.

Pylades:

Then has he actually

Arrived?

Orestes:

Oh yes, eventually he *has* come.

But quickly he earned our opprobrium

As evil to his friends.

Pylades:

And did he bring

His cursèd wife?

Orestes:

No, quite a different thing –

She brought *him*.

Pylades:

Well, where is the woman, then?

The ruin of so many Grecian men? 680

Orestes:

She's in my house - if I may call it so.

Pylades:

What did you say to Menelaus, though?

Orestes:

To save our lives.

Pylades:

Ye gods! And how did he

Answer? I'd love to know that.

Orestes:

Cautiously,

As base friends do.

Pylades:

And what was his excuse?

Orestes:

Those fine maids' father came.

Pylades:

What? Tyndareus?

Angry about his daughter?

Orestes:

That's correct,

For Menelaus had much more respect

For his kin than his own.

Pylades:

Did he not dare,

When he was with you, to have share 690

In your distress?

Orestes:

He was not naturally

A warrior, strong in the company

Of women only.

Pylades:

You're on the extremes

Of wretchedness and you must die, it seems.

Orestes:

There'll be a vote.

Pylades:

Deciding what? For I

Am fearful.

Orestes:

Whether we should live or die:

Few words although the case is large.

Pylades:

Then flee,

The two of you together!

Orestes:

Don't you see?

We're being watched by guards on every side.

Pylades:

Indeed armed men in every street I spied. 700

Orestes:

The town's beleaguered by its enemies.

Pylades:

Enquire of me about my miseries!

I'm ruined, too!

Orestes:

By whom? Would you combine

Additional unhappiness with mine?

Pylades:

My father Strophius has banished me

In anger.

Orestes:

With a charge the citizenry

Condone or only he?

Pylades:

A godless sin

He says it is that I have helped you in

The murder.

Orestes:

Then it seems you share my woe.

Pylades:

I don't resemble Menelaus, though; 710

We must be strong.

Orestes:

But don't you fear that you

Will be condemned to execution, too?

Pylades:

I'm not an Argive.

Orestes:

When a mob is led

By reprobates it will engender dread.

Pylades:

But when they're supervised by honest men,

Their counsels will be honest, too.

Orestes:

Well, then,

Let's talk!

Pylades:

About what?

Orestes:

Well, suppose I tell

The citizens –

Pylades:

That what you did was well-

Considered?

Orestes:

In atonement, certainly!

Pylades:

I fear that they would catch you happily. 720

Orestes:

Then should I crouch in fear and quietly die?

Pylades:

No, that's a coward's way.

Orestes:

Then how should I

React?

Pylades:

What means of safety have you here?

Orestes:

I've none.

Pylades:

And if you go, could you steer clear

Of troubles?

Orestes;

Maybe.

Pylades:

Better than to stay!

Orestes:

Then I will go.

Pylades:

If you die in this way,

You'll die with honour.

Orestes:

Yes, you're right; and thus

I'll shun the charge of being timorous.

Pylades:

Better than by staying.

Orestes:

After all, my deed

Was just.

Pylades:

Let's hope that everyone will heed 730

That view alone.

Orestes:

And some may pity me.

Pylades:

They must consider your nobility,

A salient point.

Orestes:

Indeed they may resent

My father's death.

Pylades:

Yes, that's quite evident.

Orestes:

I must avoid the coward's part.

Pylades:

Well said!

Prestes:

And should my sister know?

Pyldes:

No!!

Orestes:

True – I dread

Her tears.

Pylades:

Indeed, that would be ominous.

Orestes:

Then we'll not tell her.

Pylades:

It would offer us

More time as well.

Orestes:

There's one impediment...

Pylades:

What's that?

Orestes:

That the goddesses will prevent 740

My deed with fits of madness.

Pylades:

Nonetheless

I will take care of you, so do not stress!

Orestes:

It irks to touch a sick man.

Pylades:

But to tend

To you should not irk me since you're my friend.

Orestes:

Don't let my madness taint you!

Pylades:

Let that go!

Orestes:

You will not hesitate about this?

Pylades:

No,

That's a grave ill in friends.

Orestes:

Then be my guide!

Pylades:

A service I am happy to provide.

Orestes:

Take me to Father's tomb.

Pylades:

Why?

Orestes:

So I may

Beg his assistance.

Pylades:

That's the proper way. 750

Orestes:

May I not see my mother's grave?

Pylades:

Oh no,

She was an enemy. Go quickly, though,
Lest Argos catch you first. Rely on me
To prop your body, slow from malady.
I'll bear you through the town, and I'll contemn
The mob and feel no shame in front of them.
For how am I to prove my friendliness
If I can't help you in your sore distress?

Orestes:

Friends are more trustworthy than family,
For strangers understand one's misery 760
And pity it. [exeunt]

Chorus:

 The great wealth and the strength
Boasted in Greece and all along the length
Of Simois turned backwards long ago
From Atreus' house due to an ancient woe,
When strife came to the sons of Tantalus:
A golden ram and a most piteous
Banquet of children's flesh stopped this distress,
But this is why an unending excess
Of murders, through their blood, will never go
But leaves those brothers floundering in woe. 770
What seemed good was not good, for to impair
A mother's flesh and brandish in the air
Your sword, stained black with gore, is lunacy.
Queen Clytaemnestra cried out piteously
And with her final breath said to her son,
"Don't kill me, son! What you hope to have done

Is steeped in sin." What illness can exceed
A misdeed such as this? What has more need
Of grief or pity? What a dreadful wrong!
Now he's insane, the victim of the throng 780
Of Furies. Ah, his blood-flecked eyes! His stare!
His mother's breast, as he was standing there,
Over her golden robe, he saw, yet he
Made her his victim as a penalty
For Agamemnon's pain. [enter Electra]

Electra:

Where is my dear

Orestes, ladies?

Chorus:

He's gone to appear

Before the people in the court to see

If they've negotiated a decree

Of life or death.

Electra:

Oh no, what made him do

A thing like that?

Chorus:

Pylades told him to. 790

But here's a messenger. We'll soon find out

What happened to your brother there, no doubt. [enter Messenger]

Messenger:

Lady, I bring you tidings sad to hear.

Electra:

We're lost – your words have made it very clear.

Messenger:

You both must die today.

Electra:

I long have thought
This would occur, wasting away and fraught
With misery. What did the Argives say
To find us guilty and force us to pay
The supreme penalty? Tell me, old friend,
Is it by stones or steel that we must end 800
Our lives?

Messenger:

I'd just arrived and through the gate
I came, needing to know about your fate.
I always liked your father, reared within
The house. Though poor, yet I was loyal in
The service of my friends. Many people sought
A seat up high where Danaus, it's thought,
Amassed his folk so that he might requite
Aegyptus. So when I beheld this sight,
I asked a citizen: "What's happened here?
Has news of enemies created fear 810
In Argos?" "That's Orestes," he replied,
"Who's here to see how we are to decide
His fate." I saw an unexpected thing –
Pylades and your brother entering
Together (I wish I'd not seen that sight):
One kept his head down, weakened by some blight
Or other, while his comrade shared his grief,
Attempting to afford him some relief,
Just like a brother. Then, when all were there,

A herald rose and said: "Will someone care 820

To give his views about this case for us?

Death or reprieve?" And then Talthybius

Stood up, the man who helped his father sack

The Phrygians. The man was such a hack

With those in power (he always was!), and he

Spoke of your father most admiringly

But not your brother. He was devious,

His sentiments perverse and treacherous,

Lambasting harmful parents, all the while

Giving Aegisthus' friends a knowing smile. 830

That's heralds for you, for they always end

Up on the lucky side and count as friend

A powerful man within the parliament.

Then Diomedes spoke – his sentiment

Was to reprieve you both. But he kept clear

Of guilt and said you should be sent from here.

Some roared out their approval; some, however,

Protested. Next arose a man who never

Stopped talking, someone full of impudence,

An Argive though originally from hence, 840

An ignorant blusterer and one who would

In time engender something far from good.

For pleasing tricks of speech and unsound views

Persuade the mob but seriously abuse

The state, but those who always offer sound

And sensible intelligence are bound

To benefit the state eventually.

One should regard a leader similarly,

Like orators and statesmen. His solution
Was stoning for yourself and execution 850
For Orestes. But your uncle Tyndareus
Kept on suggesting that they should produce
The penalty of death for both of you.
Another then proposed the opposite view;
Though unattractive, he stood bravely there,
Although his contact with the town was rare.
He was a member of the farming band
(The only people who preserve our land),
A clever man, most eager to maintain
An argument, a man without a stain 860
Upon his character. He said they ought
To make Orestes king because he sought
To avenge his father, for he also stated
That she by whom he was assassinated,
The wicked, sinful queen, was of the kind
Who would not let our soldiers leave behind
To take up arms and fight in a campaign,
If those who stay behind become a bane,
Corrupting other people's wives. He swayed
The better sort, for then nobody made 870
Another speech. Your brother, nonetheless,
Came forward and said, "I helped you no less
Than Agamemnon by my deed – if we
Were to legitimize the butchery
Of men by women, death would be most fit,
For you would be enslaved, the opposite
Of what is right. But now my father's dead,

Slaughtered by her who has betrayed his bed.
But if you take my life, the law will then
Be weakened: so the sooner that all men 880
Are dead the better. For, in any case,
Audaciousness among the female race
Will not be lacking." Although he spoke well.
He did not bring them round. But that rakehell
Who favoured death prevailed. With difficulty
Orestes got them to agree that he
Might die by his own hand with you today
And dodge a death by stoning in this way.
Pylades, weeping, brought him hither, where
His comrades bear him company and share 890
Their lamentation. Such a pitiful sight
Is poor Orestes! You must quit the light –
Prepare the sword – or noose! Your noble birth
Meant nothing; at the centre of the earth
Phoebus was your undoing.

Chorus:

Hapless maid!

You utter not a word, your face you shade
And stare upon the ground, as if about
To launch upon a long, lamenting shout.
Pelasia, I now take up the wail
While scratching at my cheeks with my white nail, 900
And beat my head, praising Persephone.
Let Cyclops' land break forth in threnody,
Mourning our house and my poor self who'll feel
Upon my head the bloody sting of steel.

This is the strain of those about to cease
Their life, who once were leaders of all Greece.
Pelops's race is doomed. The fame that crowned
Their happy home has now in blood been drowned
By envious Heaven. Oh, alas, you race
Of short-lived men, in tears and doomed to face 910
An unexpected fate! Eventually
We suffer such a great variety
Of woes. The insecurity we bear
Is great but we must weather our despair.
I yearn to reach that rock that's dangling
High in the air with golden chains that swing
About, that I may grieve to Tantalus
Whose ancestors engendered ruinous
Events. On wingèd horses Pelops flew
Across the sea, killed Myrtilus and threw 920
His corpse into the ocean's swell, once he
Had raced nearby Geraistus' strand, the sea
Flecking his face with foam. That's when a pox
Of curses plagued my house among the flocks
Of Hermes, where a golden lamb was spied
On Atreus' pasture-land and prophesied
The curse. Eris reversed the very course
Of the sun's winged chariot towards the horse
Of Dawn. Zeus moved the seven Pleiads, too,
Exchanging death for death as on they flew - 930
The feast to which Thyestes gave his name,
The treacherous love that brought Aerope shame!
But now the crowning woe is plaguing me

And Agamemnon for our tragedy.

Chorus:

Here's your convicted brother and his friend

Pylades, ever-faithful to the end,

True as a brother, pacing carefully

Beside him as the latter shakily

Stumbles.

Electra:

I weep to see you stand before

The tomb, my brother. So let me once more, 940

And finally, gaze on you. Ah, my mind

Is drifting.

Orestes:

Silence, woman! Be resigned!

No womanish lamenting!

Electra:

How can I

Be silent when we're both condemned to die?

Orestes:

Spare me a second death! For look at me –

I'm dead already. Cease your threnody!

Electra:

A dreadful fate for one so young! For you

Ought to live out your life, but now you're due

To die.

Orestes:

Do not unman me, for you wring

Tears from me as I start remembering 950

My sorrows.

Electra:

We shall die, and I must grieve

For it's a piteous thing for men to leave

This world, for life is sweet.

Orestes:

Today we're set

To die, and therefore we must either whet

The sword or place the noose.

Electra:

You be the one

To kill me, brother – Agamemnon's son

Ought not to be dishonoured by another

Who slaughters me.

Orestes:

Enough blood of my mother

Pollutes me. I won't slaughter you – no, slay

Yourself by your own hand in any way 960

You choose.

Electra:

I will. I'll use the steel sword's sting

Straight after you, although I long to fling

My arms about you.

Orestes:

Do so, if you will,

Should in embraces any joy be still

Found in a person very near to death.

Electra:

My dear, you have a name which on one's breath

Sounds sweet and lovely to your sister, who

Is your soul-partner.

Orestes:

Ah, just like the dew

My heart melts. To return your fond embrace

I yearn. But why should I feel such disgrace? 970

[They embrace] We're heart to heart now, sister. Ah, but we

Must forfeit marriage and a family.

Electra:

If only we were slain with just one sword,

Should it be lawful, and Argos afford

Us just one cedar coffin!

Orestes:

Certainly

That would be sweet, but you can surely see

We have few friends, thus not allowed to share

A tomb.

Electra:

Did Menelaus try to spare

Your life or even speak to you? Ah, he

Was traitor to my father, cowardly 980

As well.

Orestes:

The man did not even appear,

Setting his sights on being monarch here,

Thus careful not to save his friends. We should

See if we may achieve a death that's good

And noble, worthy of the king. I'll let

All see my noble spirit as I set

The sword against my heart. And you must see

That in your turn you show like bravery.

Pylades, when we're dead treat us with grace,

And lay us out, then take us to the place 990

Where Agamemnon lies and there, I pray,

Inter us both, for now I'm on my way

To do the deed.

Pylades:

I have one point to make

Before I speak – you're making a mistake

If you believe that I would care to go

On living when you're dead.

Orestes:

Why do you, though,

Wish to die with us?

Pylades:

What is life to me

Without the pleasure of your company?

Orestes:

You did not kill your mother – I did so,

And it has brought me misery and woe. 1000

Pylades:

But I assisted you, and so I ought

To suffer the same penalty they sought

For you.

Orestes:

Yield to your father! Do not die

With us! You have a city still, but I

Do not. You have wealth and a home; though you

Did not wed my unhappy sister who

To you had been betrothed by me since I
For your companionship had such a high
Regard, seek for yourself another bride
And rear a family now we're not tied 1010
By blood. Farewell, be happy, my dear friend,
As living people may, though at the end
Of life we may not.

Pylades:

 You've not grasped what I
Have told you. May the fruitful earth and sky
Reject my blood if I should ever be
A traitor and desert you while I'm free
Myself! I aided you, I won't gainsay,
Contriving the whole plot, for which you pay
The penalty. So we must die – all three –
Together. I consider her to be 1020
My wife, for we were once betrothed. And so
Whatever shall I utter once I go
To Delphi if before your tragedy
I was your true friend but consequently
I ceased our friendship? Since we're doomed, let's take
Counsel that Menelaus may partake
Of our misfortune!

Orestes:

 Dear friend, would that I
Could see that taking place before I die!

Pylades:

Delay the sword, then!

Orestes:

1030

1030

But quietly! For these are women here,
And women I scarce trust.

Well, have no fear!

Pylades:

Menelaus.

If we can achieve success,

Pylades:

She's hiding in the house.

Putting her seal

Pylades:

Is wed to Hades.

How? Her company

Pylades:

Don't fear those folk.

Orestes:

They're just attracted by 1040

Mirrors and perfumes!

Pylades:

Ah yes, luxuries!

Has she brought to our land any of these?

Orestes:

So much that they won't fit all Greece.

Pylades:

Well, we

Ignore the race of slaves, for we are free.

Orestes:

If I can do this deed, I will not shy

Away from dying twice.

Pylades:

Neither will I

If I'm avenging you.

Orestes:

Your plan, my friend?

Pylades:

To seem as if about to meet our end.

Orestes:

And then?

Pylades:

Lament our lot.

Orestes:

And therefore she

Will weep, although within her heart she'll be

1050

Happy.

Pylades:

The same as us.

Orestes:

How shall we go

About it next?

Pylades:

We'll have our swords below

Our cloaks.

Orestes:

Shall we dispatch her servants, then,

Before we shall dispose of her?

Pylades:

We'll pen

Them separately in the house.

Orestes:

And we must kill

Whoever makes a noise.

Pylades:

Her death then will

Be all our care.

Orestes;

Ah, *that* I understand.

Pylades:

Yes, that's the thing. Attend and hear how grand

My scheme is! If a woman's chaste and we

Kill her, her death will cause great infamy

1060

For us. But as it is, her punishment

Will be a recompense and will content

All Greece, atoning for the fathers who

Through her were slain, whose progeny she slew,
The brides made widows. Altars will burn bright
And bless us all; there'll be shouts of delight
Because a wicked woman's blood was shed,
And you, my dearest friend, once she is dead,
Won't be a "matricide". Oh no, that name
You will resign and henceforth possess fame 1070
As "killer of Helen, the murderess".
Menelaus should not ever gain success
While Agamemnon, Electra and you
Must die. Your mother – well, she's someone who
I'll pass by, for it surely would be wrong
To mention her. The house should not belong
To Menelaus, though his brother's war
In distant Troy has been responsible for
His gaining Helen back. I vow that I
Will cut the woman up, or let me die! 1080
If we do not accomplish this, my friend,
We will set fire to her house, then end
Our lives. We won't fail to achieve one claim
To honour for we'll then acquire fame
In death or flight.

Chorus:

How every woman hates
That shameful witch, which she with justice rates!

Orestes:

True friends are priceless – neither monarchy
Nor opulence deserves priority.
A noble comrade is pre-eminent

Over a crowd. Aegisthus' punishment 1090

You generated, aiding me when I

Was plagued with danger, and you now stand by

My side again by helping me impose

A means of punishment upon my foes.

But I'll stop praising you, for there's something

That's somewhat wearisome in honouring

A person to excess. But, come what may,

Since I must breathe my last this very day,

I must act that I may inflict redress

On those who wounded me with faithlessness 1100

And cause them pain. I'm Agamemnon's son

Indeed and once was thought to be the one

To rule Greece, no despot but, all the same,

Godlike in might. My father I'll not shame

By dying like a slave – with my last breath

I'll be a free man. But before my death

I'll punish Menelaus. We'll be blessed

If we achieve one thing, if we can wrest

Security somehow in any way

And not be killed but kill instead – I pray 1110

For this. These words of mine which now have crossed

My lips are sweet, embodying no cost.

Electra:

I think I understand...

Orestes:

What do you mean?

Divine protection? Where may it be seen?

I know how shrewd you are.

Electra:

Well then, attend,

Both of you!

Orestes:

Then go on! If you intend

Good news, I'm pleased.

Electra:

Is Helen's progeny

Known to you? Oh, of course!

Orestes:

Hermione:

My mother reared her – yes, certainly I

Know her..

Electra:

She's at your mother's tomb.

Orestes:

But why? 1120

What are you hinting at? What hope can you

Expect from this?

Electra:

Well, she was going to

Pour a libation.

Orestes:

So? How does that make

For safety for us?

Electra:

On her way back, take

Her as a hostage.

Orestes:

What good will that do?

Electra:

If Menelaus tries to injure you,
Once Helen's slaughtered, or any of us –
Because our friendship's most harmonious –
Tell her that you will kill Hermione;
Then you must draw your sword and threateningly 1130
Hold it to the maiden's throat and keep it there.
Should Menelaus then attempt to spare
Her life, allow him to take up the girl,
But if he does not try to curb his whirl
Of rage, then slit her throat. I think if he
Should come on strong at first, eventually
He'll calm down, for he is not brave or bold
By nature. And so this is my stronghold.

Orestes:

Oh, spoken like a man! How very far
You're worthier to live than die – you are! 1140
Pylades, such a maid would surely give
You pain if you lost her or, if you live,
Your marriage will be blest.

Pylades:

It may be thus,
And may she come to Phocis, making us
A happy couple!

Orestes:

How soon will it be
The palace will receive Hermione?
The rest you said was good if we succeed

In snaring that ungodly fellow's seed.

Electra:

She must be near – the length of time agrees

Exactly.

Orestes:

Good, Electra! Stay here, please, 1150

And wait for her, and keep an eye out for

Menelaus or a friend of his before

The murder's done. If they should come, you should

Either beat on the door's panel of wood

Or shout. Let's in, preparing for their doom.

Let's don our swords. Oh, in your home of gloom,

Father, Orestes calls on you to aid

The destitute; on your account I'm made

To suffer wrongfully, because my deed

Was righteous. Menelaus' wife I need 1160

To slay, for he's to blame.

Electra:

O hear us crying –

Your children, father, for your sake are dying.

Pylades:

My father's kinsman, hear my prayers and save

Your progeny.

Orestes:

I to my mother gave

A fatal blow –

Electra:

I held the sword –

Pylades:

I freed

Them both from fear...

Orestes:

...Assisting you indeed,

Father.

Electra:

I was not false to you.

Pylades:

O hear

Their cries and save them!

Orestes:

I, with many a tear,

Pour a libation.

Electra:

I with groans.

Pylades:

I pray,

Cease, for our business must be underway. 1170

And if our prayers can really travel through

The ground, he hears them. Father Zeus and you,

Justice, may we all triumph! For us three

There's just one struggle, just one penalty –

To live or die. O noble ladies, you...

Chorus:

Hail, lady! We may call you noble, too.

Electra:

Station yourselves, some on the high road here,

Others elsewhere, and watch the house.

Chorus:

My dear,

Why call us to this duty?

Electra:

I am scared

That someone in the palace is prepared 1180

For slaughter.

Chorus 1:

We'll make haste and take good care

To watch upon the eastern road.

Chorus 2:

And there,

Upon the western road, we'll take *our* stance.

Electra:

Be circumspect with many a sideways glance!

Chorus:

We will.

Electra:

Yet keep an eye on everything

Behind your tresses!

Chorus 1:

Who's that wandering

Around the house?

Electra:

We're lost, for he'll disclose

Immediately the ambush of our foes.

Chorus 2:

Be calm, my dear -the road's not occupied,

As you believe.

Electra:

Ah yes, but is your side

1190

Before the courtyard safe?

Chorus 1:

All goes well here.

Look to your watch – no Greek is coming near.

Chorus 2:

Same here.

Electra:

Then I will listen by the gate.

Chorus:

Hey, you within the house? Why vacillate?

All's quiet now, so act!

Electra:

They do not hear.

Their swords are blunted by her looks, I fear.

Some armed Greek soon will come here, hastening

To save her. It's no time for dawdling –

Be more alert! Turn round – then turn again!

Chorus:

I'm looking everywhere.

Helen (within):

I'm being slain

1200

Most cruelly!

Chorus:

Did you hear that? The slaughter

Is being carried out on Leda's daughter.

Electra:

Lord Zeus, assist our friends!

Helen:

Husband, I die,

But you won't help me although you're nearby.

Electra:

Destroy her, kill her, slay the bitch! For she

Left both her husband and her family:

Thus many Grecian men were slain along

The river by the iron darts among

The eddies of Scamander.

Chorus:

Hush! I hear

The sound of someone's footsteps coming near 1210

The house.

Electra:

My friends, here comes Hermione,

Advancing through this gory butchery.

No noise! She comes headlong towards the snare –

A splendid catch if we can mesh her there!

Station yourselves once more and act serene

So that you won't betray the bloody scene

You've witnessed, and I'll do the same. [enter Hermione] Ah, maid,

I think that you've come hither having laid

A wreath and poured libations to the dead.

Hermione:

I have indeed, and yet I feel some dread, 1220

Hearing some shrieking somewhat far away

Electra:

But why? Our troubles *here* cause us dismay.

Hermione:

Oh no! What is your news?

Electra:

My brother and I

Have here in Argos been condemned to die.

Hermione:

Oh no! By my own kin?

Electra:

It is decreed,

And we've put on the yoke of dire need.

Hermione:

Was that the reason for your miseries?

Electra:

It was – a suppliant fell at Helen's knees...

Hermione:

Who is he?

Electra:

Poor Orestes, for he sought

Mercy for us.

Hermione:

The palace, then, well ought 1230

To shout aloud.

Electra:

What else could urge a plea

That is delivered so compellingly?

Go to your happy mother, then, and throw

Yourself before her; to your comrades go

And with them beg your father not to see

That we're consigned to death's eternity.

My mother nursed you, so commiserate

With us in pity! Be our opiate!

Assist us in our struggle! I will be

Your guide. In you lies our security – 1240

And you alone.

Hermione:

I'm hurrying to show

That you are safe as long as you may know

It's in my hands. [exit Hermione]

Electra:

Friends, grasp your swords and seize

The prey we're after!

Hermione [within]:

Oh no, who are these?

Orestes:

We're here to save ourselves not you. Don't squeal!

Electra:

Hold her, hold her, hold her! And point your steel

Against her throat and wait in silence! Then

Menelaus will discover he's found men,

Not Phrygian cowards, and, as cowardly

Himself, he will be treated fittingly. 1250

Chorus:

Awake the house in case the Argives fear

About the murder just committed here

And feel the need to offer aid, before

I know for sure that Helen lies in gore,

Or hear it from a servant. For I know

A part of all that happened here, although

The rest's a blank to me. It's only right

That retribution from the gods require

The sins Helen committed, for she brought
Tears to all Greece through all the ills she wrought 1260
By following that diabolic boy
Of Ida and brought all of Greece to Troy.
Be quiet, for a Phrygian's coming out,
Whom we must ask what this is all about. [enter Phrygian]

Phrygian:

I have escaped the Argive sword, despite
My Asian slippers, in a panicked flight
Over the cedar beams and Dorian frieze.
Ladies, can I escape across the seas
Encompassing the world or can I fly
Straight through the air?

Chorus:

But who is this I spy? 1270

A slave of Helen's?

Phrygian:

Troy, the holy hill
Of Ida with its fruitful soil, my shrill
And alien cry laments your devastation:
The beauteous Helen was your ruination,
Born of a swan. I wail for lovely Troy,
Apollo's polished tower, the handsome boy,
The horseman Ganymede who shared the bed
Of Zeus.

Chorus:

I don't quite know what you have said,
So tell us clearly.

Phrygian:

Hear my Barbary cry,
Which prophesies the time when people die, 1280
When kings are slain. I'll tell you everything.
Two lions came – one the son of the king,
The other Strophius' son, a crafty man,
Odysseus-like (for when he'd hatched a plan,
He kept his silence, though his loyalty
To friends was certain, and his bravery
As well, a man most talented in war,
A deadly serpent, though). I curse him for
His silent plotting. In they came to meet
Helen, all tears, and both men took a seat, 1290
This side and that, in all humility,
Though armed. They threw themselves submissively
At Helen's feet. The servants she had brought
From Phrygia sprang up, with terror fraught,
And called to one another, "Treachery!"
And although some of them said they could see
No cause, yet there were others now who felt
The viper who to Clytaemnestra dealt
A fatal blow had Helen in a snare
That he'd devised for her..

Chorus:

But meanwhile where 1300
Were you? You were in panicked flight, I guess.
Phrygian:
No, I was fanning Helen's lovely tress,
As Phrygians do. She twisted flax between
Her fingers, as the yarn fell, being keen

To sew a purple cloth with it to grace
The Trojan spoils, a gift she then would place
On Clytaemnestra's tomb. "Rise from your chair,
Daughter of Zeus," Orestes said, "for there
Is something I must say to you. Proceed
To our ancestral hearth." He took the lead, 1310
She innocently following. But he
Who comes from Phocis yelled, "Away from me,
You craven Phrygians!" He penned then all,
Some in the stables, others in the hall,
Far from their mistress.

Chorus:

Then?

Phrygian:

O native land!

The butchery I saw! Swords now in hand,
They cast their eyes about in case there should
Be someone near. Like mountain boars, they stood
Before her, saying, "You now meet your death:
Your craven spouse is causing your last breath - 1320
He left his brother's son right here to die."
And then she cried aloud, "Oh no! Ai ai!"
Her arm across her breast, she beat her head,
Then turned her golden-sandalled feet and fled.
But in his Argive boots Orestes went
Before her, grabbed her by the hair and bent
Her neck back, thus to drive his black sword through
The lady's throat.

Chorus:

You Phrygians – where were you?

Phrygian:

We struck the doorposts' bolts and, with a shout,
We ran to her that we might get her out 1330
With stones and javelins and many a sword.
Pylades, though, undaunted, came toward
Us like Hector or Ajax when we caught
Sight of him as at Priam's gate he fought.
We clashed with him, but it was obvious
That Greeks are much superior to us
In battle strength. One of our men had fled,
One died, one had been hurt, another pled
That he be spared, but we escaped, concealed
By night's black darkness; some dropped down, some reeled, 1340
While some lay dead. As Helen by this slaughter
Was sinking to her death, her luckless daughter
Came in, and like mad Bacchants these two men
Ran to Hermione, then back again
To seize her mother, but she'd vanished quite
Straight through the house. O Zeus, Earth, light and night!
Was this a magic spell? A wizard's art?
A heavenly theft? I could not even start
To say what happened next. I fled! And so
Menelaus suffered all that painful woe 1350
To get his wife again – but bootlessly.

Chorus:

But here's the most amazing sight to see –
Orestes, sword in hand, is coming hither –
He's rushing with excited footsteps. [enter Orestes]

Orestes:

Whither

Went she who vanished to escape my sword?

Phrygian:

Before you I prostrate myself, my lord,

The way we do in Troy.

Restes:

But we're not there:

No, we're in Argos.

Phrygian:

Wise men everywhere

Would choose life over death.

Orestes:

May I surmise

That not for Menelaus came those cries 1360

Of yours?

Phrygian:

Oh no, they were for you, whose need

I more respect.

Orestes:

Did Helen, then, indeed

Die justly?

Phrygian:

Yes, she did, even if she

Had three throats to be slit.

Orestes:

You're cowardly,

Which makes you glib, for that's not what you think.

Phrygian:

It is, for she it was who made Greece sink
In ruin, Troy as well.

Orestes:

You'd better vow

You really mean that, or I'll kill you now.

Phrygian:

Upon my life!

Orestes:

Does every Phrygian fear

Steel as you do?

Phrygian:

When your sword's held so near, 1370

It flashes gleams of blood. Remove it, please!

Orestes:

You seem to me like somebody who sees

A Gorgon, fearing to be turned to stone.

Phrygian:

No, to a corpse! This Gorgon head's unknown

To me.

Orestes:

Although you are a slave, you still

Fear death, which would release you from all ill.

Phrygian:

We all are glad to see the light of day

Whether we're slaves or free.

Orestes:

Ah, what you say

Is wise – you're saved by your sagacity.

Go in!

Phrygian:

I'm spared?

Orestes:

You are.

Phrygian:

How happily 1380

I hear that!

Orestes:

Do you think I'd undergo

Slitting your throat, you stupid so-and-so?

You're not a woman, nor do you belong

Among the race of men. I came along

To shut you up, for Argos, once it hears

A hapless cry for help, pricks up its ears.

For Menelaus' sword I have no dread –

Proud of the golden curls about his head,

Just let him come! If he seeks punishment

For Helen's death and sends a regiment 1390

Of Argives and declines to rescue me,

Electra or Pylades, finally

He will behold his daughter's corpse as well

As Helen's. [exeunt]

Chorus:

Fortune! What a living hell

Still plagues the race of Atreus. Should we bear

The news to town? Stay silent? That is where

More safety lies. Look at the sudden trail

Of smoke up in the sky, which tells the tale!

They're kindling torches so that they might fire

The halls of Tantalus – the peril's dire 1400

They plan to kill. A god, though, will decide
Our end. For we have seen the house subside,
Crushed by avenging fiends because they threw
Myrtilus from his chariot. In view
Comes Menelaus speedily – he knows,
No doubt, all that has happened here. All those
Within, make fast the doorways rapidly!
A lucky man's a dangerous enemy
For men like you, Orestes. [Orestes and Pylades appear
on the roof holding Hermione. Enter Menelaus]
Menelaus:

I have come,
Hearing about the pandemonium 1410

Occurring here. Lions, not men, are they
Who did these strange and violent deeds today.
My wife has not been slaughtered, so they say,
But vanished (one whose wits have gone astray
Through fear has doubtless said so). It's a lie,
A trick that has been manufactured by
That matricide, Orestes. One of you,
Smash down the door so that I may rescue
My child and take a last look at my wife.

These hands of mine will take away the life 1420
Of these vile men and send them down below
To meet her there.

Orestes:

The door's shut – leave it so,
You villain Menelaus, or I'll split

This ancient parapet apart and hit
You with its coping-stone and break in two
Your skull. The doors are barred, preventing you
From bringing aid.

Menelaus:

What's this? Many a brand
Of fire and a troop of men who stand
Above the house, with one sword placed below
My daughter's throat.

Orestes:

What do you wish to know
Of me?

Menelaus;

There's not a thing, but I suppose
That I must listen to you.

Orestes:

I propose
To kill your daughter, if you want to know.

Menelaus:

You slaughtered Helen – now you wish to go
On slaughtering?

Orestes:

I wish I had, instead
Of being duped by the gods.

Orestes:

She is not dead,
You say, just to insult me?

Orestes:

Painfully

It's true. If only I'd –

Menelaus:

You frighten me.

Done what?

Orestes:

Polluted Hell with the decay

OF Greece.

Menelaus:

Give me my wife so that I may 1440

Inter her!

Orestes;

Ask the gods! But I *will* slay

Your daughter.

Menelaus:

That's the mother-killer's way –

To go on killing.

Orestes:

Yes, that I might aid

His memory because he was betrayed

By you in death.

Menelaus:

Is not the present stain

Besmirching Clytaemnestra, whom you've slain,

Still not enough?

Orestes:

I tell you, villain, no!

I'd never be worn out if I should go

On killing them non-stop.

Menelaus:

Pylades, you,

I think, have been a partner in this, too. 1450

Orestes:

His silence says he has – let it be me

Who says so.

Menelaus:

To your cost, unless you flee!

Orestes:

We won't. We'll burn the palace down.

Menelaus:

Will you

Wreck your ancestral home?

Orestes:

Yes, that we'll do

Lest you obtain it, and this girl will burn

In sacrifice within it.

Menelaus:

In your turn,

If you should sacrifice her, you will pay.

Orestes:

Then be it so!

Menelaus:

No, no! Do not, I pray!

Orestes:

Silence! Your woes are just, and so you must

Endure them.

Menelaus:

If that's so, then is it just 1460

That you should live?

Orestes:

It is, and rule a realm.

Menelaus:

Where?

Orestes:

Here in Argos I will steer the helm.

Menelaus:

And carry out all its solemnities?

Orestes:

Indeed.

Menelaus:

And sacrifice?

Orestes:

That's right – for these

I'm qualified. Are you?

Menelaus:

Most certainly,

Because my hands are clean.

Orestes:

Well, that may be,

But not your heart.

Menelaus:

But who would speak to you?

Orestes:

All men who love their fathers.

Menelaus:

And those who

Respect their mothers?

Orestes:

They are lucky men.

Menelaus:

In your case, you have not been lucky, then. 1470

Orestes:

Oh no, I hate bad women.

Menelaus:

I lament

Poor Helen.

Orestes:

What of me?

Menelaus:

Helen, I went

To Troy for you, only to have you slain.

Orestes:

I wish!

Menelaus:

A million pains!

Orestes:

I know of pain!

Menelaus:

Such pain!

Orestes:

You didn't help us – that is why

You grieve.

Menelaus:

I'm in your grip.

Orestes:

No, you're gripped by

Your cowardice.

Menelaus:

Take your weapon away

From my child's throat!

Orestes:

You liar!

Menelaus:

Will you slay

My daughter?

Orestes:

Yes.

Menelaus:

Oh, what am I to do?

Orestes:

Go to the Argives and persuade them to – 1480

Menelaus:

Do what?

Orestes:

Refrain from slaughter.

Menelaus:

Will you kill

My daughter otherwise?

Orestes:

Indeed I will.

Menelaus:

Poor Helen!

Orestes:

As am I!

Menelaus:

Cruelly slain

Once I from Troy had brought you back again.

Orestes:

If only she had been!

Menelaus:

After much woe.

Orestes:

Not at my hands, though.

Menelaus:

Ah, she suffered so!

Orestes:

You wouldn't help me.

Menelaus:

You have me.

Orestes:

Not true –

It's your own cowardice that now has you. [to Electra, on the roof]

Electra, set this place alight below!

Pylades, my most trusted comrade, go 1490

And burn the parapet!

Menelaus:

Arm, arm, you men

Of horse-adoring Argos! Arm and then

Run here! This fellow's trying to break free,

Who slew his mother. Such profanity! [enter Apollo, on the roof]

Apollo:

Menelaus, calm yourself! I'm calling you

By name. I'm calling you, Orestes, too,

Who guard Hermione, your sword in hand,

That you may hear my words and understand
Their meaning. I'm Apollo, progeny
Of Leto. Despite your avidity, 1500
You failed to kill Helen, when you were keen
To gall her husband. Here she's clearly seen
In Heaven, rescued and not slain. For I
Snatched her beneath your sword when ordered by
Lord Zeus, for she's his daughter and must be
Immortal, joining the Dioscuri
To save seafarers. Choose another to wed:
With Helen's looks the gods brought to a head
A war in Troy where many men would die,
Diminishing the burden of a high 1510
And growing population. As for you,
Orestes, you must leave and travel to
Parrhasia where you will have to live
For one whole year, and then its folk will give
Your name to it, and then you will reside
In Athens where you're destined to be tried
Before the Furies who will prosecute
You for your mother's murder, while your suit
The gods will arbitrate. Then there will be
A righteous vote and you'll successfully 1520
Defend your case. You'll wed Hermione,
Whose neck your sword is threatening presently;
Neoptolemus, although he thinks he will,
Won't marry her - a Delphic sword will kill
That man when he comes to me to obtain
Amends for when his father had been slain –

Achilles. Your Electra guarantee
To Pylades as bride, as formerly
You promised her, as evermore his life
Will be propitious with her as his wife. 1530

Menelaus,
You must let Orestes reign
In Argos. Rule in Sparta, which caused pain
To you throughout your life. The civic wrangle
Of Argos and Orestes I'll untangle,
For on account of me Orestes slew
His mother.

Orestes:

Prophet Phoebus, hail to you,
Because it has turned out your augury
Was not a lie. And yet it frightened me
That I had listened to some hound of Hell,
Thinking I'd heard your voice. But all is well, 1540
And I obey you now. I will set free
Hermione from slaughter and agree
To wed her at her father's word.

Menelaus:

I greet
You, Helen, trusting you'll enjoy your seat
In Heaven's court. As Loxias has said,
Orestes, I agree that you must wed
My daughter. You are noble, and so you
Should flourish in a noble marriage, too,
And may I, as your father-in-law, also
Obtain a noble wife.

Apollo:

Each of you, go 1550

Where I've appointed you, and reunite!

Menelaus:

I must obey.

Orestes:

I, too, must do what's right.

Menelaus, I am reconciled with fate,

And, Phoebus, with your words.

Apollo:

Go, venerate

The fairest goddess, Peace. Helen I'll bring

To Zeus's halls in Heaven, twinkling

With stars, and there she'll be enthroned beside

Hera and Hebe, who's Achilles' bride,

Where she'll be honoured everlastingly

Along with the Zeus-born Dioscuri 1560

To guard the sea.

Chorus:

Great Victory, hear my praise

And crown me constantly throughout my days!

