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Cast of Characters

ORESTES

MESENKER

ELECTRA

TYNDAREUS

HELEN OF TROY

MENELAUS

PYLADES

TROJAN SLAVE

HERMIONE

CHORUS

Character Notes

Three actors play the following parts:

ORESTES / MESSENGER

ELECTRA / TYNDAREUS

HELEN OF TROY / MENELAUS / PYLADES / TROJAN SLAVE

The actress who plays HERMIONE is part of the CHORUS

Only in the case of college productions may the roles be single cast.

The Chorus

The CHORUS is 5–9 women or men or both

The chorus always speaks in unison but when they sing can sing solo as well as severally.

Setting

This play is set in Argos in front of the palace of Agamemnon

Design

Costume is largely contemporary.

Music, sound design, dance, lighting are all complex and essential.

The Whomp is crucial.

A Few Words On This...

Orestes is one of the very last plays written by a Euripides thoroughly disenchanted with Athens, out of heart with a compromised and disintegrating democracy. This idiosyncratic work, unlike any other in the Greek canon, was the most popular play of the classical world following his death; it was performed and parodied for centuries but then fell out of favor for millennia after that. Renaissance and modern era scholars found it peculiar, ignoble, largely immoral, and the ending inexplicable; not until the 80s did it attract a kind of interest again.

It is a peculiar work—harrowing, ironic and deeply metatheatrical—a playful, reckless, and terribly clever experimentation with genre. Its humor and arch theatricality are so contemporary and its as—if not *more*—sophisticated than any modern play or performance text.

I do not speak or read ancient Greek! In working on this I used teaching texts packed with notes, as well as translations designed to be readable but not literary. Even the most exact translations differ on word choice, emphasis, flavor, meaning; my task was to sink into the play, line by line, and to think it through again.

Love alters the beloved, and this is not entirely the play that Euripides wrote. It's always a translation in spirit, and word by word, line by line, the vast majority of it hews so extremely close to the original as to function as a literal translation. My aim in working on this play is not to adjust it to my own interests but to bring it to life, as best I can, with every complexity intact; in doing so I have allowed myself liberties and equivalencies. I've teased out some of the backstory, which is not as present to modern day Americans as it was to ancient Athenians; I've cut some allusions which are now too elusive to be engaging, I've made some small trims, and in making decisions I have inevitably made minor interpretations. Some of the choral sections of this version are quite close to the original text, others step farther afield; all of them, however, reflect the concerns of the odes from which they were drawn.

The beams of Greek Tragic Narrative are load bearing, meant to support—in a way that current serious narrative drama can't—a saturated theatrical experience, with music and dance; it should be bravura, innovative, and in the purest sense engaging and entertaining.

I've brought myself fully to this process and am in the play for sure, but probably not where you'd expect a contemporary author to be. Most everything that is ironic, bouncy, grave, bizarrely fresh and relentlessly modern about the play is Euripides. The tip toe dance is

Euripides; the fabulous and super sardonic ending is all Euripides. The energy, the inventiveness, the gorgeousness and despair, are that of a bitter and brilliant 73 year old man sitting at a desk 2,400 years ago.

Notes Toward Production

The Chorus

The Chorus is 5–9 women or men or both. They are playing the highborn female companions of Electra (ladies in waiting, loosely) and so if played by men they should be played in a female costume. There's something inevitably stylized about men in women's costume but it's important to shy away from full-blown camp.

James Sugg wrote wonderful music for the first production; you can preview it and get rights for it by contacting Playscripts, Inc. or you can create your own.

The chorus sings, they dance, they shout, they speak in unison, they sing harmonically, and in blazing solos. They should be thrilling, and sometimes a little ridiculous, and in all of their solemnity, and all of their silliness, a real source of theatrical pleasure, a real opportunity for bravura performance.

The Ending

The ending—and this is pure Euripides—is disconcerting, deeply ironic, sarcastic even; just when things could not possibly be worse the God arrives—and I think there may be some question as to whether it really *is* the God—and sets things straight in a way which is disturbingly breezy; it's a happy ending which is more dark and cynical and unsettling than a tragic one.

It requires a coup de theatre for the arrival of Apollo, something which entirely changes the tone and tenor of the stage space and, possibly, calls its stability into question.

The Play

I think the best straight translation to read is the Arrowsmith, which takes some interpretive liberties but has real life and bounce and is very readable. His intro is really worth reading as well. William Arrowsmith, in the series edited by David Grene and Richard Latimore. If you read the Arrowsmith you may also want to read the version in the Loeb Classical Library, translated by David Kovacs. It is less sprightly, but more accurate.

There's a great book by Matthew Wright, Senior Lecturer in Classics at the University of Exeter, which I really recommend to anyone thinking of directing the play. *Euripides: Orestes*, part of the Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy series, published by Duckworth, Gerald and Co. Ltd. It's a very fun, readable discussion of the play and how it has been received, interpreted, and performed.

Acknowledgements

This play was first produced in a co-production between Two River Theater Company of Red Bank, New Jersey (Aaron Posner, Artistic Director) and The Folger of Washington DC (Janet Griffin, Artistic Director).

It ran from January 27 to March 7 in DC and then played in Red Bank from March 23 to April 11.

The cast for both runs was as follows:

ELECTRA / TYNDAREUS	Holly Twyford
ORESTES / MESSENGER	Jay Sullivan
HELEN OF TROY / MENELAUS /	
PYLADES / GREEK SLAVE	Chris Genebach
HERMIONE	Margo Seibert
CHORUS	Lauren Culpepper, Rebecca Hart, Marissa Molnar, Margo Seibert, Rachel Zampelli
Director	Aaron Posner
Composer / Co-Music Director	James Sugg
Movement Director	Patty Gallagher
Scenic Design	Daniel Conway
Costume Design	Jessica Ford
Lighting Design	Tyler Micoleau
Resident Dramaturg	Michele Osherow
Production Stage Manager	Amanda Michaels

I would like to especially thank Professor Michael Shaw and Bryan Doerries, for their assistance with the translation.

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This play was developed in part while in residence at The National Theater Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center.

All production groups performing this play are required to include the following credits on the title page of every program:

Orestes: An Antic Tragedy was originally produced by Folger Theatre, Washington, D.C. and Two River Theater Company, Red Bank, New Jersey.

ORESTES
AN ANTIC TRAGEDY

transadapted by Anne Washburn

FROM THE PLAY BY EURIPIDES

(ELECTRA in front of the palace. ORESTES near her huddled and sleeping on the ground, wrapped up in his jacket.)

ELECTRA.

Everything we can imagine we may
have to suffer, and we will endure.

Tantalus: they say he was the son of Zeus half
God, half—it's a tricky mixture, half. God. Man. He
had fabulous wealth, he had elegant timing—
which is luck. Beloved of the Gods, he sat at
their banquet flush with wine, their beauty, his beauty
they say that he said...and he probably felt at
the time that it was reckless but who can resist
his own wit when it shimmers just, perfect, at the
very tip of the tongue. There was a ghastly pause,
they say, and then the scraping of a chair...they say
that now he orbits in mid air a massive rock
suspended just above him creaking, and shifting;
he writhes now, so they say, in an Eternal Flinch.

Pelops is the son of Tantalus, the son of
Pelops, is Atreus, Atreus feuding with
his brother Thyestes sits Thyestes down—
I will not linger on this—to a dark
and savory dish, I think a pie, made from the
meat of Thyestes' sons and when Thyestes has
his fill, pushes the plate away with a sigh,
Atreus whips aside a curtain, reveals the
severed heads, the little hands picks up a hand and
waves it: hello papa, hello papa, hello.

Time passes and events occur but I move to
the birth of Atreus's sons; the Glorious
Agamemnon—it seemed like glory at the time—
and Menelaus and Menelaus marries
Helen. Helen. Who the gods loathe. He marries her—
and think a moment—it could have been otherwise—

Agamemnon marries Helen's sister, lovely
 Clytemnestra who bears him Iphigenia
 and then another daughter—myself, Electra,
 and one son: exiled, returned, destroyed: Orestes.

On his return from Troy Clytemnestra rinses
 Agamemnon in the bath, she sponges the dust
 from his broad shoulders and she gathers as he sinks
 deeper into the hot water into the arms
 of his wife a length of white linen. It's been ten
 years he's been gone, ten minutes in the house, she draws
 the fabric through the water her fingers soapy
 and merciful against the knot of his back the
 scars on his neck weaves murmuring sweetly into
 his hair the cloth through his knees and she's nibbling his
 ear just nips under and around the ankles he
 sighs with pleasure shifts and stretches out his length and
 can't, his legs, tethered. His eyes open. Standing in
 the doorway is a man with the sleek soft body
 of ten years not on ships, not in battle, but in
 between sheets. Aegisthus. The only—uneaten—
 son of Thyestes steps forward, in his shaking
 hand a gaudy sword, never damped with sweat or blood,
 ornamental, practically a party favor.

Blood on tile in the morning; bathwater and soap.

And why she does this? I'm a virgin. I can't say.
 It's a mystery I leave for you to consider.

And then Apollo. Can I possibly accuse
 a God of injustice? Of course not. He wouldn't
 let Orestes go he worked at him he prodded
 him he coaxed him until he yes, yes until he
 killed the woman who gave birth to him an act not
 as it develops, without some controversy
 in the eyes of the world but in obedience
 to Apollo he killed her, and what I could
 do to help, although only a woman, I did.

And now Orestes lies here, a wreckage, his clothes
 drenched in her blood, his skin saturated with it,
 the goddesses who now pursue him I don't dare
 to name. It's six days since her murder he doesn't
 eat, won't bathe. He lies there wrapped in his jacket. When
 the fever breaks he's lucid and he sobs. Other
 times he staggers up and lunges forward like a
 colt with broken legs, running from fire. Our city,

Argos, decrees that no one is to shelter us,
or give us food: we are polluted, matricides.

Today the people assemble to vote on our
sentence... If we die, it will be by stoning.
Are we more, do you think, or less fortunate
than our ancestor Tantalus who always fears
but never meets his fate?

We have one hope: Uncle
Menelaus—blown off course on his return from
the war and after ten years fruitless wandering
has finally made his way home. His ship is anchored
on the headlands, only five miles away. Helen
he sent ahead last night by darkness, in fear that
those with sons, husbands, fathers dead on the fields and
beaches of Troy would see her and be moved to rage.
Troy: glittering, ravishing, ravished, broken, burnt,
toppled, razed, annihilated Troy. That Helen.

She's inside the house. Weeping for her dead sister
but she has one consolation, Menelaus
before he sailed for Troy, brought their daughter here from
Sparta, and left her in my mother's care. Helen,
in looking at her, can't choose between laughter and
tears, and while she dabbles in both I watch the road
for Menelaus. We're too weak to make any
defense. Our house, once so powerful, crumbles.

(HELEN enters, carrying tray with libations.)

HELEN.

Electra. Oh. Oh, I can see her, my poor dead
sister, I can see her in your face. And ah your
father. Oh. What it is to see the dead again.

(She steps toward her; ELECTRA steps back.)

And you, you're half wild, with the bony look of an
old virgin. Come, come with me inside: I have oils
that smell of meadows and I'll do your hair, oh. No.
Oh what am I thinking no one will marry you
now, oh

(She sees ORESTES.)

Sweet, how *are* you poor Orestes how he
must suffer oh but he killed her, killed her his own—
but I don't blame you. I blame Apollo. I don't
think it pollutes me to speak with you let me—see,

I'm not ashamed to touch—

(She steps forward to touch ELECTRA's cheek, ELECTRA steps back.)

But I am so sorry
to come and find my sister gone. I sailed for Troy
and I never said goodbye. I wasn't myself
at all, I know that now, a God gripped me and what
I did I did not knowing what I did. Ah, but
how I miss her now. How unlucky we have been.

ELECTRA.

How lucky 'we' have been, you can see for yourself:
Here I am keeping sleepless watch over a corpse
(and he is a corpse, except for a little breath).
You're still gorgeous and Menelaus his ship packed
full of Trojan gold is richer than when he left.

HELEN.

How long has he been huddled here like this?

ELECTRA.

Ever since he murdered his mother.

HELEN.

Sad wrecked boy. And Clytemnestra. Oh.

ELECTRA.

There you have it: this has broken him.

HELEN.

Niece I have a favor to ask you.

ELECTRA. (Ironically:)

Of course. I'm doing nothing of importance here.

HELEN.

Thank you. Will you go to my sister's grave for me?

(A beat.)

ELECTRA.

To my mother's grave? Why do you ask me to go.

HELEN.

To bring her libations. And a lock of my hair.

ELECTRA.

Nothing stops you from visiting the grave yourself.

HELEN.

I'd rather not be seen on the streets of Argos.

ELECTRA.

Meek now? When you left your husband you were so bold!

HELEN.

Yes what you say is true. Although it is unkind.

ELECTRA.

But why on earth would you feel uncomfortable here?

HELEN.

The men whose sons. Died. In Troy. I fear their anger.

ELECTRA.

Yes it's true you are a topic in the city.

HELEN.

Oh! That's why I'm begging you. Please go in my place!

ELECTRA.

You cannot ask me to look at my mother's grave.

(Beat.)

HELEN.

It would be so strange, and cold, to send a servant.

ELECTRA.

Well then why don't you send little Hermione?

HELEN.

O—send an unmarried girl out into public?

ELECTRA. *(Also an unmarried girl.)*

Duty to her aunt. Who raised her. In your absence.

HELEN.

Yes of course. Yes that makes sense. Yes. Hermione!
Come out, my love.

(HERMIONE enters.)

Oh. It's still so startling that you've grown. I look for your bare shining face and what I see are knees. Please darling take this, and my hair. Mix the honey and the milk and pour it with the wine onto the grave. Stand on the new heaped earth and say: "Helen, your sister, sends these gifts to you darling she would come herself *(Beat.)* but is afraid of the mob." Then ask for her kindness for me, for you, for my husband, and for these two, destroyed by a God. That's it. Quick quick. As quickly as you can through the streets—don't spill—make the offering—but don't rush that—and then quick as a bunny back as quick as you can.

(They exit.)

ELECTRA.

Human nature is a curse. Did you see? Ten years
in the Trojan citadel. Annihilation
of Troy, the ruin of Greece, Agamemnon slain,
my brother and myself reduced to shambles, wraiths.
And none of this changes her. She clips just the tips
of her curls to keep her beauty. How revolting
she must be to the immortal Gods!

(The CHORUS appears.)

Oh but no,
my friends who lament with me, they'll wake Orestes
he'll start raving and I know I'll break down in tears
Friends quietly, silently, make no noise and no

(An instrument makes a sound.)

clattering. I know you only mean to be kind.
Soft, soft, light little footsteps.

(The CHORUS is doing the Tiptoe dance.)

CHORUS.

Silent silent feet.

ELECTRA.

Now please step back from the bed.

CHORUS. *(Loudly and enthusiastically.)*

We're backing away!

ELECTRA.

Ai ai but keep your voice down too, no louder than
the lowest sound, than the softest flute, than a breath.

CHORUS.

See how gently and how quietly we can speak.

ELECTRA.

That's right. Now come here—so lightly, so silently
he's finally asleep—and tell me why you're here.

CHORUS.

We came because we want to know how he is now.

ELECTRA.

He breathes but it's shallow. Only a broken gasp.

CHORUS.

Oh the poor boy.

ELECTRA.

If you wake him you kill me.

CHORUS.

Oh the poor boy. Shattered by the command of the God.

ELECTRA. (*Working herself up:*)

These are his sufferings! Injustice moved Apollo when he muttered through his Oracle. Unjustice forced my brother to the murder of his mother.

CHORUS.

Look! He's stirring.

ELECTRA.

Yes because you thoughtless wretches have woken him up with all of your shouting.

CHORUS.

But

no, look, he's subsided.

ELECTRA.

Go, just please go away back to the noisy inferno you came from but for God's sake do it quietly.

CHORUS.

See, he sleeps now.

ELECTRA.

Good.

(She sings in a very high register, dramatically:)

NIGHT, DIVINE NIGHT,
LUSTROUS QUICKENING
OF THE DARKNESS

OH NIGHT! OH NIGHT!
RISE UP FROM
YOUR ENDLESSNESS
SWEEP TOWARDS US
FROM THE NOTHINGNESS
POUR TOWARDS US
FROM OBLIVION
IT IS DESPAIR
THAT WE ARE LIVING IN
WE ARE DESTROYED
THIS IS DISASTER
BEAT YOUR WINGS!

SURGE EVEN FASTER!
BEAT YOUR WINGS!—

(The CHORUS, which has been dancing or swaying quietly, takes up a complementary keen.)

—AI
NOT ANOTHER SOUND
GOOD FRIENDS, YOUR SILENCE.
YOUR TOTAL SILENCE. FAR FROM HIS BED.
WHERE HE IS SLEEPING. I BEG
YOU.

CHORUS.

Tell us how it will end for him.

ELECTRA.

Only in his death. He doesn't even eat now.

CHORUS.

So there's no hope then.

ELECTRA.

Apollo splayed us on his
alter when he compelled us to the murder of
our bloodthirsty mother—oh unholy act!

CHORUS.

You only did what was right.

ELECTRA.

But not what was good.

You gave life, Mother, and took it; you slew and you
were slain; we were born in your blood and now we drown
in it. My brother's only lingering before
vanishing and I, I exist without living,
a ghost in the sunlight, my life long since dissolved
in moans, clenched fists, tears in the night: unwed, childless
me, desolate, my only life a string of dry days.

CHORUS.

Electra. He's so still now. See if he's breathing.

(ORESTES wakes and stretches.)

ORESTES.

Oh sleep, sleep, sweet witchcraft, loyal, merciful, you
came when I most needed you you genius goddess
of oblivion who has the words to praise you?
No one, you, you have my gratitude forever!

I don't know how I got here how did I get here?
I was...huh, I don't know, there's a kind of a blank.

ELECTRA.

I was so glad to see you finally asleep.
Here do you want me to lift you up a little?

ORESTES.

Yes if you can, lift me, and (*Licking his lips:*) uh there's a crust on
my lips, and around my eyes, it's in the lashes.

(She takes out a handkerchief, licks the end of it, and dabs at his face.)

ELECTRA. (*Fondly:*)

Disgusting monster. No don't worry, I don't mind
it at all, I'm just so glad you're feeling better.

ORESTES.

Sit by me, and I'll prop myself up against your
side, brush the hair from my face I can't see through it.

ELECTRA.

Poor suffering head, look how snarled and chaotic
it is: it's dirty and swirled and knotted and wild.

ORESTES.

Oh okay lay me back, lay me back on the bed.
The fits leave me and I'm useless, almost boneless.

ELECTRA.

There you go. A healthy man can leap from his bed but
a sick man sinks down into it, and can't break free.

ORESTES.

Now lift me up again, and now turn me over—
I'm afraid the ill are impossible to please.

ELECTRA.

I can move your feet onto the ground. It's been so
long since you touched the earth: and change is always good.

ORESTES.

Walking seems like something a healthy man would do;

(As he swings his feet over with her help.)

If you can't *be* healthy then by all means *seem* it.

ELECTRA.

Now listen darling, listen to me while you can,
the Furies are gone now and you've got to think straight—

ORESTES.

Something's happened. If it's wonderful, excellent; but if it's trouble I have my share already.

ELECTRA.

Menelaus is here. He returned last night. His ship is in the harbor *he's come back to Argos*.

ORESTES.

Now? He's come now? That can't be true, if it is we have hope—our uncle owes our father *everything*.

ELECTRA.

I swear to you it's true. You'll believe it when you see Helen, still perfumed with smoldering Troy.

ORESTES.

I'd envy him more if he returned without her. That woman is a radioactive packet.

ELECTRA.

The shame our grandfather must feel, can you imagine it: both of his daughters hated throughout Greece.

ORESTES.

Don't only deplore them don't just mouth the words you must make the choice to have a very different heart—

(He jolts or something.)

ELECTRA.

Orestes, your eyes, I can see your thoughts whirling. How can you slip away so quickly you were just sane!

(He covers his eyes with his hands.)

ORESTES.

No I can't look, no I don't want to see them—blood splotted eyes, limbs writhing and sliding, heaving forward—

ELECTRA.

Sweetheart no, there's nothing there. Sit back, open your eyes. Nothing is as bad as what you imagine.

(He opens his eye. Sees something.)

ORESTES.

Mother hold them back! They're bounding towards me! Apollo they're going to kill me now, rip my throat— Priestess of death! Goddesses of nothingness!

(He begins to thrash about.)

(ELECTRA reaches around his back and clasps him.)

ELECTRA.

I won't let go of you. I won't give up on you.

ORESTES. (*Sharp intake of breath, freezes, caution, sly glance back.*)

From nowhere. I thought I had my eye on each one of you but you leapt from the air. (*Beat.*) Who can help me?

ELECTRA.

No one can help us if a god hates us

(*He turns suddenly and grips ELECTRA by the throat and hair.*)

ORESTES.

Ah ha!

Flap your ghastly black wings! Twirl your red spattered eyes!
Gnash your slippery fangs and flick that nasty tongue—
You can drag me to hell but you'll do it with your
feathers in my teeth!

(*He drops her.*)

Where is my bow? Apollo
gave me a horn tipped bow to defend myself from
ghoulies armed with lunacy—ah, yes, that's right, now

(*He locates an imaginary bow.*)

(*He's aiming into an imaginary middle distance.*)

we have it: some pampered immortal is about
to receive a very human shot across the
bow unless she hoists her mainsail and skedaddles—
oi! You listening? Fwing! Fwing! Fwing! Don't you see them?
Zinging towards you, my deadly speedy feathered friends.

No no!

Enough of this! Shoo! Churn your wings up through the skies!
Blame Apollo, blame his oracles, don't blame me!

.....oh.....

I'm raving. I'm out of breath. I'm out of bed. The
surge has passed, the wave receded, the sea is calm.

(*ELECTRA's head is buried in her robe.*)

Electra are you crying? Won't you look at me?
It breaks my heart that you suffer this with me. You
stood by me but it was my arm plunged the knife in—
no it was Apollo who spurred me on, what he
drove me to, full of opinion on what is right

and what is wrong but unwilling to dirty his own hands. I think if I had asked our father, face to face, should I kill her, he would have touched my cheek and told me no, he would have begged me 'no, don't thrust your sword into her throat; her blood won't bring me back to life and it will eat you away'. Electra, Dry your tears. Let me see your face. We have nothing left. All that we can do is to comfort each other.

(ELECTRA *looks up.*)

You're almost as filthy as I am and just as thin. Go inside. Wash your face and eat a little. How will you look after me if you're in pieces?

ELECTRA.

I'll live as long as you live, and die when you do—
I'd be helpless without you, a woman alone.
Lie here and rest a while, breathe slowly, eat something,
and think of anything but that which frightens you.
Unreality is as exhausting as truth.

(ELECTRA *enters the palace, ORESTES returns to bed.*)

CHORUS. (*Sings & dances:*)

AI AI AI AI...AH AI AI AI AI AI AI AI AI...AH

THRONGING, TERRIFYING / WHEELING, TURNING
PINIONS UNFURLING / WINGS SET & LOCK
FURIES! FURIES! FUR—

DARK LADIES OF THE UPPER STRATOSPHERE
REEKING OF SORROW, DRENCHED WITH WAILING
DRUMMING WITH YOUR FEET ON THE BRIGHT
STRETCHED AIR

AVENGERS OF BLOODSHED, LAUNCHED AND SAILING

I AM BEGGING YOU, I AM BEGGING YOU
RELEASE HIM, DISGORGE HIM, *VOMIT HIM UP!*

(*Spoken:*)

Poor fool the ruin you came to how you
Were undone, kneeling at the oracle
An old woman swooning in fumes, *Delphi*,
Holy Delphi chamber of prophecy
Where bright Apollo spoke, and *chewed you up*

(*Sung:*)

NOT THE WRENCHING GLORIOUS MADNESS OF WINE
OR THE DEEP UNFURLING MADNESS OF LUST

gone. Glaucus is a sailor's god, rough but reliable; and we wept bitterly. We reached the harbor here I was eager to fold Orestes and Clytemnestra in my arms, to know they were safe. I heard the news from a sailor at the dock. So. If one of you young ladies can tell me where I will find Agamemnon's son. He was a child burrowed in his mother's skirts when I left for Troy; I wouldn't know his face.

ORESTES.

You look for me, Menelaus. This is, I am, Orestes. I will tell you willingly what I have suffered, and done. But first I am on my knees, and I am clinging to you I am begging you you have arrived at the perfect moment.

MENELAUS.

What am I looking at is this a corpse?

ORESTES.

I'm breathing, and assembled; only that.

MENELAUS.

Unfortunate man. Your knotted hair. Like a beast.

ORESTES.

It's what I've done that has made me bestial.

MENELAUS.

Your dry unblinking eyes, and that terrible stare.

ORESTES.

All that's left of what I was is my name.

MENELAUS.

How can this thing be Agamemnon's son.

ORESTES.

No longer his son; I'm my mother's killer now.

MENELAUS.

Yes I've heard. Better if it's mentioned with restraint.

ORESTES.

Alright. The God did not restrain himself with me.

MENELAUS.

What has happened to you? You are wasted away.

ORESTES.

It's my brain, in all of it's horrible glory.

MENELAUS.

It is important to concentrate, and make sense.

ORESTES.

Remorse, more than anything, remorse is destroying me.

MENELAUS.

She's a fierce goddess. Yes. There are ways to dodge her.

ORESTES.

And fits of madness. Payment for my mother's death.

MENELAUS.

These fits of madness, when did they begin what day?

ORESTES.

They began the day we buried my poor mother.

MENELAUS.

Where were you, inside? Or sitting by the pyre?

ORESTES.

By the ashes. Watching her bones cool.

MENELAUS.

Were you alone? Was there anyone to aid you?

ORESTES.

Pylades. Friend in murder, and madness.

MENELAUS.

And what do you see, when these fits grab you?

ORESTES.

I see three—like women, but more like night.

MENELAUS.

I know who you mean. And I won't name them.

ORESTES.

You're sensible. They are astonishing.

MENELAUS.

So it's they who have brought you to this state.

ORESTES.

They howl for me, they slaver at my heels!

MENELAUS.

It's only right that the wrong should suffer.

ORESTES.

I do have a recourse. My final one.

MENELAUS.

Suicide? I would advise against it.

ORESTES.

Apollo. I murdered on his orders.

MENELAUS.

They were strange, corrupt, indecent orders.

ORESTES.

We're slaves to the Gods. Whatever the Gods may be.

MENELAUS.

And he offers you no help, Apollo.

ORESTES.

He waits. He bides his time. He is Divine.

MENELAUS.

How long has it been, since your mother's death?

ORESTES.

It's been six days now. The pyre is still warm.

MENELAUS.

And how do you stand in the city now?

ORESTES.

So hated that no one will speak with me.

MENELAUS.

Do you still hold Agamemnon's scepter?

ORESTES.

Keep the scepter? No. The condemned don't rule.

MENELAUS.

Do you know how they intend to proceed?

ORESTES.

The city votes today on our sentence.

MENELAUS.

Why don't you run? Flee and cross the border.

ORESTES.

We're surrounded by a forest of steel.

MENELAUS.

Argive troops? Men hired by your enemies?

ORESTES.

Troops, citizens: everyone wants us dead.

MENELAUS.

You've endured so much. It could not be worse.

ORESTES.

You are the refuge that I have hoped for!
Look at you: successful, triumphant—this
is your moment, we're desperate, don't horde your
glory, take on our trouble, and repay
our father for what he gave to you, for
everything he lost for you, with our *lives*.

(The CHORUS points offstage.)

CHORUS.

Now comes the Spartan Tyndareus
struggling against his aged body,
bearing down upon us. His hair is shorn
to the skull, and he is wearing black.

ORESTES.

My Grandfather. Oh, oh Uncle, this is
the man, of all men, I most dread to face:
My grandfather. He held me in his arms
when I was small, he lifted me up, spun
me, flung me high into the air and caught
me, while I shrieked, and giggled, he kissed me,
he and gentle Leda, they loved me as
much as their own two sons and I and my
heart catches and tears and my soul chills what
I have done what I have done in return.

Darkness, enter. Capture me and hide me,
let a cloud spread thickly in front of
me so that I will not I can't look into
his eyes.

(Enter TYNDAREUS.)

TYNDAREUS.

Where is my daughter's husband, where
is Menelaus? I was pouring wine
onto the earth at Clytemnestra's grave
when I heard he had finally arrived,
with...his wife, safe after so many years.
Who can lead me to him? It has been so
long, and I want to take him by the hand.

MENELAUS.

Venerable Tyndareus! Ramrod straight
and handsome as ever, I wish you joy.

TYNDAREUS.

Joy to *you* my son in law, joy—oh, Gods.
Here at the door to the house is the snake
who struck his mother: livid-eyed, foul, and
loathsome. You speak to it, Menelaus?

MENELAUS.

If I do? His father was dear to me.

TYNDAREUS.

Can you still call it Agamemnon's son?

MENELAUS.

I do. I pity and must honor him.

TYNDAREUS.

Ah. You think like a Barbarian now.

MENELAUS.

It is Greek custom to honor your kin.

TYNDAREUS.

No Greek will place himself above the law.

MENELAUS.

Slavish obedience is not morality.

TYNDAREUS.

That is a slippery, modern wisdom.

MENELAUS.

Or one beyond the angry, and the old.

TYNDAREUS.

These *sophistications* are more than your
man deserves. The right and the wrong of this are
clear to anyone. My daughter killed her
husband. An abomination. Which I
shall never defend. He should have punished
her as law and religion require: he
should have thrown her from the house. Removed her
from society. He would now have an
excellent reputation and the throne
of Argos. Instead: disaster, and now

he will meet the same fate as his mother.

He had every right to judge her;
but his judgment has made him worse than her.

I will ask you this Menelaus. A man's wife kills him. The son kills his mother in revenge and is killed in turn by his own brother avenging their mother, when does this frenzy end? Our ancestors had the answer: exile. Let no one pollute his hands with another man's blood. I have only contempt for rapacious women and my daughters most of all. I will not speak to Helen again and I find your efforts to regain that trash astonishing. But the *law* which protects them, which protects every one of us from the passions of others, from the ruin of cities and the collapse of nations I will protect that sacred law with my dying breath. What

(He suddenly turns to ORESTES.)

was in your heart, wretch, when your mother knelt at your feet, when your mother pulled the breast that had nourished you from her robes and begged you 'no'? I was not there to see it. Thinking of it these weak old eyes run with tears. The gods loathe you, that we know: they have made you mad, yes your craven desperate look prosecutes you sufficiently there is no need of further witness to your crimes.

My daughter is dead and a death richly deserved but not at the hands of her son.

My life has been honorable, fortunate, they would have said I died a happy man but for my daughters. There my fate, torqued.

CHORUS.

In our children we send our heart into the world unguarded. Lucky the man whose children do not destroy his happiness.

ORESTES.

I think how can I speak to you sir. Each word I say will inflame you, and your gray hair haunts me but I will speak yes I on the one hand yes I was wrong to have killed my mother, yes, but I am on the other hand right, in avenging my father.

What should I have done? Your daughter—I can't bear to call her my mother—led a life of private and unholy luxury and in saying this I shame myself but I will speak anyway: Aegisthus was a secret husband in my father's house how could I not hate her? How could I not avenge him? While my father, so far from home, bore arms in the command of all Greece she wrapped her arms around her lover she sinned and knowing, knowing that she sinned she brought judgment not upon herself but on my father—for her *lust* she killed him.

In the Gods name—and in mentioning the Gods I'm ahead of myself but still—I should sit by and I should do nothing? What would my father have done to me then? His avenging spirits would have torn me apart—or does my mother have Furies, while he, who is more deeply wronged, has none?

And Apollo who speaks from Delphi, from the navel of the world, unerringly—when he speaks all of mankind obeys him—It was on his orders that I killed my mother send *him* into exile, put *him* to death he's the guilty one here not me what else should I have done? If the god's name can't clear me from pollution if the god won't lift a finger to save me where is there refuge in this world for anyone?

It is you, sir, aged respectable sir who have undone me by rearing up a wicked daughter thanks to her I've lost my father and have killed my mother no

don't say that the deed was wrong say only that I'm ruined by it.

CHORUS.

Women are always a complication and a difficulty in the lives of men.

TYNDAREUS.

Your brazenness, your gleeful refusal to curb your tongue, your deliberate, savage,

desire to wound me only ignites my enthusiasm for your death. I came here to tend my daughter's tomb but now I will not leave until I see you in the earth beside her. I go now to the Argive assembly and when I am done there the city will come crashing down on you and your sister—and that's a threat I mean literally—you will be stoned to death; she deserves to die even more than you do: a shrill and malevolent sprite, all wrath and gossip, she urged you onwards whispering in your ear, claiming to have dreamt of Agamemnon crying vengeance, lingering on the lurid details of your mother's adultery (a sin for which Clytemnestra is now, we can only hope, amply punished by the Gods below) Incandescent, until the palace was ablaze with her hate. Menelaus I trust you will hear me: don't make your bed with murderers and side against the righteous from sentiment—if you protect him you oppose the wrath of heaven, and of me.

(He exits.)

ORESTES.

Go then. And Menelaus and I can speak to one another freely, like men—
Uncle you are pacing. Back...and forth.

MENELAUS.

Quiet. I've got to think this one out. I'm trying to work out the best way to proceed.

ORESTES.

Don't make a final decision now. Hear what I have to say first, and then decide.

MENELAUS.

There are times when silence is better than speech, and there are times when speech is better than silence.

ORESTES.

Okay then. I'm going to speak at great length. Long speeches are better than short ones and I want to be sure that you understand

me. Menelaus. I'm asking you to repay the debt you owe my father not with money but with my life. I have done wrong. And my wrong requires wrong from you.

My father was wrong to lead the Greeks to Troy, yes, for Helen's wrong. He did that wrong for you because you were dear to him, and you asked him. Give me that. Don't consider what I'm asking of you, if it's right, if it's wrong, think only that I *am* asking you and I'm not asking you what you asked of my father: ten years of his life ten years of combat, danger, ten years on a filthy beach in a barbarian land away from wife, from family, from home. I ask only that you make a stand with us this one day.

And as for what happened at Aulis where the fleet had gathered to set sail for Troy: twenty years ago—it could have ended there it would have ended there the wind had stalled and the troops were restless, ready to give the whole thing up and sneak for home but Odysseus, crafty, and unwilling to lose your war, announced to the camp that the Goddess withheld the wind, and that she required a sacrifice. So while your own daughter Hermione nestled safe in Argos my mother packed a wedding dress and traveled with Iphigenia to a beach full of soldiers and there, on a white rock by the bright sea, my sister's throat was slit open, blood pouring into the salt air while my mother screamed, and the men, mesmerized, forgot their families and their untilled fields until the winds turned and the sails caught no you took my sister I'm not in a position to drive a hard bargain you need not kill Hermione but give me my life or or think of it don't think that it's *my* life you're giving me, Orestes, think that I am the last of my father's line and when I die the House

of Tantalus crumbles beneath me save
 as he would beg you to my father's house.
 You're going to say it's impossible yes
 it's impossible that's when we *need* friends
 when it's all an impossibility—
 when the gods give us success we don't need
 love; for the lucky, the gods are enough.

(Tries again:)

This isn't flattery or desperation and
 I don't want you to think that but—Helen:
 the whole world knows you love your wife
 and I beg you I beg you in her name—

(To himself:)

Oh what have I come to, I will stop at
 nothing, apparently, listen to me—

What does it matter: I do what I do
 for the whole house, all of my family
 the living the dead the cursed I am on
 my knees pleading for the entire line.

(To MENELAUS again:)

Uncle. Imagine your brother is here
 with us now. That his spirit floats above
 us. His armour glinting, his face grave and
 Imagine that when I speak, you hear his
 voice.

I've said everything I can. I only
 ask for my life. Which every man craves.

CHORUS.

I am only a woman but I beg
 you: help where you are needed. It is in
 your power.

(Bit of a ghastly pause.)

MENELAUS.

Orestes you have every claim on me.
 You're a man I have a real regard for
 in a difficult position, and my
 kin. I wouldn't think myself a man if
 I weren't willing to fight for you, willing
 even to die for you, if God gives me
 that power. Let's think this through. My fighting

force is sadly reduced, and the patience of my allies is exhausted: we can't take the city on in battle—it's noble but useless to die fighting. But with words, Words. We may be able to get somewhere. Nothing is so formidable that it can't be managed by tact, a gentle *word* will often succeed where an army fails—where we seem to agree, we can be most persuasive. You're a Romantic, Orestes, and you're tired, and you want a sword in your hand and to have done with it but we can't fight our troubles single handed. I'll go into the city, see what I can do.

(*He exits.*)

ORESTES.

Useless coward! You'll fight to the ends of the earth for a slut, but won't break a sweat for your kin. Run! That's right, shake your fanny and flee! All Agamemnon did for you: nothing. He's deserted you father, he's betrayed me, nothing stands between us and the wrath of the people, my last hope gone.

But wait, I see Pylades, best of friends, returned from Phocis—his sandals tearing the earth behind him! There is no sight more welcome than a friend in difficulty.

PYLADES.

I *hurtled* here: coming into town the streets were packed, the people moving in a crowd to the amphitheater; I asked why they said they were meeting now against you and your sister, that they mean to kill you both immediately what is this what has happened, tell me how you are, you are my brother, you know that, my dearest friend.

ORESTES.

We're destroyed. That's pretty much all of it.

PYLADES.

Then I'm demolished. I'll share what you have.

ORESTES.

Menelaus has turned his back on us.

PYLADES.

Of course. A rotten wife rots her husband.

ORESTES.

Slow to arrive, but so quick to disappoint.

PYLADES.

And that blond bitch. Did he bring her with him?

ORESTES.

Better to say that it was she brought him.

PYLADES.

Where is that one-woman army grinder?

ORESTES.

In my house. If I still can call it mine.

PYLADES.

So what did you say to Menelaus?

ORESTES.

Please, I said. Don't stand by and watch us die.

PYLADES.

And he said what I want to know to that.

ORESTES.

He was careful, to not say *anything*.

PYLADES.

But he wasn't he what was his excuse?

ORESTES.

We were interrupted—my grandfather.

PYLADES.

Tyndareus. Not a friend I suppose?

ORESTES.

No. Menelaus found him compelling.

PYLADES.

So he doesn't have the balls to help you.

ORESTES.

He's a brave man in front of the ladies.

PYLADES.

Then you're in trouble, is there no way out?

ORESTES.

The city votes on it this afternoon.

PYLADES.

It's desperate. Grab Electra and escape.

ORESTES.

There are guards watching us on every side.

PYLADES. (*Putting it together:*)

I saw the streets closed off. That's all for you.

ORESTES.

We are like a citadel under siege.

PYLADES.

Ask what about me. I'm finished too.

ORESTES.

Tell me what happened. Your troubles are mine.

PYLADES.

My father has exiled me from Phocis.

ORESTES.

Is this a private quarrel or was it...

PYLADES.

My 'unholy' assistance in your...

ORESTES.

My wretched life will ruin yours as well.

PYLADES.

I endure it. I'm no Menelaus.

ORESTES.

They may try to put you to death also...

PYLADES.

I fall under Phocian jurisdiction.

ORESTES.

We've got to think.

PYLADES.

About what to do next.

ORESTES.

I tell the assembly—

PYLADES.

Your deeds were just?

ORESTES.

I avenged my—

PYLADES.

They may arrest you right there.

ORESTES.

Or I can curl up here and wait.

PYLADES.

Like a coward.

ORESTES.

Then what should I do.

PYLADES.

Is there safety for you here?

ORESTES.

None.

PYLADES.

And if you go there is a glimmer of hope.

ORESTES.

Possibly.

PYLADES.

So going is better than staying.

ORESTES.

I should go then.

PYLADES.

If you die it's a better death.

ORESTES.

And my cause is just.

PYLADES.

Pray they will see it that way.

ORESTES.

Some may pity me.

PYLADES.

Moved by the fate of a prince.

ORESTES.

And the death of a king.

PYLADES.

Yes, yes it could happen!

ORESTES.

Then onward! I won't die cowering.

PYLADES.

Yes! Let's go!

ORESTES.

Shall we tell Electra?

PYLADES.

Oh, no. Most certainly not.

ORESTES.

There would be tears and wailing.

PYLADES.

Wouldn't be lucky.

ORESTES.

No, silence is our way.

PYLADES.

Far less time consuming.

ORESTES.

There is just one thing...

PYLADES.

What is it Friend, out with it.

ORESTES.

If I begin to rave again—

PYLADES.

I'm at your side.

ORESTES.

Madmen are repellent.

PYLADES.

Never to me. Not you.

ORESTES.

They say insanity is infectious...

PYLADES.

Huh. Pfeh.

ORESTES.

You aren't afraid.

PYLADES.

Fear just isn't part of friendship.

ORESTES.

Then lead on friend!

PYLADES.

Hurry, we must arrive before the vote.

Now lean on me, that's right, I'll hold you up.

It doesn't matter what the people think,
the stares of the crowd; my loyalty is worth
nothing, if I can't support you right now.

ORESTES.

Real comrades are your only true family.
Bonds of the spirit are stronger than blood
and a true friend is worth a thousand kin!

CHORUS. (*Sings & dances:*)

THE TIDAL WAVE OF GOLD AND PRIDE
THAT BURST THE GATES OF TROY ASIDE
NOW DRAINS AWAY...

DRUNK BY MOUTHS BENEATH THE FLOOR
EVERYTHING THAT WENT BEFORE
AN ANTIC PLAY...

THAT DARLING BOY IS NOW A SNACK
FURIES STRETCH HIM ON THE RACK
AND HIT REPLAY.

THAT DARLING BOY IS NOW A SNACK
FURIES STRETCH HIM ON THE RACK
AND HIT REPLAY:

ONE. (*As CLYTEMNESTRA:*)

YOUR FACE IN MY HANDS
MY TEARS ON YOUR CHEEK
YOUR EYE AND MY EYE
HUSH JUST LET ME SPEAK

ALL.

(Darling no darling no darling no)

ONE.

YOUR SWORD AT MY THROAT
MY HANDS ON YOUR CHEST
YOUR HAND ON MY CHEEK
YOU DRANK FROM THIS BREAST

ALL.

(DARLING NO DARLING NO DARLING NO)

ONE.

MY FACE IN YOUR HANDS
YOUR TEARS ON MY CHEEK

WE'RE HOLDING OUR BREATH
I DON'T DARE TO SPEAK

ALL.

(DARLING NO, DARLING NO NO DARLING
DARLING DARLING NO

DARLING NO DARLING NO! NO DARLING DARLING
DARLING NO...)

(Enter ELECTRA.)

ELECTRA.

Women where is Orestes? Has he been
seized by his madness and bolted away?

CHORUS.

Not at all, he's gone to face the citizens.

ELECTRA.

Oh no he didn't. No. What possessed him?

CHORUS.

Pylades. But a messenger arrives—
He'll soon tell us what we need to know.

MESSENGER.

Wretched Lady, unhappy Electra
daughter of grand general Agamemnon—

ELECTRA. (*Sinks to the ground.*)

Your first words tell me all I need to know.

MESSENGER.

The people have put it to a vote and
you and your brother are to die today.

ELECTRA.

Aiya! Aiya!

Oh, look, all my careful
imaginings, my rehearsals for this
moment have been for nothing: I'm trembling,
and about to faint. Tell me about the
trial. Tell me about the speeches—which words
led us to our death and what will happen
to us will we be stoned or put to sword?

MESSENGER.

I was coming into the city from
the country—rumor had already reached

us there and I wanted news of you and your brother—You will not remember me but I served your father loyally for many years, he was good to me and poor though I am I am not ungrateful—In the forum I saw a crowd, thronging up the hill to take their places in assembly “what” I asked “is this? Is war broken out again? Tell me” “Look over there” someone said and I saw a sight I did not expect to see and which I wish I had not seen:

Orestes, low and broken, held close by Pylades who led him like a brother, sharing with him every tentative step.

Now the Argives are gathered together and a herald rises “Who wishes to speak out his opinion. Shall Orestes, for the crime of matricide, live or die?”

And up like a shot stands Talthybius who was with your father at the sack of Troy, he is the kind of man who wishes I think not so much to speak as to be known to have spoken. He had lavish praise for your father but felt that you and your brother had set a bad precedent for arguments between parents and children. He smiles the while towards Menelaus who sits upright, very still and grave, like a man who feels the throne already firm beneath him— Next speaks lord Diomedes: he calls for banishment, not death to keep the city clean of blood guilt. There’s a storm of response to this: some in favor, some against, shouting on all sides, and then up stands a smooth and plausible man, shiny with self regard and a loud and easy speaker and his eloquence—paid for, I have no doubt, by Tyndareus who sat behind him smiling broadly and leaping up to whisper in his ear—bent the crowd for your immediate death by stoning.

The last to speak is an unpolished man from the country, a farmer, not much to

look at but blameless in his conduct and steady in his ways. He says for what he's done Orestes should be crowned at once for killing a wicked godless woman for how can men go off to war in peace if they leave behind them households any man can corrupt—this argument I'd say the better element seems to agree with.

Now stands Orestes and what he said was, I am sure, most convincing. Perhaps it was the *way* he said it that did not win approval from the crowd which loves a polished speaker his hair his speech was a little wild and your Grandfather's puppet urged his own point on to much success and at the counting of the votes you and your brother were condemned to death. Orestes did manage with great toil to win this much: you will not be stoned; he promises that by your own hands you will die today.

Your royalty is no help to you and divine Apollo has left you to die.

(MESSENGER *exits.*)

(*There is a terrible pause.*)

(*Spoken: slow, numb:*)

ELECTRA.

I lead the wailing Oh

CHORUS.

Oh, Oh Argos!

ELECTRA.

Raking my nails down my cheek

CHORUS.

Bloody and torn!

CHORUS.

Oh! Oh! Oh!

ELECTRA.

I beat my hand on the floor of the earth so that it sounds on the ceilings of hell

CHORUS.

Ai ai! Ai Ai! Ai Ai!

ELECTRA.

Let Persephone wonder
at the shaking
of her chandeliers

CHORUS.

Ai ah! Ai ah!

ELECTRA.

Let her take iron blades
and sheer the hair from her head!

CHORUS. (*Plunges into song:*)

NOW THE END OF THE LINE
NOW THE LAST OF THEIR DAYS
NOW THAT GLORIOUS HOUSE
NOW THOSE SHIMMERING MEN
VANISH
VANISH
VANISH
INTO THE HAZE

ELECTRA. (*Speaks:*)

Isn't it wretched to be human?
Years riddled with troubles and twists
and your fate, you can't help but notice—

CHORUS. (*Sings:*)

LUCK DOESN'T LAST FOR THE LIVING (NO)
JOY DOESN'T LINGER LONG (JOY DOES NOT LINGER LONG)
THE GOD IS DRIVING US FORWARD
THE WAVE HAS HURLED US ON
THE EARTH DISSOLVES BENEATH US
WE, SHIMMER, AND THEN WE'RE GONE
(WE SHIMMER
AND THEN
WE'RE GONE...
WE SHIMMER
AND THEN
WE'RE GONE...)

ELECTRA. (*Speaks:*)

Isn't it wretched to be human?
Years riddled with troubles and twists
and your fate, you can't help but notice—
it's the last thing you would expect.

CHORUS. (*Sings:*)

(WE SHIMMER, AND THEN, WE'RE GONE)

ELECTRA.

Oh how I wish

Oh how I wish I could go

If I could only go

CHORUS.

You can never go

ELECTRA.

To that rock hung up high
where Tantalus dangles
in the darkening sky

I would tell him our story
he would shudder and weep
how the sins of our blood
pull us into the deep

I want to return

CHORUS.

No you can never go back

ELECTRA.

To that moment in time
back to that banquet
back by his side
as he opens his lips
gleaming with pride
I want to cover his mouth
in that God dazzled room
I want to lead him away
but it's always too late he always

CHORUS.

Always always

ELECTRA.

Speaks too soon

CHORUS.

You can never go back.

ELECTRA.

I want to shout into space
where he dangles above:
in our family hate
always mingles with love—

(Ancient Greek [trans. in Appendix]:)

hin en threenoisin
anaboaso
geranti pateri
Tantaloi

(CHORUS joins in:)

hos eteken eteke
genetoras emethen
doman has
kateidon atas
tethripobamoni
stoli saloi
eleos eleos
hod erketai
ton thanoumenon
hiper
io o pandakrut
ephemeron
ethne polipona
stratelatan
Hellas, Hellas, Hellas

ELECTRA. (*Alone:*)

You will always be twisting
We will always be wrecked
Our fate, you can't help but notice
It's the last thing
You would ever
Expect.

CHORUS.

But here is Orestes, ready to die.
Pylades guides each step, like a brother.

(ORESTES and PYLADES enter.)

ELECTRA.

Oigaw! Oh brother. I look at you and
I see your grave, freshly piled with rock. I
see your funeral pyre, smoldering to ash.
This is my last look at you, my brain reels!

ORESTES.

That's enough. No more, no more cowardly
tears. It's a hard fate yes but endure it.

ELECTRA.

How can I be silent? This is the last sound these lips will ever make. This light the—

ORESTES.

This torture is too much on top of death—no more. Let our last moments be peaceful.

ELECTRA.

Your youth has been such misery, and your death so fast so soon—you should have your life!

ORESTES.

I beg you no, stop. I'm going to die yes but like a man, dry eyed and upright.

ELECTRA.

Not mourn? Not mourn? We are about to *end* Orestes and lose life which is so sweet!

ORESTES.

These thoughts are useless. This is useless. Will you choose the noose or shall I hone a sword?

ELECTRA.

You must kill me, brother. I won't let an Argive have that final satisfaction.

ORESTES.

Enough to have my mother's death on me I won't have yours; take your life how you like.

ELECTRA.

All right then. I can use a sword as well as you. But let me hold you a moment.

ORESTES.

If it will give you pleasure. If there is any pleasure for two so close to death.

(An embrace.)

ELECTRA.

Oh dearest one. Sweet. Precious body and inside of it my own heart, my own soul.

ORESTES.

This breaks me now. Why feel shame. I'll die a little boy, crying in his sister's arms.

ELECTRA.

I wish one sword could kill us both
and one cedar coffin receive us.

ORESTES.

That would be best, but we're a little short
of relatives to see us well buried.

We'll make sure our death is a noble one—
worthy of Agamamnon. I will thrust
my sword into my heart, like a prince, and
swear that you will be as bold and quick.

Pylades, you are our witness. And when
we both are dead, lay us in the family
tomb, side by side with our father. And so,
goodbye. I am going now to do it.

PYLADES.

Wait. Objection. You can't possibly think
I want to go on living while you die.

ORESTES.

There's no reason for you to die with me.

PYLADES.

No reason for me to live without you.

ORESTES.

You didn't kill your mother. As I did.

PYLADES.

I aided you. Also abetted you.

ORESTES.

Go back to your father. Meet his rage, and
live. You have your city, which I do not.
You have your father's house and a fortune.
The marriage to Electra which I did
promise you is off, but marry elsewhere,
have a family. The life that you will
have, have for me, who will have none at all.

PYLADES.

No no no, you're not understanding me.
May the ground buck me from it and the bright
air refuse my lungs if I desert you
and scurry off for my own freedom. You
can't deny that I was there. There? I worked
the whole plot out

(To ELECTRA:)

—with your aid; and I do
consider you my bride in all but name
and I will die with you—but since we are
to die—I’m dying with you, all
right? That’s settled?—Menelaus, who does
not know what it is to share the burdens
of his friends, should now be *educated*.

ORESTES.

Oh if I could see this before I die.

PYLADES.

Hold off the fancy swordplay, and listen.

ORESTES.

I don’t mind waiting if it means vengeance.

PYLADES.

Shhhh. Those women there, can they be trusted?

ORESTES.

These old friends? Don’t worry. They’re on our side.

PYLADES.

A bitter blow to Menelaus: kill Helen.

ORESTES.

How? I’m all for it if it can be done.

(PYLADES: *cutting throat gesture*.)

PYLADES.

The sword. She’s in your palace now correct?

ORESTES.

Oh yes. With paint chips, and fabric samples.

PYLADES.

She can redecorate her palace in Hell.

ORESTES.

She’s surrounded by her barbarians.

PYLADES.

I’m the last man to fear soft Trojan slaves.

ORESTES.

They’re vicious fast with mirrors and perfume.

PYLADES.

She brought her Trojan luxuries back here?

ORESTES.

You know Greece was always too small for her.

PYLADES.

Slaves are no match in a fight with free men.

ORESTES.

If we can only do this—I'd die *twice*.

PYLADES.

To see you well avenged? So would I.

ORESTES.

Take me through the plan now, every step.

PYLADES.

We enter the house: "Now we go to kill ourselves"

ORESTES.

Excellent. And then what happens next.

PYLADES.

We go to Helen: 'Ah, we're very unhappy'

ORESTES.

She weeps—but on the inside bubbles with delight.

PYLADES.

As do we, my friend. Ah yes, as do we.

ORESTES.

And then what next. How are we to kill her.

PYLADES.

We carry swords. Concealed in our coats.

ORESTES.

And we get rid of her attendants how.

PYLADES.

We lock all of them up in different rooms.

ORESTES.

Yes and whoever won't keep quiet we kill.

PYLADES.

And after that: I think our task is clear.

ORESTES.

Clear enough: the murder of Helen.

PYLADES.

And this, this is the *genius* of the plan:
to kill a better woman would be wrong,

savagery, but Helen we punish for all of Greece: for fathers slain, for brides made widows, for parents bereft. *There will be shouts of joy. Burnt offerings* will be sent to the *Gods*, the people will call down *blessings* on you. And after this day they will not call you Matricide, no, all that will be forgotten, you will have a better title: Orestes, Slayer of Helen the Killer of Men—it cannot be *borne* that Menelaus thrives while your father and you and your sister die; your mother—I'm going to leave that topic be – the bastard gets his rotten wife back only thanks to Agamemnon's spear and then he takes your throne and he leaves you to dangle in mid air *Let me die if I don't kill her*. And if the murder fails we take our torches, and we set this whole place on fire! Our rage will be famous. Our fury honored.

CHORUS.

Tyndareus' daughter disgraces the name of woman, and they all hate her.

ORESTES.

There is nothing, nothing of more value than a trusted friend, not wealth, a kingdom, you *mastermind*, at my side in danger: Yes I will die, but not before I ruin and repay those who have betrayed me. I am the son of Agamemnon a man who did not seize his power, but was *begged* to take it and ruled his free people like a god. And I will not dishonor him by dying meekly like a slave *vengeance* on Menelaus!

I only wish there were a way to do it and to live to kill, and not *be* killed that would be elegant... but this is a giddy and useless wish, a pleasant exercise of words...

ELECTRA. (*Cold quiet burning gripped by inspiration.*)

I know how to do it. I know how all of us can find freedom, and safety.

ORESTES.

I think only a god could give us that
but I know the strength of your brain: tell us.

ELECTRA.

All right listen—and you too Pylades.

ORESTES.

I have a feeling this will be good. Speak!

ELECTRA.

Helen's little daughter: Hermione.

ORESTES.

Raised by our mother yes I know the girl.

ELECTRA.

She has gone off to Clytemestra's tomb.

ORESTES.

There to do what. What are you suggesting.

ELECTRA.

There she pours libations on her aunt's grave.

ORESTES.

Great. And all this has what to do with us?

ELECTRA.

Seize her as a hostage on her return.

ORESTES.

And if we do this how does it help us.

ELECTRA.

When Helen is killed Menelaus will
lunge forward, ready to attack: until
he finds your sword at Hermione's throat.
If he's willing to trade you freedom for
his daughter's life then, yes, you let her run
into his arms. But if his temper flares
and he moves forward, you can press the blade
against her tender flesh, just enough to
draw blood—he'll soon calm down; he isn't brave
or bold by nature and that, gentlemen,
is my plan, and all that I have to say.

ORESTES.

The spirit of a man embodied in
a beautiful woman: die? You? There is
no one in this world who more deserves to

live Pylades what you lose if we fail—
and if we live, by the Gods, what a wife!

PYLADES.

There is nothing could make me happier
than to make this brilliant woman my bride.

ORESTES.

But when does Hermione get back? Your
plan is excellent but only if we
manage to nab the degenerate's spawn.

ELECTRA.

She should be here...at any moment.

ORESTES.

Perfect. Electra you wait here in front
to intercept her, and keep an eye out
for Menelaus or his friends: no one
must interrupt us—bang on the door if
anyone approaches. It's time to arm
ourselves, enter the house, and set to work.

(He prepares himself for prayer.)

O Father, now in the dark halls of Night,
your son Orestes calls to you: help us.

ELECTRA.

Father, come, if you hear our voices through
the deep earth come and protect your children.

PYLADES.

O Agamemnon, my father's kinsman,
hear my prayers as well and save your children.

ORESTES.

I killed my mother.

ELECTRA.

I handed him the sword.

PYLADES.

And I? I quenched his doubts and urged him on.

ORESTES.

For you, father.

ELECTRA.

I did not betray you.

PYLADES.

Does this not move you sir to hurry to their side?

ORESTES.

Tears are my libation.

ELECTRA.

Mine is wailing.

PYLADES.

Enough. Now is the time to act. If words penetrate the earth he hears us: Zeus, grant victory to this man, this woman, and to myself—three friends united in one struggle with one outcome: all to live or failing that, together all to die.

(PYLADES and ORESTES exit into palace)

ELECTRA.

My dear friends, noble women of Argos.

CHORUS.

My Lady? *We* still call you 'Lady' for you still are royal though you're soon to die.

ELECTRA.

I'll need half of you up on the main road; the rest guard the way that leads to the house.

CHORUS.

But why—what exactly is happening?

ELECTRA.

So that the Unexpected will not interrupt the bloody work within.

CHORUS A.

Let's hurry then, I'll take the East road.

CHORUS B.

I'll take this one leading to the West.

ELECTRA.

Keep your eyes on the move, look all ways.

CHORUS A.

Over here, over there. We're alert and watching everywhere.

ELECTRA.

Spin yourselves around.
Push your hair back if you need to see.

CHORUS A.

Here's someone on the road! Look who is that coming is that a townsman approaching?

ELECTRA.

Oh Gods we're done for, he will find us out and raise an alarm and our enemies—

CHORUS A.

No no no, wait, dust cloud, dust cloud sorry; there's no one coming towards us after all.

ELECTRA.

What about your side, is it still secure?

CHORUS B.

Alls clear here but watch for your area.

CHORUS A.

No there's no one coming this direction.

ELECTRA.

Keep quiet while I listen at the door.

(A very tense few beats.)

CHORUS. (Shouting at the Palace:)

What is the silence? What is the delay?
Where is the victim, dappled with her blood?!

ELECTRA.

There is no answer, Gods, O, my heart is pounding. Has her lovely face disarmed them?

CHORUS.

At any moment an armed soldier will rush at the palace on a rescue run.

ELECTRA.

Keep a closer lookout—pace the road! This is not a time to relax—move, move, move!

CHORUS.

We wheel about in every direction.

HELEN.

Help me! Men of Argos help me! Murder!

ELECTRA.

Did you hear that scream? Now they have begun the slaughter. That cry, I think, was Helen.

CHORUS.

Oh Zeus, Zeus, Unfailing Zeus, come to us.

HELEN.

Menelaus! Menelaus! Help me!

CHORUS and ELECTRA. (*Sing:*)

FLASH YOUR SWORDS! SLASH AND THRUST!
SLAUGHTER! SLAY! SMITE! DESTROY!
VENGEANCE FOR THE YEARS
SHE FILLED ALL GREECE WITH TEARS
THAT TRAITOROUS BITCH FROM TROY!

CHORUS A.

Quiet! Quiet! Silence everyone—Hush!
I hear the sound of footsteps on the road.

ELECTRA. (*Scarcely able to contain her excitement:*)

Dearest friends, it is Hermione and
she is walking right into the field of
slaughter. Now keep your voices low, she has
stumbled straight into our lair and she is
excellent prey if we can only catch her.
As you were before, calm as if nothing
is happening, I will let my face drain
of rapture and look sad and low, as if
nothing is happening.

Ah sweet girl, you're
back from Clytemnestra's tomb, attending
the grave and pouring honey to the dead.

HERMIONE.

Yes I came I first I secured her
favor but I was on the road and
I was still a long way off and I
heard I think from inside the palace
I heard I think a terrible cry.

ELECTRA.

Of course. We're all terribly sad here.

HERMIONE.

Oh don't tell me so! What is the news?

ELECTRA.

The city has sentenced us to death.

HERMIONE.

Oh no, no no not you my cousins!

ELECTRA.

Yes. And so we bear it as we must.

HERMIONE.

So then that was that terrible cry—

ELECTRA.

A suppliant bent at Helen's knee.

HERMIONE.

Who I beg you knelt there tell me now.

ELECTRA.

Orestes pled for mercy for us.

HERMIONE.

There was every reason then to shout.

ELECTRA.

Well why else would someone scream like that?

But darling, go, and throw yourself on
to the ground before your blessed mother

join us in our struggle beg her please:
don't let Menelaus watch us die.

Remember how my mother held you
snuggled in her arms, pity us—you
are our only hope for liberty.

HERMIONE.

I'll go *now*, as quickly as I can:
if my love can move then you are free.

(She enters the palace.)

ELECTRA.

Orestes! Pylades! You have your
swords swoop down upon your prey!

HERMIONE.

Oh no!

ELECTRA.

Hold her, hold her! Your sword at her throat
and then stand like stones. Menelaus
will see that he has found men to fight
not Trojan cowards; he will regret
the day he called himself a soldier.

(ELECTRA enters the house.)

CHORUS. (*Sings:*)

AI AI AI FRIENDS STOMP STOMP
STOMP YOUR FEET AND SHOUT SHOUT
RAISE AN ALMIGHTY DIN
SO THE NOISE FROM WITHOUT
DROWNS THE SCREAMING WITHIN
DROWNS THE SCREAMING WITHIN!

YI YI YI FRIENDS SHRIEK SHRIEK
SHRIEK AND CLAP AND STAMP STAMP
LET NO ONE RUN TO SEE
UNTIL THE BODY DAMP
WITH BLOOD IS SHOWN TO ME
SHOW HELEN'S BODY TO ME!

FLASH YOUR SWORDS! SLASH AND THRUST!
SLAUGHTER! SLAY! SMITE! DESTROY!
VENGEANCE FOR THE YEARS
SHE FILLED ALL GREECE WITH TEARS
THAT TRAITOROUS BITCH FROM TROY!

CHORUS.

Quiet. The bolts are clanging, the palace
gate is opening...

(TROJAN SLAVE *enters.*)

A Trojan—now at
last we learn what is happening in there.

TROJAN SLAVE.

Yelp! That was nearly death I run from
hopping hopping away up into
the cedar beam and from there clamber
and then flit and then commando up
and around the carve column top and
one mighty bound above the waving
point of Argive sword with slippered feet
I kiss! I touch! I bless the earth! but
Where is escape (now) foreign damosels?

CHORUS.

Trojan tell us what is going on.

TROJAN SLAVE. (*Sings:*)

OH TROY, OH TROY. I HAVE SEEN FROM YOUR WALLS
MOUNT IDA BLOSSOMED IN SPRING, GREEN IN SUMMER
THE CLEAN EERIE LIGHT OF MANY FALLS,
THE PLAIN IN WINTER WINDSWEPT STARK AND WHITE

THE PALACE MY HOME HAS CRUMBLED, TUMBLED
 BY LITTLE LIGHT HANDS BY HELEN, BRIGHT EYED AND
 GRACEFUL AS A SWAN WE ARE HUMBLLED
 A FURY WHOSE BEAUTY BROUGHT GREEK TERROR ON.

CHORUS.

What happens in the house we must know.

TROJAN SLAVE. (*A bright sharp wail:*)

Ailino, Ailino.

(*Pauses for a moment to let that sink in.*)

That

is how we *barbarians* sorrow
 when royal blood quenches the hot earth.
 But to tell you in all exactness:
 there come into the palace two Greek
 lions, one the general son, and the
 other super sneaks plotty bold man
 and plunk themselves wet face one each side
 beauteous Helen, and sobbing clutch
 each one her knee imploring mercy
 we are up her Trojans like a flock
 of bright bird frantic and in panic
 flapping 'Treachery' whispering now
 to some mind you there is no problem
 it is a sweet scene, touching to see
 but for the mother killing viper.

CHORUS.

And where were you? Shot off in terror?

TROJAN SLAVE.

It so happens that I am wafting,
 in the Trojan way with round feather
 fan the curls of Helen breezing at
 her cheek breezing wafting breezing waft.
 Says Orestes to her 'hey, come with
 me gracious lady please here by this
 ancient hearth here where Pelops himself
 would once then sit and you and I can
 for a moment speak more quietly'
 and she, all sweetness but no gift for
 prophesy goes with him meanwhile the
 Phocian flashing at the eye is shout
 "move Trojan coward!" and severally
 we are shut up in stables and in

little rooms all about, in porches,
all at a distance from our lady.

CHORUS.

What happened next?

TROJAN SLAVE.

Oh great mother sweet mighty goddess
what I see in that house, what scenes of
wickedness my eyes are searing still—
They pull each from the darkness of his
clothes a shining knife, and looks whirling
about to see they are all alone
and stand before her says “Die, for your
husband’s cowardice now you will die”
Screaming oh she screams Aie! Aie!
She wave her pale arm and with a flick
a flash of her gold sandal turn to
run but Orestes is before her
and his fingers in her hair twisted
her neck bent back and knife at her throat.

CHORUS.

And you did you nothing to help her?

TROJAN SLAVE.

From room to room we shout and beat with
rods on doors until we are burst out
and from every direction run with
rocks, and spears we pull from walls, one
has a sword but Pylades meet us:
maniac, gleaming, undaunted:
one flee, one land extinct, one deeply
cleave is bleeding, and one beg for life.
And then when Helen sink onto
the ground to die Hermione dart
in and they plunge upon her and they
seize and then again to Helen but
there O where she was—she was!—O Zeus,
O Earth, O Light, O Night—there, no one
was there! Helen vanish from the room,
maybe the walls is air, and after
that I do not know I slip away.
And this ten years of struggle have brought
Menelaus: nothing; she is gone.

(ORESTES throws open the doors, maybe blood trickles beneath.)

ORESTES.

Where is the Trojan who just fled my sword?

(TROJAN SLAVE *throws self on ground.*)

TROJAN SLAVE.

I prostrate lord in the Eastern way.

ORESTES.

This isn't Troy. You are in Greece now.

TROJAN SLAVE.

Eitherwhere wise men choose life to death.

ORESTES.

All of that screaming. For Menelaus?

TROJAN SLAVE.

Oh that? Oh no, I called for help for you!

ORESTES.

So the death of Helen: was that justice?

TROJAN SLAVE.

If she had three throats! Each one should be slit.

ORESTES.

A coward's tongue, in a flatterer's mouth.

TROJAN SLAVE.

Helen: Scourge of Troy! Imploder of Greece!

ORESTES.

Swear you are sincere or I will kill you.

TROJAN SLAVE.

By my life! As you see I honor it.

ORESTES.

Did every Trojan run from steel like you?

TROJAN SLAVE.

Put it away. Up close is death-glilty.

(ORESTES *torments him with its proximity.*)

ORESTES.

It's not a Gorgon. You won't turn to stone.

TROJAN SLAVE.

To a stone, no. Into a corpse, perhaps.

ORESTES.

Why does a slave fear death? You're free in Hell.

TROJAN SLAVE.

What face is not more flattered by sunlight.

(ORESTES turns his face up for a moment. To the sun:)

ORESTES.

Nicely said. Your sense saves you. Now inside.

TROJAN SLAVE.

You will not kill me?

ORESTES.

I spare you.

TROJAN SLAVE.

Hurrah!

ORESTES.

Or...wait...I have an idea...

TROJAN SLAVE.

Oh no.

ORESTES.

Fool, it's no heroics to slit your throat, for though not born a woman you don't belong with men. I came out from the palace to stop your shrieking as Argos is quick to arm. But now I say: let Menelaus, come. This time I think he will find me eloquent.

(ORESTES exits into the house.)

(TROJAN SLAVE goes running off towards the center of town.)

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

OH ARGOS...

CHORUS.

NOW EVERYTHING TUMBLES TO DARKNESS THE
WATERS ARE RISING

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

OH ARGOS...

CHORUS.

DEEP IN THE DRAINS OF THE HOUSE A PRESENCE
IS THRIVING

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

OH ARGOS...

CHORUS.

THEY'RE LIGHTING THE TORCHES TO SET THE OLD
PALACE ON FIRE

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

OH ARGOS...

CHORUS.

IT BEGINS AS A RIOT AND ENDS AS
A FUNERAL PYRE.

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

OH ARGOS...

CHORUS.

SMOKE IS UNFURLING AND TWIRLING UP IN
TO THE AIR

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

OH ARGOS...

CHORUS.

WATCH WHILE YOU CAN, COME MORNING
THEY WILL NOT BE THERE

SINGLE CHORUS GIRL.

(Spoken, straight to the audience, the effect is jarring:)

They will not rest or pause and they won't they can't stop

CHORUS.

And here is Menelaus running
He must have gotten word hurry and
secure the doors with bars a man
flashing with luck and glory is a
dangerous opponent for someone
as afflicted as you Orestes.

(MENE LAUS enters.)

MENE LAUS.

I've come at news so violent, so
incredible, I will not call them
men, beasts, Open the door! Force the Gates.
My daughter at least I can rescue
her and then the animals will die.

(ORESTES appears on the roof. PYLADES and ELECTRA stand next to him, their faces concealed with scarves or bandanas, holding torches.)

(Maybe there is black smoke, maybe we hear choppers, maybe not, but that's the general effect.)

ORESTES.

You there, take your hands from the door—you,
Glorious Menelaus, yes, you
back! Or I'll tear up the ancient stones
and send this house smashing down on your
skull: the doors are bolted, and barred and
you, my dear old friend, are powerless.

MENELAUS.

A blaze of torches on the roof, and
men at bay, and ah, what is this, my
daughter, a sword held up to her throat!

ORESTES.

Would you like to ask me questions? Or shall I speak.

MENELAUS.

Neither is of interest but I don't have a choice.

ORESTES.

Does this interest you? I'm going to kill your daughter.

MENELAUS.

You murdered my wife. Isn't that murder enough?

ORESTES.

Oh I wish I had. But the Gods snatched her away.

MENELAUS.

You're taunting me now, don't deny that you killed her.

ORESTES.

I do deny it. Painfully. I wish I had.

MENELAUS.

You wish you had done what this is too much for me.

ORESTES.

Sent her, the pollution of Greece, straight into Hell.

MENELAUS.

Give me Helen's body. So I can bury her.

ORESTES.

Ask the Gods for it. Now I will kill your daughter.

MENELAUS.

You pile murder upon murder upon murder.

ORESTES.

I can never tire, while there are sluts to kill.

MENELAUS.

And you Pylades. Isn't this enough for you?

*(As the actor playing PYLADES is currently playing MENE-
LAUS, another person, his face cloaked, is standing in for PY-
LADES. All look at him.)*

ORESTES.

His silence is his answer, I can speak for him.

MENELAUS.

You'll pay for it. Unless you can fly, you will pay.

ORESTES.

We don't plan to escape. We'll set the place on fire.

MENELAUS.

The house of your father? And all of his fathers?

ORESTES.

Better gone than in your hands. Oh, and the girl dies.

MENELAUS.

Kill her then. But rest assured I'll have my revenge.

ORESTES.

Your suffering is your justice. Submit to it.

MENELAUS.

No! Take the sword from her throat!

ORESTES.

You're bluffing then.

MENELAUS.

Please. Don't kill my child. Please.

ORESTES.

At last. The real man.

MENELAUS.

What do you want me to do.

ORESTES.

Persuade the people.

MENELAUS.

Of what?

ORESTES.

I want a retrial. I want fairer terms.

MENELAUS.

And if not then you will kill my daughter.

**THIS PLAY IS
NOT OVER!**

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