
ARISTOPHANES

FROGS

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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This text provides links to explanatory notes (indicated by asterisks), but those reading the entire play might be better served by printing out those pages separately.

The translator would like to acknowledge the extremely valuable help of W. B. Stanford's edition of *The Frogs* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

In the following translation, the normal line numbers refer to the English text. The ones in square brackets refer to the Greek text.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Aristophanes (c. 456 BC to c. 386 BC) was the foremost writer of comic drama in classical Athens. His surviving plays are the only complete examples we have of Old Comedy. *Frogs* was first produced in Athens in 405 BC. By this time Athens had been at war with Sparta for over twenty-five years.

*For Annie
in whom the best spirit of Aristophanes still lives on.*

THE FROGS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

XANTHIAS: a slave

DIONYSUS: the god, appearing in human form as a middle-aged man

HERCULES: the legendary hero

CORPSE: a dead man being carried off to Hades

CHARON: the ferry man transporting the dead to Hades

CHORUS OF FROGS

CHORUS OF INITIATES: worshippers of the gods of the underworld

AEACUS: a gatekeeper in Hades

SERVANT

FIRST HOSTESS (PANDOKEURIA)

SECOND HOSTESS (PLATANE)

SERVANT OF PLUTO

EURIPIDES: the playwright

AESCHYLUS: the playwright

PLUTO: king of Hades

VARIOUS ATTENDANTS

[The play opens on a street leading to Hades, with a door in the centre of the backstage area. Enter Dionysus, appearing as a middle-aged man with a noticeable paunch, wearing a yellow tunic and over that a lion skin. He's carrying a huge club, one commonly associated with Hercules. On his feet he wears soft leather lace-up boots. Behind him comes his slave Xanthias riding on a donkey and carrying a huge amount of luggage. Xanthias notices the audience]

XANTHIAS

Look, master, an audience! Shouldn't I say something?
Tell them one of those jokes they always fall for?

DIONYSUS

O, all right—say what you like. Only no jokes
about how you're dying to piss. I can't stand those—

they're all so stale.

XANTHIAS

What about my other jokes?

DIONYSUS

Go ahead—just nothing about your bladder,
about how it's going to burst.

XANTHIAS

What? You mean I can't tell
that really funny one . . .

DIONYSUS

I suppose so—
but don't say anything about the bit.

XANTHIAS

What bit?

DIONYSUS

The bit about how you need to shift your load
to take a piss.

10

XANTHIAS

Not even this one—
“Here I am transporting such a load
if I get no relief I may explode.”

[10]

DIONYSUS

Please, please, don't say that one—
not unless I'm sick and need to throw up.

XANTHIAS

Then what's the point of my being here like this?
Why do I get to carry all the heavy baggage
if I can't tell the usual porter jokes—you know,
the ones Ameipsias and Phrynichus
and Lycias, too, in all their comedies
provide the slave who carries all the bags.*

20

DIONYSUS

Just don't. Those jokes are all so feeble—
when I have to watch a play and hear them
by the time I leave I've aged at least a year.

XANTHIAS [*striking a heroic tragic pose*]

Alas, for my neck beneath this triply damned yoke.

I suffer all this pressure and can't tell my joke.

[20]

DIONYSUS

It's an outrage, sheer insolence, that I,
Dionysus, son of Winejar, have to walk like this,
sweating along so he can ride at ease
without a care and carrying no load.

XANTHIAS

What!?

30

Aren't I carrying the load?

DIONYSUS

How can you be?

You're riding on your ass.

XANTHIAS

I'm loaded down.

All this stuff . . .

DIONYSUS

What do you mean by that?

XANTHIAS

What I just said carries lots of weight.

DIONYSUS

Isn't the donkey carrying our load?

XANTHIAS

No, no way. Not the load I'm holding.

DIONYSUS

How come?

How can you be carrying anything at all
when someone else is carrying you?

XANTHIAS

I've no idea.

But my shoulder's falling off.

[30]

DIONYSUS

All right, then.

Since you claim the donkey's useless to you,
why not take your turn and carry it?

40

XANTHIAS

What a wretched life!

I should have gone away to fight at sea—
then I'd be free and I'd have told you straight
what you could do with that ass of yours.*

DIONYSUS

Get down, you useless idiot! We're there—
by the door I'm aiming for, my first stop.

[Dionysus knocks very aggressively on the door and calls out in a very imperious tone]

Hey, in there! Doorman! I'm summoning you.

[The door opens and Hercules steps out, wearing a lion's skin and carrying a club. He's amazed that someone is dressed up to resemble him]

HERCULES

Who's banging on this door—smashing at it
like some wild centaur. My god, what's this?

[Hercules inspects Dionysus' outfit and starts to laugh uproariously]

DIONYSUS

Hey, my boy . . .

XANTHIAS

What?

DIONYSUS

Didn't you see?

XANTHIAS

See what?

50 [40]

DIONYSUS

How scared he was of me?

XANTHIAS

Yes, by god, he was,
scared you're nuts.

HERCULES [*doubling up with laughter*]

By holy Demeter,
I can't stop laughing. I'll try biting my lip.
No, no use. I can't stop laughing at him.

DIONYSUS

Come here, my good man. I need something from you.

HERCULES [*still laughing out of control*]

I can't help myself—he's so ridiculous.
Seeing that lion skin above that yellow dress.
What's going on? Do people with large clubs
now walk around in leather booties?
Where on earth do you think you're going?

60

DIONYSUS

I've done naval service under Cleisthenes.*

HERCULES

At that sea battle?

DIONYSUS

Yes—and sunk enemy ships,
twelve or thirteen of them.

[50]

HERCULES

Just the two of you?

DIONYSUS

Yes, by Apollo, we did.

XANTHIAS

Then I woke up.

DIONYSUS

I was on board with Euripides' *Andromeda*,
reading to myself aloud, when suddenly
a huge urge seized my heart. You've no idea how strong.

HERCULES

An urge? How big was it?

DIONYSUS

The size of Molon—tiny.*

HERCULES

For a woman?

DIONYSUS

No, no.

HERCULES

A young lad, then?

DIONYSUS

Certainly not.

HERCULES

Well, then, a man?

DIONYSUS

Ugh!

70

HERCULES

Did you grab hold of your Cleisthenes?

DIONYSUS

Don't mock me, brother.* I'm not doing so well,
tormented by such hot desires.

HERCULES

Tell me,
my little brother, what's it like?

DIONYSUS

I can't explain.
But I'll try to show you by analogy.
Have you ever had a craving for some stew?*

[60]

HERCULES

For stew? In my life maybe ten thousand times.

DIONYSUS

Is that explanation clear enough to you?
Or shall I try some other way?

HERCULES

Not about stew!
That I understand completely.

DIONYSUS

Well then,

80

that's how much I'm eaten up with my desire
for Euripides.

HERCULES

Even when he's dead?*

DIONYSUS

So no one's going to talk me out of it—
I have to find him.

HERCULES

Right down in Hell?

DIONYSUS

Or even lower,
by god, if there's such a place.

[70]

HERCULES

What's the point of that?

DIONYSUS

I need a clever poet. There's none around.
The ones we've got are all so lousy.

HERCULES

What? Isn't Iophon still up there?*

DIONYSUS

He's the only good one left—if he's any good.
I'm not really sure if that's the case.

90

HERCULES

If you've got to take a playwright back,
why not Sophocles? He's better than Euripides.

DIONYSUS

Not 'til I get Iophon all by himself,
without his father, Sophocles, so I can test
the metal of his poetry. Besides, Euripides
is such a rascal he may try to flee Hades
and come with me. But Sophocles was nice—
easygoing while on earth and down here, too.

[80]

HERCULES

What about Agathon? Where's he?

DIONYSUS

He's left us—
a fine poet lamented by his friends.

100

HERCULES

Where's he gone?

DIONYSUS

Off to feast with saints.*

HERCULES

And Xenocles?*

DIONYSUS

O by god, may he drop dead!

HERCULES

Well then, Pythangelos?

XANTHIAS

What about ME?
In pain all this time—my shoulder's sore as hell.

HERCULES

Surely you've other artsy-fartsy types—
thousands of tragic poets—all of them
way more wordy than Euripides?

[90]

DIONYSUS

No, no—
all chatterboxes, twittering swallows in a music hall,
mere foliage—disgraces to the artist's craft.
Once they get a chance to stage their plays,
to crap all over tragedy, they disappear.
If you looked you'd never find one playwright,
someone creative who could well declaim
a worthy sentiment.

110

HERCULES

That word "creative"—
what's it mean?

DIONYSUS

Someone poetical enough
to give utterance to something grand,

something like

[Dionysus strikes a tragic pose]

“the sky, Zeus’ pied-a-terre,”
“the foot of time,” or this — “a mind that will not swear
on sacred offerings but a perjured tongue
that’s false with no sense of its perfidy.”

[100]

120

HERCULES

You like that stuff?

DIONYSUS

Like it? I’m crazy about it.

HERCULES

I swear it’s all bullshit — and you know it.

DIONYSUS

Now, now, don’t try to tell me what to think,
not with tragedy. You’re no expert there.

HERCULES

I still say it sounds like total rubbish.

DIONYSUS

Why not teach me how to stuff my guts?

XANTHIAS

WHAT ABOUT ME??!!!!

DIONYSUS

That’s the reason I’ve come here
and dressed like you — so you can fill me in,
in case I need to know, about this place —
who welcomed you down here, who’d you meet

130

[110]

that time you went down after Cerberus.*

Tell me about the harbours, resting places,
bakeries and brothels, water fountains,
the cities, highways, all the detours,
the local customs and the fine hotels,
the ones with fewest bugs.

XANTHIAS

Still no word of me.

HERCULES

O you valiant heart! Are you man enough
to venture down below?

DIONYSUS

Forget my courage.

Show me the highway, the shortest one there is,
that takes me directly down to Hades.

140

Don't prattle on about the temperature—
and say it's way too hot or cold for me.

HERCULES

Let's see . . . what should I mention first of all?

[120]

Which one? Hmmm. You could try a stool and rope—
you could just hang yourself.

DIONYSUS

Stop it right there.

That way gives me a choking feeling.

HERCULES

There's a straight short cut, well traveled, too—
with pestle and mortar . . .

DIONYSUS

You mean hemlock.*

HERCULES

That's it!

DIONYSUS

Too cold—too much like winter. Right away
the shins get frozen solid.

HERCULES

All right, then.

150

You want me to tell you how to get there fast.

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god. I'm not one to take a hike.

HERCULES

How about a stroll to Kerameikos* . . .

DIONYSUS

Okay, what then?

HERCULES

Climb up the tower there—
right to the very top . . .

DIONYSUS

And then what?

[130]

HERCULES

Take a look at the torch race starting up—
when the spectators all yell out “They’re off!”
then off you go as well.

DIONYSUS

Off? Where to?

HERCULES

Down.

DIONYSUS

No, I can’t take that road. I’d pulverize
both rissole wrappers of my brain.

HERCULES

What’s left?

160

DIONYSUS

The road you used.

HERCULES

O, an enormous journey.
At the very start you come to a vast lake—
immense and bottomless.

DIONYSUS

How do I get across?

HERCULES

In a tiny boat—miniscule—like this [*indicating the size*].
An ancient sailor takes you for a fee—
two obols.

[140]

DIONYSUS

Two obols? It’s amazing
what two obols can buy anywhere.*

How come it's here in Hades, too?

HERCULES

That was Theseus.*

He started it. Once past the lake you'll find snakes.

You'll see thousands of them, horrific monsters.

170

DIONYSUS

Don't keep trying to scare me. That won't work.

There's no way you'll get me to turn back.

HERCULES

Then a huge sewer, always full of liquid turds —
and lying in it anyone who harmed a guest
or screwed a lad and then took back the cash,
or smacked his mother, punched his father's jaw,
or swore false oaths, or else had copied out
a speech of Morsimus.*

[150]

DIONYSUS

By god, with them in the shit
should lie whoever learned a war dance by Cinesias.*

HERCULES

Next the breath of flutes will sound around you.

180

You'll see the finest light, just like in Athens,
and myrtle groves, with happy men and women
gathered there to celebrate and clap their hands.

DIONYSUS

So who are they?

HERCULES

Those are the initiates,
the ones who celebrate the mysteries.*

XANTHIAS

Then, by god, in these mysteries I play the ass.

I'll not stand for this a moment longer.

[160]

[Xanthias dismounts and starts to unload the baggage he has been carrying]

HERCULES

Those ones will tell you all you need to know.

These initiates live closest to the road

which takes you to the doors of Pluto's place.*

190

And so, my brother, I bid you fond farewell.

DIONYSUS

Good bye—god keep you healthy, too.

[Hercules exits back through the door. Dionysus turns to Xanthias, who has just about finished putting down all the luggage he has been carrying]

You there—take up the baggage once again!

XANTHIAS

Before I've put it down?

DIONYSUS

Yes, and hurry up.

[Enter a solemn funeral cortege parrying a dead man towards Hades]

XANTHIAS

Come on, I'm begging you. Hire one of them—
someone carrying the corpse. That's why they're here.

DIONYSUS

And if I don't find anyone?

XANTHIAS

I'll do it.

DIONYSUS

Fair enough. All right, they're bringing out a corpse
You there . . . you stiff . . . I'm talking to you . . . Hallo!

[170]

[The corpse suddenly sits up straight]

You want to take a little luggage down to hell?

200

CORPSE

How much?

DIONYSUS

This stuff here.

CORPSE

Will you pay two drachmas?

DIONYSUS

My god, no. Less than that.

CORPSE

Then go away.

DIONYSUS

Hang on, my dear fellow. Can't we haggle?

CORPSE

If you don't pay two drachmas, forget it.

DIONYSUS

How about nine obols?

CORPSE

No bloody way!

I'd rather you shoved me back to life again.

[Corpse lies down and the funeral procession moves away]

DIONYSUS

What a pompous boor!

XANTHIAS

To hell with him—

I'll take the stuff myself.

[Xanthias starts loading himself with the baggage once again]

DIONYSUS

That's my good man—

a loyal and worthy slave. Let's get that boat

[Enter Charon rowing his small boat across the stage]

CHARON

Ahoy there! Coming alongside.

[180]

XANTHIAS

What's this?

DIONYSUS

This?

210

By god, it's the lake Hercules talked about.

And I see the boat . . .

XANTHIAS

You're right. Thanks to Poseidon.
This must be Charon.

DIONYSUS

Ahoy there, Charon . . .
Greetings, Charon . . . Charon, halloooo!

CHARON

Who's seeks a rest from work and trouble?
Who's heading for Fields of Forgetfulness,
Never-never land, the Cerberians,
the Ravens* and Tartarus.

DIONYSUS

That's me.

CHARON

Then jump aboard.

DIONYSUS

Where do you put in?
The Ravens? Is that a stop?

CHARON

Yes, by god—
a special stop just for you. Get in.

220

DIONYSUS [*to Xanthias*]

All right, my lad, hop in.

CHARON

I won't take the slave—
not unless he fought at sea to save his skin.

[190]

XANTHIAS

Not me, by god, no way. My eyes were bad.

CHARON

Then you must make a detour round the lake.

XANTHIAS

Where do I wait for you?

CHARON

At Wuthering Rock*—
right by the rest stop.

DIONYSUS

You got that?

XANTHIAS

I got that.

[picking up the bags]

Why am I so unlucky? When we began
I must've really pissed somebody off.

CHARON *[to Dionysus]*

Sit down there—at that oar.

[Dionysus sits on one of the oars]

Anyone else?

230

Hurry up—all aboard! What are you doing?

DIONYSUS

What am I doing? I'm sitting on this oar.
That's what you ordered me to do.

CHARON

Come on, fatso—park your butt right here.

DIONYSUS *[moving off the oar]*

There!

[200]

CHARON

Can you pick up the oar? Stretch your arms.

DIONYSUS

Like this?

CHARON

Don't be such a fool. Set your foot there.
Now pull the oar with all your force.

DIONYSUS

How can I?

I've had no practice. I'm no sailor.
And besides, I'm not from Salamis.*
How'm I supposed to row a boat?

240

CHARON

It's not hard. You'll hear lovely melodies

once you make the effort.

DIONYSUS

Songs? Whose songs?

CHARON

The amazing music of the swan frogs.

DIONYSUS

All right, then. Get the tempo going.

CHARON

Yo ho, heave ho. Yo ho heave ho.

*[As the small boat begins to move, the Chorus of Frogs is heard from off stage]**

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax

Brekekekex koax koax.

[210]

Children of the marsh and lake
harmonious song now sweetly make,
our own enchanting melodies
koax koax.

250

The songs we sang for Nysas lord,
for Dionysus, son of Zeus,
in Limnai at the Feast of Jars*
as people in their drunken glee
thronged into our sanctuary.

Brekekekex koax koax.

[220]

DIONYSUS *[still rowing]*

I'm starting to get a pain in the ass
from all your koax koax.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

260

DIONYSUS

Not that you give a damn about it.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS

Piss off—and take that koax koax with you.
Nothing but koax koax.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Yes, and for us that's fine
you meddling fool—so asinine.
Music-loving Muses love us too
as does goat-footed Pan
[230]
playing music on melodious pipes.
Apollo as he strums his lyre
loves us and what we sing,
for in the marshy waters here
we grow the reeds that bridge his string.
Brekekekex koax koax.

270

DIONYSUS [*still rowing*]

Well, I'm getting blisters and a sweaty bum.
Next time I bend down it's going to speak . . .

[As Dionysus leans forward for the next stroke he lifts his rear end up in the air to fart at the Frog Chorus, but their next line drowns out the sound]

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax.

DIONYSUS

Stop it, you music-loving tribe!

[240]

CHORUS OF FROGS

No, no. We'll sing on all the more—
if we've ever hopped on shore
on sunny days through weeds and rushes
rejoicing in our lovely songs
as we dive and dive once more,
or as from Zeus' rain we flee
to sing our varied harmonies
at the bottom of the marsh,
our bubble-splashing melodies.

280

DIONYSUS

Brekekekex koax koax—
from you I'm catching your disease!

[250]

CHORUS OF FROGS

If that's the case, you'll never please.
That's hard on us.

290

DIONYSUS

But worse for me—
I may blow up here as I row.

CHORUS OF FROGS

Brekekekex koax koax

DIONYSUS

Go on. Keep croaking. I don't care.

CHORUS OF FROGS

We'll croak on 'til our throats wear out.
We'll croak all day.

[260]

DIONYSUS

Brekekekex koax koax
You never beat me in this play!

CHORUS OF FROGS

And you've no chance to win your way,
not matched with us.

DIONYSUS

And you've no hope outdoing me.
No, no. If I must I'll yell all day,
koaxing you to get my way—
Brekekekex koax koax

300

[Dionysus listens for a response from the Chorus, but there is none]

You see. Sooner or later I was going to win—
and make you stop your harsh koaxing din.

CHARON

Stop it. Ship that oar alongside here.
Get out . . . and pay your fare.

DIONYSUS

Two obols? Here.

[270]

[Dionysus pays Charon, who rows his way off stage. Dionysus starts looking

around for Xanthias]

Xanthias! Hey, Xanthias!

XANTHIAS *[offstage]*

Over here!

DIONYSUS *[still calling]*

Come here!

[Xanthias appears with the baggage but without the donkey]

XANTHIAS

Greetings, master.

DIONYSUS

All right, what have we got?

XANTHIAS

Nothing but filthy muck—mud and darkness.

310

DIONYSUS

Did you see the men who beat their fathers—
or perjurers—the ones he mentioned?

XANTHIAS

You mean you don't?

DIONYSUS *[looking at the audience]*

By Poseidon, yes I do!

Now I see them. So what do we do next?

XANTHIAS

We'd better get away from here.
Hercules mentioned to us it's the place
where wild beast prowl.

DIONYSUS

To Hell with him!

He was talking big to make me scared.
He saw I was a fighter, and he's jealous.
No one's more full of it than Hercules.
But I'm keen now for some adventure,
some exploit worthy of this expedition.

[280]

320

XANTHIAS

Of course you are. What's that? I hear a noise.

DIONYSUS

What? Where is it?

XANTHIAS

Behind us.

DIONYSUS [*pushing Xanthias*]

Get behind me.

XANTHIAS

No, it's up ahead.

DIONYSUS [*pushing Xanthias again*]

You get in front.

XANTHIAS

My god!

Now I see it. Ooooh, a monstrous beast!

DIONYSUS [*cowering behind Xanthias*]

What's it like?

XANTHIAS

It's weird—all sorts of shapes.

Now it's an ox—no, no, a jackass—

now it's a woman—what a gorgeous babe!

[290]

DIONYSUS

Where is she?

I'll go say hello.

XANTHIAS

Hold on a minute!

330

She's not a woman any more. Now she's a bitch!

DIONYSUS [*terrified*]

It's Empusa!!*

XANTHIAS

Her whole face is on fire!

DIONYSUS

Her legs—does she have one made of bronze?

XANTHIAS

Yes!

By Poseidon, yes! The other's made of cow shit.
And that's no lie.

DIONYSUS

Where can I run?

XANTHIAS [*imitating Dionysus*]

Where can I run?

DIONYSUS [*appealing the audience*]

O holy man, save me—so we can drink together.*

XANTHIAS

We're screwed! Oh, lord Hercules!

DIONYSUS

Don't call me that!

I'm begging you, my man—don't say that name!

XANTHIAS

Then Dionysus . . .

DIONYSUS

That's worse than Hercules.

[300]

XANTHIAS [*to the imaginary monster*]

Beat it! Shoo! Come on, master.

DIONYSUS

What's going on?

340

XANTHIAS

Cheer up—we've come through everything just fine.

Now like Hegelochus we can recite

“After the storm I see the seals are calm.”*

Empousa's left.

DIONYSUS

You swear?

XANTHIAS

Cross my heart.

DIONYSUS

Swear again.

XANTHIAS

Yes, by Zeus.

DIONYSUS

Swear it one more time.

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, I swear.

DIONYSUS

That was a close shave—
looking at her almost made me puke.

XANTHIAS

You were so terrified you stained your pants.

DIONYSUS [*in a tragic tone*]

Woe, woe, why do such ills afflict me so?

Which god shall I accuse of thus destroying me?

[310]

350

XANTHIAS

How 'bout Zeus' airy pied-a-terre or the foot of time?

[The sound of music being played on the pipes comes from inside the house]

XANTHIAS

Listen!

DIONYSUS

What is it?

XANTHIAS

You don't hear that?

DIONYSUS

What?

XANTHIAS

A tune played on the flute.

DIONYSUS [*continuing his tragic rant*]

Ah yes, and now
the scent of torches just came wafting o'er me,
torches of mystery . . .

XANTHIAS [*interrupting*]

Shhhh. Let's squat down here—
keep quiet and pay attention.

[The Chorus of Initiates is heard offstage]

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Iacchus, O Iacchus,
Iacchus, O Iacchus.

XANTHUS

Master, this is it—the initiates
doing their chant, the ones he talked about—
Diagoras' hymn to Iacchus.*

360

[320]

DIONYSUS

It sounds like that to me. We'd best shut up,
so we find out for sure.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Iacchus, living here
in your highly honoured shrines—
Iacchus, O Iacchus
in this meadow come to dance
with partners in your mystery.
Shake the garland round your head,
the fruit-filled myrtle, come and tread
[330]
our playful rite's unbridled steps
where the Graces join in, too—
our pure and sacred dance and song,
the chant of your initiate throng.

370

XANTHIAS

O holy noble daughter of Demeter,*
I just smelt roast pork—how sweet a smell that is.

DIONYSUS

If you keep quiet, you may just get a slice.

[Enter the Chorus of Initiates carrying torches]

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Awake the blazing torches in your hands!
[340]

CHORUS OF INITIATES

O Iacchus, Iacchus — with us you stand
light-bearing star in our nocturnal rite.
For now the meadow blazes light,
old men's knees will move again
as they dance off their ancient pain,
the lengthy cycle of their aged plight
in this your ceremonial night..

380

[350]

As your radiant torches blaze
bring to this flowery marshy place,
the forward march of all the young
that constitute your choral throng,
O sacred one.

390

CHORUS LEADER

Let all those stand in silence here
and keep their distance from our dance —
all those who have no sure command
of ritual words and purposes,
who have not purified their hearts,
the ones who've never seen or danced
the noble Muses' ritual songs,
or played their part in Bacchic rites
of bull-devouring Cratinus,*
or like words fit for foolish clowns
when such words are not suitable —
or anyone who just can't turn away
from fights and hateful party strife,
who cannot be a genial citizen,
easygoing with his countrymen,
but lights and fans the flames of war,
ambitious to advance himself,
whoever guides our state through storms
and is corrupted by some bribe,
betrays our watch posts and our ships
or from Aegina smuggles goods,
like that wretch Thorycion,
our customs agent who shipped off
illicit stuff to Epidaurus* —
oar pads and cloth for sails and pitch,
or who persuades some other man
to send supplies to hostile ships,

400

[360]

410

or anyone opposing Hecate
in dithyrambic choruses,
or any politician setting out
to pare back pay our poets get
because they mock him in these rites,
ancient rites of Dionysus.

I say to all such people, and I say again—
and for a third time I state once more—
stand back from our choral mysteries.
But those now here begin the songs,
the dances lasting all night long,
as fits our ceremonial throng.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Now each one boldly marches on
into the meadow's flowery lap,
and each one stamps the ground—
we joke, make fun, we mock,
our bellies crammed with breakfast food.

CHORUS LEADER

Move on, now—but see you praise
the saving goddess in a noble way,
as you sing out our melodies.
She says she acts to save our land
from season unto season,
against the wishes of Thorycion.

Come now, cry aloud another chant
for goddess Demeter, our harvest queen,
a celebration made in sacred song.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

O Demeter, queen of our sacred rites, stand with us here
preserve us now, your chorus. Let me play in safety,
let me dance all day, tell lots of really funny jokes,
and offer many serious reflections, too.
Then, as befits your ceremonial rites, let me,
with my ridicule and fun, take off first prize,
let me wear the wreath, garland of victory.

CHORUS LEADER

Come now, with your singing summon here

that lovely god, our partner in this dance.

CHORUS

Widely honoured Iacchus,
creator of the sweetest joyful song,
[400]
come here with us to Demeter,
show us how you move along
this lengthy way with so much ease.

Iacchus, lover of the dance,
escort me forward as I prance.

In your playful penny-pinching mood`
you've torn my tiny dancing shoes,
you've ripped my dress to shreds—
Iacchus, you've found a way
for all of us to dance and play
what more, we never have to pay.

460

O Iacchus, lover of the dance
escort me forward as I prance.

What's more, as I just glanced aside
around me here, I saw a girl,
a lovely partner in the dance—
her scanty dress was ripped in two,
I saw a nipple peeking through.

[410]

470

Iacchus, lover of the dance,
escort me forward as I prance.

DIONYSUS

Hey, I'm always keen to enjoy myself.
I'd like to dance with her.

XANTHIAS

Me, too.

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Would you like to join us now in making fun
[420]
of Archedemos, who at seven years old
was toothless, no genuine Athenian teeth.*
And now he plays big shot in politics
among the dead above—the best there is
at double dealing and corruption.
And Cleisthenes, I hear, still picks his ass

480

and rips his cheeks apart among the tombstones,
blubbering over his dead lover Sabinos.

And Callias, they say, son of the man
who used to bugger his own horses,
has fights at sea, naval entanglements,
his arse hole covered by a lion skin.

[430]

DIONYSUS [*approaching the Leader of the Chorus*]

Could you please inform the two of us
where Pluto lives when he's at home down here?
We're strangers in these parts. We've just arrived.

490

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

No need to travel very far from here—
so don't ask me again. You should know
you're there—right at this very door.

[440]

DIONYSUS [*to Xanthias*]

All right, lad, pick up the bags again.

XANTHIAS [*grumbling as he picks up the luggage*]

What's this all mean—the same old storyline,
with Corinth, son of Zeus . . . all this baggage.*

CHORUS OF INITIATES

Keep up the dance
along the round path sacred to our goddess,
to the flower-bearing grove—let's play
with those who join this festival,
the one our goddess so adores.

500

I'll join the women and the girls
who dance to the goddess all night long,
the ones who bear the sacred light.

Let's move on into flowery meadows,

[450]

the rose-filled fields, and worship there
the way we always do, with song and dance,
where blessed Fates assemble, too.

510

[*The Chorus exits*]

DIONYSUS

Let's see—what style do I use at this point

[460]

to knock upon the door? Which one to use?

What's the local style of knocking here?

XANTHIAS

Stop wasting time. Try chewing on the door—
act like Hercules. You've got his height and might.

DIONYSUS [*knocking*]

You in there! Doorkeeper!

AEACUS [*from inside*]

Who is it?

DIONYSUS

It's great Hercules!

[*Aeacus bursts through the door and grabs Dionysus very roughly*]

AEACUS

O you abominable, you shameless reckless wretch—
villain, villain, damned smiling villain—
the man who made off with Cerberus my dog!

You grabbed him by the throat and throttled him,
then took off on the run, while I stood guard.

520

Now you're caught—black-hearted Stygian rocks,
[470]

and blood-dripping peaks of Acheron
will hold you down. Roaming hounds of Cocytus
will gnaw your guts to bits—Echnida, too,
and she's a hundred heads. The Tartesian eel
will chew your lungs, your kidneys bleed
from entrails Tithrasian Gorgons rip apart.

I'll set out hot foot in their direction.

[*Aeacus lets go of Dionysus, who drops to the ground in terror. Exit Aeacus
back into the house. Dionysus lifts his tunic and inspects his underpants*]

XANTHIAS

What have you done?

DIONYSUS

I've made an offering. Call the god.

530

XANTHIAS

You're being ridiculous. Get up. Move it,
before some stranger spots you.

[480]

DIONYSUS

I'm going to faint.

Bring the sponge here—set it on my heart.

[*Xanthias rummages through the bags and finds a large sponge*]

XANTHIAS

I've found the sponge! Here—you can do it.

[Dionysus takes the sponge and begins to clean up his crotch with it]

XANTHIAS

Where are you putting that sponge? O golden gods,
you keep your heart in there?

DIONYSUS

It was scared—
it ran off to my lower bowel.

XANTHIAS

Of all gods and men
no one's more cowardly than you.

DIONYSUS

Me?

How can I be when I asked you for the sponge?
Another man would not have asked, as I did.

540

XANTHIAS

What would he have done?

DIONYSUS

Well, a coward
would have lain there and stunk up the place.
But I stood up—what's more, I wiped myself.

[490]

XANTHIAS

By Poseidon, a valiant act.

DIONYSUS

By Zeus. I think it was.
Weren't you scared shitless by his angry words,
by all those threats?

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, I never thought of them.

DIONYSUS

All right then, since you're so brave, so valiant,
you can be me. Take this club and lion skin.
If you're got the guts, I'll trade places with you.
I'll carry all the baggage.

XANTHIAS

All right.
I've got no choice. Quick, give me that.

550

[Xanthias takes the club and puts on the lion skin]

XANTHIAS *[in the grand style]*

Now gaze upon the Xanthian Hercules—
see if I turn coward and act like you.

[500]

DIONYSUS

No, by god, you'll well deserve a whipping.
Come on, then, I'll pick up the bags.

[Dionysus starts to pick up a few of the smaller pieces. A Servant enters through the door]

SERVANT

Have you come back, my dearest Hercules?
Come on in. Once the goddess heard you'd come
she had us baking bread loaves right away,
boiling up pea soup—two or three cauldrons full,
roasting an entire ox, baking honey cakes
and cookies. So do come in.

560

XANTHIAS

That's really nice,
but I'm afraid . . .

SERVANT

I won't let you get away—
by Apollo, no. She's stewing bird meat,
toasting fresh desserts, mixing sweetest wines.
Please come in.

[510]

XANTHIAS

I appreciate it, but . . .

SERVANT

You can't be serious. I won't let you leave.
There's a lovely flute girl in there, just for you—
two or three dancing girls, as well.

XANTHIAS

What's that?
Did you say dancing girls?

SERVANT

Young and in full bloom—
all freshly plucked. So come on in. Right now
the cook's all ready to produce the fish.
The table's being brought in.

570

XANTHIAS

You go on back.

First, tell those dancing girls inside I'm coming.

[to Dionysus]

You, slave, follow me. And bring the baggage.

[520]

DIONYSUS

Hey, hold on a minute. All this pretence,
you can't be taking it so seriously.

The fact I dressed you up as Hercules—
that was just fun. Don't play the fool with me.

Pick up these bags again and bring them in.

XANTHIAS

What? You're not intending to take back from me
what you gave in person?

580

DIONYSUS

You bet I am.

Take off that lion skin.

XANTHIAS

I want witnesses—

I entrust my law suit to the gods.

DIONYSUS

What gods?

To think that you, a slave and mortal, too,
could play Hercules, Alcmene's son—
so arrogant and stupid.

[530]

XANTHIAS

All right, all right.

Have it your way, then. Take the costume.

Perhaps some day the gods'll make you need me.

[Xanthias hands the club and lion skin to Dionysus]

CHORUS

There's a man with brains,
with keen intelligence—
someone who's sailed about a bit
and always rolls himself around
to the right side of the ship.
He's not one to stand transfixed
like some image made in paint

590

or frozen solid like a stone.
To move away from where one stands
to places much more comfortable—
that indicates a clever man,
[540]
a born Theramenes.*

600

DIONYSUS

Now that would be extremely funny
to see Xanthias, my slave, lying at ease
enjoying bed linen from Milesia,
as he smooches with some dancing girl.
He asks me for a pot to piss in—
but I, looking at him straight, grab him hard
right by his cucumber.

[Dionysus laughs at the thought, but then reconsiders]

But then he'd see me
and, being a rascal, sock me on the jaw.
He'd knock my front teeth out for sure.

*[Pandokeutria, a landlady, enters through the door, looks at Dionysus, and
calls back through the doorway]*

PANDOKeutRIA

Plathane, Plathane, come out here.
That fellow's back who came to our hotel
and ate up all our bread, all sixteen loaves.

610

[550]

[Enter Plathane, another landlady]

PLATHANE

My god, that's the one.

XANTHIAS

Oh, oh. Someone's in trouble.

PANDODEUTRIA

And twenty boiled hams afterwards as well—
at half an obol each.

XANTHIAS

Now he's in for it.

PANDOKeutRIA

And lots of garlic, too.

DIONYSUS

My good women, you jest.

You don't know what you're saying.

PANDOKEURIA

O yes, we do.

You thought I wouldn't know you any more
because you've got those little booties on.
What else was there? I haven't said a word
about the pickled fish.

620

PLATHANE

You left out
all the fresh cheese, by god, the scoundrel ate.
He gobbled up the baskets, too.

[560]

PANDOKEURIA

To top it all,
when I tallied up his bill, he just looked at me
and yelled, a massive roar right in my face.

XANTHIAS

That's just like him. He does that everywhere.

PANDOKEURIA

Then he pulled out his sword—he looked insane.

PLATHANE

My god, you poor dear!

PANDOKEURIA

We were both terrified.
Somehow we ran up fast onto the shelf,
and he took off, grabbing up the mats.

630

XANTHIAS

Well, that's exactly how he operates.

PANDOKEURIA

We've got to deal with him somehow. I know—
go call my patron Cleon.*

PLATHANE

If you meet him,
get Hyperbolos, as well. We'll fix this fellow.

[570]

PANDOKEURIA

You wretched greedy swine—I'd be so happy
to smash your molars with a rock, those teeth
which gobbled down my stuff.

DIONYSUS

That's really nice—
and I'd like to dump you in a deep ravine.

PLATHANE

I could take a sickle and slice that gullet
which wolfed down all my tripe. Instead of that,
I'll get Cleon to draw up a charge,
so we can fish food out of him right here.

640

[Exit Plathane and Pandokeutria]

DIONYSUS

Now, may I die the nastiest of deaths,
my little Xanthias, if I'm not fond of you . . .

XANTHIAS

I know what you're thinking. Just stop right there.
Don't say a word. I'm Hercules again—
but I won't do it.

[580]

DIONYSUS

Dear little Xanthias,
don't say such things.

XANTHIAS

How could I be Hercules—
remember I'm a slave and mortal, too.

DIONYSUS

I know you're angry—you've a right to be.
But even if you hit me, I won't criticize.
And if in future I take anything from you,
may I be chopped down root and branch.
Let me die in the worst way possible—
me, my wife, and kids—and Archedemus, too—
the man with clammy eyes.

650

XANTHIAS

On those conditions I accept your oath.

[Xanthias and Dionysus exchange the lion skin and club once again]

CHORUS:

Since you've taken up the skin,
the one you had before,
your task is now to start again,
to reinvigorate yourself—
once more put on that dreadful stare,

[590]

660

recall the god you imitate.
If you get caught in foolish talk
or squeak out squeals of fear,
you'll be compelled a second time
to carry all the bags.

XANTHIAS

Men, the advice you give me is not bad.
I was thinking the same thing myself.
What's more, if all this turns out a success,
he'll try to take this back from me again.
I know that for a fact. But I'll make myself
a manly man—with a gaze like mustard.
I need to do that—for just as I thought
I hear the sound of scraping by the door.

670

[600]

[Enter Aeacus with servants]

AEACUS

Tie up this dog thief. Get a move on, too—
so we can punish him. Be quick about it.

DIONYSUS

Oh, oh. Someone's in trouble now.

XANTHIAS

What the hell!

You stay away from me!

AEACUS

O ho, you're fighting back!

[calling inside the house]

Ditylas, Sceblias, Pandocus—outside!—
come here and punch this fellow out.

680

[Servants appear and begin to fight Xanthias]

DIONYSUS

It's shameful, a complete disgrace—
the way he hits them back—and more than that—
he steals.

[610]

AEACUS

That's shocking.

DIONYSUS

It's even worse.
It's scandalous and dreadful.

XANTHIAS

Now, by god,
I'm prepared to die if I was ever here
before today, or stole a thing from you
that's worth a hair. What's more, I'll make an offer,
like a true gentleman—take this slave of mine
and torture him. If you find out from him
I've done wrong, then take me out and kill me.

690

AEACUS

How should I torture him?

XANTHIAS

All the ways there are.
Tie him to a ladder, hang him up,
whip him with nails, twist him on the rack,
[620]
strip off skin, fill his nose with vinegar,
load bricks on him—do everything you can.
Just don't flog him with fresh onions or a leek.

AEACUS

That offer's fair. So if I beat the slave
and cripple him, I'll pay for damages.

XANTHIAS

Not to me. Just take him off for torture.

700

AEACUS

No. I'll torture him right here, so he'll confess
before your very eyes.

[To Dionysus]

Put down that load.
And hurry up. Don't give me any lies.

DIONYSUS

I here proclaim no one should torture me.
I'm an immortal god. If you do so,
you'll have yourself to blame.

AEACUS

What are you saying?

[630]

DIONYSUS

I'm saying I'm Dionysus, an immortal,
a son of Zeus—this man here's a slave.

AEACUS

You hear that?

XANTHIAS

I hear what he claims to be—
all the more good reason for flogging him.
If he's a god, he won't feel a thing.

710

DIONYSUS

You're right.
And since you also claim that you're a god,
why don't you take as many blows as me?

XANTHIAS

Fair enough. Then whichever of the two
you see bursting into tears or flinching
as he's whipped—you'll know he's not the god.

AEACUS

You're a fine gentleman—that's obvious.
[640]
You stand for justice. All right—the two of you,
take off your clothes.

[Xanthias and Dionysus remove their clothes and get down on all fours in preparation for the whipping. Aeacus produces a massive whip]

XANTHIAS

How will you judge this?
How will you keep it fair?

AEACUS

That's easy.
I'll alternate the blows.

720

XANTHIAS

A fine suggestion.

AEACUS *[striking Xanthias]*

There!

XANTHIAS

Watch closely if I flinch or not.

AEACUS

But I just hit you.

XANTHIAS

By god, I didn't feel a thing.

AEACUS

All right. Now I'll lay into this one here.

[Aeacus strikes Dionysus]

DIONYSUS

When are you going to start my whipping?

AEACUS

I just did.

DIONYSUS

Why didn't I sneeze?

AEACUS

I haven't a clue.

Back to this one again.

XANTHIAS

Get on with it!

[Aeacus strikes Xanthias much harder than the first time]

XANTHIAS *[feeling the pain]*

Ahhhh!!!

AEACUS

What's that sound about? Did that blow hurt?

XANTHIAS

No, by god. I was just remembering

^[650]

the feast for Hercules at Diomeia.

730

AEACUS

The man's a saint. All right, now this one's turn.

[Aeacus strikes Dionysus, again much harder than before]

DIONYSUS

Oooowww! Ahhh!!

AEACUS

What was that cry?

DIONYSUS

I see men on horseback.

AEACUS

Why are your eyes full of tears?

DIONYSUS

I smell onions.

AEACUS

You didn't feel a thing?

DIONYSUS

No, nothing—
nothing that bothered me.

AEACUS

All right, then,
back to this one here.

[Aeacus hits Xanthias really hard]

XANTHIAS

Aiiieeee!!

AEACUS

What was that?

XANTHIAS *[pretending he has a thorn in his hand]*

A little prickle. Pull it out.

AEACUS

What's going on?

Now it's this one's turn.

[Aeacus strikes Dionysus very hard]

DIONYSUS

Aaaiiii!! O Apollo,
who presides at Delphi and at Delos . . .

XANTHIAS

You hear that—the man's in pain.

DIONYSUS

No, I'm not.

740 [660]

I was remembering some poetry,
a verse from Hipponax.

XANTHIAS

You're getting nowhere.
Hit him on the ribs.

AEACUS

A good idea, by god.
Stick out that pot of yours.

[Aeacus hits Dionysus savagely on the ribs and stomach]

DIONYSUS

Aaaiiii! O Poseidon . . .

XANTHIAS

Someone's feeling pain.

DIONYSUS [*continuing to recite poetry*]

. . . you who command

Aegean headlands and the green-grey sea . . .

AEACUS

Holy Demeter, I can't sort this out.

Which one's the god? You'd best come inside.

My master Pluto will know who you are,

[670]

so will Persephone, his wife—they're gods.

750

DIONYSUS

Now you talking. I'd have liked it better

if you'd thought of that before these whippings.

[*Dionysus and Xanthias and Aeacus go into the house leaving the Chorus on stage*]

CHORUS

You Muses, enter now our sacred dance.

Enjoy our songs and gaze upon

the massive crowds of people here,

thousands of clever thinkers in their seats,

in love with honour more than Cleophon,

on whose snarling lips a Thracian swallow sits,

[680]

making an awful din—on that foreign leaf

she squawks her nightingale's lament,

for he'll soon be sentenced, sent to die

although the jury's votes create a tie.*

760

CHORUS LEADER

It's just and proper in this city

our sacred chorus give advice and teach.

So first it seems appropriate to us

to free the citizens from inequalities—

to ease their fears. So if a man slips up

thanks to the wrestling tricks of Phrynicus,*

I say we should allow the ones who fall

[690]

to state their case, reform their evil ways.

Besides that's no dishonour to our city.

It would bring benefits. It's scandalous

that those who fought a battle once at sea

770

should instantly become Plataeans,
masters instead of slaves.* I don't deny
this worked out well—in fact, I praise it.
It's the only well-intentioned thing you did.
But as well as this it stands to reason
we should forget the single blow of fortune
of those who fought so much at sea beside you,
just like their fathers, your ethnic kinsmen—
that's what they keep requesting. But you here,
whom nature made the wisest of all people,
[700]
should drop your anger and make everyone
who fights alongside us at sea a kinsman,
a citizen. For if we are too proud,
too puffed up with self-worth, especially now,
when we're encircled by the sea's embrace,
in future time we'll look like total fools.

780

If I've a keen sense of the life and style
of someone who will someday cry in woe,
this tiny irritating ape Cleigenes,
[710]
the most corrupt of all our laundry types,
those noble men who cut the soap with ash,
dilute the mix, and use Cimolian earth,
won't be with us long. He knows it, too—
that's why he's not a man promoting peace.
He knows that someday in a drunken fit
he may well lose his staff of office,
and, more than that, be stripped of all his clothes.*

790

800

This city, it often seems to me
treats our best and worthiest citizens
the way it does our old silver coins,
[720]
our new gold ones, as well.* This money
was never counterfeit—no, these coins
appeared to be the finest coins of all,
the only ones which bore the proper stamp.
Everywhere among barbarians and Greeks
they stood the test. But these we do not use.
Instead we have our debased coins of bronze,
poorly struck some days ago or yesterday.
That's how we treat our finest citizens,

810

the nobly born, our righteous men,
our best and brightest, the ones well trained
in music and the dance at the palaestra.*
Instead we use foreign bronze for everything—
useless men from useless fathers, red heads,*
[730]
men who've come here very recently—
the sort the city at its most negligent
would never use in earlier days,
not even as a scapegoat.* But now,
you silly fools, it's time to change your ways.
Use worthy people once again. You'll see—
if you're successful, then you'll merit praise.
And if you fail, well, you'll be a fine match
for the tree you're hanging from. At any rate,
should you slip up, that's what the wise will say.

820

[Enter Xanthias with a servant from the house]

SERVANT

By Zeus who saves us, that master of yours
is a very cultured gentleman.

XANTHIAS

Of course, he is.

The only things he knows are how to drink
[740]
and dip his dink.

830

SERVANT

But not to beat you on the spot
when they proved that you're the slave—and one
who claimed you were the master.

XANTHIAS

If he had,
he'd have had regrets—and that's a fact.

SERVANT

What you just did is worthy of a slave,
something I love to do.

XANTHIAS

Forgive my asking,
but what is it you love to do?

SERVANT

It's more than love—

almost ecstasy—when I can curse my master
out of ear shot.

XANTHIAS

What about really bitching,
whenever you've received a total thrashing
and run outside?

840

SERVANT

Yes, I do like that, too.

XANTHIAS

What about sticking your nose in everything?

SERVANT

By god, there's nothing finer—that's for sure.

XANTHIAS

By Zeus, divine protector of our race,
what about listening to our masters' chat
when they spread gossip . . .

[750]

SERVANT

I'm even crazier for that!

XANTHIAS

. . . then passing on the gossip all around,
to everyone outside the house?

SERVANT

You mean me?

Every time I do that, I piss myself.

XANTHIAS

By Phoebus Apollo, give me your hand,
let me kiss you, and you kiss me.

850

[Notices a noise from inside the house]

Tell me,
by Zeus, patron of all flogged slaves like us,
what's going on inside the house, that noise,
all that yelling and abuse?

SERVANT

Oh that—

that's Euripides and Aeschylus.

XANTHIAS

Ah ha!

SERVANT

Big, big trouble's in the works down here
among the dead—a massive civil war.

[760]

XANTHIAS

What about?

SERVANT

There's a custom in these parts
that in the arts—the great and worthy ones—
the best man in his special area
gets all his meals for free at City Hall
in the chair of honour next to Pluto . . .

860

XANTHIAS

I get it.

SERVANT

. . . until someone else arrives
who has more skill than he does. At that point,
he has to yield his place.

XANTHIAS

But why would this
get Aeschylus upset?

SERVANT

Well, he had his chair,
the one for tragedy, as the finest
in that form of art.

XANTHIAS

Who's got it now?

[770]

SERVANT

When Euripides came down to Hades
he started showing off his rhetoric
to thieves, bag snatchers, parricides,
to all the ones who steal—and here in Hades
that's most of us. Well, they listened to him,
heard his counter-arguments, his twists and turns,
and went nuts for him. So they then proposed
he was the wisest of all men. With that,
Euripides got so worked up he claimed
that chair where Aeschylus sits down.

870

XANTHIAS

Didn't people throw stuff at him?

SERVANT

My god, no.

Quite the opposite. They all cried out
to have a trial set up which could find out
which of the two men was the wiser poet.

880

[780]

XANTHIAS

The crowd of scoundrels?

SERVANT

Yes, that bunch—

they made a din, by god—right up to heaven.

XANTHIAS

Didn't Aeschylus get some support?

SLAVE

It's like this audience—too few good men.

XANTHIAS

So what's Pluto planning to set up?

SLAVE

A contest— there's going to be a trial right here,
a test of skill.

XANTHIAS

What about Sophocles—

how come he didn't claim the poet's chair?

890

SLAVE

My god, he wouldn't. When he first arrived
he kissed Aeschylus, shook him by the hand,
and kept his distance from the chair of honour.

[790]

And now, according to Cleidemides,
he means to sit by as a substitute.

If Aeschylus wins out, he'll keep his place.

If not, in this contest of poetic skill
he says he'll fight on to the bitter end
against Euripides.

XANTHIAS

So this affair is on.

SLAVE

Yes, in a minute. In this very spot
some fairly weird things will be going on—

900

they're testing poetry with balance scales!

XANTHIAS

What?! They'll weigh tragedy in milligrams?

SERVANT

And they're bringing out some measuring sticks,
rulers for words, framed rectangles . . .

XANTHIAS

Will they be constructing bricks?

[800]

SERVANT

. . . bevels, too,
and wedges—all because Euripides
says he'll test their tragedies, every word.

XANTHIAS

Well, my guess is that Aeschylus
isn't liking this at all.

SLAVE

He just glared,
lowering his head as if he were a bull.

910

XANTHIAS

Who's going to judge this trial?

SLAVE

That's difficult.
Wise men are hard to find—in short supply.
And Aeschylus didn't really hit it off
with the Athenians . . .

XANTHIAS

Perhaps because
he thought that most of them were criminals.

SERVANT

. . . and he considered other people
worthless as judges of true poetry.
So at last they turned toward your master,
since he's got some knowledge of that art.
But let's go in. There's always trouble for us,
every time our master's in a rush.

[810]

920

[Xanthias and the Servant go into the house]

CHORUS *[in a parody of the tragic style]*

Now the loud-roaring hero feels in full his fury—

that valiant vehemence which surges up within,
when he confronts his rival in poetic craft
sharpening smooth-talking tusks, just like a boar.
His frenzied passion's going to make those eyeballs roll.
The battle's here at hand—helmet-glancing war,
horse-crested words, while splintered axles break apart,
as the subtle chisel-worker tries to push and parry
930 [820]
steed-prancing phrases from the man who builds our minds.
The bristling crest erect there on his shaggy neck,
his natural hair, a fearful scowl upon his brow,
and bellowing, he'll launch his language fixed with bolts,
like planking for a ship, he'll rip the words apart,
blasting with his giant's lungs. The other man,
the one who works his mouth, who tortures every word,
unrolling his smooth tongue and shaking envy's rein,
will dissect and parse those words, and, splitting hairs,
refute all that large labour of the former's lungs. 940

[Enter Aeschylus, Euripides, Dionysus, and Pluto, with attendants]

EURIPIDES

I'll not give up the chair—no more advice.
I say I'm better in poetic skill.

[830]

DIONYSUS

Why are you silent, Aeschylus? You hear
the claim he's made.

EURIPIDES

His high-and-mighty pose—
he does that at the start of every play,
some hocus-pocus for his tragedies.

DIONYSUS

My dear fellow, that's too much big talk.

EURIPIDES

I know the man—and for a long time now
I've studied him. He makes crude characters
with stubborn tongues. As for his own mouth,
it's unrestrained and uncontrolled, unlocked,
no proper discourse, bombastiloquent. 950

AESCHYLUS

Is that so, you garden-goddess child?

[840]

You say that of me, you gossip-monger,
a beggar's poet who picks and stitches rags?
You'll regret those words.

DIONYSUS

Hey, Aeschylus,
hold on. Don't fire up your heart so angrily,
with such ill will.

AESCHYLUS

No, no, I won't hold back,
'til I've exposed the man and clearly proved
this cripples' poet is a boastful fool . . .

960

DIONYSUS [*to the attendants*]

Hey, boys, bring out a sheep—a black one, too.
It looks as if a storm's about to break.*

AESCHYLUS:

. . . collecting all those monodies from Crete,
importing impure marriage into art . . .*

[850]

DIONYSUS

Whoa, hold on there, much-honoured Aeschylus.
And you, my poor Euripides, back off
beyond this breaking storm—that would be wise,
in case his anger cracks your skull in two,
some heady phrase makes all your brain leak out
your hero Telephos. And you there, Aeschylus,
don't get so angry. Test him, but calmly—
and then be tested, too. It's just not right
for poets to engage in such abuse,
like two women selling bread. You bellow
as if you were a tree on fire.

970

EURIPIDES

I'm ready.

[860]

I don't mind biting or being bitten first,
whatever he prefers, about my diction,
or the songs and sinews of my tragic plays—
and by god, about Peleus, too,
my Meleager or my Aeolos,
or, even more about my Telephos.*

980

DIONYSUS

What do you want to do? Tell us, Aeschylus.

AESCHYLUS

I have no wish to enter battle here.
The war we fight is not on equal terms.

DIONYSUS

Why's that?

AESCHYLUS

My poetry did not die with me,
but his did once he died. So it's down here—
he'll have it with him when he wants to speak.
But nonetheless since it's what you want,
we must go through with this.

[870]

DIONYSUS [*to the assembled group*]

Come now,
someone bring an offering here, and fire as well,
so I can pray before this contest starts,
our battle of the brains, and judge the fight
with maximum aesthetic expertise.

990

[*addressing the Chorus*]

Now for the Muses you should sing a song.

CHORUS

O you nine sacred Muses
mighty Zeus' virgin daughters,
gazing down on subtle minds,
you see intelligence at work
in men who write our maxims.
When such as these go out to fight,
with counterarguments and tricks,
with fiercely studied wrestling moves,
with crooked throws, come to us here,
observe the power of these mouths,
their awesome skill in making words,
[880]
sawing phrases up like sawdust.
Now our great contest in this art
stands ready, let the business start.

1000

DIONYSUS

Before we have you two recite your lines,
you ought to offer up your prayers.

AESCHYLUS

who nourishes my mind, make me worthy
to be there in your mysteries.

DIONYSUS [*to Euripides*]

It's your turn—
take some incense. Make an offering.

EURIPIDES

All right—
but I pray to different gods.

DIONYSUS

Personal ones?
Your very own? Freshly minted?

EURIPIDES

That's right.

[890]

DIONYSUS

Then pray away to those private gods of yours.

EURIPIDES

O air, my food, O pivot of my tongue,
O native wit, O nose that smells so fine,
whatever words I seize upon, let me
refute them—let the victory be mine.

1020

CHORUS

Now we're filled with great desire
to hear from poets with such skill,
the pathway in this war of words
they'll walk along. Their tongues are wild,
no lack of boldness in their mood,
nor are their intellects asleep.

It looks as though we're going to see
one man say something quite urbane
and finely trimmed. The other one
will seize him and his arguments,
the roots and all, and then attack
and scatter words around the place
like wrestle-rolling on a mat.

[900]

1030

DIONYSUS [*To Aeschylus and Euripides*]

You must speak at full speed. But see you talk
this way— with elegance, no metaphors,
and nothing someone else might say.

EURIPIDES

All right.

As for myself—the kind of poet I am—
I'll say that in my final words. For first,
I'll demonstrate this fellow's fraudulent,
a cheat. I'll show just how he took them in,
and fooled those idiots reared on Phrynichos.*
First, he'd wrap a person up and sit him down
with his face hidden away—some character
like Niobe or his Achilles—
mere window dressing for the tragedy.
They didn't speak or even mutter.

1040

[910]

DIONYSUS

That's right. They didn't.

EURIPIDES

And then his Chorus thumped their lyrics out—
strings of them, four in a row without a break,
the character just sat on stage in silence.

DIONYSUS

Well, I liked that they kept quiet. It pleased me.
It wasn't any worse than those today
who babble on and on.

1050

EURIPIDES

You were a fool—
no doubt of that.

DIONYSUS

I think so, too. But why so?
Why did our friend here do that?

EURIPIDES

It was a trick
designed to keep spectators in their seats,
waiting for when Niobe might start to speak.
So the play continued on and on and on . . .

[920]

DIONYSUS

What a rascal! How he had me fooled!
[to Aeschylus] Why are you fretting there and fidgeting?

EURIPIDES

Because I've caught him out. When he'd played this trick
and half the play was done, someone would speak up,

1060

a dozen ox-like words—with eyebrows, crests,
some fear-faced things full of the bogey man,
which no one in the audience understood.

AESCHYLUS

How miserable I feel . . .

DIONYSUS

Stay quiet please.

EURIPIDES

Nothing he said was ever clear.

DIONYSUS [*to Aeschylus*]

Don't grind your teeth.

EURIPIDES

He talked on about Scamanders, trenches,
shields with bronze enamelled griffon-eagles,
in horse-cliffed phrases hard to comprehend.

[930]

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god, one long night I got no sleep
from worrying what kind of bird was called
the tawny clear-voiced horse cock.

1070

AESCHYLUS

You idiot!

It was a symbol painted on the ships.

DIONYSUS

I thought it was Eryxis, Philoxenos' son.

EURIPIDES

Did you have to work a rooster in
just for the tragedy?*

AESCHYLUS

You god-forsaken wretch,
what sorts of plays did you create?

EURIPIDES

None like you—
no horse-cock monsters or goat-stags, by god,
the sort they paint on Persian tapestries.
When I first took this art of plays from you,
crammed with bombast to the gills, fustian stuff,
at first I made it slim, reduced its weight,

1080

[940]

with vesicles, and walks, and laxatives.
I gave a potion drawn from bookish chat,
and took care nursing it with monodies.

DIONYSUS

And you mixed in Cephisophon, as well.*

EURIPIDES

I wasn't fool enough to put in there
whatever stuff I chanced upon, or add
just anything I found. The character
who came out first would right away explain
on my behalf the background of the play.

1090

DIONYSUS

Which was better than your own, by god.

EURIPIDES

After those opening words I never set
anything superfluous in the play. No.
For me the woman spoke—so did the slave,
the master, maiden, the old woman, too.

[950]

AESCHYLUS

Well, shouldn't you be killed for daring this?

EURIPIDES

By Apollo, no. I was doing my work
the democratic way.

DIONYSUS [*to Euripides*]

My dear chap,

I'd forget that—from your point of view
that's not the best line you could take.*

1100

EURIPIDES [*indicating the audience*]

I taught these people here to speak their minds . . .

AESCHYLUS

I say so too—and before doing that
I wish you'd split apart—right down the middle.

EURIPIDES

. . . introducing subtle rules for words,
for verses nicely trimmed. I taught them to think,
to see, to understand, to love new twists
and double dealing, to suspect the worst,
to be too smart in everything . . .

AESCHYLUS

I agree.

EURIPIDES

. . . and I brought in domestic issues, too— 1110
useful matters of things we understand,
things people here could challenge me about. [960]
They know their stuff—so they could test my art.
I didn't boast or lose my common sense.
Nor did I scare them all with characters
like Cycnus and Memnon, who walk around
with bells attached.* Look at our disciples,
his and mine—you know them all quite well.
Meganeitos and rough Phormisios
are his—great long-beard-lance-and-trumpet men, 1120
flesh-rippers with the pine—whereas, for me
there's neat Theramenes and Cleitophon.*

DIONYSUS

Theramenes? Now, he's a clever man,
expert in everything. When he meets trouble,
when it hits him in the face, he gets away,
no problem, by changing who he is—
if being a Chian doesn't work for him, [970]
he claims that he's Achaean.*

EURIPIDES [*rushing his concluding speech*]

I taught these people here
to think about such things. 1130
I brought logic into art.
I made them questioners.
Now they see everything
and understand it all.
Their minds are more profound—
they organize their homes
much better than before.
So now they ask "Where's this?"
"How's it going?" "Who took that?"

DIONYSUS [*imitating Euripides speaking style here*]

Yes, by god, that's what they do. 1140
[980]
Now each Athenian man
goes home and starts to yell—

to scream at his own servants,
“Where’s my pot? My sardine—
who’s bitten off its head?
My bowl from bygone years,
is it, too, dead and gone?
And where’s my garlic clove?
I had it yesterday.

Who’s munching on my olives?”
Before this, they’d just sit
and gape there stupidly,
like little mummy’s boys
and silly sweet-toothed fools.

1150

[990]

CHORUS [*to Aeschylus*]

You see this, radiant Achilles,*
Come now, what can you say to him?
Don’t let your anger take control
and carry you beyond the track.
He’s charged you with some dreadful things.
But now, you noble gentleman,
respond to him, but not with wrath
Haul in your sails—except the tips—
then bit by bit bring in your ship.
Keep watching for an easy wind.
You just may get a gentle breeze.

1160

[1000]

DIONYSUS

Now you who were first among the Greeks
to raise the solemn towers of spoken words
adorning them with tragic gibberish,
be strong and spout forth eloquence.

AESCHYLUS

This trial enrages me—it pains my spleen
to have to answer such a man. But still,
to stop your claim that I’m incompetent
you answer this for me: Why should anyone
admire the man who is a poet?

1170

EURIPIDES

For cleverness
and good advice—and since we help improve
the men who live within our cities.

AESCHYLUS

So if that's something you didn't do,
instead transforming fine and decent men
to make them scoundrels, what would you say
you'd then deserve by way of punishment?

[1010]

1180

DIONYSUS

Death—but don't ask him.

AESCHYLUS

Consider first
the nature of the men he got from me—
were they not nobly born and six feet tall?
There were no runaways, no layabouts,
no scoundrels like today, no ne'er-do-wells.
No. Those men breathed spears and javelins,
white-crested helmets, coronets, and greaves,
with passions wrapped in seven oxhide folds.

EURIPIDES

This is getting bad.

DIONYSUS

His helmet-making
wears me down.

EURIPIDES

What exactly did you do
to make these men so noble?

1190

DIONYSUS

Aeschylus,
speak up. Forget your pride and stubbornness.

[1020]

AESCHYLUS

I wrote a play brim full of war god Ares.

DIONYSUS

Which one was that?

AESCHYLUS

My *Seven Against Thebes*.
Every man who saw it fell in love with war.

DIONYSUS

But you did something bad there with the Thebans—
you made them more courageous in the war.
For that you should be spanked.

AESCHYLUS [*to the audience*]

You too,

you could have trained yourselves for war as well,
but you weren't so inclined. Then after that,
by putting on my *Persians* I instructed them
so they were always keen to beat their foes—
thus honouring our finest act.*

1200

DIONYSUS

I was pleased
when you cried out in sorrowful lament,
“O child of Darius, who is dead,” and then,
the chorus clapped its hands and all yelled out
“Booo hooo.”

AESCHYLUS

Poets need to work on things like
this. [1030]
Look back—they've been useful from the start,
the noble race of poets. There's Orpheus—
he taught us rituals and not to kill,
Musaeus showed us cures for sicknesses
and oracles as well, and Hesiod
taught farming, harvest times, and how to plough.
As for divine Homer, where's his renown,
his special fame, if not in what he taught,
those useful facts about courageous deeds,
and battle ranks and how men arm themselves.

1210

DIONYSUS

Well, that may be, but Homer didn't teach
a thing to Pantacles, that clumsy oaf.
The other day while marching on parade,
he clipped his helmet on, and then he tried
to tie the crest on top.

1220

AESCHYLUS

And brave men, too—
Homer gave us lots—with them the hero
Lamachos. I took Homeric warriors,
and let my brain write many noble deeds
about great lion-hearted fighting men
like Patroclus and Teucer—in this way
I urged our citizens to match themselves
with them, when they heard the trumpet sound.

[1040]

But by god I never made a single whore
like Phaedra or that Sthenoboa.*
No one's ever known me as a man
who writes about the way a woman loves.

EURIPIDES

No, by god. Whatever you possess,
there's nothing there of Aphrodite.

AESCHLYUS

Let her stay away! But she took her seat
when she sat down hard on you and yours.
She really squashed you flat.

DIONYSUS

She sure did, by god.

What you wrote about the wives of other men
you had to suffer with your own.

EURIPIDES

You wretched man,

How has my *Stheneboia* harmed our state?

1240

AESCHYLUS

Because you helped persuade the noble wives
^[1050]
of well-born men to drink down hemlock,
ashamed of those like your Bellerophon.

EURIPIDES

My *Phaedra* story—did I make that up?

AESCHYLUS

No—it was there. But it's a poet's task
to conceal disgrace—not put it on parade
front and centre and instruct men in it.
Small children have a teacher helping them,
for young men there's the poets—we've got
a solemn duty to say useful things.

1250

EURIPIDES

When you spout on of Lycabettus
and subjects like magnificent Parnassus,
does this involve your teaching useful things?
We need to use the language people use.

AESCHYLUS

You pestering demon, don't you see

that noble thoughts and fine ideas perform
produce a language of commensurate size?

Besides, it's fitting for the demi-gods
to speak in loftier terms—just as they wear

[1060]

much finer robes than ours. But you besmirched
what I displayed with such nobility.

1260

EURIPIDES

What did I do?

AESCHYLUS

First, you dressed your kings in rags,
to make them pitiful to all who watched.

EURIPIDES

If I did that, what damage did it do?

AESCHYLUS

It's your fault no rich man any more
is keen to pay out money for a ship.
Instead he wraps himself in rags and weeps
and whines about how poor he is.

DIONYSUS

Yes, by Demeter, that's true. But underneath
he wears a tunic of pure wool. And then,
if he deceives them with a speech like that,
he pops up in the market by the fish.*

1270

AESCHYLUS

And then you taught them how to babble on
with stupid gossip—so the wrestling schools
[1070]
stood empty and the buttocks of our young,
who chattered all the time, were quite worn out.
You then convinced the Paralos' crew*
to argue with their officers. In my day
they were ignorant of this—all they knew
was how to yell for food and cry “Yo ho.”

1280

DIONYSUS

By Apollo, that's right—and how to fart
straight in the faces of the rowers there, or shit
on sailors down below, their mess mates.
On shore they'd rob someone. Now they talk back—
they never row—just sail out here and there.

AESCHYLUS [*rapidly summing up his opening argument*]

What crimes is he not guilty of?

Did he not put up on display
pimps and women giving birth
in holy shrines and having sex

1290

[1080]

with their own brothers, and then claim
that living is no life? So now,
because of him our city here
is crammed with bureaucratic types
and stupid democratic apes
who always cheat our people.
Nobody carries on the torch—
no one's trained in that these days.

DIONYSUS

No, by god, they're not. That's why
while at the Panathenic games

1300

[1090]

I laughed myself quite pissless—
a slow, pallid, porky runner
went on by—head drooping down—
far behind the rest. In that race
he wasn't very good. Well then,
the folks at Keremeios gate
began to whack him in the gut,
to hit his ribs and sides and butt.
While their hands were slapping him,
he let rip a tremendous fart
which killed the torch. Then on he ran.

1310

CHORUS

The event is huge, the strife intense—
the mighty war goes on. It's hard to choose.

[1100]

When one man presses hard, the other one
wheels round and launches the attack once more.

[*addressing Aeschylus and Euripides*]

You two, don't you stay inactive where you sit.
For wit knows many varied ways to strike.
And so, no matter what you're fighting for,
speak out, set to, bring up your works—
the old and new. Put your daring to the test—

1320

say something that's intelligent and deft.
Don't be afraid the people watching here
are just too ignorant and will not see [1110]
the subtle points in what you two may say.
Don't worry on that score, for it's not true.
They've served in wars—and each man owns a book.
He understands the witty parts. You see,
it's in their nature to possess strong minds,
but now the whetstone's really sharpened them.
So have no fears—examine everything— 1330
at least for the spectators' benefit
since they've become so wise.

EURIPIDES

All right, I'll turn to the prologues you composed,
so I can start off with a test to check [1120]
the first part of a clever poet's tragedy.
In setting down just how events occurred
this man was never clear

DIONYSUS

Which one will you test?

EURIPIDES

Quite a few. [to Aeschylus] But first, will you recite for me
an opening from your *Oresteia*.

DIONYSUS

Let everyone keep quiet. Achilles, speak. 1340

AESCHYLUS [quoting from the *Choephoroi*]

“O Hermes underground, who oversees
my father's power, be my rescuer,
my ally, answering the prayers I make.
I've come back and returned unto this land.”

DIONYSUS

You see some flaws in this?

EURIPIDES

More than a dozen.

DIONYSUS

But the whole thing's only four lines long! [1130]

EURIPIDES

And each of them has twenty errors.

DIONYSUS

I warn you, Aeschylus, keep quiet. If not,
you'll forfeit these four lines and owe some more.

AESCHYLUS

Am I to remain silent just for him?

1350

DIONYSUS

I think that's best.

EURIPIDES

Right at the very start
he's made a huge mistake—as high as heaven.

AESCHYLUS

You do see you're talking rubbish.

EURIPIDES

If so,
it doesn't bother me.

AESCHYLUS

You claim I'm wrong—
well, where are my mistakes?

EURIPIDES

Recite the start again.

AESCHYLUS

“O Hermes underground, who oversees
my father's power . . .”

EURIPIDES

Orestes says this
at the tomb of his dead father, does he not?

AESCHYLUS

I won't deny it.

[1140]

EURIPIDES

Since his father died
a brutal death at the hands of his own wife
and by a secret trick, how can he claim
that Hermes watches over anything?

1360

AESCHYLUS

That's not my sense—when he speaks, he means
Hermes, god of luck, who watches all the dead.
And his words clearly show that this Hermes
obtained that office from his father Zeus.

EURIPIDES

So you've made an even bigger blunder
than I thought—if this subterranean job
comes from his dad . . .

DIONYSUS

If that's the case,
he's a grave robber on his father's side.

1370

AESCHYLUS

That's cheap wine you're drinking, Dionysus,
it lacks bouquet.

[1150]

DIONYSUS

Recite another line for him.

[to Euripides]

And you, take care about the damage you inflict.

AESCHYLUS *[quoting again]*

“. . . my father's power, be my rescuer,
my ally, answering the prayers I make.
I've come back and returned unto this land.”

EURIPIDES

The skilful Aeschylus has just revealed
the same thing twice.

DIONYSUS

How so?

EURIPIDES

Look at the verse.
All right, I'll tell you—“I've come back”
is followed by the word “returned”—coming back
and returning—they mean the same.

1380

DIONYSUS

Yes, by god—
exactly like a man who says to someone,
“Hey, lend me a baking dish or, if you like,
a dish for baking.”

AESCHYLUS

You blithering idiot,
it's not the same at all. That line of verse
has beautifully chosen words.

[1160]

EURIPIDES

It does?

Then show me what you mean.

AESCHYLUS

To come unto a land
refers to someone with a native home—
he's come back—there's nothing else implied.
But when a man arrives who's been an exile,
he comes back and returns.*

1390

DIONYSUS

By Apollo, that's good!
What do you say to that, Euripides?

EURIPIDES

I say Orestes didn't "return" home.
He came in secret, without permission
from those in charge.

DIONYSUS

By Hermes, that's good.
But I don't get what you mean.

EURIPIDES

Come on then,
[1170]
try another line.

DIONYSUS

Yes, let's have some more.
Get a move on, Aeschylus. And you,
keep looking out for something bad.

AESCHYLUS [*reciting more lines*]

"On this heaped-up burial mound I pray
my father hears and listens . . ."

1400

EURIPIDES

It's there again—
he's saying the same thing twice—
to hear, to listen—obviously the same.

DIONYSUS

Well, you fool, he is speaking to the dead.
And we don't reach them even with a triple prayer.

AESCHYLUS

All right, how do you compose your prologues?

EURIPIDES

I'll tell you. And if I say the same thing twice
or you see extra padding there, some verse
that doesn't suit the plot, then spit on me.

DIONYSUS

Come on, speak up. I need to clearly hear
[1180]
the language in your prologues working well.

1410

EURIPIDES [*reciting from one of his plays*]

"Oedipus to start with was a lucky man . . ."

AESCHYLUS

By god, no he wasn't—his nature
gave him a dreadful fate. Before his birth
Apollo said he'd murder his own father—
he wasn't even born! How could he be
a lucky man right at the very start?

EURIPIDES [*continuing to recite*]

"Then he became most wretched of all men."

AESCHYLUS

No, no, by god. He always was like that.
And why? Because as soon as he was born,
he was exposed out in the cold, in a pot,
so he wouldn't grow into a murderer
and kill his father. He dragged himself away
to Polybus on mutilated feet.
And after that he married an old woman,
though he was young, and, as things turned out,
she was his mother. So he poked out his eyes.

1420

[1190]

DIONYSUS

Then he'd have ended happy after all,
if, like Erastinides, he'd been a general.*

EURIPIDES

You're being stupid. I make my prologues well.

1430

AESCHYLUS

Is that so? Well, by god, I won't scratch
each phrase word for word, but with help from the gods
I'll kill your prologues with a little oil jug.

[1200]

EURIPIDES

My prologues? With an oil jug?

AESCHYLUS

Yes, just one.

The way you write, well, everything fits in—
a little fleece, a little oil jug,
a little bag—they all mesh nicely in
with your iambs. Let me demonstrate.*

EURIPIDES

What this? You'll demonstrate?

AESCHYLUS

That's what I'm saying.

DIONYSU

All right, Euripides, you've got to speak.

1440

EURIPIDES [*reciting some more of his own lines*]

"Aegyptos, so many people say,
with fifty children in a rowing boat,
landing in Argos . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

What's this stuff about an oil jug?
You'll regret this.

DIONYSUS

Recite another prologue
so I can see the point again.

[1210]

EURIPIDES [*continuing to recite*]

"Dionysus clothed in fawn skins leaps
among the torches on Parnassus,
on that mount he waved his thysrus—
there he danced and . . ."

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

O dear,
we've been stricken with an oil jug once again.

1450

EURIPIDES

It's no big deal. In this next prologue
he can't tie in his little oil jug.
"Among all men there's not one living

who's blessed in everything—if nobly born
he lacks sufficient livelihood, or else,
if basely born, . . .”

AESCHYLUS

. . . he's lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

Euripides . . .

EURIPIDES

What?

DIONYSUS

It seems to me
you should haul in your sails. This little oil jug—
[1220]
it's going to introduce a mighty storm.

1460

EURIPIDES

By Demeter, I won't even think of it.
Here's one will knock that oil jug from his hand.

DIONYSUS

All right, recite another one—take care—
keep your distance from that little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

“Abandoning Sidon city, Cadmus,
Agenor's son . . .”

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

My dear fellow, buy the oil jug from him,
so he can't shatter all our prologues.

EURIPIDES

What?

I should purchase it from him?

DIONYSUS

I think you should.

EURIPIDES

No way. I've got lots of prologues to recite—
1470 [1230]
ones where he can't stick in his little oil jug.
“Pelops, son of Tantalus, arrived at Pisa,

and riding his swift horses . . .”

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

You see—he stuck in that little oil jug
once again. Look, my good man, pay his price—
use all your means. You’ll get it for an obol.
And it’s really nice—a good one.

EURIPIDES

Not yet—

I’ve still got plenty left: “Oeneus once
from his own land . . .”

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

EURIPIDES

Let me at least recite the whole line first—
“Oeneus once from his own land received
a bounteous harvest—then while offering
first fruits for sacrifice . . .”

1480

[1240]

AESCHYLUS

. . . lost his little oil jug.

DIONYSUS

In the middle of the service? Who stole it?

EURIPIDES

Back off, my dear man—let him speak to this:
“Zeus, as truth reports . . .”

DIONYSUS

You’ll be destroyed—
For he’ll just say “lost his little oil jug.”
These oil jugs pop up in your prologues
the way warts grow on eyes. For god’s sake,
change the subject. What about his lyrics?

1490

EURIPIDES

All right. I’ll show how bad he is at them.
His songs are awful—they all sound just the same.

[1250]

CHORUS

What’s going to happen now?
I’ve got an idea how

he'll criticize and mar
the one whose lyrics are
our finest songs so far.
How will his censure ring
to a Dionysian king,
for me a fearful thing?

1500 [1260]

EURIPIDES

His songs are truly quite astonishing.
I'll give quick proof, for I'll condense them all
into a single song.

DIONYSUS

All right, you do that.
I'll gather up some pebbles and keep score.

[Someone begins the accompaniment on a flute]

EURIPIDES *[beginning his parody of Aeschylus]*

Phthian Achilles, O, you hear the crash—
the loud man-slaughtering BASH, why don't you come,
come here to help us? As the primordial race,
we honour Hermes by the lake—BASH.
Why come you not to our assistance?

DIONYSUS

That's two bashes for you, Aeschylus.

1510

EURIPIDES *[continuing the parody]*

Most glorious of Achaean men, O Atreus,
who rules far and wide, learn of me—BISH BASH—
why come you not to our assistance?

[1270]

DIONYSUS

There's a third bash for you, Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES *[continuing the parody]*

Be still! Attendants on the bee priestess
are nigh to open up Artemis' shrine—BASH.
Why come you not to our assistance?
I have authority to utter out in full,
to speak those fatal orders ruling us
and this our expedition—BISH BASH.
Why come you not to our assistance?

1520

DIONYSUS

By ruling Zeus, what a pile of bashes!

The toilet's where I want to be right now —
this bashing's swollen both my kidneys.

[1280]

EURIPIDES

Don't go, not before you listen to
another group of songs, compressed medlies
of this man's lyric melodies.

DIONYSUS

All right then, go on.
But you can leave out all the bash and crash.

EURIPIDES

[continuing his parody of Aeschylus]

How the Achaeans' twin-throned power, youth of Greece —

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat —

1530

sent by the Sphinx, presiding she dog of unlucky days —

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat —

swooping bird with spear and with avenging hand —

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat —

[1290]

granting eager sky-diving dogs to light upon —

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat —

the allied force assembled to assault great Ajax —

Tophlatto-thratto-phlilatto-thrat.

DIONYSUS

What's this phlatto-thrat? Is it from Marathon?

Where did you pick up your rope-twisting songs?

1540

AESCHYLUS

I brought them to a noble place from somewhere fine,

lest I be seen to gather up my crop

from that same sacred meadow of the Muse

[1300]

as Phrynichos. But this fellow over here

gets his songs anywhere — from prostitutes,

Meletus' drinking songs, flute tunes from Caria,

from lamentations or dance melodies,

as in a moment I will demonstrate.

Let someone bring a lyre here — and yet

who needs a lyre for this man? Where is she,

1550

that girl who beats time with her castanets?

Come hither, you Muse of this Euripides —

for your style fits the songs we're going to sing.

[Enter a very old and ugly woman who accompanies Aeschylus' parody by

clicking her castanets and dancing very badly]

DIONYSUS *[reacting to the old woman's appearance]*

This Muse is hardly the most gorgeous babe
we've ever seen from Lesbos, that's for sure.

AESCHYLUS *[parodying Euripides]*

You chattering kingfishers in the sea
in the ever-flowing waves [1310]

who wet wing-tops with water drops
like so much dripping dew,
and spiders underneath the roof, 1560

your fingers wi-i-i-i-i-i-i-inding
threads for stretching on the loom,
work of tuneful weaving rods,
where dolphins, those flute-loving fish,
leap at the blue-peaked prows,
at oracles and stadiums.

I joy in early budding vines, [1320]
the spiral cluster, killing pain.

O my child, hurl your arms about me . . .
You see this foot?

DIONYSUS

I see it.

AESCHYLUS

And the other one?

DIONYSUS

I see that too.* 1570

AESCHYLUS *[to Euripides]*

You write this sort of bilge and then you dare
to criticize my songs—you, who wrote your tunes
to twelve-stringed music of Cyrene?* Bah!
So much for his songs. I still want to check
his solo melodies, their lyric style. [1330]

[parodying Euripides once more]

O Night, O darkly shining Night,
what are you sending me,
what dreams of woe,
from Hades' halls—
what souls without a soul, 1580

the children of black night,
so horrible they raise my hair
in black corpse-clothes —
murder, murder —
such huge fingernails.

Now, servants, light my lamp for me,
haul river water in your pails
and warm it up, so I
may rinse away my dream,
O spirit of the sea.

[1340]
1590

That's it—oh all you
who share this house with me,
gaze here upon these portents.
My Glyce's fled away —
she stole my cock and ran.
You nymphs born on the mountain peaks,
and you, O Mania, aid me now.

There I was, poor wretched me,
at work with all my daily tasks,
my spindle full of thread,
my fingers wi-i-i-i-i-i-inding,
as I wove skeins of yarn
to carry off to market
for sale in early morning.

1600
[1350]

But now my bird has flown,
flown off into the atmosphere
its wing-tips oh so nimble.
It's left me woes, woes,
and in my eyes tears, tears—
they trickle, trickle down,
O miserable me.

1610

O you Cretans, Ida's children,
seize your bows and rescue me.
Swiftly move your limbs,
make full circle round this house.
And child Diktyнна, Artemis,
so beautiful, by all means bring
your baby bitches to my home.

[1360]

And you, oh Hecate, Zeus' child,
with blazing fire-brands in both your hands,
light my way to Glyke's place,
so I can then reveal her theft
and catch her in the act.

1620

DIONYSUS

Stop the songs.

AESCHYLUS

All right. I've said enough.
Now I want to bring him to the balance scale,
the very thing to test our poetry —
to check how much our phrases weigh.

DIONYSUS

Come here, then, if I have to do this —
treating poets just like cheese for sale.

CHORUS:

Clever men like these take pains,
[1370]
for here's a marvel once again.
Devices new and strange they bring.
Who else would think up such a thing?
I'd not believe it—even though
I met someone who told me so.

1630

DIONYSUS

Come on. Stand beside the balance scales.

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES *[together]*

All right.

DIONYSUS

Now, each of you grab hold and don't let go
until I yell at you—I'll say "Cuckoo!"
[1380]

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES: *[each one holding a scale pan]*

We're holding on.

DIONYSUS

Speak your line into the scale.

EURIPIDES *[reciting]*

“I wish that Argive ship had never flown . . .”

1640

AESCHYLUS *[reciting]*

“O river Spercheios, where cattle graze . . .”

DIONYSUS

Cuckoo!!! Let go . . .

[Dionysus inspects the scale pans and sees that Aeschylus' side has sunk more]

The pan on this man's side
has gone much further down.

EURIPIDES

And why is that?

DIONYSUS

Why? Because he put a river in it.
He wet his words the way wool-sellers do—
whereas you put in a word with wings.

EURIPIDES

All right, let him speak again and match me.

DIONYSUS

Grab hold again.

AESCHYLUS and EURIPIDES

We're ready.

DIONYSUS

So speak down.

[1390]

EURIPIDES *[reciting]*

“Persuasion has no temple except speech.”

AESCHYLUS *[reciting]*

“The only god who loves no gifts is Death.”

1650

DIONYSUS

Let go. Let go. This one's going down again.
He put death in—the heaviest of harms.

EURIPIDES

But I put in persuasion—and my line
was beautifully expressed.

DIONYSUS

Persuasion's light—
she's got no brains at all. Say something else,
a heavy line, immense and ponderous,
to make you sink.

EURIPIDES

A heavy line like that,
where can I find such lines in all my verse?

DIONYSUS

I'll tell you. "Achilles threw the dice—
^[1400]
two snake's eyes and a four." You'd better speak—
it's the last time the two of you get weighed.

1660

EURIPIDES *[reciting]*

"His right hand grasped the heavy iron club . . ."

AESCHYLUS *[reciting]*

"Chariot piled on chariot, corpse on corpse . . ."

DIONYSUS

This time he got you once again.

EURIPIDES

How so?

DIONYSUS

He put in two chariots and two stiffs.
A hundred Egyptians couldn't shift that load.*

AESCHYLUS

No more contest with me word for word—
put him in the scale pan with his wife and kids,
throw on Cephisophon. Let him step in,
sit down—he can bring all his books. For me—
I'll only speak two verses of my own.

1670

[1410]

DIONYSUS

These men are friends of mine, so I won't judge
the two of them. I don't want to be at war
with either man. One of them, I think,
is really clever. The other I enjoy.

PLUTO

Won't you fail to get the thing you came for?

DIONYSUS

What if I chose the other man?

PLUTO

Take one—
whichever one you wish, so you don't leave
and make your trip in vain.

DIONYSUS

May gods bless you.
Look, how 'bout this—I came here for a poet.

1680

EURIPIDES

What for?

DIONYSUS

So I might save our city
and let it keep its choruses. Therefore,
whichever one of you will give our state
the best advice, well, that's the man I'll take.
So first, a question for each one of you—
What's your view of Alcibiades?*

—
This issue plagues our city.

[1420]

EURIPIDES

The people there—
what do they think of him?

DIONYSUS

What do they think?
The city yearns for him, but hates him, too,
yet wants him back. But you two, tell me this—
what's your sense of him?

1690

.EURIPIDES

I hate a citizen
who helps his native land by seeming slow,
but then will quickly inflict injuries
which profit him but give our city nothing.

DIONYSUS

By Poseidon, that's well said. Now, Aeschylus,
[1430]

what's your view on this?

AESCHYLUS

The wisest thing
is not to rear a lion cub inside the city,
but if that's what the citizens have done,
we'd must adjust ourselves to fit its ways.

DIONYSUS

By Zeus the saviour, this decision's hard.
One spoke with skill, the other was so clear.
All right, each one of you speak up again.
Tell me of our state—how can we save her?

1700

EURIPIDES

Use Cinesias as Cleocritus' wings—
then winds would lift them over the flat sea.*

DIONYSUS

A really funny sight. But what's the point?

EURIPIDES

In a sea fight, they'd take some vinegar,
and dump the bottles in opponents' eyes.
But I know the answer—let me speak.

[1440]

DIONYSUS

All right, say on.

EURIPIDES

When those among us
who have no faith act faithfully, and things
bereft of trust are trusted . . .

1710

DIONYSUS

What's that?
I don't get what you're saying. Speak out
more clearly—more matter with less art.

EURIPIDES

If we removed our trust from politicians
on whom we now rely, and used the ones
we don't use now, we could be saved. It's clear
we're not doing well with what we're doing now,
if we reversed our course, we might be saved.

[1450]

DIONYSUS

Well put, O Palamedes,* you clever man.
Did you come up with this idea yourself,
or is it from Cephisophon?

1720

EURIPIDES

It's mine alone.
that bit about those jars of vinegar—
Cephisophon's idea.

DIONYSUS [*to Aeschylus*]

Now you. What do you say?

AESCHYLUS

About our state—acquaint me first of all
with those in her employ. Surely they're good men?

DIONYSUS

Of course they're not. She hates those worst of all.

AESCHLYUS

She loves the ne'er-do-wells?

DIONYSUS

Not really—
but she's got no choice. She has to use them.

AESCHYLUS

How can one save a city like this one,
which has no taste for woolen city coats
or country cloaks of goat skin?

1730

DIONYSUS

By Zeus,
to get upstairs, you'd best come up with something.

[1460]

AESCHYLUS

Up there I'd talk, but I don't want to here.

DIONYSUS

Don't be that way. Send something good from here.

AESCHYLUS

When they consider their foe's land their own
and think of their land as the enemy's,
and when they look upon their ships as riches

and see their wealth as wretchedness . . .*

DIONYSUS

Yes, but jury members wolf down all the cash.

1740

PLUTO

You should decide.

DIONYSUS

I'll make my choice between them.

I'll choose the one who's pleasing to my soul.

EURIPIDES

Do not forget those gods by whom you swore
to take me home. You have to choose your friends . . .

[1470]

DIONYSUS

My tongue made that oath, but I choose Aeschylus.

EURIPIDES

What have you done, you foulest of all men?

DIONYSUS

Me? I've picked Aeschylus to win. Why not?

EURIPIDES

Do you dare to look me in the face
after you've done the dirtiest of deeds?

DIONYSUS

What's dirty if this audience approves?

1750

EURIPIDES

You're heartless. Will you never think of me
now that I'm dead?

DIONYSUS

What if living isn't really dying,
or breathing dining, or sleep a pillow slip?*

PLUTO

Come inside now, Dionysus.

DIONYSUS

What for?

PLUTO

So I can entertain you here, before you go.

DIONYSUS

An excellent idea, by god. I won't say no. [1480]

CHORUS

Blest is the man with keen intelligence—
we learn this truth in many ways
Once he's shown his own good sense
he goes back home again. 1760

He brings our citizens good things
as well as family and friends,
with his perceptive mind. [1490]

So to be truly civilized,
don't sit by Socrates and chat
or cast the Muses' work aside,
forgetting the most vital skills
of writing tragedies.
Wasting time with pompous words,
while idly scratching verbal bits— 1770
that suits a man who's lost his wits

PLUTO

So now, farewell, Aeschylus—go, [1500]
save our city with your noble thoughts,
and educate our fools—we have so many.
Take this sword, hand it to Cleophon.

Present this rope to tax collector
Myrmex and his colleague Nicomachos—
this hemlock give to Archenomos.

Tell them to come here fast without delay.

If they don't come soon, then, by Apollo, 1780

[1510]

I'll brand and cripple them, then ship them down
at full speed underground with Adeimantos,
Leucolophos's son.*

AESCHYLUS

That I'll do. As for my chair of honour,
give it to Sophocles to keep safe for me
in case I ever come back here. He's the one
whose talent I would put in second place.

Bear in mind—the rogue right there, this clown, [1520]

this liar, will never occupy my chair,
not even by mistake.

PLUTO [*to the Chorus*]

Let your torches shine,
your sacred torches light the way for him,
escort him on his way — and praise his fame
with his own songs and dances.

1790

CHORUS

First, all you spirits underneath the ground,
let's bid our poet here a fond farewell,
as he goes upward to the light. To the city
grant worthy thoughts of every excellence.
Then we could put an end to our great pain,
the harmful clash of arms Let Cleophon —
and all those keen to fight — war on their enemy
in their ancestral fields, on their own property.*

[1530]

1800

NOTES

*[Note that the line numbers in the following notes refer to the translated text
not to the original Greek]*

- * (line 21) *Phrynichus, Ameipsias, Lycias*: comic poets, rivals of Aristophanes. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 44) the fight at sea refers to the naval victory of *Arginusae*. Athenian slaves who had fought were freed (this is the first of a number of references to this action). [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 61) *Cleisthenes*: a well-known homosexual in Athens, a favourite target of Aristophanes. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 68) *Molon*: a man remarkable for his size — either very large or very small. The joke would seem to demand something very small. Given the sexual innuendo, it may be the case that Molon was a very big man with (reputedly) a very small penis. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 72) *brother*: Hercules and Dionysus are both sons of Zeus, hence brothers. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 76) *stew*: Hercules was famous for his enormous appetite. [\[Back to text\]](#)

- * (line 82) *dead*: Euripides had died in Macedonia the year before the first production of *The Frogs*. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 88) *Iophon*: son of Sophocles and a writer of tragedies. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 101) *Agathon*: an important and successful Athenian tragic playwright. He'd recently left Athens and was living in Macedonia. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 102) *Xenocles* and *Pythangelos*: minor Athenian tragic playwrights. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 131) *Cerberus*: in one of Hercules' most famous exploits, he went down into Hell and returned with the Cerberus, the watch dog of Hades. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 148) *hemlock*: a lethal poison which begins by numbing the lower limbs. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 153) *Kerameikos*: a district in Athens. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 167) *two obols*: the standard amount for welfare payments or daily pay for soldiers and sailors. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 168) *Theseus*: the legendary founder of Athens, who made his own journey to Hades and back, and hence (according to this comment) introduced Athenian customs into Hades. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 178) *Morsimus*: an inferior tragic playwright. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 179) *Cinesias*: an Athenian poet. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 185) *the mysteries*: secret cult religious rituals for special groups of initiates. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 190) *Pluto*: god of Hades. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 218) *Ravens*: a reference to a curse invoking the ravens to pick someone's bones. Charon lists various regions of Hell like so many stop on a bus route. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 226) *Wuthering Rock*: a part of the landscape of hell (possibly invented here by Aristophanes). [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 239) *Salamis*: an island close to Athens, famous for its sailors. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- * (line 245) *Chorus of Frogs*: it's not clear whether this chorus remains off

stage or not. [\[Back to text\]](#)

- *(line 254) *feast of Jars*: a reference to an annual Athenian festival (the Anthesteria) held early in the year in the precinct of Dionysus "in the marsh" (Limnai). The festival involved a lot of drinking. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 332) *Empousa*: a celebrated Athenian ghost-monster who could change her shape. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 336) *so we can drink together*: Dionysus here appeals to the audience, specifically to the Priest of Dionysus who traditionally sat in the front row. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 343) *Hegelochos . . . seals are calm*: Hegelochos was an actor in Euripides' plays who garbled a word and made the lines ridiculous (like changing "sea" to "seal"). [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 361) *Iacchos* was a minor divine presence associated with Dionysian celebrations. *Diagoras* may refer to a notorious Athenian atheist. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 375) *daughter of Demeter*: a reference to Persephone, wife of Pluto, king of Hades. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 399) *Cratinus*: a well-known and successful comic poet before Aristophanes. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 414) *Aegina . . . Thoracion . . . Epidaurus*: Aegina was an island centre for illegal trade during the war. Thoracion was (one assumes) well known as a corrupt official. Epidaurus was a naval centre close to Athens. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 479) *Archedemos . . . teeth*: a complex joke about a prominent Athenian politician, alleging that he is not a genuine citizen (something that was determined at seven years of age). [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 498) *Corinth, son of Zeus*: an expression meaning (in effect) "always the same old stuff." People from Corinth were (by reputation) never tired of boasting about the divine origin of the founder of their city. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 600) *Theramenes*: An Athenian politician famous for his political survival skills. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 633) *Cleon . . . Hyperbolos*: Athenian politicians with a special interest in leading the common people. [\[Back to text\]](#)

- *(line 762) *Cleophon . . . votes are equal*: Cleophon was an Athenian politician in favour of the war. The gibe here suggests he's not a true Athenian. Aristophanes' prediction that Cleophon would soon be sentenced to death came true a year later. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 768) *Phrynichus*: Athenian politician who led the revolution in 411 BC. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 775) *Plataeans . . . masters instead of slaves*: after the naval battle of Arginusae, the Athenians freed the slaves who had fought and gave them rights of citizenship equivalent to the rights of the Plataeans, important allies of Athens. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 800) *Cleigenes . . . clothes*: Aristophanes here attacks the keeper of a public bath and laundry for cheating his customers, predicting that soon he will lose his political office. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 804) *our new gold ones, as well*: a famous comparison between the political leaders and the debased coinage (one of the effects of the war). [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 815) *palaestra*: the traditional school in Athens, emphasizing physical fitness and the arts. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 817) *red heads*: a reference to foreigners or slaves, not true Athenians. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 821) *scapegoat*: once a year in Athens two condemned criminals were beaten out of the city and executed in a purification ritual to cleanse the city of its collective guilt. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 962) *about to break*: Dionysus pretends he needs to offer a sacrifice to placate the god of storms. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 850) *monodies . . . marriage into art*: an attack on Euripides' innovations and on the alleged immorality in his plays. Monodies are long lyrical solos for main characters. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 981) *Telephos*: a beggar hero of one of Euripides' plays. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1041) *Phrynichos*: the most important writer of tragedy before Aeschylus. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1076) *rooster . . . just for the tragedy*: Aeschylus refers to a rooster in *Agamemnon*. [\[Back to text\]](#)

- *(line 1086) *Cephisophon*: an Athenian who lived in Euripides' house and was rumoured have assisted Euripides with his plays and had an affair with his wife. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1101) *line you could take*: Euripides' sympathies in his life appeared to be with the oligarchs, not with the democrats in Athens. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1117) *with bells attached*: Cycnus and Memnon were characters in plays by Aeschylus. Warriors had bells attached to their shields or to their horses' harnesses. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1122) *Cleitophon*: an Athenian member of the group around Socrates. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1128) *Achaean*: this joke is hard to render accurately. The Greek says (literally) "not a Chian [*i.e.*, *from Chios*] but a Kian" or (more freely) "not a Chian with a ch but a Kian with a k," indicating the man's slippery character, able to change nationality by altering the spelling of the word. The change to "Achaean" may make the joke somewhat more compressed and workable, especially when the speech is spoken rather than read. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1155) *Achilles*: calling Aeschylus "Achilles" is a reminder both of his traditionally noble character and of his mood. Like Achilles he sits there silent and enraged. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1203) *finest act*: a reference to the defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, for most Athenians the high point of their city's history. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1231) *Phaedra and Sthenoboea*: an attack on heroines in plays by Euripides. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1273) *by the fish*: a reference to the fact that fish was an expensive food in Athens at the time. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1277) *Paralos' crew*: the *Paralos* was the flag ship of the Athenian navy. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1391) *and returns*: Aeschylus' hair-splitting point is that "come back" and "return" mean different things, because the latter is appropriate for those whose political status is uncertain. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1429) *Erastinides*: Athenian general condemned to death after the battle of *Arginusae*. [\[Back to text\]](#)

- *(line 1438) *demonstrate*: in the section which follows Aeschylus repeatedly uses the phrase "lost his little oil jug" to bring out the triviality of Euripides' verse, especially its rhythms and its imagery. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1570) *that too*: Aeschylus is calling attention to the rhythmic feet in Euripides' verse. Dionysus, of course, misunderstands and starts inspecting Aeschylus' feet. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1573) *Cyrene*: a notorious prostitute. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1666) *raise that load*: Egyptians had a reputation for great strength. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1686) *Alcibiades*: a brilliant and charismatic, but erratic and controversial Athenian politician and general in the closing years of the Peloponnesian War. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1705) *flat sea*: Cinesias was very tall and skinny, and Cleocritus was reported to look like an ostrich. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1720) *Palamedes*: a hero in the Trojan war. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1739) *wretchedness*: Aeschylus is here apparently defending the early Athenian policy of putting all their faith in the navy to prosecute the war, leaving the land open for enemy occupation. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1753) *pillow slip*: Dionysus is here mocking Euripides with echoes of the latter's own verses. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1783) *Adeimantos*: a general in Athens, later accused of treachery. [\[Back to text\]](#)
- *(line 1801) *properties*: Cleophon was a leader of the pro-war party. The point here is that many of those advocating war were not putting their own property in danger, unlike many Athenian farmers and landowners whose lands were occupied by the enemy forces. [\[Back to text\]](#)

SOPHOCLES ELECTRA

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(Reformatted 2019)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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In the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text, and the numbers without brackets refer to the English text. Partial lines are normally included with an adjacent partial line in the reckoning. The stage directions and footnotes have been provided by the translator.

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

The translator would like to acknowledge the helpful translation of and editorial commentary on the Greek text of *Electra* by Richard Jebb.

BACKGROUND NOTE

Sophocles' *Electra* is based on one of the final episodes in the long and bloody history of the royal family of Mycenae, often called the House of Atreus. This part of the longer narrative begins when Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and leader of the Greek expedition against Troy, sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to get favourable winds, so that the Greek fleet could sail from Aulis. After the

ELECTRA

sacrifice, the winds changed, and the Greek army sailed to Troy, where they remained for ten years.

While Agamemnon was away from Mycenae at Troy, his wife, Clytaemnestra, began an affair with Aegisthus, a cousin of Agamemnon's. When Agamemnon returned from Troy, the two lovers killed him at a feast celebrating his return. After the murder, Agamemnon's son, Orestes, was taken away from Mycenae in secret, to protect him. The daughters (Chrysothemis, Iphianassa, and Electra) remained in the royal palace of Mycenae with Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, who assumed royal power in the city.

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

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

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PAEDAGOGUS: an old man, tutor to Orestes in earlier days¹

ORESTES: son of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon

PYLADES: son of Strophius of Phocis, friend of Orestes

ELECTRA: daughter of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon

CHRYSOTHEMIS: daughter of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon

CHORUS: women of Mycenae²

CLYTAEMNESTRA: widow of Agamemnon, wife of Aegisthus

AEGISTHUS: husband of Clytaemnestra.

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

PAEDAGOGUS

Son of Agamemnon, who years ago
was our commanding general at Troy,

¹The word *paedagogus* means tutor.

²The word CHORUS in the text below indicates speeches delivered by the Chorus Leader, by the entire Chorus, or by a smaller group of Chorus members, as a director of a production of the play will determine.

ELECTRA

now you can view in front of you the place
you have longed to look at all this time.
There is the ancient Argos of your dreams,
the sacred grove where a stinging gadfly
drove Inachus's daughter mad.³ And there,
Orestes, is the Lycian market place,
named for the wolf-killing god, Apollo,
and on the left is Hera's famous shrine. 10
From where we stand here, you must know
that you are looking at gold-rich Mycenae.
There is the home of Pelops' family, [10]
scene of so much murderous destruction.⁴
It was there, years ago, your blood sister
handed you to me, and I took you away,
right after the slaughter of your father.
I saved you and raised you up to manhood,
so you could avenge your father's murder.⁵
And now, Orestes, and you, too, Pylades, 20
his dearest friend, we must sort out quickly
what we intend to do. The sun's bright rays
already are around us, waking up
the birds with their clear morning songs,
and stars of the dark night have moved away.
And so, before anyone comes from the house, [20]
we need to talk things over. At this point,
we can afford to hesitate no longer.
The time has come for us to act.

ORESTES

My friend,
the follower I cherish most of all, 30
you give me clear proof of your loyalty
towards our house. Just as a well-bred horse

³Argos, which often designates a specific town, here refers to the territory around Mycenae. Inachus was a river god. His daughter, Io, was changed into a cow by Zeus to hide the girl (on whom Zeus had amorous designs) from Hera, his divine wife. Hera, suspecting her husband was having an affair and seeking revenge, sent a gadfly with a dreadful sting to persecute Io and drive her out of Argos.

⁴Pelops was the founder of the royal line at Mycenae, and his actions (which are mentioned later) launched a series of catastrophes for the family.

⁵Jebb notes that Orestes was born before the Trojan War, which lasted ten years, and that, according to traditional stories, Aegisthus ruled Mycenae for seven years. Therefore, Orestes was about ten years old when he was taken away from his home by the Paedagogus and is now about nineteen or twenty years old.

ELECTRA

does not lose heart in the face of danger,
in spite of its old age, but pricks up its ears—
that's how you urge us on and follow us
in the foremost ranks. So I will tell you
what I have resolved. Pay close attention
to what I have to say, and set me straight [30]
if in any way I am off the mark.

When I went to the Pythian oracle 40
to find out how I might obtain justice
for my father from those who murdered him,
Phoebus gave me his reply, as follows:
“You must go by yourself, without weapons
and without an army, then use deception—
let your hand steal a slaughter that is just.”⁶
That is what we heard the oracle proclaim.
So, when the time is right, you should go
inside that house and find out everything [40]
that's going on. Once you know the facts, 50
you can provide us a reliable report.

Given your age and how much time has passed,
they will not recognize you—your grey hair
will not rouse suspicion. You must tell them
you are a foreigner. You come from Phocis,
sent here by Phanoteus, their greatest ally.
Tell them—and swear an oath to this effect—
Orestes has died in a fatal accident.
He was thrown from his racing chariot
at the Pythian games.⁷ Make that your story. 60 [50]
We two will start, as Apollo ordered,
at my father's grave, offering libations
and locks of hair I cut from my own head.
Then we'll come back here, carrying with us
that bronze-sided urn which, as you know,
we have hidden somewhere in the bushes,
so that with a false report we bring them
the joyful news: my body is no more—
it has already been consumed by fire
and reduced to ash. How does that harm me, 70
when with deceitful news of my own death,

⁶The Pythian oracle at Delphi, a shrine to the god Phoebus Apollo, was one of the most famous religious shrines in Greece.

⁷The Pythian games were a major athletic festival held every four years in honour of Apollo at Delphi.

ELECTRA

I shall, in fact, be saved and win great fame? [60]
I do not think that what one says is bad
if it leads one to success. Before now,
I've often known of wise men who have died
a false death in some story and who then,
once home again, were honoured all the more.
With such deceptive words I am quite sure
I, too, will survive and shine out like a star
down on my enemies. Land of my fathers 80
and all you gods native to this place,
welcome me with good fortune on my journey,
and you, as well, home of my ancestors,
for I come at the urging of the gods [70]
to cleanse you in the name of justice.
Do not send me from this land dishonoured—
let me be master of my possessions
and the restorer my family home.
I have said enough for now. Go, old man.
Tread carefully. Do what you have to do. 90
We two will leave—this moment favour us,
and every enterprise men undertake
is ruled, above all else, by opportunity.

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

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

PAEDAGOGUS

Wait, my son!

I think I heard a cry come from the door,
the moaning of a servant girl inside.

ORESTES

Could it be poor Electra? Should we stay [80]
and listen to her cries?

PAEDAGOGUS

No, no.

We must not seek to do anything
before attending to Apollo's orders. 100
To follow what he said, we should begin
by pouring out libations to your father.

ELECTRA

For doing that first will bring us victory
and strength in everything we undertake.

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

ELECTRA

O sacred daylight and the air, two partners
sharing space around this earth as equals,
how often have you heard my mournful songs
or blows I strike against my bloodstained chest, [90]
whenever gloomy night has moved away.
My hateful bed in this long-suffering house 110
knows how I spend interminable nights,
how much I weep for my ill-fated father.
Bloodthirsty Ares did not strike him down
in that foreign land. It was my mother
and that man who shares her bed, Aegisthus.
They split his head with a murderous axe,
the way woodcutters hack an oak tree down.
No one apart from me sheds tears of pity [100]
for what they did, when you, my father, died
in such a sorrowful and shameful way. 120
But I will never cease with my laments
and bitter cries, as long as I can see
the glittering radiance of the stars
or the light of day. Like the nightingale
who killed her offspring, I will not give up
my cries of grief but shout them out aloud
to all those gathered at my father's door.⁸
O home of Hades and Persephone, [110]
O Hermes, our escort in the world below,
O sacred Ara, goddess of revenge, 130
and you, too, sacred daughters of the gods,
you Furies, who keep watch for those who die
unjustly and for those whose marriage bed
is secretly dishonoured, come, help me,
bring vengeance for the murder of my father,

⁸Procne, wife of Tereus, killed her son, Itys, and served him to Tereus for dinner in an act of revenge for Tereus's brutal rape and mutilation of her sister, Philomela. Procne was then turned into a nightingale who was always grieving for the loss of her child.

ELECTRA

the piteous death of her own parent.
My heart prefers the one who always cries
“Itys, Itys,” that bird distraught with grief,
a messenger from Zeus. O Niobe,
all-suffering Niobe, I think of you [150]
as a divinity, weeping forever
in your rocky tomb.¹⁰

CHORUS

Among all mortal beings
you are not the only one, my child, 170
visited by grief, but you show less restraint
than those inside whose blood and parentage
you share—your sisters Iphianassa
and Chrysothemis—who are still alive,
as is the one who spends his youthful years
secluded and in sorrow, but confident [160]
that one day this famous land of the Mycenians
will welcome him as an illustrious son,
when, with Zeus’s gracious guidance, Orestes
will return to Argos.¹¹

ELECTRA

Ah yes, Orestes— 180
whom I’ve been waiting for with a desire
that never tires, in ceaseless wandering,
childless and unmarried, cheeks bathed with tears,
in this miserable state, carrying
a destiny of pain that never ends,
while he forgets what he has suffered
and what he learns from me. What message
do I get that does not disappoint me? [170]
He always yearns to be here, but even so,

¹⁰The phrase “that bird distraught with grief” is another reference the nightingale (see Footnote 7 above). Niobe was queen of Thebes. The gods punished her for pride, by destroying all her fourteen children. Niobe, overwhelmed with grief, fled to Mount Sipylus in Lydia (now Turkey), where she was turned into stone. The rock, according to ancient traditions, wept tears. Niobe is frequently invoked as a symbol of extreme grief and eternal mourning.

¹¹Jebb notes that in Sophocles’s version of the story Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra had five children: four daughters (Iphigeneia, Electra, Chrysothemis, and Iphianassa) and one son (Orestes). Iphigeneia was killed at Aulis, offered up by her father as a sacrifice to the gods, so that the Greek fleet would receive a favourable wind. Orestes is “secluded” because he has been living in exile. Other versions of the story generally omit Iphianassa or else suggest that she is the same person as Iphigeneia.

ELECTRA

for all his longing, he chooses not to come.¹² 190

CHORUS

You must be brave, my child, and do not fear.
For Zeus in heaven is still powerful.
He watches us and governs everything.
Leave that excessive rage of yours to him.
Do not take your anger at your enemies
to an extreme—but do not forget them.
For Time is kind, a god who bring content,
and Agamemnon's son, who lives in Crisa, [180]
where cattle graze in pastures by the shore,
has not abandoned you—nor has the god 200
who reigns beside the banks of Acheron.¹³

ELECTRA

But I have spent most of my life already
in utter hopelessness. I cannot bear it.
I am wasting away. I have no children,
no loving husband as my champion,
and, like a despised foreigner, I slave
in my father's house in shabby clothes [190]
and stand to eat at tables with no food.

CHORUS

There was a cry of grief at his return,
a mournful cry, as your father lay there, 210
reclining at the banquet, when swift blows
from a bronze-jawed axe were aimed against him.
His massacre was planned by treachery,
the killing performed by lust—those two
gave fearful birth to a monstrous form,
divine or mortal, which killed our king.¹⁴ [200]

ELECTRA

O how I despise that day—of all days

¹²This speech indicates that Electra and Orestes have been in contact with each other. She has been sending him messages (presumably about what is happening to her in Mycenae), and he has been telling her how much he wants to return.

¹³The Acheron is a river in the underworld. The god “who reigns beside the shores of Acheron” is Hades. Jebb notes that some commentators consider the phrase a reference to Agamemnon.

¹⁴Jebb observes that the Chorus is not sure whether the murder of Agamemnon is a human or divine action (or both). Given the bloody history of the royal family of Argos, they are not ruling out the possibility that some divine agency may have been at work.

ELECTRA

that ever dawned I hate that one the most.
And that night! The overpowering pain
of that horrific feast! My father witnessed 220
the fatal blow from those two killers' hands—
the hands that stole my life by treachery
and ended it forever. May those two
be punished by great Olympian Zeus
with suffering to pay for what they did, [210]
and, after such a crime, may they derive
no joy from all their regal splendour.

CHORUS

Do not say any more. That's my advice.
Given the way things are, do you not see
how by your own actions you plunge yourself, 230
to your great shame, in self-inflicted ills?
You have brought many troubles on yourself
by always breeding strife in your sad heart.
You must not let such feelings force you
into open war with those in power. [220]

ELECTRA

My appalling suffering drove me to it.
I am well aware of my own feelings.
My passions are not something I forget.
But in this time of dreadful torment,
as long as I still live, I will not stop 240
these frantic cries of grief. O noble friends,
what clear-thinking person could believe
mere words would be of any help to me?
You want to offer me some consolation,
but let me be. Leave me alone. My pain
will never find relief, nor will my troubles [230]
ever cease—for they are infinite,
as countless as my cries of mourning.

CHORUS

And yet, out of kindness, I advise you,
like a trustworthy mother, do not add 250
more grief to what you face already.

ELECTRA

What limit has been set to what I suffer?
Tell me, how it can be a noble act

ELECTRA

to neglect the dead? What mortal men
were ever born with such an attitude?
May I never share in such men's honour,
and if I ever live a prosperous life, [240]
may I not have a single moment's ease,
if I curb the wings of my shrill sorrows
and neglect to honour my own father. 260
For if, when he is dead, a man just lies there,
a miserable nothing, merely dust,
and his murderers do not pay him back
with a just punishment, blood for blood,
then let men's sense of piety and shame
completely fade away! [250]

CHORUS

My child, I came here
to support your cause and help my own, as well.
But if what I advise is incorrect,
then your opinion must prevail with us,
and we will follow in one group together. 270

ELECTRA

I feel ashamed, my friends, if my impatience
and my many cries of mournful sorrow
seem to you excessive. Please forgive me.
But my harsh treatment forces that on me.
How could any well-born woman not behave
as I do, when she sees her father wronged?
I see that constantly—day and night—
and things are not improving—they're getting worse! [260]
First, there is my mother, who gave birth to me.
The way she treats me, she has now become 280
truly hateful. Then, here in my own home,
I am living with my father's murderers.
They govern what I do, and from those two
I get what I require or do without.
And then imagine how I spend my days,
when I observe Aegisthus sitting there,
on my father's throne, and see him wearing
the clothes my father wore, or pouring out
libations at the hearth—the very place
he struck him down, or when I witness 290 [270]
the crowning outrage in all this—the killer
in my father's bed beside my mother—

ELECTRA

if I must call that dreadful woman mother,
sleeping with such a man in the same bed!
She has become so reckless, she can live
with that polluted wretch and have no fear
of the avenging Furies. In fact, she seems
to laugh at what she's done, for she has picked
the day when, years ago, with her deceit
she killed my father, as a day to celebrate 300
with dance and song, and in month-long rituals [280]
to those gods who protect her, she offers
sacrificial sheep. I observe all this,
and in my misery shout out my grief,
as I waste away inside this house,
crying in sorrow for that profane feast
named for my father.¹⁵ I do this alone,
for I am not free to indulge my grief
as fully as my heart desires. If I try,
that woman, that so-called noble lady, 310
keeps scolding me with shameless insults—
“You godforsaken, hateful girl, are you
the only one who has lost a father?
Is there no one else who needs to mourn? [290]
I hope you die a truly wretched death,
and may the gods below never free you
from your present grieving.” With words like that
she keeps abusing me, unless she hears
Orestes might be coming. Then, enraged,
she comes and shouts, “Are you not the one 320
who did this to me? This is all your fault!
You stole Orestes from me and in secret
sent him away from here. But rest assured—
for doing that you will be justly punished.”
That's how she snarls at me, and by her side,
encouraging her, is that splendid man, [300]
her husband, impotent in every way,
a blight on all mankind, who fights his wars
with the help of women! But I am dying
from despair, always waiting for the day 330
Orestes comes and ends my suffering.
He keeps on planning to do something great,
but his delays have shattered all my hopes.

¹⁵The feast in question is the one Clytaemnestra organizes each year on the anniversary of Agamemnon's death, a celebration Clytaemnestra has, with grim irony, named after the dead king.

ELECTRA

O my friends, when this is our condition,
there is no place for prudence or respect—
in evil times we are forcibly compelled
to act in evil ways.

CHORUS

Tell me this— [310]
while you've been speaking to us, has Aegisthus
been nearby, or has he left the house?

ELECTRA

I am sure he's left. If he were close by, 340
I would never venture from the house.
At the moment he happens to be gone—
he's in the country.

CHORUS

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

ELECTRA

He is not here. Speak up. What is it you want?

CHORUS

All right, I'll ask you this—what can you tell me
about your brother? Is he coming soon,
or will he be delayed? I'd like to know.

ELECTRA

He says he'll come. But though he says that,
he never does what he has promised. 350

CHORUS

But any man is likely to delay
when undertaking something challenging. [320]

ELECTRA

When I saved him, I did not hesitate.¹⁶

CHORUS

Do not fear. He has a noble nature

¹⁶Electra is referring here to the day she handed Orestes over to the Paedagogus right after Agamemnon's murder, thus saving him from Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra.

ELECTRA

and will stand by his friends.

ELECTRA

I believe that.

If I did not, I'd not have gone on living.

CHORUS

We should stop talking. I see Chrysothemis,
your sister, coming from the palace—
like you, a daughter born to Agamemnon
and Clytaemnestra, holding in her hands 370
the customary tributes to the dead,
offerings for those in the world below.

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

So you're out here once again, Electra,
by the public doorway, telling stories.
What is it you're saying to people now?
In all this time have you not learned to stop 330
this vain obsession with your pointless rage?
I, at least, understand my situation.
What's happening at present makes me sad,
so much so, in fact, that if I had the strength, 380
I would speak out, tell people how I feel.
But as it is, in these turbulent times,
I think it prudent to pull in my sails
and not to have them see me as a threat,
when there is nothing I can do to harm them.
If only you would be like that, as well.
Of course, the way you choose to act is just,
and my advice is not, but if I wish
to live in freedom, then in all I do 340
I must obey the ones with power. 390

ELECTRA

Yes, but I find it astonishing that you
forget your father. You are his daughter,
born from him, and yet your sole concern
is for your mother. Your advice to me—
all of it—consists of things she taught you.
None of it expresses what you feel.
So make a choice: you can be reckless,

ELECTRA

or else prudent and forget your friends.
Just now you told me, if you had the strength,
you'd demonstrate how much you hate those two. 400
And yet when I'm doing everything I can
to avenge our father, instead of helping me,
you try to turn me from my purpose. [350]
Is this not merely adding cowardice
to all our other troubles? Tell me this—
or else hear it from me—what benefits
would I receive if I stopped mourning.
I am alive, aren't I? I live a wretched life,
I know, but it is good enough for me.
I infuriate those two, and doing that 410
pays honourable tribute to the dead,
if those below feel any gratitude.
You talk to me of hatred—but your hate
is only words. The way you act makes you
an ally of the ones who killed our father.
I would never let them have their way,
not even if they offered me a gift [360]
of all those things in which you take such pride.
So you can have your finely furnished table
and your rich life that swims in luxury. 420
As for me, the only nourishment I need
is not to pain my heart. I do not want
those privileges you have—nor would you,
if you had any sense. As things stand now,
when you could be called daughter of the man
who was the noblest father of them all,
they ought to call you Clytaemnestra's child.
With such a name, most men would clearly see
how vile you are, a woman who abandoned
her dead father and her family friends. 430

CHORUS

In the name of the gods, no words of anger!
For each of you has said some useful things—
if you, Electra, learned to follow her advice, [370]
and she, in turn, could learn to follow yours.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Women of Mycenae, I am quite familiar
with the way she talks. I would not have said

ELECTRA

a word about these things, had I not heard
that she will soon confront the very worst
of all calamities—a looming threat
that will suppress her endless wailing.

ELECTRA

Go on—

440

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

[380]

450

ELECTRA

Is this really what they plan to do with me?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Yes it is—once Aegisthus comes back home.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

460 [390]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

CHRYOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

Ah yes,
such a splendid and enviable life!

CHRYOTHEMIS

It could be that, if you had any sense.

ELECTRA

Do not tell me to betray the ones I love.

CHRYOTHEMIS

That's not what I'm saying. I'm telling you
that you should yield to those in power.

ELECTRA

So use your flattery on them yourself.
What you advise is not the way I am.

470

CHRYOTHEMIS

There is no honour in ruining oneself
through mere stupidity.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYOTHEMIS

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

[400]

ELECTRA

Those words
are ones that cowards would approve of.

CHRYOTHEMIS

So I cannot get you to agree with me?

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Then I'll be on my way, 480
off to the place where they have sent me.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Mother sent me out to take libations
and these offerings to our father's grave.¹⁷

ELECTRA

What are you saying? She's sending those
for her worst enemy?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

"The one she murdered"—
that's what you'd like to add.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I think it was a vision in the night— 490 [410]
it frightened her.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Why does her fear
rouse in you such hope?

¹⁷Jebb notes that offerings were articles of food (e.g., cakes) to be burned at the gravesite. Libations were liquids poured out over the dead person's burial site.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

They say she saw our father—yours and mine—
come back to life and with her once again.

He took the sceptre which he used to bear,
the one now carried by Aegisthus,

500 [420]

and fixed it in the ground beside the hearth.¹⁸

From that sceptre grew a flourishing branch
which cast a shadow over all Mycenae.

That's what I heard from someone who was there
as she was talking to the sun about her dream.

That's all I know, except she sent me out
because she was afraid. And now I beg you,
by all our family gods, take my advice.

Don't let such thoughtlessness destroy you!

510

If you reject me now, you're going to suffer—
and then you'll come to me and beg for help.

[430]

ELECTRA

Dear sister, do not let what you are holding
touch our father's tomb. Piety and custom

do not permit you to bring burial gifts

to our dead father from his hateful wife

or pour libations. Throw them to the winds,
or hide them in a deep and dusty hole,

where no offering of hers is ever near

our father's resting place. When she is dead,

520

let those treasures be there, preserved for her
deep in the earth. If she were not by nature

the most reckless of all women, she would never

¹⁸As Jebb notes, Agamemnon could fix the sceptre in the ground because the floor of the room in which the hearth was located was beaten down earth. Alternatively, Agamemnon could have planted the sceptre outside beside the altar of Zeus in the main courtyard of the palace.

ELECTRA

have such detestable libations offered [440]
to the man she killed. And consider this—
do you believe the dead man in his grave
will accept such tributes and feel affection
for the woman who dishonoured him in death,
treating him as one might treat an enemy—
with mutilation—and who, to cleanse herself, 530
wiped the bloodstained axe on her victim's head.¹⁹
Surely you do not think those offerings
can possibly absolve her of the murder?
That will not happen. Set those gifts aside,
and trim a lock of hair on your own head.
Take some of mine as well. As an offering,
it's not worth much, but in my wretched state [450]
it's all I have. Offer him this unwashed hair
and this plain, unembroidered belt of mine.
Kneel down, and beg him to return to us— 540
to come in person from beneath the earth,
a welcome help against our enemies.
And pray his son Orestes is alive
and will prevail and trample underfoot
all those who stand against him, so that we,
in days to come, may decorate his grave
with wealthier hands than we have now,
as we offer him these gifts. The way I feel,
it may well be our father played a part
in sending her this terrifying dream. 550 [460]
But even so, dear sister, do as I ask—
perform this service for yourself and me,
and help the mortal man we love the most,
the father we two share, now lying in Hades.

CHORUS [to Chrysothemis]

The girl has spoken with true piety.
If you are wise, you'll act on what she says.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I intend to. It makes no sense at all,
when dealing with an action that is just,

¹⁹Mutilating a dead enemy (by cutting off his extremities and placing them under the arms of the corpse) was thought to prevent the spirit of the dead man from taking vengeance for the killing. The Greek does not specify what Clytaemnestra wiped on Agamemnon's head. Her hands or her weapon seems the most obvious dramatic possibility.

ELECTRA

for the two of us to argue. Instead,
we should be hastening to perform it. 560
But, my friends, in the name of the gods,
when I attempt to carry out this rite, [470]
you must not say a word. For I know this—
if my mother hears about this venture,
I'll pay a bitter price for what I've done.

[Exit Chrysothemis.]

CHORUS

Unless I am a foolish prophet
and have no skill in judging things,
then Justice, who signals her approach,
is on her way, and in her hands
she holds the mighty power 570
of righteous victory. Yes, my child,
she will be here soon and will pursue them.
That sweet-breathing dream I heard about [480]
a moment ago has given me hope.
Your father, king of the Greeks,
does not forget, nor does that axe—
that ancient bronze-jawed double axe,
which, in an aching act of treachery,
hacked him down and killed him.

And she, too, will be coming here 580
the goddess with many hands and feet,
who lurks in ominous ambush— [490]
an untiring bronze-shod Fury.²⁰
That pair was seized by passionate lust
for a foul and loveless marriage
polluted and stained with murder—
an act the laws of Zeus forbid.²¹
Because of that, I am quite sure
the omen of the dream is good.
For we would never see such things 590
without some form of justice done
to criminals and those who help them. [500]

²⁰The Furies (or Eriynes) were female goddesses of vengeance, especially for blood crimes against members of the family. They are called bronze-shod because their shoes never wear out in their pursuit of their victims.

²¹The phrase “That pair” is a reference to Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus.

ELECTRA

But if this vision in the night should fail
to be fulfilled, then prophecies
from fearful dreams and oracles
for mortal beings exist no more.

O horseman Pelops long ago,
the source of so much sorrow,
how you have brought calamity
upon this land.²² For since the day 600
of that despicable, outrageous act,
when Myrtilus sank to his final rest
beneath the waves, hurled to his death
from a golden chariot, this family [510]
has always lived with so much pain,
never free from pitiless disaster.

[Enter Clytaemnestra attended by a servant.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You seem to be wandering out here again
quite freely, while Aegisthus is away.
He always stops you loitering outside
beyond the gates, shaming your family.²³ 610
Since he's been gone, you hardly notice me,
and yet time and again you keep complaining [520]
to many people how arrogant I am—
I run things in a reckless, unjust way,
abusing you and those you care about.
But I am not the one who's insolent.
When I insult you, I am just returning
those insults I so often hear from you.
You're always harping on the same excuse—

²²Pelops, a distant ancestor of the Mycenaean royal family, entered a competition in order to win Hippodameia as his wife. The girl's father, Oenomaus, king of Pisa, had promised her to anyone who could beat him in a chariot race. If the suitor failed to win, then he was killed. Pelops convinced the king's charioteer, Myrtilus, to sabotage Oenomaus's chariot by tampering with the wheels. Myrtilus did so, Oenomaus crashed, and Pelops won the race and Hippodameia. Soon afterwards Pelops quarrelled with Myrtilus and threw him into the sea. As he was drowning, Myrtilus uttered a curse against Pelops and all his descendants. This curse is traditionally the initial cause of all the bloody troubles of the royal family in Mycenae. Sophocles here suggests that Myrtilus was thrown from his chariot. The more common account is that Pelops hurled him into the sea. The lines may be conflating the story of Oenomaus, who died in the sea when his chariot wheel came off during the race with Pelops, and the story of Myrtilus.

²³It was (and in many places still is) considered shameful for a family to let a young, unmarried girl walk around in a public place alone.

ELECTRA

I was the one who killed your father. 620
Yes, I killed him. I understand that.
I don't deny it. But I was not alone,
for Justice executed him, as well.
That killing would have had your full support,
if you'd been thinking straight. Your father—
the man for whom you're always grieving— [530]
was the only Greek who dared to sacrifice
your own blood, your sister, to appease the gods.²⁴
When he planted her seed he felt no pain
comparable to the agonies I felt 630
when I gave birth to her. Now, tell me this—
for whose sake did he sacrifice that girl?
Was it for the Argives?²⁵ Is that your answer?
But those men had no right to kill my daughter.
And if he sacrificed my child for Menelaus,
his brother, should he not pay a penalty
for that to me? Did not Menelaus have
two children? Surely, to be fair, those two
should have been offered up instead? After all, [540]
their parents were the reason for the voyage.²⁶ 640
Was Hades' craving to devour my children
greater than his urge to feast on Helen's?²⁷
Or had their atrocious father set aside
all affection for his children born from me,
while he still cared for those of Menelaus?
Did that not show he was a wretched father
who had no feelings? That's my view of it,
even if you don't agree with what I've said.
And the girl who died would speak as I do,
if she could find a voice. That's why, for me, 650
there's nothing to regret in what I've done.
You may well find the way I think offensive. [550]
If so, make sure, when you are judging others,
that what you say about them is the truth,

²⁴The gods told Agamemnon that the Greek fleet would not receive a favourable wind for the fleet, unless he sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia. Agamemnon sacrificed the girl, and the Greeks sailed to Troy.

²⁵The Greek forces at Troy were often called the Argives or the Achaeans, rather than Greeks.

²⁶Menelaus was married to Helen (Clytaemnestra's sister), who later eloped to Troy with Paris, a Trojan prince. The immediate cause of the war was Menelaus's desire to get her back. The other Greek warriors joined (some unwillingly) because they had earlier agreed to provide assistance to whichever one of them married Helen.

²⁷Hades is the god who rules the underworld.

ELECTRA

before you lay the blame on someone else.

ELECTRA

At least you cannot say on this occasion
I was the one who started the abuse
and you replied because you were provoked.
But with your permission, I would like to speak
on behalf of my dead father and my sister
and talk about what really happened. 660

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

ELECTRA

All right then, I will answer what you said.
You admit you killed my father. What speech
could ever be more shameful than those words,
whether what you did was justified or not? [560]
But I will prove to you that when you killed him
you did not do it in the name of Justice. 670
No, that vile man who is now your lover
persuaded you to do it. Ask Artemis
the hunter goddess, why she held in check
the winds at Aulis. Was she punishing
a wrong someone had done? I will tell you,
since it is not right for us to question her.²⁸
My father—so I've heard—was once out hunting
in a sacred grove of goddess Artemis,
when his footsteps roused a startled deer,
a dappled stag with horns. He threw his spear 680
and hit the beast. Then, as it so happened,
he uttered a loud boast about the slaughter.
Artemis was enraged. She kept the Greeks [570]
detained at Aulis, until my father,
to compensate her for that creature's life,
sacrificed his daughter. So she was killed.
There was no other way to free the army,
so it could sail to Troy or go back home.
He struggled hard against the god's demands,
resisting what he was compelled to do, 690

²⁸Human beings were not in a position to interrogate gods about their motives.

ELECTRA

but in the end with great reluctance
he sacrificed her to preserve his troops,
and not for Menelaus. But let's assume,
to adopt your argument, he killed her
for his brother's sake. Is that a reason
for you to kill him? What gives you that right?
Take care when you establish rules for men [580]
you do not bring yourself remorse and pain.
For if we were to kill all those who killed,
blood for blood, and you were dealt with justly, 700
then surely you would be the first to die.
You should consider whether what you say
is just a mere excuse. Please tell me this—
why do you now live in such a shameful way,
committing the most atrocious of all crimes,
by sleeping with a guilty murderer?
He first conspired with you to kill my father,
and after that you bore his offspring.
The ones you had before you pushed aside,
legitimate children of a lawful marriage.²⁹ 710 [590]
How can I approve of what you've done?
Are you suggesting that your way of life
is also retribution for your daughter?
If that's what you are saying, it's a disgrace—
marrying an enemy to avenge a child!
There's nothing honourable in such an act.
But there's no point in criticizing you.
You'll only say I'm slandering my mother.
Well, I don't consider you my mother—
you're more my mistress. That's how tiresome 720
my life is here. You and that man of yours
make everything so miserable for me! [600]
As for your other child, poor Orestes,
who only just escaped your clutches,
he spends his sad life far away in exile.
How many times have you complained I raised him
so he could punish you for what you've done?
Well, you can be sure of this—I would have,
if I'd been strong enough. For that, at least,
you should denounce me, telling everyone 730
whatever you like—that I'm disloyal,
abusive, and absolutely shameless.

²⁹Some traditional accounts state that Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra had two children.

ELECTRA

For if I naturally possess the skill
to act like that, then given who you are,
I am a credit to the one who bore me.

CHORUS

I can see she's angry, but is she right? [610]
For I no longer think she even cares
whether she has Justice on her side.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

And how am I supposed to care for her,
when, at her age, she insults her mother? 740
Does she not strike you as a person
who would do anything and feel no shame?

ELECTRA

It may not look that way, but I do feel shame
That's something you should understand.
I know that what I do is inappropriate,
unsuitable for someone of my age.
But your hostility and what you've done
force me, against my will, to act this way. [620]
Shameful actions teach us shameful deeds.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You shameless creature, you talk far too much
about how I behave and what I say. 750

ELECTRA

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

ELECTRA

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

ELECTRA

CLYTAEMNESTRA

All right, calm down. 760
Now that I've allowed you to speak freely, [630]
will you allow me to complete my sacrifice?

ELECTRA

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

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA *[to her Attendant]*

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

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

O Phoebus, our protector, hear my prayer, 770
although in what I say I must be careful,
for those around me are not all my friends,
and while this girl is standing close to me [640]
I do not think it wise that every detail
sees the light of day. She is malicious,
and that chattering tongue of hers might sow
wild rumours all around the city.
But even though I speak so guardedly,
hear what I have to say! The vision I saw
in that ambiguous dream last night— 780
if it's an omen favourable to me,
O Lycian king, then let it be fulfilled.
If not, if that dream is inauspicious,
let it recoil on those who wish me harm!
If anyone is hatching treasonous schemes
to force me from my rich successful life,
let them not prevail, but grant instead [650]
that I may always live the way I do,
in safety, governing the royal throne
and palace, home of Atreus's sons, 790

ELECTRA

spending pleasant days with those good friends
I have around me now and with my children,
the ones who feel no bitterness towards me
and bear me no ill will. O Lycian Apollo,
be gracious to us. Hear us when we pray,
and grant to each of us the things we ask.
As for my secret prayers, I will say nothing.
You are a god, and I know you hear them,
for, as is fitting, all things are perceived
by gods who are the children of great Zeus.³⁹

800

[Enter the Paedagogus.]

PAEDAGOGUS

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

[660]

CHORUS

Yes, stranger, it is.
Your assumption is correct.

PAEDAGOGUS

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

CHORUS

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

PAEDAGOGUS *[to Clytaemnestra]*

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

810

³⁹Clytaemnestra is not willing, in the presence of Electra, to speak all her prayers aloud. Presumably, those silent prayers have something to do with Orestes.

ELECTRA

PAEDAGOGUS

Phanoteus from Phocis [670]
asked me to bring you an important message.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

PAEDAGOGUS

My message is brief: Orestes has been killed.

ELECTRA

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

PAEDAGOGUS

What I just said 820
and now repeat is this—Orestes has been killed.

ELECTRA

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA *[to Electra]*

That's enough! Keep your feelings to yourself!

[Clytaemnestra turns back to the Paedagogus.]

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

PAEDAGOGUS

I was sent to tell you what took place, [680]
and I will give you the entire story.
Orestes travelled to that famous shrine
at Delphi, whose glory all Greeks share,
to compete for prizes at the games held there. 830
When he heard the loud cry of the herald
for the first event, a foot race, he moved
onto the track, a splendid looking youth,
who won the admiration of the crowd.

ELECTRA

He raced once around the track and finished first,
winning the honour of a glorious prize.
As for his other feats that day, let me say this:
I do not know any man who could have matched
his strength and skill. And one thing you should know— [690]
in every contest which those judges called 840
he won first prize, and all those there agreed
he was a fortunate young man each time
the heralds shouted out he was an Argive
called Orestes, son of Agamemnon,
who once commanded Greece's famous army.³¹
That's how things began for him that day.
But when a god decides to harm someone,
there's no escape, not even for the strong.
One day soon afterwards at sunrise,
Orestes took part in a chariot race, 850 [700]
with many others—one was from Achaea,
one from Sparta, and two from Libya,
both very skilled at racing chariots.
Orestes was the fifth man in the race
with his Thessalian mares. The sixth,
with chestnut colts, was from Aetolia,
the seventh a driver from Magnesia.
An Aenian man, whose team was white,
was eighth, and ninth a man from Athens.
The tenth and final man was a Boeotian. 860
Special judges chose each starting place [710]
by drawing lots, and then the teams moved up
to their assigned positions. A trumpet blared,
and they raced off, shouting at their horses
and brandishing the reins. The entire track
was filled with the din of clattering chariots,
stirring up the dust. In the mass confusion
no one spared the whip, as each man strove
to push on and get past his rival's wheels
and the snorting nostrils of his horses. 870
The foaming slobber of the panting teams
fell across their backs and chariot wheels.
Each time Orestes swung past the turning post [720]
he let the trace horse on the right run wide

³¹Following the lead of many other translators, I omit line 691 in the Greek, which lists the contests (single lap race, double lap race, and pentathlon). Jebb suggests it is a later interpolation and discusses the difficulties it presents.

ELECTRA

and kept the reins taut on the left-hand side.
He came so close he almost grazed his wheels.³²
So far the chariots had all been running well,
but then the Aenian's hard-mouthed horses
lost control and bolted, as they were ending
their sixth lap and starting on the seventh, 880
smashing headlong into a Libyan chariot.
The pile up caused a number of collisions,
as racing teams crashed into one another
and broke apart. The racing course at Crisa [730]
was full of shattered chariots. Seeing this,
the man from Athens, a skilful driver,
pulled aside, reining in his horses,
to let the mass of chariots behind him
rush past and crash into the wreckage.
Orestes was holding back his horses, 890
counting on a fast sprint at the finish.
But when he noticed the Athenian
was the only chariot left in the race,
he raised a cry that pierced his horses' ears
and set out after him. They drew level.
As the chariots raced on, first one of them
would surge ahead and then the other,
the horses straining neck-and-neck to win.
So far poor Orestes had kept his poise, [740]
standing balanced in the upright chariot, 900
and moving safely past the turning posts.
But then, as his team made the final turn,
quite inadvertently he slackened off
the left-hand rein and struck the pillar,
breaking his axle box. He pitched forward,
across the rail, and got tangled in the reins.
As he fell down, his team of horses panicked,
bolting all around the middle of the track.
When people saw he'd fallen from his chariot,
they cried out with pity that such a youth, 910 [750]
who'd achieved so much, was so unlucky.
He was dragged along the ground and tossed

³²In the chariot race, each competitor drove a four-horse team, two yoked horses in the middle and two trace horses on the outside. The drivers raced a number of laps counter clockwise around a course marked with a pillar at each end (the turning post). A key moment was the turn around the pillar, when a good rider guided his left trace horse as close to the pillar as possible, without having his wheel hit it. That meant that the driver had to keep a tight control on the left-hand trace horse, the one nearest the pillar. The right-hand horse was left to run as hard as it could.

ELECTRA

into the air feet first, until the charioteers
with difficulty rounded up his horses
and cut him loose, covered in so much blood
that even a friend would not have recognized
his mangled corpse. They quickly built a pyre
and burned the body. Chosen men from Phocis
are bringing here in a small urn made of bronze
his mighty body, now nothing but ash, 920
so he may have the burial he deserves [760]
in his ancestral home. That ends my story.
The words are sad enough, but for those of us
who saw it, it was the greatest of all sorrows,
the most painful sight that we have ever seen.

CHORUS

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

O Zeus, should I consider this good news
or horrible but of benefit to me?
It's a bitter feeling—I am so miserable 930
and yet what makes me grieve has saved my life.

PAEDAGOGUS

My lady, why has my speech made you sad?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Motherhood has a mysterious power.
No matter how much he may make her suffer, [770]
a woman can never hate the child she bears.

PAEDAGOGUS

Then it seems my journey has been futile.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, no—your trip has not been futile.
How can you say that when you have come
bringing me sure proof that he is dead?
His got his life from me, and yet he fled— 940
abandoning the breast that nurtured him
and the one who raised him. He became
totally estranged from me, an exile.
Once he left Mycenae, he never saw me.

ELECTRA

He accused me of his father's murder
and often threatened he would take revenge.
At night sweet sleep could never close my eyes, [780]
or in the day—each moment made me feel
as if I was about to die. But today,
my fear of him is gone—and of that girl, 950
who causes me more grief than he does.
She lives with me and drinks my lifeblood neat.
But now, I think, in spite of all her threats,
I'll spend my days in peace and comfort.

ELECTRA

Alas for me and the agony I feel!
Now I must mourn your death, Orestes,
for even though you're dead, this woman,
your mother, still insults you. Is that right? [790]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

ELECTRA

O Nemesis, goddess of retribution 960
for those who have just died, listen to her!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

ELECTRA

So then insult us!
This is your lucky day.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You will not stop me now—
you and Orestes.

ELECTRA

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA *[to the Paedagogus]*

Well, stranger,

ELECTRA

you deserve a fine reward, if your trip here
has brought her noisy chatter to an end.

PAEDAGOGUS

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, no, not yet. That would be unworthy
of me and of the friend who sent you.³³ 970 [800]
Do come inside—we'll leave the girl out here
to howl about the troubles she has had
and what the ones she loves have suffered.

[Clytaemnestra and the Paedagogus go into the palace.]

ELECTRA

How did that wretched woman seem to you?
Was she in pain, grieving and weeping bitterly
over her dead son? No, as she left here
she was laughing! This is the end for me.
Dearest Orestes, your death has finished me,
tearing from my heart whatever hopes 980
I still had that one day you would come [810]
to avenge our father and my suffering.
But now where can I turn? I am alone,
for you are lost to me, as is my father.
Now I must go back to being a slave
for those I hate the most, those murderers,
who killed my father. Should I do that?
No, from now on I will not live with them.
I will lie down beside these palace gates
and let my life wither away unloved. 990
If any of those living in the house [820]
finds this offensive, let them kill me.
The killer would be doing me a favour—
my life is pain, and I have no desire
to keep on living anymore.

CHORUS

Where are the thunderbolts of Zeus
or the blazing Sun? What are they doing

³³As an important royal figure, Clytaemnestra would be expected to provide appropriate hospitality for a messenger from an ally.

ELECTRA

if they see these things and keep them hidden?

ELECTRA [*screaming and sobbing*]
Aaaiiiii!

CHORUS
My child, why are you crying?

ELECTRA
This is too much!

CHORUS
Do not shout such things. 1000 [830]

ELECTRA
You will destroy me!

CHORUS
Destroy you? How?

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

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

ELECTRA [*screaming again*]
Aaaaaiiiii! [840]

CHORUS
. . . his mind is still alert, 1010
and he rules the dead.³⁴

³⁴Amphiarus, an Argive prophet, was reluctant to join an expedition led by Polyneices, a son of Oedipus, against Thebes. Polyneices bribed Amphiarus's wife, Eriphyle, with a golden necklace, and she convinced her husband to join Polyneices. After the Thebans defeated Polyneices, Amphiarus fled and was swallowed up when the earth was split apart by a thunderbolt. His son Alcmaeon avenged his father by killing Eriphyle. The Chorus offers Amphiarus as an example of someone who died as a result of his wife's treachery and greed (i.e., someone like Agamemnon)

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Alas!

CHORUS

Alas, indeed. That deadly lady . . .

ELECTRA [*interrupting*]

. . . was destroyed.

CHORUS

Yes, she was killed.

ELECTRA

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

CHORUS

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

ELECTRA

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

1030 [850]

CHORUS

We have watched you as you grieve.

ELECTRA

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

CHORUS

What are you saying?

ELECTRA

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

and who still has a significant existence in the underworld. Electra seizes on the point that the death of Amphiaraus was avenged, whereas Agamemnon's death has not yet been avenged.

ELECTRA

CHORUS

All mortal men must die— [860]
that's Nature law.

ELECTRA

But not like that—
not like poor Orestes—those thundering hooves
and he was cut and tangled in the reins! 1040

CHORUS

His wounds are unimaginable!

ELECTRA

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

CHORUS

Alas!

ELECTRA

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

[Enter Chrysothemis.]

CHRYOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

CHRYOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

You poor girl, are you mad? Are you mocking

ELECTRA

my misfortunes and your own?

[880]

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

1060

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

You poor wretch, what evidence did you see
that led you to have faith in such a story?
What lit the fire of such a fatal hope?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Now, by the gods, hear what I have to say—
learn what I have seen before you tell me
whether I have lost my mind or not.

[890]

ELECTRA

If telling me your story makes you happy,
then go ahead.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

All right, I'll tell you
everything I saw. When I reached the grave,
our father's old ancestral tomb, I noticed
that streams of milk had recently been poured
on the top part of the mound. His burial site
was surrounded by all sorts of flowers.
I was astonished at the sight. I looked around,
in case someone might come too close to me,
but the whole place was absolutely still.
When I saw that, I moved closer to the grave,
and there I noticed, right beside the mound,
a lock of hair—cut off not long ago.
And in that instant a familiar image
rushed into my heart, and I imagined

1070

[900]

1080

ELECTRA

I was looking at a token of the man
I love the most of all, my dear Orestes.
I took it in my hands and raised it up,
saying nothing that might spoil the moment.
My eyes at once were filled with tears of joy,
and I felt then as I do now, the offerings
had to come from him. Who else would do it, 1090
apart from you and me? And I know this— [910]
I did not make those offerings. Nor did you.
How could you? You are not allowed to go
outside the house without being punished,
not even to worship at the holy shrines.
Our mother's heart would never prompt her to it,
and she could not have done so unobserved.
No, these offerings are from Orestes.
And so, dear sister, pluck up your courage.
One's fortune does not always stay the same. 1100
To this point ours has been abominable,
but today perhaps brings us new promise
that many good things lie in store.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What?
Are you not overjoyed to hear my news?

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

How could I not know what I saw so clearly?

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

From someone who was there when he was killed.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

O no! What about the tributes at the grave? [930]
Who put them there?

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

How can I bring the dead to life again? [940]

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

What I want is for you to have the courage 1130
to do what I suggest.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

ELECTRA

If it does us good,
I will not refuse.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

Then listen. Here's what I intend to do.
You know we have no friends who can assist us.
Hades has taken them away. We two,
the only ones still left, are now alone. [950]
As long as I still heard he was alive and well,
I hoped that one day Orestes would return 1140
to avenge the murder of our father.
But now he's gone, I look to you for help.
I need you to be firm—no holding back—
and work with me, your sister, to kill
our father's murderer, Aegisthus.
That's my plan. I will keep nothing secret
from you anymore. How much longer
will you wait around doing nothing?
Where can you look for any real hope?
All you can do now is lament the loss 1150
of your father's rich estate and feel sad [960]
that after all these years you are unmarried
and have not heard your joyful bridal song.
Do not cling onto the hope that one day
this will happen. No, that man, Aegisthus,
is no fool. He will never let the two of us
have any children. That would pose for him
a real danger. But if you do decide
to follow my advice, first of all,
you will win praises for your piety 1160
from our dead father and our brother.
And afterwards you will be free again,
just as you were free when you were born, [970]
and you will have a marriage you deserve.
For all men's eyes are drawn to true nobility.
Do you not see how, if you do as I suggest,
you and I will win a glorious reputation?

ELECTRA

Every citizen and stranger will look at us
and shower us with praise, saying things like,
“My friends, look at those two sisters. They saved
their father’s home. At the risk of their own lives,
they stood against their powerful enemies
and killed them. They are worthy of our love,
and all of us should show them due respect.
At festivals and when the people gather,
these two should be honoured for their courage.”
That’s how everyone will talk about us,
and then, whether we are alive or dead,
our glory will not fade. So, dear sister,
agree with me. Take up our father’s cause
and our brother’s. Bring my troubles to an end
and your own, as well. Remember this—
for all those born to noble families
living life in shame is a disgrace.

CHORUS

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

CHRYSOthemis [*to the Chorus*]

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

[*To Electra*]

What are you thinking when you arm yourself
in recklessness and call for my support?
Look at you! You’re a woman, not a man—
your strength is no match for your enemies,
and their good fortune grows stronger every day,
while ours declines and soon will disappear.
Who could ever plot to kill a man like that
and get away with it unharmed? Be careful—
our present lives are difficult enough.
They could get even worse if anyone
hears you talk like that. If we win glory,
there is no help or benefit for us
if we die in disgrace. For death itself
is not the worst. No, wanting to die
is worse when one has no way to do it.

ELECTRA

So before we are completely ruined,
and our entire family is destroyed, [1010]
I beg you to control your anger.
As for what you said to me, for your sake
I will be silent. It will not harm you.
But now it's time you acted sensibly. 1210
You are weak, and so you must give way
to those with power.

CHORUS

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

ELECTRA

I knew you would reject what I proposed.
So I must act alone, kill him myself
with my own hands. I will not give up. [1020]

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

I had the heart to do it, but at the time
my mind was ill-prepared—I could not act. 1220

CHRYSOTHEMIS

That's the way you should be thinking now.

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

ELECTRA

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

ELECTRA

You will never have to hear such words from me. 1230

CHRYSOTHEMIS

That's something for the future to decide. [1030]

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

Just go—and tell your mother everything!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

You realize how you dishonour me.³⁵

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

Must I then follow
what you think is just?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

When you are reasonable
I'll let you lead us both.

ELECTRA

It's terrible 1240
for one to speak so well and be so wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

³⁵The dishonour, Jebb explains, comes from Chrysothemis's rejection of Electra's appeal to her as a sister.

ELECTRA

You've just described yourself exactly.

[1040]

ELECTRA

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

But there are times when justice does us harm.

ELECTRA

I have no wish to live by rules like that.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

ELECTRA

I will do it.

The things you say will not prevent me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Are you sure? You won't reconsider?

ELECTRA

No. There's nothing worse than bad advice.

1250

CHRYSOTHEMIS

You do not seem to hear a word I say.

ELECTRA

I made up my mind some time ago.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

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

[1050]

ELECTRA

Then go inside.

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

CHRYSOTHEMIS

If you believe your thinking is correct,

ELECTRA

then think that way. But when troubles come, 1260
you'll be praising the advice I gave you.

[Chrysothemis goes into the palace.]

CHORUS

Why, when we observe the birds above [1060]
and see how, with sure intelligence,
they provide sustenance to those
who gave them life and reared them,
why do we not do the same?
But by the lightning flash of Zeus
and by celestial goddess Themis,
our punishment will not be long delayed.
O Voice that echoes through the earth 1270
to the dead below, shout out, I beg you,
a pitiful cry to the son of Atreus,
to tell him of our joyless shame.

Tell him there is sickness in the home— [1070]
strife between his children—two sisters
no longer live in loving harmony.
Abandoned and alone, Electra
in her misery confronts the storm,
always grieving for her father's fate,
like the ever-plaintive nightingale, 1280
with no concern for death, but ready
to die if she can purge the house
of those two Furies.³⁶ Could any child
born to a noble father ever be
more faithful to her royal lineage? [1080]

No truly noble natures wish
to shame their name and reputation
by living a disgraceful life,
just as you, my child, have chosen
a life of mourning for your family. 1290
You have spurned dishonour
and won double praise—for wisdom
and for being the best of daughters.

³⁶The word "Furies" is normally associated with the divine agents of blood revenge, but sometimes (as here) it is used to denote the perpetrator of the evil act (i.e., the person the Furies seek to destroy).

ELECTRA

I pray you live with wealth and power, [1090]
as far above your enemies as now
you are beneath them. For I find you
in distress, but still observing
nature's most important laws,
and with your piety toward Zeus
winning the greatest praise for virtue. 1300

[Enter Orestes and Pylades.]

ORESTES

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

CHORUS

What do you want? Where is it you wish to go? [1100]

ORESTES

For a long time now I have been seeking
the house in which Aegisthus lives.

CHORUS

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

ORESTES

Well then,
which of you will inform those in the house
that guests they have long been expecting
have arrived? 1310

CHORUS

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

As you can see,
we have come bearing in this small urn
all that remains of the man who died.

ELECTRA

Alas, that makes me feel so wretched!
This is what I feared, and now I see
what you are holding in your hands
there seems evidence that he is dead.

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

O, if that urn really holds Orestes, 1330
then, stranger, in the name of all the gods, [1120]
let me hold it in my hands and lament,
weeping for these ashes and for myself,
and for my family, our entire race.

ORESTES *[to his attendants]*

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

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

ELECTRA

ELECTRA [*taking the ashes*]

O memorial of the one I loved
more dearly than all other living men, 1340
remnant of the life of my Orestes!
As I take you back, how you contradict
the hopes I had when I sent you away!
Now, my hands raise up just lifeless ash,
but when I sent you off, away from here,
O my child, how splendid you were then! [1130]
How I wish I could have left this life
before these hands of mine took you in secret
and sent you out into a foreign land,
to rescue you from death. You would have died 1350
on the very day our father perished
and shared his tomb.³⁷ But now you have died
away from home, away from your own land,
in lonely exile, far from your sister.
I feel so sad—these loving hands of mine
did not bathe or dress your corpse or take
the painful burden from the blazing fire, [1140]
as is required. No. Instead, you poor man,
you were cared for by the hands of strangers
and returned a small weight in a tiny urn. 1360
Alas for the way I looked after you
so long ago, that hard sweet futile work.
For you were never then your mother's love
but mine, and there was no one in the house
except for me who acted as your nurse.
You always called me "sister." Now you're dead,
and in a single day all that has gone. [1150]
You swept in like a destructive whirlwind
and carried everything away. Father is gone. 1370
And now because of you, I, too, have died,
for you have passed away. Our enemies
are laughing. Mother, who is no mother,
is insane with joy. You often sent me
secret messages about her, saying
you would come back as an avenger.
But now a divine spirit of misfortune,
yours and mine, has taken that away

³⁷If Electra had not saved Orestes, he would have died, but he would have received full funeral rites and a proper grave at home. Now, he appears to have died away from home and received no appropriate rites.

ELECTRA

and, instead of your beloved shape,
has sent me back a useless ghost and ash. 1380

Alas, for me! This pitiful body! [1160]
Alas! Alas for dear Orestes,
who set out on a dreadful journey.
You have finished me, dear brother—
yes, destroyed me. So welcome me now
into this urn, let my nothingness share
your home, too, now that you are nothing,
so I can spend my future days with you
in the earth below. When you lived above,
we shared things equally, and now I long 1390
to die and not be parted from your grave.
For I see the dead are free from misery. [1170]

CHORUS

You were the child of a mortal father,
Electra. Remember that. Orestes, too,
was mortal. So do not grieve too much.
Death is a debt that all of us must pay.

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

What is troubling you? Why did you say that?

ORESTES

Is this the noble body of Electra? 1400

ELECTRA

It is, but in a miserable state.

ORESTES

Your situation seems so desperate!

ELECTRA

Your sigh of pity is surely not for me, [1180]
is it, stranger?

ELECTRA

ORESTES

You have been abused—
treated without piety or honour.

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

Alas for your unmarried, ill-fated life.

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

I did not understand my own distress.

1410

ELECTRA

What has been said to make you see this?

ORESTES

It was observing you in obvious pain.

ELECTRA

You have not seen much of what I suffer.

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

Because I am living with the murderers.

[1190]

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

1420

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

There is no one. The one I was counting on—
you have just handed me his ashes.

ORESTES

You poor girl, I feel pity seeing you here.

1430

ELECTRA

You are the first who ever pitied me.

[1200]

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

Are you a foreign relative of ours?

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

No. Please do not take what I most cherish.

ORESTES

You must not keep it.

ELECTRA

How wretched I will feel,
Orestes, if I cannot bury you. [1210]

ORESTES

Speak more auspicious words. It is not right
for you to show such grief.

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

It is not right for you to speak this way.

ELECTRA

So with the dead I have no rights at all?

ORESTES [*grasping the urn*]

You do have rights, but not with this man here. 1450

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES [*taking the urn*]

These are not his ashes—
that is just a story we invented.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Then where is the grave of poor Orestes?

ORESTES

There isn't one. The living have no grave.

ELECTRA

What are you saying, young man?

[1220]

ORESTES

What I'm telling you
is not a lie.

ELECTRA

So the man is still alive?

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

Are you Orestes?

ORESTES

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

1460

ELECTRA

O most blissful day!

ORESTES

Yes, most blissful. I will confirm that!

ELECTRA

O to hear your voice! You have come back?

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

And I am holding you here in my arms?

ORESTES

May you hold me in your arms forever!

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

O you female citizens of Argos,
so dear to me, gaze upon Orestes,
who, in a story he made up, was dead
and, thanks to that deception, has been saved. 1470

CHORUS

We see him, my child. What has happened here [1230]
makes me rejoice and fills my eyes with tears.

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

What do you mean?

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

No! By Artemis, the eternal virgin,
I do not think it ever could be right 1480 [1240]
to fear that useless load of women
who always stay inside the house.

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

My child, I know. But we must think of them

ELECTRA

when the right moment prompts us, not before.

ELECTRA

For all time to come, each fleeting moment
would be appropriate for me to talk
with justice about what I have suffered.
Only now have my lips been free to speak. 1490

ORESTES

I agree. So you should guard that freedom.

ELECTRA

What should I do?

ORESTES

Do not try to say too much
at inappropriate times.

ELECTRA

But when you appear,
how could anyone consider it right
to stay silent instead of speaking out? [1260]
For now, against all my expectations,
by some miracle I have seen you! 1500

ORESTES

You saw me once the gods urged me to come.³⁸

ELECTRA

If it was a god who brought you to our home,
then you have brought up a divine favour
greater than the one I noticed earlier.
I see in it the work of heavenly power.³⁹ [1270]

ORESTES

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

³⁸Jebb comments that Orestes returned to Argos when he oracle told him to do so (he also observes that a line is probably missing from the manuscript here).

³⁹The earlier favour Electra refers to here may be the bad dream Clytaemnestra had, an event that Electra interprets as a sign that the gods on her side.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

1510

ORESTES

What should I not do?

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

So you agree with me?

ORESTES

Why would I not agree?

ELECTRA

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

1520

ORESTES

You must stop all unnecessary talk.
Do not tell me how bad our mother is
or how Aegisthus squanders all the goods
of our ancestral home—the wealth he wastes
or throws away on things that have no use.
The time you took to tell me all the details
would cost the opportunity we have.
Instead of that, you must describe for me
the facts that suit our present purposes—
how my arrival now enables us

[1290]

1530

ELECTRA

to bring our enemies' laughter to an end,
either openly or else by ambush.
Once we two have gone inside the house,
mother must not learn how you are feeling
from your delighted face. You must lament,
as if the story we made up was true.
When we have triumphed, that will be the time
to rejoice and glorify our freedom.

1540

[1300]

ELECTRA

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

1550

[1310]

1560

[1320]

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA [*to Orestes and Pylades*]

Go in, strangers, chiefly because you bring
something no person in this family

1570

ELECTRA

could send away or be happy to receive.

[Enter the Paedagogus from the house.]

PAEDOGOGUS

You foolish children, have you lost your wits?
Do you have no regard for your own lives,
or have your minds lost any natural sense?
Don't you realize you're not on the edge [1330]
of lethal danger but in its very midst?
If I had not been standing by these doors,
keeping watch for ages, what you're planning
would be inside the house before your bodies. 1580
I've taken care of that. So stop this talk
and all these insatiable cries of joy,
and go inside. In moments such as these
delay is dangerous. It's time to act.

ORESTES

What am I going to find when I go in?

PAIDAGOGUS

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

ORESTES

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

PAEDAGOGUS

You are now a man who dwells in Hades.

ORESTES

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

PAEDAGOGUS

I'll tell you that when all of this is over.
As far as they're concerned, things favour us,
even in matters which are dishonourable.⁴⁰

⁴⁰This odd-sounding sentence probably means (according to Jebb) that the situation is advantageous for the plotters, even in things which they might not consider morally correct (e.g., Clytaemnestra's joy at the reported death of her son).

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

Don't you recognize him?

ELECTRA

No. I have no idea.

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

What man? What are you talking about?

ORESTES

I'm talking about the man who secretly, [1350]
thanks to your precautions, carried me 1600
to the land of Phocis.

ELECTRA

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

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

What an amazing day! You, the sole saviour
of Agamemnon's house, how did you get here?
Are you really the man who rescued me
and my Orestes from our many troubles?
O those dear hands and those beloved feet
that did us such a service! How could you 1610
live with me so long and stay anonymous,
shedding no light at all on what had happened,
and boring me with stories, when you knew
the truth of what was truly sweet to me? [1360]
Welcome, father, for in you I seem to see
a father. Welcome! In a single day
I have truly hated and then truly loved you,
more so than any other mortal man.

ELECTRA

PAEDAGOGUS

Enough for now, I think. As for the rest,
the stories of what happened in the years
you were apart, there will be lots of time,
many circling nights and days, Electra,
for you to find that out in every detail. 1620

[To Orestes and Pylades]

You two are here now. I advise you both
to seize this opportunity to act.
For Clytaemnestra is all by herself.
For the moment there is no man inside.
But if you hesitate, remember this— [1370]
you'll have to face the other men inside
and those stronger and more skilled in fighting. 1630

ORESTES

Pylades, the task we have to carry out
does not require us to say a lot.
Instead, we should quickly move inside,
once we have ritually acknowledged
our ancestral gods, who protect these gates.

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

ELECTRA

Lord Apollo, listen to them kindly,
and to me as well. I have often come
to you as a suppliant at your shrine,
carrying in my hands whatever gifts
I could gather. And now, Lycian Apollo, 1640
I pray to you with what I have at hand,
I implore you with this supplication [1380]
to be our willing champion in this plan,
reveal to all the price the gods demand
from human beings for their impiety.

[Electra goes into the house.]

CHORUS

See now how Ares moves ahead,
breathing bloody and unholy strife.

ELECTRA

The avengers of those wicked crimes
have just gone in the house, the hounds
that none escape. What my soul dreams
will not hang in suspense for long. 1650 [1390]

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

[Enter Electra from the house.]

ELECTRA
O my dearest friends, in a few moments 1660
the men will have carried out their work.
But you must wait in silence.

CHORUS
How are they?
What are they doing now? [1400]

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

CHORUS
Why have you run outside?

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

CLYTAEMESTRA *[from within the house]*
Aaaaiiii! The palace
has no friends! It's filled with murderers!

ELECTRA
Someone let out a cry in there! My friends, 1670

ELECTRA

did you not hear it?

CHORUS

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*from inside the house*]

Alas, I'm done for. Where are you, Aegisthus?
Where are you?

ELECTRA

Listen! Another scream!

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*from inside the house*]

My child, my son, have pity on your mother!

ELECTRA

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

CHORUS

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*from inside the house*]

I have been stabbed!

1680

Aaaiii . . .

ELECTRA

Strike her twice, if you have the strength!

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*from inside the house*]

Aaaiii . . . another blow!

ELECTRA

O how I wish
Aegisthus had been stabbed as well!

CHORUS

The curses have come to their conclusion.
Those who were in the earth are now alive,
and in a flood of lethal retribution

[1420]

ELECTRA

those dead long ago are draining blood
from those who slaughtered them.

[Orestes and Pylades enter from the house.]

CHORUS

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

1690

ELECTRA

Orestes, what's going on?

ORESTES

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

ELECTRA

Is she dead?
Is that wretched woman dead?

ORESTES

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

CHORUS

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

ELECTRA

You two, shouldn't you go back inside?

[1430]

ORESTES

Where do you see him?

ELECTRA

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

1700

CHORUS

Get into the hallway
as quickly as you can. What you did before

ELECTRA

proved successful, so do it once again.

ORESTES

Don't worry. We'll finish what we started.

ELECTRA

Do what you mean to do, but quickly.

ORESTES

I'm going.

ELECTRA

I'll take care of things out here.

[Orestes and Pylades go into the house.]

CHORUS

You might pour a few kind-sounding words
into Aegisthus' ear—that could be helpful,
blinding him as he hurries to the struggle
where he will find just retribution.

[1440]

1710

[Enter Aegisthus.]

AEGISTHUS

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

ELECTRA

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

1720

AEGISTHUS

Where are these strangers then? Tell me.

[1450]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Inside.

Their hostess welcomed them with all her heart.

AEGISTHUS

Is it true they're saying he is dead?

ELECTRA

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

AEGISTHUS

Can I see this proof clearly for myself?

ELECTRA

You can. But it is not a pleasant sight.

AEGISTHUS

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

1730

ELECTRA

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

AEGISTHUS

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

[1460]

1740

ELECTRA

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

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

AEGISTHUS

O Zeus, what I see before me is a scene

ELECTRA

the jealousy of the gods has brought about.
If Nemesis is here, I will say nothing.
Remove the cloth covering his eyes
so, as my relative, he may receive
appropriate funeral rites from me.

ORESTES

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

[1470]
1750

AEGISTHUS

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

[To Electra]

But you should summon Clytaemnestra here,
if she is in the house.

ORESTES

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

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

AEGISTHUS *[staggering back]*

What's this?
What am I looking at?

ORESTES

Are you afraid?
Do you not recognize her?

AEGISTHUS

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

ORESTES

Do you not see how, for some time now,
you have been discussing living people

1760

ELECTRA

in language appropriate for the dead?⁴¹

AEGISTHUS

Alas, I grasp the meaning of your words. [1480]
The man addressing me must be Orestes.

ORESTES

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

AEGISTHUS

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

ELECTRA

No, my brother. For the sake of the gods,
do not let him say anything at all
or to plead at length. When mortal beings
are caught out in the midst of evil deeds, 1770
how can a man who is about to die
get any benefit from a delay?
No. Kill him as quickly as you can,
then throw the corpse out to be buried
by beasts who ought to deal with men like him,
far from our sight. That is the only way,
as far as I'm concerned, we'll ever find
deliverance from all our ancient grief. [1490]

ORESTES [*to Aegisthus*]

Get inside—and hurry. What's at issue here
is not mere words but rather your own life. 1780

AEGISTHUS

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

ORESTES

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

⁴¹Orestes is presumably referring to the earlier speeches of Aegisthus in which he assumed that Orestes had died in the chariot accident.

ELECTRA

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is an emeritus professor at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* and has translated a number of classic works into English, including the following (most of them published as books and ebooks by Richer Resources Publications).

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*
Aeschylus, *Persians*
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*
Aristophanes, *Birds*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Aristophanes, *Knights*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Aristophanes, *Peace*
Cuvier, *Discourse on Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream and Rameau's Nephew*
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Euripides, *Electra*
Euripides, *Medea*
Euripides, *Orestes*
Homer, *Iliad*
Homer, *Odyssey*
Kafka, *Metamorphosis, A Hunger Artist, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*
Kant, *Universal History and Nature of the Heavens*
Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy, Volume I*
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuses of History*
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*
Rousseau, *Social Contract*
Sophocles, *Ajax*
Sophocles, *Antigone*

ELECTRA

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

Ian Johnston has a web site ([johnstoniatexts](http://johnstoniatexts.com)) where he has posted these translations, as well as a number of lectures, workbooks, essays, and book reviews.

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Aristophanes Lysistrata

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LYSISTRATA

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The translation, which has been prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo British Columbia, Canada (now Vancouver Island University), may be distributed to students without permission and without charge, provided the source is acknowledged. There are, however, copyright restrictions on commercial publication of this text (for detail consult Ian Johnston at ian.johnston@viu.ca).

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

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help provided by Alan H. Sommerstein's edition of *Lysistrata* (Aris & Phillips: 1990), particularly the commentary.

It is clear that in this play the male characters all wear the comic phallus which is an integral part of the action throughout. Note, too, that in several places in *Lysistrata* there is some confusion and debate over which speeches are assigned to which people. These moments occur, for the most part, in short conversational exchanges. Hence, there may be some differences between the speakers in this text and those in other translations.

Aristophanes (c. 446 BC to c. 386 BC) was the foremost writer of Old Comedy in classical Athens. His play *Lysistrata* was first performed in Athens in 411 BC, two years after the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, when Athens suffered an enormous defeat in the continuing war with Sparta and its allies (a conflict which lasted from 431 BC to 404 BC).

LYSISTRATA

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

LYSISTRATA: a young Athenian wife
 CALONICE: a mature married woman
 MYRRHINE: a very attractive teenage wife.
 LAMPITO: a strong young country wife from Sparta.
 ISMENIA: a women from Thebes
 SCYTHIAN GIRL: one of Lysistrata's slaves
 MAGISTRATE: an elderly Athenian with white hair
 CINESIAS: husband of Myrrhine
 CHILD: infant son of Myrrhine and Cinesias
 MANES: servant nurse of the Child
 HERALD: A Spartan envoy
 CHORUS OF OLD MEN
 CHORUS OF OLD WOMEN
 ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR
 SPARTAN AMBASSADOR
 WOMAN A: one of the wives following Lysistrata
 WOMAN B: one of the wives following Lysistrata
 WOMAN C: one of the wives following Lysistrata
 ARMED GUARDS: four police officials attending on the Magistrate
 WOMEN: followers of Lysistrata
 RECONCILIATION: a goddess of harmony
 ATHENIAN DELEGATES
 SPARTAN DELEGATES
 SLAVES AND ATTENDANTS

[The action of the play takes place in a street in Athens, with the citadel on the Acropolis in the back, its doors facing the audience]

LYSISTRATA

If they'd called a Bacchic celebration
 or some festival for Pan or Colias
 or for Genetyllis, you'd not be able
 to move around through all the kettle drums.
 But as it is, there are no women here.

[Calonice enters, coming to meet Lysistrata]

LYSISTRATA

Ah, here's my neighbour—at least she's come.¹
 Hello, Calonice.

CALONICE

Hello, Lysistrata.

What's bothering you, child? Don't look so annoyed.
 It doesn't suit you. Your eyes get wrinkled.

LYSISTRATA

My heart's on fire, Calonice—I'm so angry
 at married women, at us, because,
 although men say we're devious characters . . .

10

[10]

CALONICE *[interrupting]*

Because by god we are!

LYSISTRATA *[continuing]*

. . . when I call them all
 to meet here to discuss some serious business,
 they just stay in bed and don't show up.

CALONICE

Ah, my dear, they'll come. It's not so easy
 for wives to get away. We've got to fuss
 about our husbands, wake up the servants,
 calm and wash the babies, then give them food.

LYSISTRATA

But there are other things they need to do—
 more important issues.

20

[20]

CALONICE

My dear Lysistrata,
 why have you asked the women to meet here?
 What's going on? Is it something big?

LYSISTRATA

It's huge.

¹Lysistrata is complaining that if the city had called a major festival all the women would be in the streets enjoying themselves. But none of them, it seems, has answered her invitation to a meeting (as we find out a few lines further on).

CALONICE

And hard as well?

LYSISTRATA

Yes, by god, really hard.

CALONICE

Then why aren't we all here?

LYSISTRATA

I don't mean *that!*

If that were it, they'd all be charging here so fast.

No. It's something I've been playing with—
wrestling with for many sleepless nights.

CALONICE

If you've been working it like that, by now
it must have shrivelled up.

LYSISTRATA

Yes, so shrivelled up
that the salvation of the whole of Greece
is now in women's hands.

30

[30]

CALONICE

In women's hands?

Then it won't be long before we done for.

LYSISTRATA

It's up to us to run the state's affairs—
the Spartans would no longer be around.

CALONICE

If they weren't there, by god, not any more,
that would be good news.

LYSISTRATA

And then if all Boeotians
were totally destroyed!

CALONICE

Not all of them—
you'd have to save the eels.¹

LYSISTRATA

As for Athens,

I won't say anything as bad as that.

You can imagine what I'd say. But now,
if only all the women would come here
from Sparta and Boeotia, join up with us,
if we worked together, we'd save Greece.

40

[40]

CALONICE

But what sensible or splendid act
could women do? We sit around playing
with our cosmetics, wearing golden clothes,
posing in Cimmerian silks and slippers.

LYSISTRATA

Those are the very things which I assume
will save us—short dresses, perfumes, slippers,
make up, and clothing men can see through.

50

CALONICE

How's that going to work?

LYSISTRATA

No man living
will lift his spear against another man . . .

[50]

CALONICE [*interrupting*]

By the two goddesses, I must take my dress
and dye it yellow.²

LYSISTRATA [*continuing*]

. . . or pick up a shield . . .

¹At the time *Lysistrata* was first produced, the Athenians and Spartans had been fighting for many years. The Boeotians were allies of the Spartans. Boeotia was famous for its eels, considered a luxury item in Athens.

²The two goddesses are Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The Athenian women frequently invoke them.

LYSISTRATA

CALONICE *[interrupting again]*

I'll have to wear my very best silk dress.

LYSISTRATA *[continuing]*

. . . or pull out his sword.

CALONICE

I need to get some shoes.

LYSISTRATA

O these women, they should be here by now!

CALONICE

Yes, by god! They should have sprouted wings
and come here hours ago.

LYSISTRATA

They're true Athenians,
you'll see—everything they should be doing
they postpone till later. But no one's come
from Salamis or those towns on the coast.

60

CALONICE *[with an obscene gesture]*

I know those women—they were up early
on their boats riding the mizzen mast.

[60]

LYSISTRATA

I'd have bet
those women from Acharnia would come
and get here first. But they've not shown up.

CALONICE

Well, Theogenes' wife will be here.
I saw her hoisting sail to come.¹ Hey, look!
Here's a group of women coming for you.
And there's another one, as well. Hello!
Hello there! Where they from?

70

[Various women start arriving from all directions]

LYSISTRATA

Those? From Anagyrus.

¹Theogenes was a well-known merchant and ship owner.

LYSISTRATA

CALONICE

My god, it seems we're kicking up a stink.¹

[Enter Myrrhine]

MYRRHINE

Hey, Lysistrata, did we get here late?
What's the matter? Why are you so quiet?

LYSISTRATA

I'm not pleased with you, Myrrhine. You're late.
And this is serious business.

[70]

MYRRHINE

It was dark.
I had trouble tracking down my waist band.
If it's such a big deal, tell these women.

LYSISTRATA

No, let's wait a while until the women
from Boeotia and from Sparta get here.

80

MYRRHINE

All right. That sounds like the best idea.
Hey, here comes Lampito.

[Lampito enters with some other Spartan women and with Ismenia, a woman from Thebes]

LYSISTRATA

Hello Lampito,
my dear friend from Sparta. How beautiful
you look, so sweet, such a fine complexion.
And your body looks so fit, strong enough
to choke a bull.

[80]

LAMPITO²

Yes, by the two gods,

¹Calonice is making an obscure joke on the name Anagyrus, a political district named after bad-smelling plant.

²In Aristophanes' text, Lampito and other Spartans use a parody of a Spartan dialect, a styl of speaking significantly different from (although related to) Athenian Greek. Translator have dealt with this in different ways, usually by giving the Spartans a recognizable English!

[Footnote continues]

LYSISTRATA

I could pull that off.¹ I do exercise
and work out to keep my bum well toned.

CALONICE [*fondling Lampito's bosom*]

What an amazing pair of breasts you've got!

90

LAMPITO

O, you stroke me like I'm a sacrifice.

LYSISTRATA [*looking at Ismenia*]

And this young woman—where's she from?

[90]

LAMPITO

By the twin gods, she's an ambassador—
she's from Boeotia.

MYRRHINE [*looking down Ismenia's elegant clothes*]

Of course, from Boeotia.

She's got a beautiful lowland region.

CALONICE [*peering down Ismenia's robe to see her pubic hair*]

Yes. By god, she keeps that territory
elegantly groomed.

LYSISTRATA

Who's the other girl?

LAMPITO

A noble girl, by the two gods, from Corinth.

dialect, for example, from the Southern States or Scotland, or English with a foreign accent. The difference between the Spartans' speech and the language of the others reflects the political antagonism between the Athenians and Spartans. Here I have not tried to follow this trend. My main reasons for doing so are (in brief) that, first, some dialects are in places incomprehensible to some readers or have been made irrelevant (e.g., Jack Lindsay's Scottish language in the Bantam edition of Aristophanes or the erratic Russian English of the Perseus translation) and, second, I wish to leave the choice of dialect or accent up to the imagination of the readers or the directors of stage productions (who might like to experiment with dialects which will connect with their particular audiences more immediately than any one I might select).

¹Spartans commonly invoke the divine twins Castor and Pollux, brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra.

LYSISTRATA

CALONICE [*inspecting the girl's bosom and buttocks*]

A really noble girl, by Zeus—it's clear
she's got good lines right here, back here as well.

100

LAMPITO

All right, who's the one who called the meeting
and brought this bunch of women here?

LYSISTRATA

I did.

LAMPITO

Then lay out what it is you want from us.

MYRRHINE

Come on, dear lady, tell us what's going on,
what's so important to you.

LYSISTRATA

In a minute.

Before I say it, I'm going to ask you
one small question.

CALONICE

Ask whatever you want.

LYSISTRATA

Don't you miss the fathers of your children
when they go off to war? I understand
you all have husbands far away from home.

[100]

110

CALONICE

My dear, it's five full months my man's been gone—
off in Thrace taking care of Eucrates.

MYRRHINE

And mine's been off in Pylos seven whole months.¹

¹Thrace was a region to the north of Greece, a long way from Athens. Eucrates was an Athenian commander in the region. Pylos was a small area in the south Peloponnese which the Athenians had captured and occupied for a number of years.

LAMPITO

And mine—as soon as he gets home from war
he grabs his shield and buggers off again.

LYSISTRATA

As for old flames and lovers—they're none left.
And since Milesians went against us,
I've not seen a decent eight-inch dildo.
Yes, it's just leather, but it helps us out.¹
So would you be willing, if I found a way,
to work with me to make this fighting end?

[110]
120

MYRRHINE

By the twin goddesses, yes. Even if
in just one day I had to pawn this dress
and drain my purse.

CALONICE

Me too—they could slice me up
like a flat fish, then use one half of me
to get a peace.

LAMPITO

I'd climb up to the top
of Taygetus to get a glimpse of peace.²

LYSISTRATA

All right I'll tell you. No need to keep quiet
about my plan. Now, ladies, if we want
to force the men to have a peace, well then,
we must give up . . .

[120]
130

MYRRHINE *[interrupting]*

Give up what? Tell us!

LYSISTRATA

Then, will you do it?

¹Miletus had rebelled against Athens in the previous year. That city was associated with sexuality and (in this case) the manufacture of sexual toys.

²Taygetus was a high mountain in the Peloponnese.

MYRRHINE

Of course, we'll do it,
even if we have to die.

LYSISTRATA

All right then—
we have to give up all male penises.

[The women react with general consternation]

Why do you turn away? Where are you going?
How come you bite your lips and shake your heads?
And why so pale? How come you're crying like that?
Will you do it or not? What will it be?

MYRRHINE

I won't do it. So let the war drag on.

CALONICE

I won't either. The war can keep on going.

140 [130]

LYSISTRATA

How can you say that, you flatfish? Just now
you said they could slice you into halves.

CALONICE

Ask what you like, but not that! If I had to,
I'd be willing to walk through fire—sooner than
than give up screwing. There's nothing like it,
dear Lysistrata.

LYSISTRATA

And what about you?

MYRRHINE

I'd choose the fire, too.

LYSISTRATA

What a debased race
we women are! It's no wonder men write
tragedies about us. We're good for nothing
but screwing Poseidon in the bath tub.
But my Spartan friend, if you were willing,
just you and me, we still could pull it off.
So help me out.

150 [140]

LAMPITO

By the twin gods, it's hard
for women to sleep all by themselves
without a throbbing cock. But we must try.
We've got to have a peace.

LYSISTRATA

O you're a true friend!
The only real woman in this bunch.

CALONICE

If we really do give up what you say—
I hope it never happens!—would doing that
make peace more likely?

LYSISTRATA

By the two goddesses, yes, 160
much more likely. If we sit around at home
with all our makeup on and in those gowns
made of Amorgos silk, naked underneath, 150
with our crotches neatly plucked, our husbands
will get hard and want to screw. But then,
if we stay away and won't come near them,
they'll make peace soon enough. I'm sure of it.

LAMPITO

Yes, just like they say—when Menelaus
saw Helen's naked tits, he dropped his sword.¹

CALONICE

But my friend, what if our men ignore us? 170

LYSISTRATA

Well then, in the words of Pherecrates,
you'll find another way to skin the dog.²

¹In a famous story, Menelaus went storming through Troy looking for his wife, Helen, in order to kill her. But when he found her, he was so overcome by her beauty that he relented and took her back home to Sparta.

²Pherecrates was an Athenian comic dramatist. The line may be a quotation from one of his plays.

CALONICE

But fake penises aren't any use at all.
What if they grab us and haul us by force
into the bedroom. 160

LYSISTRATA

Just grab the door post.

CALONICE

And if they beat us?

LYSISTRATA

Then you must submit—
but do it grudgingly, don't cooperate.
There's no enjoyment for them when they just
force it in. Besides, there are other ways
to make them suffer. They'll soon surrender. 180
No husband ever had a happy life
if he did not get on well with his wife.

CALONICE

Well, if you two think it's good, we do, too.

LAMPITO

I'm sure we can persuade our men to work
for a just peace in everything, no tricks.
But how will you convince the Athenian mob?
They're mad for war. 170

LYSISTRATA

That's not your worry.
We'll win them over.

LAMPITO

I don't think so—
not while they have triremes under sail
and that huge treasure stashed away
where your goddess makes her home.¹ 190

LYSISTRATA

But that's all been well taken care of.

¹The financial reserves of the Athenian state were stored in the Acropolis.

Today we'll capture the Acropolis.
The old women have been assigned the task.
While we sit here planning all the details,
they'll pretend they're going there to sacrifice
and seize the place.

LAMPITO

You've got it all worked out. [180]
What you say sounds good.

LYSISTRATA

All right Lampito,
let's swear an oath as quickly as we can.
That way we'll be united.

LAMPITO

Recite the oath. 200
Then we'll all swear to it.

LYSISTRATA

That's good advice.
Where's that girl from Scythia?

[The Scythian slave steps forward. She is holding a small shield]

Why stare like that?
Put down your shield, the hollow part on top.
Now, someone get me a victim's innards.

CALONICE

Lysistrata, what sort of oath is this
we're going to swear?

LYSISTRATA

What sort of oath?
One on a shield, just like they did back then
in Aeschylus' play—with slaughtered sheep.

CALONICE

You can't, Lysistrata, not on a shield,
you can't swear an oath for peace on that 210 [190]

LYSISTRATA

What should the oath be, then?

CALONICE

Let's get a stallion,
a white one, and then offer up its guts!

LYSISTRATA

Why a white horse?

CALONICE

Then how will we make our oath?

LYSISTRATA

I'll tell you, by god, if you want to hear.
Put a large dark bowl down on the ground,
then sacrifice a jug of Thasian wine,
and swear we'll never pour in water.

LAMPITO

Now, if you ask me, that's a super oath!

LYSISTRATA

Someone get the bowl and a jug of wine.

[The Scythian girl goes back in the house and returns with a bowl and a jug of wine. Calonice takes the bowl]

CALONICE

Look, dear ladies, at this splendid bowl. 220 [200]
Just touching this gives instant pleasure.

LYSISTRATA

Put it down. Now join me and place your hands
on our sacrificial victim.

[The women gather around the bowl and lay their hands on the wine jug. Lysistrata starts the ritual prayer]

O you,
Goddess of Persuasion and the bowl
which we so love, accept this sacrifice,
a women's offering, and be kind to us.

[Lysistrata opens the wine jug and lets the wine pour out into the bowl]

CALONICE

Such healthy blood spurts out so beautifully!

LAMPITO

By Castor, that's a mighty pleasant smell.

MYRRHINE

Ladies, let me be the first to swear the oath.

CALONICE

No, by Aphrodite, no—not unless
your lot is drawn.

230

LYSISTRATA [*holds up a bowl full of wine*]

Grab the brim, Lampito,
you and all the others. Someone repeat
for all the rest of you the words I say—
that way you'll pledge your firm allegiance:
No man, no husband and no lover . . .

[210]

CALONICE [*taking the oath*]

No man, no husband and no lover . . .

LYSISTRATA

. . . will get near me with a stiff prick. . . Come on,
say it!

CALONICE

. . . will get near me with a stiff prick.
O Lysistrata, my knees are getting weak!

LYSISTRATA

At home I'll live completely without sex . . .

240

CALONICE

At home I'll live completely without sex . . .

LYSISTRATA

. . . wearing saffron silks, with lots of make up . . .

CALONICE

. . . wearing saffron silks, with lots of make up . . .

[220]

LYSISTRATA

. . . to make my man as horny as I can.

CALONICE

. . . to make my man as horny as I can.

LYSISTRATA

If against my will he takes me by force . . .

CALONICE

If against my will he takes me by force . . .

LYSISTRATA

. . . I'll be a lousy lay, not move a limb.

CALONICE

. . . I'll be a lousy lay, not move a limb.

LYSISTRATA

I'll not raise my slippers up towards the roof . . .

250

CALONICE

I'll not raise my slippers up towards the roof . . .

[230]

LYSISTRATA

. . . nor crouch down like a lioness on all fours.

CALONICE

. . . nor crouch down like a lioness on all fours.

LYSISTRATA

If I do all this, then I may drink this wine.

CALONICE

If I do all this, then I may drink this wine.

LYSISTRATA

If I fail, may this glass fill with water.

CALONICE

If I fail, may this glass fill with water.

LYSISTRATA

Do all you women swear this oath?

ALL

We do.

LYSISTRATA

All right. I'll make the offering.

[*Lysistrata drinks some of the wine in the bowl*]

CALONICE

Just your share,
my dear, so we all stay firm friends.

[A sound of shouting is heard from offstage]

LAMPITO

What's that noise?

260 [240]

LYSISTRATA

It's what I said just now—the women
have already captured the Acropolis.
So, Lampito, you return to Sparta—
do good work among your people there.
Leave these women here as hostages.
We'll go in the citadel with the others
and help them barricade the doors.

CALONICE

Don't you think the men will band together
and march against us—and quickly, too.

LYSISTRATA

I'm not so worried about them. They'll come
carrying their torches and making threats,
but they'll not pry these gates of ours apart,
not unless they agree to our demands.

270
[250]

CALONICE

Yes, by Aphrodite, that's right. If not,
we'll be labelled weak and gutless women.

[The women enter the citadel. The Chorus of Old Men enters slowly, for they are quite decrepit. They are carrying wood for a fire, glowing coals to start the blaze, and torches to light.]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Keep moving, Draces, pick up the pace,
even if your shoulder's tired lugging
all this heavy fresh-cut olive wood.

CHORUS OF OLD MEN

Alas, so many unexpected things
take place in a long life. O Strymodorus,
who'd ever think they'd hear such news

280

about our women—the ones we fed
in our own homes are truly bad.
The sacred statue is in their hands,
they've seized my own Acropolis
and blocked the doors with bolts and bars.

[260]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Come on Philurgus, let's hurry there
as fast as we can go up to the city.
We'll set these logs down in a circle,
stack them so we keep them bottled up,
those women who've combined to do this.
Then with our own hands we'll set alight
a single fire and, as we all agreed
in the vote we took, we'll burn them all,
beginning first with Lycon's wife.¹

290

[270]

CHORUS OF OLD MEN

They'll won't be making fun of me,
by Demeter, not while I'm still alive.
That man Cleomenes, who was the first
to take our citadel, went back unharmed.
Snorting Spartan pride he went away,
once he'd handed me his weapons,
wearing a really tiny little cloak,
hungry, filthy, with his hairy face.
He'd gone six years without a bath.²

300

[280]

That's how I fiercely hemmed him in,
our men in ranks of seventeen
we even slept before the gates.
So with these foes of all the gods
and of Euripides, as well,
will I not check their insolence?

310

¹Lycon's wife was a woman in Athens famous for her promiscuity.

²Cleomenes, a king of Sparta, once came with a small army to Athens (in 508) to help the oligarch party. He had a very hostile reception and took refuge in the Acropolis, where he stayed under siege for two days. A truce was arranged and the Spartans left peacefully.

If I do not, then let my trophies
all disappear from Marathon.¹

The rest of the journey I have to make
is uphill to the Acropolis.
We must move fast, but how do we haul
this wood up there without a donkey?
This pair of logs makes my shoulders sore.
But still we've got to soldier on
giving our fire air to breathe.
It may go out when I'm not looking
just as I reach my journey's end. 320

[They blow on the coals to keep them alight. The smoke comes blowing up in their faces. The Old Men fall back, coughing and rubbing their eyes]

O the smoke!
Lord Hercules, how savagely
it jumped out from the pot right in my face
and bit my eyes like a raving bitch.
It works just like a Lemnian fire
or else it wouldn't use its teeth
to feed on fluids in my eye. 300
We need to hurry to the citadel
and save the goddess. If not now,
O Laches, when should we help her out?² 330

[The men blow on the coals and are again overpowered by the smoke]

Damn and blast this smoke!

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Thanks to the gods, the fire's up again—
a lively flame. So what if, first of all,

¹Euripides was a younger contemporary of Aristophanes. Marathon was the site of the great Greek victory over the Persian expeditionary forces in 490 BC, a high point of Athenian military achievement.

²The reference to Lemnian fire is not clear. The island of Lemnos perhaps had some volcanic activity, or else the reference is to the women of Lemnos who killed all their husbands. There is a pun on the Greek word for Lemnos and the word in the same speech referring to material in the eye.

we placed our firewood right down here, then put
a vine branch in the pot, set it alight,
and charged the door like a battering ram?
We'll order women to remove the bars, 310
and, if they refuse, we'll burn down the doors.
We'll overpower them with the smoke.
All right, put down your loads.

[The men set down their logs. Once again the smoke is too much for them]

This bloody smoke! 340
Is there any general here from Samos
who'll help us with this wood?¹

[He sets down his load of wood]

Ah, that's better.
They're not shrinking my spine any more.
All right, pot, it's now your job to arouse
a fire from those coals, so first of all,
I'll have a lighted torch and lead the charge.
O lady Victory, stand with us here,
so we can set our trophy up in there,
defeat those women in our citadel
put down this present insolence of theirs. 350

[The Old Men stack their logs in a pile and start lighting their torches on the coals. The Chorus of Old Women enters, carrying pitchers of water]

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Ladies, I think I see some flames and smoke,
as if a fire was burning. We'd better hurry. 320

CHORUS OF OLD WOMEN

We have to fly, Nicodice, fly
before Critylla is burned up
and Calyce, too, by nasty winds
and old men keen to wipe them out.
But I'm afraid I'll be too late

¹Samos was an important island near Athens. A number of the generals of Athenian force came from there.

to help them out. I've only just
 filled up my pitcher in the dark.
 It was not easy—at the well
 the place was jammed and noisy too
 with clattering pots, pushy servants,
 and tattooed slaves. But I was keen
 to carry water to these fires
 to help my country's women.

I've heard some dim and dull old men
 are creeping here and carrying logs—
 a great big load—to our fortress,
 as if to warm our public baths.
 They're muttering the most awful things
 how with their fire they need to turn
 these hateful women into ash.
 But, goddess, may I never see
 them burned like that—but witness how
 they rescue cities, all of Greece,
 from war and this insanity.
 That's why, golden-crested goddess
 who guards our city, these women
 now have occupied your shrine.
 O Tritogeneia, I summon you
 to be my ally—if any man
 sets them on fire, help us out
 as we carry this water up.¹

*[The Old Men have lit their torches and are about to move against the
 Acropolis. The Old Women are blocking their way]*

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS
 Hold on, ladies. What this I see? Men—
 dirty old men—hard at work. Honest types,
 useful, god-fearing men, could never do
 the things you do.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS
 What's happening here
 is something we did not expect to see—
 a swarm of women standing here like this
 to guard the doors.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS
 So you're afraid of us?
 Does it look like there's a huge crowd of us?
 You're seeing just a fraction of our size—
 there are thousands more.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS
 Hey there, Phaedrias!
 Shall we stop her nattering on like this?
 Someone hit her, smack her with a log.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS
 Let's put our water jugs down on the ground,
 in case they want to lay their hands on us.
 Down there they won't get in our way.

[The Old Women set down their water jugs]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS
 By god, someone should hit them on the jaw,
 two or three times, and then, like Boupalus,
 they'll won't have anything much more to say.¹

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS
 Come on then—strike me. I'm here, waiting.
 No other bitch will ever grab your balls.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS
 Shut up, or I hit you—snuff out your old age.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS
 Try coming up and touching Stratyllis
 with your finger tips!

¹Sommerstein observes (p. 171) that the epithet *Tritogeneia* ("Trito born") refers to Athena's birth beside the River Triton or Lake Tritonis in North Africa.

¹Boupalus was a sculptor from Chios.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

What if I thrashed you
with my fists? Would you do something nasty?

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

With my teeth I'll rip out your lungs and guts!

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Euripides is such a clever poet—
the man who says there's no wild animal
more shameless than a woman.

410

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Come on then,
Rhodippe, let's pick up our water jugs.

[370]

[The Old Women pick up their water jugs again]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Why have you damned women even come here
carrying this water?

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

And why are you
bringing fire, you old corpse? Do you intend
to set yourself on fire?

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Me? To start a blaze
and roast your friends.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

I'm here to douse your fire.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

You'll put out my fire?

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Yes I will. You'll see.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS *[waving his torch]*

I don't know why I'm not just doing it,
frying you in this flame.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Get yourself some soap.
I'm giving you a bath.

420

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

You'll wash me,
you old wrinkled prune?

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Yes, it will be
just like your wedding night.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Listen to her!
She's a nervy bitch!

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

I'm a free woman.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

I'll make you shut up!

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

You don't judge these things.

[380]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Set her hair on fire!

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Get to work, Achelous.¹

[She throws her jar of water over the Leader of the Men's Chorus, and, following the leader's example, the women throw water all over the old men]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

O, that's bad!

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Was that hot enough?

[The women continue to throw water on the old men]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Hot enough?
Won't you stop doing that? What are you doing?

¹The Achelous was a large well-known river and river god in northern Greece.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

I'm watering you to make you bloom.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

I'm too old and withered. I'm shaking. 430

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Well, you've got your fire. Warm yourselves up.

[A Magistrate enters with an armed escort of four public guards and slaves with crowbars and some attendant soldiers]

MAGISTRATE

Has not our women's lewdness shown itself
in how they beat their drums for Sabazius,
that god of excess, or on their rooftops
shed tears for Adonis? That's what I heard 390
one time in our assembly. Demonstrates—
what a stupid man he is—was arguing
that we should sail to Sicily. Meanwhile,
his wife was dancing round and screaming out
"Alas, Adonis!" While Demonstrates talked, 440
saying we should levy soldiers from Zacynthus,
the woman was on the roof top, getting drunk
and yelling out "Weep for Adonis! Weep."
But he kept on forcing his opinion through,
that mad brutal ox, whom the gods despise.
That's just the kind of loose degenerate stuff
that comes from women.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Wait until I tell you
the insolent things these women did to us—
all their abuse—they dumped their water jugs 400
on us. So now we have to dry our clothes. 450
We look as if we've pissed ourselves.

¹Sabazius was a popular foreign god associated with drinking (like Dionysus). Adonis was a youth loved by Aphrodite. A festival was celebrated each year in his memory. Demonstrates was a politician promoting the disastrous Athenian military expedition to Sicily. Zacynthus, an island off the Peloponnese, was an ally of Athens.

MAGISTRATE

By Poseidon,

god of the salt seas, it serves you right.
We men ourselves share in the blame for this.
We teach our wives their free and easy life,
and so intrigues come flowering out from them.
Here's what we tell some working artisan,
"O goldsmith, about that necklace I bought here—
last night my wife was dancing and the bolt 410
slipped from its hole. I have to take a boat
to Salamis. If you've got time tonight, 460
you could visit her with that tool of yours
and fix the way the bolt sits in her hole."
Another man goes to the shoemaker,
a strapping lad with an enormous prick,
and says, "O shoemaker, a sandal strap
is pinching my wife's tender little toe.
Could you come at noon and rub her strap,
stretch it really wide?" That's the sort of thing 420
that leads to all this trouble. Look at me,
a magistrate in charge of finding oars 470
and thus in need of money now—these women
have shut the treasury doors to keep me out.
But standing here's no use.

[He calls out to his two slaves]

Bring the crow bars.

I'll stop these women's insolence myself.

[He turns to the armed guards he has brought with him]

What are you gaping at, you idiot!
And you—what are you looking at?
Why are you doing nothing—just staring round
looking for a tavern? Take these crowbars
to the doors there, and then pry them open.
Come, I'll work to force them with you. 480

LYSISTRATA *[opening the doors and walking out]*

No need to use those crowbars. I'm coming out—
and of my own free will. Why these crowbars? 430
This calls for brains and common sense, not force.

MAGISTRATE

Is that so, you slut? Where's that officer?
Seize that woman! Tie her hands!

LYSISTRATA

By Artemis,
he may be a public servant, but if
he lays a finger on me, he'll be sorry.

MAGISTRATE *[to the first armed guard]*

Are you scared of her? Grab her round the waist!
You there, help him out! And tie her up!

OLD WOMAN A¹

By Pandrosus, if you lift a hand to her,
I'll beat you until you shit yourself!

490

[440]

[The armed guard is so terrified he shits]

MAGISTRATE

Look at the mess you made! Where is he,
that other officer?

[The Magistrate turns to a third armed officer]

Tie up this one first,
the one who's got such a dirty mouth.

OLD WOMAN B

By the god of light, if you just touch her,
you'll quickly need a cup to fix your eyes.²

[This officer shits his pants and runs off. The Magistrate turns to a fourth officer]

MAGISTRATE

Who's this here? Arrest her! I'll put a stop
to all women in this demonstration!

¹In modern productions the old women who speak in this scene either come out of the gates to the Acropolis or are members of the Chorus. Alternatively the speeches could be assigned to the characters we have met earlier (Myrrhine and Calonice), who have emerged from the Acropolis behind Lysistrata.

²Black eyes were treated with a small cup placed over the eye to reduce the swelling.

OLD WOMEN C

By bull-bashing Artemis, if you move
to touch her, I'll rip out all your hair
until you yelp in pain.

500

[The fourth officer shits himself and runs off in terror]

MAGISTRATE

This is getting bad.
There're no officers left. We can't let ourselves
be beaten back by women. Come on then,
you Scythians, form up your ranks.¹ Then charge.
Go at them!

[450]

LYSISTRATA

By the two goddesses, you'll see—
we've got four companies of women inside,
all fighting fit and fully armed.

MAGISTRATE

Come on,
Scythians, twist their arms behind them!

LYSISTRATA *[shouting behind her]*

Come out here from where you are in there,
all you female allies, on the double—
you market women who sell grain and eggs,
garlic and vegetables, and those who run
our bakeries and taverns, to the attack!

510

[Many women emerge from the Acropolis, armed in various ways]

Hit them, stomp on them, scratch their eyeballs,
smother them with your abuse! Don't hold back!

[460]

[A general tumult occurs in which the women beat back the Scythian guards]

LYSISTRATA

That's enough! Back off! Don't strip the armour
from those you have defeated.

¹The armed guards accompanying the Magistrate are traditionally Scythian archers.

[The armed women return into the Acropolis]

MAGISTRATE

Disaster!

My guards have acted quite disgracefully.

LYSISTRATA

What did you expect? Did you really think
you were facing a bunch of female slaves?
Or is it your belief that mere women
have no spirit in them?

520

MAGISTRATE

Spirit? By Apollo, yes!

If they're near any man who's got some wine.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

In this land you're a magistrate, but here
your words are useless. Why even try
to have a conversation with these bitches?
Don't you know they've just given us a bath
in our own cloaks? And they did not use soap!

[470]

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Listen, friend. You should never raise your hand
against your neighbour. If you do, then I
will have to punch you in the eye. I'd prefer
to sit quietly at home, like a young girl,
and not come here to injure anyone
or agitate the nest, unless someone
disturbs the hive and makes me angry.

530

CHORUS OF OLD MEN

O Zeus, however will we find a way
to deal with these wild beasts? What's going on
is no longer something we can bear.
But we must question them and find out why
they are so angry with us, why they wish
to seize the citadel of Cranaus,

540 [480]

the holy ground where people do not go,
on the great rock of the Acropolis.¹

LEADER OF THE MEN'S CHORUS *[to Magistrate]*

So ask her. Don't let them win you over.
Challenge everything they say. If we left
this matter without seeking out the cause,
that would be disgraceful.

MAGISTRATE *[turning to Lysistrata]*

Well then, by god,

first of all I'd like to know the reason
why you planned to use these barriers here
to barricade our citadel.

LYSISTRATA

To get your money
so you couldn't keep on paying for war.

550

MAGISTRATE

Is it money that's the cause of war?

LYSISTRATA

Yes, and all the rest of the corruption.
Peisander and our leading politicians
need a chance to steal. That's the reason
they're always stirring up disturbances.²
Well, let the ones who wish to do this
do what they want, but from this moment on
they'll get no more money.

[490]

MAGISTRATE

What will you do?

LYSISTRATA

You ask me that? We'll control it.

¹Cranaus was a legendary king of Athens. His citadel is the Acropolis.

²Peisander was a leading Athenian politician, suspected of favouring the war for selfish reasons.

MAGISTRATE

You mean
you're going to manage all the money?

560

LYSISTRATA

You consider that so strange? Isn't it true
we take care of all the household money?

MAGISTRATE

That's not the same.

LYSISTRATA

Why not?

MAGISTRATE

We need the cash
to carry on the war.

LYSISTRATA

Well, first of all,
there should be no fighting.

MAGISTRATE

But without war
how will we save ourselves?

LYSISTRATA

We'll do that.

MAGISTRATE

You?

LYSISTRATA

That's right—us.

MAGISTRATE

This is outrageous!

LYSISTRATA

We'll save you,
even if that goes against your wishes.

MAGISTRATE

What you're saying is madness!

LYSISTRATA

You're angry,
but nonetheless we have to do it.

570

MAGISTRATE

By Demeter, this is against the law!

[500]

LYSISTRATA

My dear fellow, we have to rescue you.

MAGISTRATE

And if I don't agree?

LYSISTRATA

Then our reasons
are that much more persuasive.

MAGISTRATE

Is it true
you're really going to deal with peace and war?

LYSISTRATA

We're going to speak to that.

MAGISTRATE [*with a threatening gesture*]

Then speak fast,
or else you may well start to cry.

LYSISTRATA

Then listen—
and try to keep your fists controlled.

MAGISTRATE

I can't.
It's hard for me to hold back my temper.

580

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

It's more likely you're the one who'll weep.

MAGISTRATE

Shut up your croaking, you old bag.

[*To Lysistrata*]

You—talk to me.

LYSISTRATA

I'll do that. Up to now through this long war

we kept silent about all those things
 you men were doing. We were being modest.
 And you did not allow us to speak up,
 although we were not happy. But still,
 we listened faithfully to you, and often
 inside the house we heard your wretched plans
 for some great deed. And if we ached inside,
 we'd force a smile and simply ask, "Today
 in the assembly did the men propose
 a treaty carved in stone decreeing peace?"
 But our husbands said, "Is that your business?
 Why don't you shut up?" And I'd stay silent.

[510]

590

OLD WOMAN

I'd not have kept my mouth shut.

MAGISTRATE [*to Lysistrata*]

You'd have been smacked
 if you had not been quiet and held your tongue.

LYSISTRATA

So there I am at home, saying nothing.
 Then you'd tell us of another project,
 even stupider than before. We'd say,
 "How can you carry out a scheme like that?
 It's foolish." Immediately he'd frown
 and say to me, "If you don't spin your thread,
 you'll get a major beating on your head.
 War is men's concern."

600

[520]

MAGISTRATE

Yes, by god!

That man spoke the truth.

LYSISTRATA

You idiot!

Is that sensible—not to take advice
 when what you're proposing is so silly?
 Then we heard you speaking in the streets,
 asking openly, "Are there any men
 still left here in our land?" and someone said,
 "By god, there's no one." Well then, after that
 it seemed to us we had to rescue Greece

610

by bringing wives into a single group
 with one shared aim. Why should we delay?
 If you'd like to hear us give some good advice,
 then start to listen, keep your mouths quite shut,
 the way we did. We'll save you from yourselves.

MAGISTRATE

You'll save us? What you're saying is madness.
 I'm not going to put up with it!

LYSISTRATA

Shut up!

620

MAGISTRATE

Should I shut up for you, you witch, someone
 with a scarf around her head? I'd sooner die!

[530]

LYSISTRATA

If this scarf of mine really bothers you,
 take it and wrap it round your head. Here—

[*Lysistrata takes off her scarf and wraps it over the Magistrate's head.*]

Now keep quiet!

OLD WOMAN A

And take this basket, too!

LYSISTRATA

Now put on a waist band, comb out wool,
 and chew some beans. This business of the war
 we women will take care of.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Come on, women,

get up and leave those jars. It's our turn now
 to join together with our friends.

[540]

630

WOMEN'S CHORUS

With dancing I'll never tire—
 weariness won't grip my knees
 or wear me out. In everything
 I'll strive to match the excellence
 of these women here—in nature,
 wisdom, boldness, charm,

and prudent virtue in the way
they love their country.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

You grandchildren of the bravest women,
sprung from fruitful stinging nettles,
let your passion drive you forward
and don't hold back, for now you've got
the winds of fortune at your back.

640

[550]

LYSISTRATA

O Aphrodite born on Cyprus
and, you, sweet passionate Eros, breathe
sexual longing on our breasts and thighs
and fill our men with tortuous desire
and make their pricks erect. If so, I think
we'll win ourselves a name among the Greeks
as those who brought an end to warfare.

650

MAGISTRATE

What will you do?

LYSISTRATA

For a start, we'll stop
you men hanging around the market place
armed with spears and acting up like fools.

OLD WOMAN A

Yes, that's right, by Paphian Aphrodite!

LYSISTRATA

Right now in the market they stroll around
among the pots and vegetables, fully armed,
like Corybantes.¹

MAGISTRATE

Yes, that's right—
it's what brave men should do.

¹Corybantes were divine attendants on the foreign goddess Cybele. They were associated with ecstatic music and dancing.

LYSISTRATA

It looks so silly—
going off to purchase tiny little birds
while carrying a Gorgon shield.¹

[560]

OLD WOMAN A

By god,
I myself saw a cavalry commander—
he had long hair and was on horseback—
pouring out some pudding he'd just bought
from an old woman into his helmet.
Another Thracian was waving his spear
and his shield, as well, just like Tereus,
and terrifying the woman selling figs
while gobbling down the ripest ones she had.²

660

MAGISTRATE

And how will you find the power to stop
so many violent disturbances
throughout our states and then resolve them?

670

LYSISTRATA

Very easily.

MAGISTRATE

But how? Explain that.

LYSISTRATA

It's like a bunch of yarn. When it's tangled,
we take it and pass it through the spindle
back and forth—that's how we'll end the war,
if people let us try, by sending out
ambassadors here and there, back and forth.

[570]

MAGISTRATE

You're an idiot! Do you really think
you can end such fearful acts with spindles,
spools, and wool?

¹Shields with monstrous Gorgon's heads depicted on them were common in Athens.

²Tereus was a mythical king of Thrace and a popular figure with Athenian dramatists.

LYSISTRATA

If you had any common sense,
you'd deal with everything the way we do
when we handle yarn.

680

MAGISTRATE

What does that mean?

Tell me.

LYSISTRATA

First of all, just as we wash the wool
in a rinsing tub to remove the dirt,
you have to lay the city on a bed,
beat out the rascals, and then drive away
the thorns and break apart the groups of men
who join up together in their factions
seeking public office—pluck out their heads.
Then into a common basket of good will
comb out the wool, the entire compound mix,
including foreigners, guests, and allies,
anyone useful to the public good.
Bundle them together. As for those cities
which are colonies of this land, by god,
you must see that, as far as we're concerned,
each is a separate skein. From all of them,
take a piece of wool and bring it here.
Roll them together into a single thing.
Then you'll have made one mighty ball of wool,
from which the public then must weave its clothes.

690

[580]

700

MAGISTRATE

So women beat wool and roll it in balls!
Isn't that wonderful? That doesn't mean
they bear any part of what goes on in war.

LYSISTRATA

You damned fool, of course it does—we endure
more than twice as much as you. First of all,
we bear children and then send them off
to serve as soldiers.

MAGISTRATE

All right, be quiet.

[590]

Don't remind me of all that.

LYSISTRATA

And then,

when we should be having a good time,
enjoying our youth, we have to sleep alone
because our men are in the army.
Setting us aside, it distresses me
that young unmarried girls are growing old
alone in their own homes.

710

MAGISTRATE

Don't men get old?

LYSISTRATA

By god, that's not the same at all. For men,
even old ones with white hair, can come back
and quickly marry some young girl. For women
time soon runs out. If they don't seize their chance,
no one wants to marry them—they sit there
waiting for an oracle.

720

MAGISTRATE

But an old man
who can still get his prick erect . . .

LYSISTRATA *[interrupting]*

O you—
why not learn your lesson and just die? It's time.
Buy a funeral urn. I'll prepare the dough
for honey cakes.¹ Take this wreath.

[600]

[Lysistrata throws some water over the Magistrate]

OLD WOMAN A

This one, too—
it's from me!

¹A honey cake was traditionally part of the funeral service. It was given to make sure the dead shade reached Hades.

[Old Woman A throws more water on the Magistrate]

OLD WOMAN B

Here, take this garland!

[Old Woman B throws more water on the Magistrate]

LYSISTRATA

Well now,

what do you need? What are you waiting for?
Step aboard the boat. Charon's calling you.
You're preventing him from casting off.¹

MAGISTRATE

I don't have to put up with these insults! 730
I'll go to the other magistrates, by god,
and show myself exactly as I am! [620]

[The Magistrate exits with his attending slaves]

LYSISTRATA *[calling out to him as he leaves]*

Are you blaming us for not laying you out
for burial? Well then, on the third day,
we'll come and offer up a sacrifice
on your behalf first thing in the morning.

[Lysistrata and the old women with her return inside the Acropolis]

LEADER OF THE MEN'S CHORUS

You men, no more sleeping on the job
for anyone born free! Let's strip ourselves
for action on this issue. It seems to me
this business stinks—it's large and getting larger. 740

[The Old Men strip down, taking almost all their clothes off]

CHORUS OF OLD MEN

And I especially smelled some gas—
the tyrant rule of Hippias.
I've a great fear that Spartan men
collected here with Cleisthenes,
have with their trickery stirred up

¹Charon was the ferryman who transports the shades of the dead across the river into Hades.

these women, whom the gods all hate,
to seize the treasury and our pay,
the funds I need to live my way.¹
It's terrible these women here
are thinking about politics 750
and prattling on about bronze spears—
they're women!—and making peace
on our behalf with Spartan types,
whom I don't trust, not any more
than gaping wolves. In this affair,
those men are weaving plots for us, [630]
so they can bring back tyranny.
But me, I won't give any ground,
not to a tyrant. I'll stand guard,
from now on carrying a sword 760
inside my myrtle bough. I'll march
with weapons in the market place
with Aristogeiton at my side.²
I'll stand with him. And now it's time
I struck those hostile to gods' law
and hit that old hag on the jaw.

[The Old Men move to threaten the Old Women with their fists]

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

When you get back home, your own mother
won't know who you are. Come on, old ladies,
you friends of mine, let's first set our burdens
on the ground.

WOMEN'S CHORUS

All you fellow citizens, 770
we'll start to give the city good advice
and rightly, since it raised us splendidly [640]

¹Hippias was a tyrant in Athens from 528 to 510. Cleisthenes, an Athenian, was a favourite target of Aristophanes, ridiculed as a passive homosexual. Here there's an accusation that he is sympathetic to the Spartans. The pay the old men refer to is a daily payment of three obol from the state to jury men.

²Aritogeiton and his friend Harmodius assassinated the tyrant Hipparchus, the brother of Hippias. The two were celebrated as heroes of democratic Athens.

so we lived very well. At seven years old,
 I carried sacred vessels, and at ten
 I pounded barley for Athena's shrine.
 Later as bear, I shed my yellow dress
 for the rites of Brauronian Artemis.
 And once I was a lovely full-grown girl,
 I wore strings of figs around my neck
 and was one of those who carried baskets.¹ 780
 So I am indebted to the city.
 Why not pay it back with good advice?
 I was born a woman, but don't hold that
 against me if I introduce a plan
 to make our present situation better. [650]
 For I make contributions to the state—
 I give birth to men. You miserable old farts,
 you contribute nothing! That pile of cash
 which we collected from the Persian Wars
 you squandered. You don't pay any taxes. 790
 What's more, the way you act so stupidly
 endangers all of us. What do you say?
 Don't get me riled up. I'll take this filthy shoe
 and smack you one right on the jaw.

CHORUS OF OLD MEN

Is this not getting way too insolent?
 I think it's better if we paid them back. [660]
 We have to fight this out. So any one
 who's got balls enough to be a man
 take off your clothes so we men can smell
 the way we should—like men. We should strip. 800
 It's not right to keep ourselves wrapped up.
 We're the ones who've got white feet.
 We marched to Leipsydriion years ago.²

¹The Old Women are referring to many city activities and rituals in which girls of noble families played important roles. The phrase "pounding barley" refers to making cakes for sacrifices.

²Leipsydriion was the site of a battle years before when the tyrant Hippias besieged and defeated his opponents. The old men are treating the event as if they had been

[Footnote continues]

And now let's stand erect again, aroused
 in our whole bodies—shake off our old age. [670]

[The Old Men take off their remaining clothes, hold up their shrivelled phalluses, and threaten the women]

If one of us gives them the slightest chance
 there's nothing these women won't continue
 trying to work on—building fighting ships,
 attacking us at sea like Artemesia.¹
 If they switch to horses, I draw the line. 810
 For women are the best at riding bareback—
 their shapely arses do a lovely job.
 They don't slip off when grinding at a gallop.
 Just look how Micon painted Amazons
 fighting men on horseback hand to hand.²
 So we must take a piece of wood with holes, [680]
 and fit a yoke on them, around their necks.

CHORUS OF OLD WOMEN

By the two goddesses, if you get me roused,
 I'll let my wild sow's passion loose and make
 you yell to all the people here today
 how I'm removing all your hair. 820

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

You ladies,
 let's not delay—let's take off all our clothes,
 so we can smell a woman's passion
 when we're in a ferocious mood.

[The Old Women take off their clothes]

WOMEN'S CHORUS

Now let any man step out against me—

victorious. The detail about their white feet, Sommerstein suggests, refers to those who were hostile to Hippias and the tyrants (hence, lovers of freedom).

¹Artemesia was queen of Halicarnassus in Asia Minor. She led ships from her city as part of the Persian expedition against Athens in 480 and fought at the Battle of Salamis.

²Micon was a well-known Athenian painter.

LYSISTRATA

he won't be eating garlic any more, [690]
and no black beans. Just say something nasty,
I'm so boiling mad, I'll treat you the same way
the beetle did the eagle—smash your eggs.¹

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Not that I give a damn for you, not while 830
I have Lampito here—Ismenia, too,
my young Theban friend. You have no power,
not even with seven times as many votes.
You're such a miserable old man, even those
who are you neighbours find you hateful.
Just yesterday for the feast of Hecate, [700]
I planned a party, so I asked my neighbours
in Boeotia for one of their companions,
a lovely girl—she was for my children—
a splendid pot of eels.² But they replied 840
they couldn't send it because you'd passed
another one of your decrees. It doesn't seem
you'll stop voting in these laws, not before
someone takes your leg, carries you off
and throws you out.

*[Lysistrata comes out from the Acropolis, looking very worried and angry.
The leader of the Women's Chorus addresses her]*

Here's our glorious leader,
who does the planning for this enterprise.
Why have you come here, outside the building,
and with such a sad expression on your face?

LYSISTRATA

It's the way these women act so badly, 850
together with their female hearts, that makes
me lose my courage and walk in circles.

¹This is a reference to an old story in which the dung beetle got its revenge against an eagle by smashing its eggs. The old woman obviously threatens the man's testicles as she says this.

²Hecate was a goddess whose worship was associated with birth and children.

LYSISTRATA

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

What are you saying? What do you mean? [710]

LYSISTRATA

It's true, so true.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

What's wrong? You can tell us—
we're friends of yours.

LYSISTRATA

I'm ashamed to say,
but it's hard to keep it quiet.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Don't hide from me
bad news affecting all of us.

LYSISTRATA

All right,
I'll keep it short—we all want to get laid.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

O Zeus!

LYSISTRATA

What's the point of calling Zeus?
There's nothing he can do about this mess.
I can't keep these women from their men, 860
not any longer—they're all running off.
First I caught one slipping through a hole [720]
beside the Cave of Pan, then another
trying it with a rope and pulley, a third
deserting on her own, and yesterday
there was a woman on a giant bird
intending to fly down to that place
run by Orsilochus.¹ I grabbed her hair.
They're all inventing reasons to go home.

[A woman come out of the citadel, trying to sneak off]

¹Orsilochus was either a well known seducer or someone who kept a brothel.

LYSISTRATA

Here's one of them on her way right now. 870
Where do you think you're going?

WOMAN A

Who me?

I want to get back home. Inside the house
I've got bolts of Milesian cloth, and worms
are eating them.

LYSISTRATA

What worms? Get back in there! [730]

WOMAN A

I'll come back right away, by god—I just
need to spread them on the bed.

LYSISTRATA

Spread them?

You won't be doing that. You're not leaving!

WOMAN A

My wool just goes to waste?

LYSISTRATA

If that's what it takes.

[Woman A trudges back into the Acropolis. Woman B emerges]

WOMAN B

I'm such a fool, I've left my wretched flax
back in my house unstripped.

LYSISTRATA

Another one 880
leaving here to go and strip her flax!
Get back inside!

WOMAN B

By the goddess of light,

I'll be right back, once I've rubbed its skin.

LYSISTRATA

You'll not rub anything. If you start that, [740]
some other woman will want to do the same.

*[Woman B returns dejected into the citadel. Woman C emerges from the
citadel, looking very pregnant]*

LYSISTRATA

WOMAN C

O sacred Eileithia, goddess of birth,
hold back my labour pains till I can find
a place where I'm permitted to give birth.¹

LYSISTRATA

What are you moaning about?

WOMAN C

It's my time—

I'm going to have a child!

LYSISTRATA

But yesterday 890
you weren't even pregnant.

WOMAN C

Well, today I am.

Send me home, Lysistrata, and quickly.
I need a midwife.

LYSISTRATA *[inspecting Woman C's clothing]*

What are you saying?

What's this you've got here? It feels quite rigid.

WOMAN C

A little boy.

LYSISTRATA

No, by Aphrodite,
I don't think so. It looks like you've got
some hollow metal here. I'll have a look. [750]

[Lysistrata looks under the woman's dress and pulls out a helmet]

You silly creature, you've got a helmet there,
Athena's sacred helmet. Didn't you say
you were pregnant.

WOMAN C

Yes, and by god, I am. 900

¹To have a child in a holy place, like the Acropolis, was considered a sacrilege.

LYSISTRATA

Then why've you got this helmet?

WOMAN C

Well, in case

I went into labour in the citadel.
I could give birth right in the helmet,
lay it in there like a nesting pigeon.

LYSISTRATA

What are you talking about? You're just
making an excuse—that's so obvious.
You'll stay here for at least five days
until your new child's birth is purified.

WOMAN C

I can't get any sleep in the Acropolis,
not since I saw the snake that guards the place.

910

[More women start sneaking out of the citadel]

WOMAN D

Nor can I. I'm dying from lack of sleep
those wretched owls keep hooting all the time.

[760]

LYSISTRATA

Come on ladies, stop all these excuses!
All right, you miss your men. But don't you see
they miss you, too? I'm sure the nights they spend
don't bring them any pleasure. But please, dear friends,
hold on—persevere a little longer.
An oracle has said we will prevail,
if we stand together. That's what it said.

WOMAN A

Tell us what it prophesied.

LYSISTRATA

Then, keep quiet.

920

"When the sparrows, as they fly away,
escaping from the hoopoe birds, shall stay
together in one place and shall say nay
to sexual encounters, then a bad day
will be rare. High thundering Zeus will say
'What once was underneath on top I'll lay.'"

[770]

WOMAN B *[interrupting]*

Women are going to lie on top of men?

LYSISTRATA *[continuing the oracle]*

"... but if the sparrows fight and fly away
out of the holy shrine, people will say
no bird is more promiscuous than they."

930

WOMAN A

That oracle is clear enough, by god.

LYSISTRATA

All you heavenly gods, can we stop talking
of being in such distress. Let us go back in.
For, my dearest friends, it will be a shame
if we don't live up to this prophecy.

[780]

[Lysistrata and the women go back into the citadel, leaving the two choruses]

MEN'S CHORUS

I'd like to tell you all a tale,
which I heard once when I was young
about Melanion, a young lad
who fled from marriage and then came
into the wilds and so he lived
up in the hills. He wove some nets
and hunted hares. He had a dog.
Not once did he return back home
He hated women—they made him sick.
And we are no less wise than he.

940

[790]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Let's kiss, old bag, give it a try.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

You won't need onions to make you cry.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

I'll lift my leg—give you a kick.

LEADER OF WOMAN'S CHORUS

Down there your pubic hair's too thick.

[800]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Myronides had a hairy dick

950

and beat foes with his big black bum.
That Phormio was another one.¹

WOMEN'S CHORUS

To you I'd like to tell a tale
to answer your Melanion.
There was a man called Timon once,
a vagabond, the Furies' child.
Wild thistles covered his whole face. [810]
He wandered off filled up with spite
and always cursing evil types.
But though he always hated men, 960
those of you who are such rogues,
women he always really loved. [820]

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

You'd like a punch right on the chin?

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Not given the state of fear I'm in.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

What if I kicked you with my toe?

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

We'd see your pussy down below.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

And then you'd see, although I'm old
it's not all matted hair down there,
but singed by lamp and plucked with flair.

*[Lysistrata appears on a balcony of the citadel, looking off in the distance.
Other women come out after her]*

LYSISTRATA

Hey, you women! Over here to me. Come quick! 970

CALONICE

What's going on? Why are you shouting? [830]

¹Myronides and Phormio were two dead generals who fought for Athens.

LYSISTRATA

A man!

I see a man approaching mad with love,
seized with desire for Aphrodite's rites.
O holy queen of Cyprus, Cythera,
and Paphos, keep moving down the road,
the straight path you've been travelling on.

CALONICE

Where is he, whoever he is?

LYSISTRATA

Over there,
right beside the shrine of Chloe.

CALONICE

O yes,
there he is, by god. Who is he?

LYSISTRATA

Have a look.
Do any of you know him?

MYRRHINE

O god, I do. 980
It's my husband Cinesias.

LYSISTRATA

All right,
your job is to torment him, be a tease,
make him hot, offer to have sex with him
and then refuse, try everything you can, [840]
except the things you swore to on the cup.

MYRRHINE

Don't you worry. I'll do that.

LYSISTRATA

All right, then.
I'll stay here to help you play with him.
We'll warm him up together. You others,
go inside.

*[The women go inside, including Myrrhine. Cinesias enters with a very large
erection. An attendant comes with him carrying a young baby]*

CINESIAS

I'm in a dreadful way.
It's all this throbbing. And the strain. I feel
as if I'm stretched out on the rack.

990

LYSISTRATA

Who's there,
standing inside our line of sentinels?

CINESIAS

It's me.

LYSISTRATA

A man?

CINESIAS

Yes, take a look at this!

LYSISTRATA

In that case leave. Go on your way.

CINESIAS

Who are you
to tell me to get out?

LYSISTRATA

The daytime watch.

CINESIAS

Then, by the gods, call Myrrhine for me.

[850]

LYSISTRATA

You tell me to summon Myrrhine for you?
Who are you?

CINESIAS

Cinesias, her husband,
from Paeonidae.¹

¹Sommerstein (p. 200) points out that Paeonidae was a political district in northern Attica. The name suggests the Greek verb *paiein*, meaning to strike or copulate. Sommerstein offers the translation "Bangwell." Jack Lindsay translates the place as "Bangtown."

LYSISTRATA

Welcome, dear friend, your name
is not unknown to us. Your wife always
has you on her lips. Any time she licks
an apple or an egg she says, "Ah me,
if only this could be Cinesias."

1000

[Lysistrata licks her fist obscenely]

CINESIAS

O my god!

LYSISTRATA

Yes, by Aphrodite, yes. And when our talk
happens to deal with men, your wife speaks up
immediately, "O they're all useless sorts
compared to my Cinesias."

[860]

CINESIAS

Please call her out.

LYSISTRATA

Why should I do that? What will you give me?

CINESIAS

Whatever you want, by god. I have this . . .

[Cinesias waves his erection in front of Lysistrata]

I'll give you what I've got.

LYSISTRATA

No thanks.

1010

I think I'll tell her to come out to you.

[Lysistrata leaves to fetch Myrrhine]

CINESIAS

Hurry up. I've had no pleasure in life
since she's been gone from home. I go out,
but I'm in pain. To me now everything
seems empty. There's no joy in eating food.
I'm just so horny.

[Lysistrata appears dragging Myrrhine with her. Myrrhine is pretending to be reluctant]

MYRRHINE

No, by god, I won't—
unless you give me something in return.
End this war.

[900]

CINESIAS

Well now, that's something I'll do,
when it seems all right.

MYRRHINE

Well then, I'll leave here,
when it seems all right. But now I'm under oath.

CINESIAS

At least lie down with me a little while.

MYRRHINE

I can't. I'm not saying I wouldn't like to.

CINESIAS

You'd like to? Then, my little Myrrhine,
lie down right here.

MYRRHINE

You must be joking—
in front of our dear baby child?

CINESIAS

No, by god.

1060

[Cinesias turns toward the attendant]

Manes, take the boy back home. All right then,
the lad's no longer in the way. Lie down.

MYRRHINE

But, you silly man, where do we do it?

[910]

CINESIAS

Where? The Cave of Pan's an excellent place.

MYRRHINE

How will I purify myself when I return
into the citadel?

CINESIAS

You can wash yourself
in the water clock. That would do the job.

MYRRHINE

What about the oath I swore? Should I become
a wretched perjurer?

CINESIAS

I'll deal with that.
Don't worry about the oath.

MYRRHINE

Well then,
I'll go and get a bed for us.

1070

CINESIAS

No, no.
The ground will do.

MYRRHINE

No, by Apollo, no!
You may be a rascal, but on the ground?
No, I won't make you lie down there.

[Myrrhine goes back into the Acropolis to fetch a bed]

CINESIAS

Ah, my wife—
she really loves me. That's so obvious.

[Myrrhine reappears carrying a small bed]

MYRRHINE

Here we are. Get on there while I undress.
O dear! I forgot to bring the mattress.

[920]

CINESIAS

Why a mattress? I don't need that.

MYRRHINE

You can't lie
on the bed cord. No, no, by Artemis,
that would be a great disgrace.

CINESIAS

Give me a kiss—

1080

right now!

MYRRHINE [*kissing him*]

There you go.

[*Myrrhine goes back to the Acropolis to fetch the mattress*]

CINESIAS

Oh my god—

get back here quickly!

[*Myrrhine reappears with the mattress*]

MYRRHINE

Here's the mattress.

You lie down on it. I'll get my clothes off.

O dear me! You don't have a pillow.

CINESIAS

But I don't need a pillow!

MYRRHINE

By god, I do.

[*Myrrhine goes back to the Acropolis for a pillow*]

CINESIAS

This cock of mine is just like Hercules—
he's being denied his supper.¹

[*Myrrhine returns with a pillow*]

MYRRHINE

Lift up a bit.

Come on, up! There, I think that's everything.

CINESIAS

That's all we need. Come here, my treasure.

[930]

MYRRHINE

I'm taking off the cloth around my breasts.

1090

¹Hercules was famous for always being hungry and having an enormous appetite.

Now, don't forget. Don't you go lying to me
about that vote for peace.

CINESIAS

O my god,

may I die before that happens!

MYRRHINE

There's no blanket.

CINESIAS

I don't need one, by god! I want to get laid!

MYRRHINE

Don't worry. You will be. I'll be right back.

[*Myrrhine goes back to the Acropolis to fetch a blanket*]

CINESIAS

That woman's killing me with all the bedding!

[*Myrrhine returns with a blanket*]

MYRRHINE

All right, get up.

CINESIAS

But it's already up!

MYRRHINE

You want me to rub some scent on you?

CINESIAS

No, by Apollo. Not for me.

MYRRHINE

I'll do it,

whether you want it rubbed on there or not—
for Aphrodite's sake.

1100

[*Myrrhine goes back to the Acropolis to get the perfume*]

CINESIAS

O great lord Zeus,

pour the perfume out!

[940]

[*Myrrhine returns with the perfume*]

MYRRHINE

Hold out your hand, now.
Take that and spread it round.

CINESIAS *[rubbing the perfume on himself]*

By Apollo,
this stuff doesn't smell so sweet, not unless
it's rubbed on thoroughly—no sexy smell.

MYRRHINE *[inspecting the jar of perfume]*

I'm such a fool. I brought the Rhodian scent!

CINESIAS

It's fine. Just let it go, my darling.

MYRRHINE *[getting up to leave]*

You're just saying that.

[Myrrhine goes back to the Acropolis to get the right perfume]

CINESIAS

Damn the wretch who first came up with perfume!

[Myrrhine comes back from the Acropolis with another box of perfume]

MYRRHINE

Grab this alabaster thing.

CINESIAS *[waving his cock]*

You grab this alabaster cock.
Come lie down here, you tease. Don't go and fetch
another thing for me. 1110

MYRRHINE

By Artemis, I'll grab it.
I'm taking off my shoes. Now, my darling, [950]
you will be voting to bring on a peace.

CINESIAS

I'm planning to.

[Myrrhine goes back to the Acropolis. Cinesias turns and sees she's gone]

That woman's killing me!
She teased me, got me all inflamed, then left.

[Cinesias gets up and declaims in a parody of tragic style]

Alas, why suffer from such agony?

Who can I screw? Why'd she betray me,
the most beautiful woman of them all?

Poor little cock, how can I care for you?

Where's that Cynalopex? I'll pay him well 1120
to nurse this little fellow back to health.¹

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

You poor man, in such a fix—your spirit
so tricked and in distress. I pity you. [960]

How can your kidneys stand the strain,
your balls, your loins, your bum, your brain
endure an erection that's hard for you,
without a chance of a morning screw.

CINESIAS

O mighty Zeus, it's started throbbing once again.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

A dirty stinking bitch did this to you.

CINESIAS

No, by god, a loving girl, a sweet one, too. 1130 [970]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Sweet? Not her. She's a tease, a slut.

CINESIAS

All right, she is a tease, but—
O Zeus, Zeus, I wish
you'd sweep her up there
in a great driving storm,
like dust in the air,
whirl her around,
then fall to the ground.
Then as she's carried down,
to earth one more time, 1140
let her fall right away
on this pecker of mine.

¹Cynalopex (= "Fox Dog") was the nickname of Philostratus who apparently was a pimp.

[Enter the Spartan herald. He, too, has a giant erection, which he is trying to hide under his cloak]

SPARTAN HERALD

Where's the Athenian Senate and the Prytanēs?¹ [980]
I come with fresh dispatches.

CINESIAS *[looking at the Herald's erection]*

Are you a man,
or some phallic monster?

SPARTAN HERALD

I'm a herald,
by the twin gods. And my good man,
I come from Sparta with a proposal,
arrangements for a truce.

CINESIAS

If that's the case,
why do you have a spear concealed in there?

SPARTAN HERALD

I'm not concealing anything, by god. 1150

CINESIAS

Then why are you turning to one side?
What that thing there, sticking from your cloak?
Has your journey made your groin inflamed?

SPARTAN HERALD

By old Castor, this man's insane!

CINESIAS

You rogue,
you've got a hard on!

SPARTAN HERALD

No I don't, I tell you. [990]
Let's have no more nonsense.

CINESIAS *[pointing to the herald's erection]*

Then what's that?

¹The Prytanēs was the business committee of the Athenian council.

SPARTAN HERALD

It's a Spartan herald's stick.

CINESIAS

O that's what it is,
a Spartan herald stick. Let's have a chat.
Tell me the truth. How are things going for you
out there in Sparta?

SPARTAN HERALD

Not good. The Spartans 1160
are all standing tall and the allies, too—
everyone is firm and hard. We need a thrust
in someone's rear.¹

CINESIAS

This trouble of yours—
where did it come from? Was it from Pan?²

SPARTAN HERALD

No. I think it started with Lampito.
Then, at her suggestion, other women
in Sparta, as if from one starting gate,
ran off to keep men from their honey pots.³ [1000]

CINESIAS

How are you doing?

SPARTAN HERALD

We're all in pain.
We go around the city doubled up, 1170
like men who light the lamps.⁴ The women

¹The Greek reads "we need Pellene," an area in the Peloponnese allied with Sparta. But, a Sommerstein points out (p. 206), this is undoubtedly a pun invoking a word meaning vagin or anus. In the exchanges which follow, the Spartans are depicted as having a decided preference for anal sex.

²Pan was a god associated with wild unrestrained sex in the wilderness.

³The meaning of the Greek word *hussakos* is very obscure. Sommerstein translates as "por barrels."

⁴The lamplighters had to walk along bent over in order to protect the flame they carried.

won't let us touch their pussies, not until
we've made a peace with all of Greece.

CINESIAS

This matter
is a female plot, a grand conspiracy
affecting all of Greece. Now I understand.
Return to Sparta as fast as you can go.
Tell them they must send out ambassadors [1010]
with full authority to deal for peace.
I'll tell out leaders here to make a choice
of our ambassadors. I'll show them my prick. 1180

SPARTAN HERALD

All you've said is good advice. I must fly.

[Cinesias and the Spartan Herald exit in opposite directions]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

There's no wild animal harder to control
than women, not even blazing fire.
The panther itself displays more shame.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

If you know that, then why wage war with me?
You old scoundrel, we could be lasting friends.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

But my hatred for women will not stop!

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

Whatever you want. But I don't much like
to look at you like this, without your clothes. [1020]
It makes me realize how silly you are. 1190
Look, I'll come over and put your shirt on.

*[The Leader of the Women's Chorus picks up a tunic, goes over to the
Leader of the Men's Chorus, and helps him put it on.]*

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

By god, what you've just done is not so bad.
I took it off in a fit of stupid rage.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

Now at least you look like a man again.

And people won't find you ridiculous.
If you hadn't been so nasty to me,
I'd grab that insect stuck in your eye
and pull it out. It's still in there.

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

So that's what's troubling me. Here's a ring.
Scrape it off. Get it out and show it to me. 1200
God, that's been injuring my eye for ages.

*[The Leader of the Women's Chorus takes the ring and inspects the Leader
of the Men's Chorus in the eye]*

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

I'll do it. You men are born hard to please. [1030]
My god, you picked up a monstrous insect.
Have a look. That's a Tricorynthus bug!¹

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

By Zeus, you've been a mighty help to me.
That thing's been digging wells in me a while.
Now it's been removed, my eyes are streaming.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

I'll wipe it for you, though you're a scoundrel.
I'll give you a kiss.

LEADER OF THE MEN'S CHORUS

I don't want a kiss.

LEADER OF WOMEN'S CHORUS

I'll will, whether it's what you want or not. 1210

[She kisses him]

LEADER OF MEN'S CHORUS

O you've got me. You're born to flatter us.
That saying got it right—it states the case
quite well, "These women—one has no life
with them, and cannot live without them."
But now I'll make a truce with you. I won't [1040]

¹Tricorynthus is a region in Attica, near Marathon. Presumably it was famous for its insects.

insult you any more in days to come,
and you won't make me suffer. So now,
let's make a common group and sing a song.

[The Men's and Women's Choruses combine]

COMBINED CHORUS *[addressing the audience]*

You citizens, we're not inclined
with any of you to be unkind. 1220

Just the reverse—our words to you
will be quite nice. We'll act well, too.
For now we've had enough bad news.

So if a man or woman here
needs ready cash, give out a cheer, [1050]
and take some minae, two or three.

Coins fill our purses now, you see.
And if we get a peace treaty,
you take some money from the sack,
and keep it. You don't pay it back. 1230

I'm going to have a great shindig—
I've got some soup, I'll kill a pig—
with Carystian friends, all good men.¹ [1060]

You'll eat fine tender meat again.
Come to my house this very day.
But first wash all the dirt away,
you and your kids, then walk on by.
No need to ask a person why.
Just come straight in, as if my home
was like your own—for at my place 1240
we'll shut the door right in your face. [1070]

[A group of Spartans enters]

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Ah, here come the Spartan ambassadors
trailing their long beards. They've got
something like a pig pen between their thighs.

¹Carystus is a state from Euboea, allied to Athens.

[The Spartan ambassadors enter, moving with difficulty because of their enormous erections.]

Men of Sparta, first of all, our greetings.
Tell us how you are. Why have you come?

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

Why waste a lot of words to tell you?
You see the state that brought us here.

[The Spartans all display their erections with military precision]

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Oh my! The crisis has grown more severe.
It seems the strain is worse than ever 1250

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

It's indescribable. What can I say? [1080]
But let someone come, give us a peace
in any way he can.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Well now, I see
our own ambassadors—they look just like
our wrestling men with their shirts sticking out
around their bellies or like athletic types
who need to exercise to cure their sickness.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

Where's Lysistrata? Can someone tell me?
We're men here and, well, look . . .

[The Athenians pull back their cloaks and reveal that, like the Spartans, they all have giant erections]

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

They're clearly suffering from the same disease. 1260
Hey, does it throb early in the morning?

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

By god, yes. What this is doing to me— [1090]

it's torture. If we don't get a treaty soon
we'll going to have to cornhole Cleisthenes.¹

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

If you're smart, keep it covered with your cloak.
One of those men who chopped off Hermes' dick
might see you.²

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR [*pulling his cloak over his erection*]

By god, that's good advice.

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR [*doing the same*]

Yes, by the twin gods, excellent advice.
I'll pull my mantle over it.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

Greetings, Spartans.

We're both suffering disgracefully.

1270

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

Yes, dear sir, we'd have been in real pain
if one of those dick-clippers had seen us
with our peckers sticking up like this.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

All right, Spartans, we each need to talk.
Why are you here?

[1100]

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

Ambassadors for peace.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

Well said. We want the same. Why don't we call
Lysistrata. She's the only one who'll bring
a resolution to our differences.

¹Cleisthenes was a well known Athenian, whom Aristophanes frequently ridicules as a passive homosexual.

²In 415 the statues of Hermes in Athens were mutilated by having their penises chopped off, a very sacrilegious act.

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

By the two gods, bring in Lysistratus,
if he's the one you want.

1280

[*Lysistrata emerges from the gates of the citadel*]

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

It seems there is no need to summon her.
She's heard us, and here she is in person.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Hail to the bravest woman of them all.
You must now show that you're resilient—
stern but yielding, with a good heart but mean,
stately but down-to-earth. The foremost men
in all of Greece in deference to your charms
have come together here before you
so you can arbitrate all their complaints.

[1110]

LYSISTRATA

That task should not be difficult, unless
they're so aroused they screw each other.
I'll quickly notice that. But where is she,
the young girl Reconciliation?

1290

[*The personification of the goddess Reconciliation comes out. She is completely naked. Lysistrata addresses her first*]¹

Come here,
and first, take hold of those from Sparta,

don't grab too hard or be too rough, not like
our men who act so boorishly—instead
do it as women do when they're at home.
If they won't extend their hands to you,
then grab their cocks.

[*Reconciliation takes two Spartans by their penises and leads them over to Lysistrata*]

¹In Aristophanes' time, this female character would be played by a man with a body stocking prominently displaying female characteristics: breasts, pubic hair, buttocks.

LYSISTRATA

Now go and do the same
for the Athenians. You can hold them
by whatever they stick out.

[1120]

1300

[Reconciliation leads the Athenians over to Lysistrata]

Now then,
you men of Sparta, stand here close to me,
and you Athenians over here. All of you,
listen to my words. I am a woman,
but I have a brain, and my common sense
is not so bad—I picked it up quite well
from listening to my father and to speeches
from our senior men. Now I've got you here,
I wish to reprimand you, both of you,
and rightly so. At Olympia, Delphi,
and Thermopylae (I could mention
many other places if I had a mind
to make it a long list) both of you
use the same cup when you sprinkle altars,
as if you share the same ancestral group.¹
We've got barbarian enemies, and yet
with your armed expeditions you destroy
Greek men and cities. At this point, I'll end
the first part of my speech.

1310 [1130]

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

This erection—
it's killing me!

LYSISTRATA

And now you Spartans,
I'll turn to you. Don't you remember how,
some time ago, Periclidias came,
a fellow Spartan, and sat down right here,
a suppliant at these Athenian altars—
he looked so pale there in his purple robes—
begging for an army? Messenians then

1320

[1140]

LYSISTRATA

were pressing you so hard, just at the time
god sent the earthquake. So Cimon set out
with four thousand armed infantry and saved
the whole of Sparta.¹ After going through that,
how can you ravage the Athenians' land,
the ones who helped you out?

1330

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

Lysistrata,
you're right, by god. They're in the wrong.

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR *[looking at Reconciliation]*

Not true,
but look at that incredibly fine ass!

LYSISTRATA

Do you Athenians think I'll forget you?
Don't you remember how these Spartans men,
back in the days when you were dressed as slaves
came here with spears and totally destroyed
those hordes from Thessaly and many friends
of Hippias and those allied with him?
It took them just one day to drive them out
and set you free. At that point you exchanged
your slavish clothes for cloaks which free men wear.

[1150]

1340

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

I've never seen a more gracious woman.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR *[looking at Reconciliation]*

I've never seen a finer looking pussy.

LYSISTRATA

If you've done many good things for each other,
why go to war? Why not stop this conflict?
Why not conclude a peace? What's in the way?

[1160]

¹Lysistrata is listing some of the festivals where all the Greek states cooperated in the ritual celebrations.

¹In 464 Sparta suffered a massive earthquake, which killed many citizens. Their slaves, who included the Messenians, rose in revolt. Sparta appealed to Athens for help, and the Athenians, after some debate, sent Cimon with an army to assist the Spartans.

[In the negotiations which follow, the ambassadors use the body of Reconciliation as a map of Greece, pointing to various parts to make their points]

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

We're willing, but the part that's sticking out
we want that handed back.

LYSISTRATA

Which one is that? 1350

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR *[pointing to Reconciliation's buttocks]*

This one here—that's Pylos. We must have that—
we've been aching for it a long time now.¹

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

By Poseidon, you won't be having that!

LYSISTRATA

My good man, you'll surrender it to them.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

Then how do we make trouble, stir up shit?

LYSISTRATA

Ask for something else of equal value.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR *[pointing to Reconciliation's public hair]*

Then give us this whole area in here—
first, there's Echinous, and the Melian Gulf,
the hollow part behind it, and these legs [1170]
which make up Megara.²

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

By the twin gods, 1360
my good man, you can't have all that!

LYSISTRATA

Let it go.
Don't start fighting over a pair of legs.

¹Pylos was a small but important part of the south Peloponnese which the Athenians had seized in 425 and held onto ever since.

²These are places relatively close to Athens.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

I'd like to strip and start ploughing naked.

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

By god, yes! But me first. I'll fork manure.

LYSISTRATA

You can do those things once you've made peace.
If these terms seem good, you'll want your allies
to come here to join negotiations.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADORS

What of our allies? We've all got hard ons.
Our allies will agree this is just fine.
They are all dying to get laid!

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

Ours, as well— 1370 [1180]
no doubt of that.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

And the Carystians—
they'll also be on board, by Zeus.

LYSISTRATA

Well said. Now you must purify yourselves.
We women will host a dinner for you
in the Acropolis. We'll use the food
we brought here in our baskets. In there
you will make a oath and pledge your trust
in one another. Then each of you
can take his wife and go back home.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

Let's go—
and hurry up.

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR *[to Lysistrata]*

Lead on. Wherever you wish. 1380

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR

All right by Zeus, as fast as we can go.

[Lysistrata and Reconciliation lead the Spartan and Athenian delegations into the Acropolis]

CHORUS

Embroidered gowns and shawls,
 robes and golden ornaments—
 everything I own—I offer you
 with an open heart. Take these things
 and let your children have them,
 if you've a daughter who will be
 a basket bearer. I tell you all
 take my possessions in my home—
 nothing is so securely closed
 you can't break open all the seals
 and take whatever's there inside.
 But if you look, you won't see much
 unless your eyesight's really keen,
 far sharper than my own.

1390

[1200]

If anyone is out of corn
 to feed his many tiny children
 and household slaves, at home
 I've got a few fine grains of wheat—
 a quart of those will make some bread,
 a fresh good-looking loaf. If there's a man
 who wants some bread and is in need
 let him come with his sacks and bags
 to where I live to get his wheat.
 My servant Manes will pour it out.
 But I should tell you not to come
 too near my door—for there's a dog
 you need to stay well clear of.

1400

[1210]

ATHENIAN DELEGATE A [*from inside the citadel*]

Open the door!

[The Athenian Delegate A comes staggering out of the citadel, evidently drunk. He's carrying a torch. Other delegates in the same condition come out behind him. Athenian Delegate A bumps into someone by the

*door, probably one of a group of Spartan slaves standing around waiting for their masters to come out*¹

ATHENIAN DELEGATE A

Why don't you get out of my way?

Why are you lot sitting there? What if I
 burned you with this torch? That's a stale routine!²
 I won't do that. Well, if I really must,
 to keep you happy, I'll go through with it.

1410

[1220]

[Athenian Delegate A chases an onlooker away with his torch]

ATHENIAN DELEGATE B [*waving a torch*]

We'll be here with you to help you do it.
 Why not just leave? You may soon be screaming
 for that hair of yours.

ATHENIAN DELEGATE A

Go on, piss off!

So the Spartans inside there can come on out
 and go away in peace.

[The two Athenian delegates force the Spartan slaves away from the door]

ATHENIAN DELEGATE B

Well now,

I've never seen a banquet quite like this.
 The Spartans were delightful. As for us,
 we had too much wine, but as companions
 we said lots of really clever things.

1420

ATHENIAN DELEGATE A

That's right. When we're sober, we lose our minds.
 I'll speak up and persuade Athenians

¹The stage business at this point is somewhat confusing. It's not clear whether the Athenian delegates who now appear are leaving the meeting in the citadel or arriving and wanting to get in. Here I follow Sommerstein, who is following Henderson, and have the delegate emerge from the meeting. The people hanging around the door are probably the slaves who came with the Spartans and who are waiting for their masters inside.

²This comment is taking a swipe at other comic dramatists who use a stock set of situation or actions, while at the same time the action uses the stock technique (not an uncommon feature of Aristophanic comedy).

LYSISTRATA

that when our embassies go anywhere [1230]
they stay permanently drunk. As it is,
whenever we go sober off to Sparta,
right away we look to stir up trouble.
So we just don't hear what they have to say
and get suspicious of what they do not state.
Then we bring back quite different reports 1430
about the same events. But now these things
have all been sorted out. So if someone there
sang "Telamon" when he should have sung
"Cleitagora," we'd applaud the man
and even swear quite falsely that . . .¹

[The Spartan slaves they forced away from the door are gradually coming back]

Hey, those slaves
are coming here again. You whipping posts, [1240]
why can't you go away?

ATHENIAN DELEGATE B

By Zeus,
the ones in there are coming out again.

[The Spartan delegates come out of the citadel. The Spartan ambassador is carrying a musical instrument]

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

Here, my dear sir, take this wind instrument,
so I can dance and sing a lovely song 1440
to honour both Athenians and ourselves.

ATHENIAN AMBASSADOR *[turning to one of the slaves]*

Yes, by the gods, take the pipes. I love
to see you Spartans dance and sing.

[The music starts. The Spartan Ambassador sings and dances]

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

O Memory, to this young man
send down your child the Muse

¹"Telamon" and "Cleitagora" were well known drinking songs.

LYSISTRATA

who knows the Spartans and Athenians.¹ [1250]
Back then at Artemesium
they fought the ships like gods of war
and overpowered the Medes,
while we, I know, led by Leonidas 1450
whetted our teeth like boars
with foaming mouths, which dripped
down on our legs. The Persian force
possessed more fighting men
than grains of sea shore sand. [1260]
O Artemis, queen of the wild,
slayer of beasts, chaste goddess,
come here to bless our treaty,
to make us long united.
May our peace be always blessed 1460
with friendship and prosperity,
and may we put an end
to all manipulating foxes. [1270]
Come here, O come here,
Virgin Goddess of the Hunt.

[Lysistrata emerges from the citadel bringing all the wives with her]

LYSISTRATA²

Come now, since everything has turned out well,
take these women back with you, you Spartans.
And, you Athenians, these ones are yours.
Let each man stand beside his wife, each wife
beside her man, and then to celebrate 1470
good times let's dance in honour of the gods.
And for all future time, let's never make
the same mistake again.

[The Chorus now sings to the assembled group, as the wives and husbands are rejoined]

¹The Spartan Ambassador is singing about two famous battles against the Persians (both in 480), the Athenian naval victory at Artemesium and the Spartan stand of the 300 at Thermopylae. This military campaign was an important highlight of Greek unity.

²There is some dispute about who this speech should be assigned to. Sommerstein (p. 221) has a useful summary of the arguments.

CHORUS

Lead on the dance, bring on the Graces,
 and summon Artemis and her twin, [1280]
 Apollo, the god who heals us all,
 call on Bacchus, Nysa's god,
 whose eyes blaze forth
 amid his Maenads' ecstasy,
 and Zeus alight with flaming fire, 1480
 and Hera, Zeus' blessed wife,
 and other gods whom we will use
 as witnesses who won't forget
 the meaning of the gentle Peace
 made her by goddess Aphrodite. [1290]

Alalai! Raise the cry of joy,
 raise it high, iai!
 the cry of victory, iai!
 Evoi, evoi, evoi, evoi!

LYSISTRATA

Spartan, now offer us another song, 1490
 match our new song with something new.

SPARTAN AMBASSADOR

Leave lovely Taygetus once again
 and, Spartan Muse, in some way
 that is appropriate for us
 pay tribute to Amyclae's god,
 and to bronze-housed Athena,
 to Tyndareus' splendid sons, [1300]
 who play beside the Eurotas.
 Step now, with many a nimble turn,
 so we may sing a hymn to Sparta, 1500
 dancing in honour of the gods,
 with stamping feet in that place
 where by the river Eurotas
 young maidens dance,
 like fillies raising dust, [1310]
 tossing their manes,
 like bacchants who play
 and wave their thyrsus stalks,

brought on by Leda's lovely child,
 their holy leader in the choral dance.¹ 1510

But come let your hands bind up your hair.
 Let your feet leap up like deer, sound out the beat
 to help our dance. Sing out a song of praise
 for our most powerful bronze-house goddess,
 all-conquering Athena!

[They all exit singing and dancing]

¹*Taygetus* is an important mountain in Sparta. *Amyclae's god* is Apollo who had a shrine at Amyclae, near Sparta. *Bronze-housed Athena* is a reference to the shrine of Athena in Sparta. *Tyndareus' splendid sons* are Castor and Pollux, the twin gods (brothers of Helen and Clytemnestra). *The Eurotas* is a river near Sparta. The *thyrsus stalk* is a plant stem held by the followers of Bacchus in their ecstatic dancing. *Leda's child* is Helen (wife of Menelaus, sister of Castor and Pollux and Clytemnestra, a child of Zeus).

LYSISTRATA

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is a retired instructor (now a Research Associate) at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. His translations include the following:

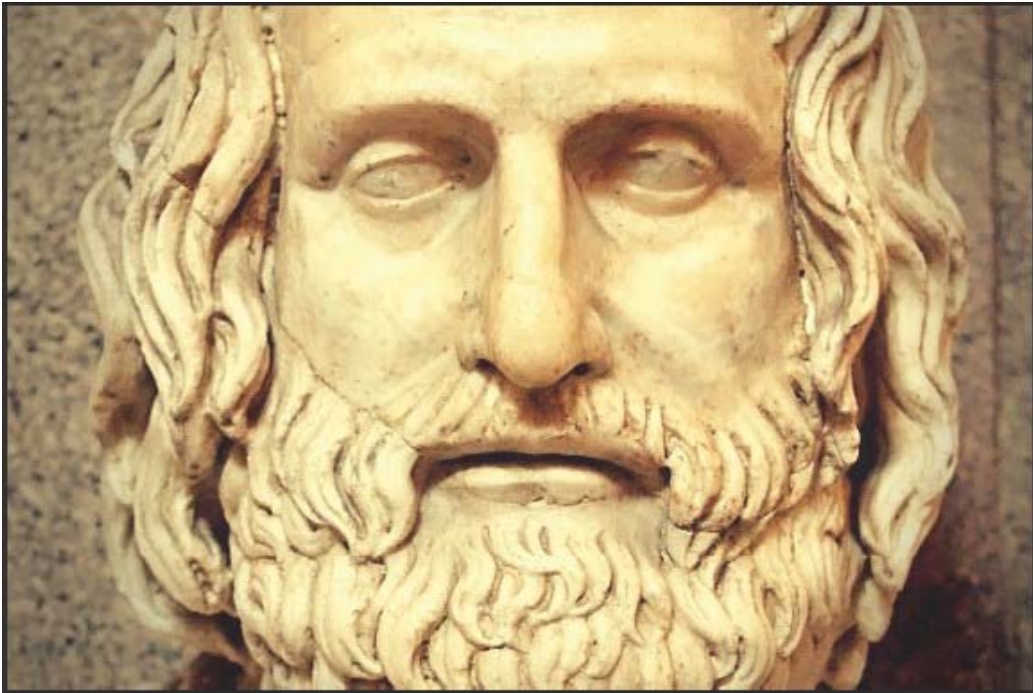
Aeschylus, *Oresteia*
Aristophanes, *Birds*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Aristophanes, *Knights*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Aristophanes, *Peace*
Cuvier, *Discourse on Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Euripides, *Medea*
Euripides, *Orestes*
Homer, *Iliad* (Complete and Abridged)
Homer, *Odyssey* (Complete and Abridged)
Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*
Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Nietzsche, *Uses and Abuses of History*
Sophocles, *Ajax*
Sophocles, *Antigone*
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

A number of these translations have been published by Richer Resources Publications, and some of these titles are available as recordings from Naxos Audiobooks.

Ian Johnston maintains a website at the following address:

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ALCESTIS

EURIPIDES

Global Grey ebooks

ALCESTIS

BY
EURIPIDES

TRANSLATED BY GILBERT MURRAY

1915

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INTRODUCTION

The *Alcestis* would hardly confirm its author's right to be acclaimed "the most tragic of the poets." It is doubtful whether one can call it a tragedy at all. Yet it remains one of the most characteristic and delightful of Euripidean dramas, as well as, by modern standards, the most easilyactable. And I notice that many judges who display nothing but a fierce satisfaction in sending other plays of that author to the block or the treadmill, show a certain human weakness in sentencing the gentle daughter of Pelias.

The play has been interpreted in many different ways. There is the old unsophisticated view, well set forth in Paley's preface of 1872. He regards the *Alcestis* simply as a triumph of pathos, especially of "that peculiar sort of pathos which comes most home to us, with our views and partialities for domestic life.... As for the characters, that of Alcestis must be acknowledged to be pre-eminently beautiful. One could almost imagine that Euripides had not yet conceived that bad opinion of the sex which so many of the subsequent dramas exhibit.... But the rest are hardly well-drawn, or, at least, pleasingly portrayed." "The poet might perhaps, had he pleased, have exhibited Admetus in a more amiable point of view."

This criticism is not very trenchant, but its weakness is due, I think, more to timidity of statement than to lack of perception. Paley does see that a character may be "well-drawn" without necessarily being "pleasing"; and even that he may be eminently pleasing as a part of the play while very displeasing in himself. He sees that Euripides may have had his own reasons for not making Admetus an ideal husband. It seems odd that such points should need mentioning; but Greek drama has always suffered from a school of critics who approach a play with a greater equipment of aesthetic theory than of dramatic perception. This is the characteristic defect of classicism. One mark of the school is to demand from dramatists heroes and heroines which shall satisfy its own ideals; and, though there was in the New Comedy a mask known to Pollux as "The Entirely-good Young Man" ([Greek:

panchraestos neaniskos]), such a character is fortunately unknown to classical Greek drama.

The influence of this "classicist" tradition has led to a timid and unsatisfying treatment of the *Alcestis*, in which many of the most striking and unconventional features of the whole composition were either ignored or smoothed away. As a natural result, various lively-minded readers proceeded to overemphasize these particular features, and were carried into eccentricity or paradox. Alfred Schöne, for instance, fixing his attention on just those points which the conventional critic passed over, decides simply that the *Alcestis* is a parody, and finds it very funny. (*Die Alkestis von Euripides*, Kiel, 1895.)

I will not dwell on other criticisms of this type. There are those who have taken the play for a criticism of contemporary politics or the current law of inheritance. Above all there is the late Dr. Verrall's famous essay in *Euripides the Rationalist*, explaining it as a psychological criticism of a supposed Delphic miracle, and arguing that *Alcestis* in the play does not rise from the dead at all. She had never really died; she only had a sort of nervous catalepsy induced by all the "suggestion" of death by which she was surrounded. Now Dr. Verrall's work, as always, stands apart. Even if wrong, it has its own excellence, its special insight and its extraordinary awakening power. But in general the effect of reading many criticisms on the *Alcestis* is to make a scholar realize that, for all the seeming simplicity of the play, competent Grecians have been strangely bewildered by it, and that after all there is no great reason to suppose that he himself is more sensible than his neighbours.

This is depressing. None the less I cannot really believe that, if we make patient use of our available knowledge, the *Alcestis* presents any startling enigma. In the first place, it has long been known from the remnants of the ancient Didascalia, or official notice of production, that the *Alcestis* was produced as the fourth play of a series; that is, it took the place of a Satyr-play. It is what we may call Pro-satyrical. (See the present writer's introduction to the *Rhesus*.) And we should note for what it is worth the observation in the ancient Greek argument: "The play is somewhat satyr-like

([Greek: saturiphkoteron]). It ends in rejoicing and gladness against the tragic convention."

Now we are of late years beginning to understand much better what a Satyr-play was. Satyrs have, of course, nothing to do with satire, either etymologically or otherwise. Satyrs are the attendant daemons who form the Kômos, or revel rout, of Dionysus. They are represented in divers fantastic forms, the human or divine being mixed with that of some animal, especially the horse or wild goat. Like Dionysus himself, they are connected in ancient religion with the Renewal of the Earth in spring and the resurrection of the dead, a point which students of the *'Alcestis may well remember. But in general they represent mere joyous creatures of nature, unthwarted by law and unchecked by self-control. Two notes are especially struck by them: the passions and the absurdity of half-drunken revellers, and the joy and mystery of the wild things in the forest.*

The rule was that after three tragedies proper there came a play, still in tragic diction, with a traditional saga plot and heroic characters, in which the Chorus was formed by these Satyrs. There was a deliberate clash, an effect of burlesque; but of course the clash must not be too brutal. Certain characters of the heroic saga are, so to speak, at home with Satyrs and others are not. To take our extant specimens of Satyr-plays, for instance: in the *Cyclops* we have Odysseus, the heroic trickster; in the fragmentary *Ichneutae* of Sophocles we have the Nymph Cyllene, hiding the baby Hermes from the chorus by the most barefaced and pleasant lying; later no doubt there was an entrance of the infant thief himself. Autolycus, Sisyphus, Thersites are all Satyr-play heroes and congenial to the Satyr atmosphere; but the most congenial of all, the one hero who existed always in an atmosphere of Satyrs and the Kômos until Euripides made him the central figure of a tragedy, was Heracles.¹

The complete Satyr-play had a hero of this type and a Chorus of Satyrs. But the complete type was refined away during the fifth century; and one stage in the process produced a play with a normal chorus but with one figure of

¹ The character of Heracles in connexion with the Kômos, already indicated by Wilamowitz and Dieterich (*Herakles*, pp. 98, ff.; *Pulcinella*, pp. 63, ff.), has been illuminatingly developed in an unpublished monograph by Mr. J.A.K. Thomson, of Aberdeen.

the Satyric or "revelling" type. One might almost say the "comic" type if, for the moment, we may remember that that word is directly derived from 'Kômos.'

The *Alcestis* is a very clear instance of this Pro-satyric class of play. It has the regular tragic diction, marked here and there (393, 756, 780, etc.) by slight extravagances and forms of words which are sometimes epic and sometimes over-colloquial; it has a regular saga plot, which had already been treated by the old poet Phrynichus in his *Alcestis*, a play which is now lost but seems to have been Satyric; and it has one character straight from the Satyr world, the heroic reveller, Heracles. It is all in keeping that he should arrive tired, should feast and drink and sing; should be suddenly sobered and should go forth to battle with Death. It is also in keeping that the contest should have a half-grotesque and half-ghastly touch, the grapple amid the graves and the cracking ribs.

* * * * *

So much for the traditional form. As for the subject, Euripides received it from Phrynichus, and doubtless from other sources. We cannot be sure of the exact form of the story in Phrynichus. But apparently it told how Admetus, King of Pherae in Thessaly, received from Apollo a special privilege which the God had obtained, in true Satyric style, by making the Three Fates drunk and cajoling them. This was that, when his appointed time for death came, he might escape if he could find some volunteer to die for him. His father and mother, from whom the service might have been expected, refused to perform it. His wife, Alcestis, though no blood relation, handsomely undertook it and died. But it so happened that Admetus had entertained in his house the demi-god, Heracles; and when Heracles heard what had happened, he went out and wrestled with Death, conquered him, and brought Alcestis home.

Given this form and this story, the next question is: What did Euripides make of them? The general answer is clear: he has applied his usual method. He accepts the story as given in the tradition, and then represents it in his own way. When the tradition in question is really heroic, we know what his way is. He preserves, and even emphasizes, the stateliness and formality of the

Attic stage conventions; but, in the meantime, he has subjected the story and its characters to a keener study and a more sensitive psychological judgment than the simple things were originally meant to bear. So that many characters which passed as heroic, or at least presentable, in the kindly remoteness of legend, reveal some strange weakness when brought suddenly into the light. When the tradition is Satyric, as here, the same process produces almost an opposite effect. It is somewhat as though the main plot of a gross and jolly farce were pondered over and made more true to human character till it emerged as a refined and rather pathetic comedy. The making drunk of the Three Grey Sisters disappears; one can only just see the trace of its having once been present. The revelling of Heracles is touched in with the lightest of hands; it is little more than symbolic. And all the figures in the story, instead of being left broadly comic or having their psychology neglected, are treated delicately, sympathetically, with just that faint touch of satire, or at least of amusement, which is almost inseparable from a close interest in character.

What was Admetus really like, this gallant prince who had won the affection of such great guests as Apollo and Heracles, and yet went round asking other people to die for him; who, in particular, accepted his wife's monstrous sacrifice with satisfaction and gratitude? The play portrays him well. Generous, innocent, artistic, affectionate, eloquent, impulsive, a good deal spoilt, unconsciously insincere, and no doubt fundamentally selfish, he hates the thought of dying and he hates losing his wife almost as much. Why need she die? Why could it not have been some one less important to him? He feels with emotion what a beautiful act it would have been for his old father. "My boy, you have a long and happy life before you, and for me the sands are well-nigh run out. Do not seek to dissuade me. I will die for you." Admetus could compose the speech for him. A touching scene, a noble farewell, and all the dreadful trouble solved--so conveniently solved! And the miserable self-blinded old man could not see it!

Euripides seems to have taken positive pleasure in Admetus, much as Meredith did in his famous Egoist; but Euripides all through is kinder to his victim than Meredith is. True, Admetus is put to obvious shame, publicly and helplessly. The Chorus make discreet comments upon him. The Handmaid is

outspoken about him. One feels that Alcestis herself, for all her tender kindness, has seen through him. Finally, to make things quite clear, his old father fights him openly, tells him home-truth upon home-truth, tears away all his protective screens, and leaves him with his self-respect in tatters. It is a fearful ordeal for Admetus, and, after his first fury, he takes it well. He comes back from his wife's burial a changed man. He says not much, but enough. "I have done wrong. I have only now learnt my lesson. I imagined I could save my happy life by forfeiting my honour; and the result is that I have lost both." I think that a careful reading of the play will show an almost continuous process of self-discovery and self-judgment in the mind of Admetus. He was a man who blinded himself with words and beautiful sentiments; but he was not thick-skinned or thick-witted. He was not a brute or a cynic. And I think he did learn his lesson ... not completely and for ever, but as well as most of us learn such lessons.

The beauty of Alcestis is quite untouched by the dramatist's keener analysis. The strong light only increases its effect. Yet she is not by any means a mere blameless ideal heroine; and the character which Euripides gives her makes an admirable foil to that of Admetus. Where he is passionate and romantic, she is simple and homely. While he is still refusing to admit the facts and beseeching her not to "desert" him, she in a gentle but businesslike way makes him promise to take care of the children and, above all things, not to marry again. She could not possibly trust Admetus's choice. She is sure that the step-mother would be unkind to the children. She might be a horror and beat them (l. 307). And when Admetus has made a thrilling answer about eternal sorrow, and the silencing of lyre and lute, and the statue who shall be his only bride, Alcestis earnestly calls the attention of witnesses to the fact that he has sworn not to marry again. She is not an artist like Admetus. There is poetry in her, because poetry comes unconsciously out of deep feeling, but there is no artistic eloquence. Her love, too, is quite different from his. To him, his love for his wife and children is a beautiful thing, a subject to speak and sing about as well as an emotion to feel. But her love is hardly conscious. She does not talk about it at all. She is merely wrapped up in the welfare of certain people, first her husband and then her children. To a modern romantic reader her insistence that her husband shall not marry again seems hardly delicate. But she does not think about romance or

delicacy. To her any neglect to ensure due protection for the children would be as unnatural as to refuse to die for her husband. Indeed, Professor J.L. Myres has suggested that care for the children's future is the guiding motive of her whole conduct. There was first the danger of their being left fatherless, a dire calamity in the heroic age. She could meet that danger by dying herself. Then followed the danger of a stepmother. She meets that by making Admetus swear never to marry. In the long run, I fancy, the effect of gracious loveliness which Alcestis certainly makes is not so much due to any words of her own as to what the Handmaid and the Serving Man say about her. In the final scene she is silent; necessarily and rightly silent, for all tradition knows that those new-risen from the dead must not speak. It will need a long *rite de passage* before she can freely commune with this world again. It is a strange and daring scene between the three of them; the humbled and broken-hearted husband; the triumphant Heracles, kindly and wise, yet still touched by the mocking and blustrous atmosphere from which he sprang; and the silent woman who has seen the other side of the grave. It was always her way to know things but not to speak of them.

The other characters fall easily into their niches. We have only to remember the old Satyric tradition and to look at them in the light of their historical development. Heracles indeed, half-way on his road from the roaring reveller of the Satyr-play to the suffering and erring deliverer of tragedy, is a little foreign to our notions, but quite intelligible and strangely attractive. The same historical method seems to me to solve most of the difficulties which have been felt about Admetus's hospitality. Heracles arrives at the castle just at the moment when Alcestis is lying dead in her room; Admetus conceals the death from him and insists on his coming in and enjoying himself. What are we to think of this behaviour? Is it magnificent hospitality, or is it gross want of tact? The answer, I think, is indicated above.

In the uncritical and boisterous atmosphere of the Satyr-play it was natural hospitality, not especially laudable or surprising. From the analogy of similar stories I suspect that Admetus originally did not know his guest, and received not so much the reward of exceptional virtue as the blessing naturally due to those who entertain angels unawares. If we insist on asking whether Euripides himself, in real life or in a play of his own free invention,

would have considered Admetus's conduct to Heracles entirely praiseworthy, the answer will certainly be No, but it will have little bearing on the play. In the *Alcestis*, as it stands, the famous act of hospitality is a datum of the story. Its claims are admitted on the strength of the tradition. It was the act for which Admetus was specially and marvellously rewarded; therefore, obviously, it was an act of exceptional merit and piety. Yet the admission is made with a smile, and more than one suggestion is allowed to float across the scene that in real life such conduct would be hardly wise.

Heracles, who rose to tragic rank from a very homely cycle of myth, was apt to bring other homely characters with him. He was a great killer not only of malefactors but of "kêres" or bogeys, such as "Old Age" and "Ague" and the sort of "Death" that we find in this play.

Thanatos is not a god, not at all a King of Terrors. One may compare him with the dancing skeleton who is called Death in mediaeval writings. When such a figure appears on the tragic stage one asks at once what relation he bears to Hades, the great Olympian king of the unseen. The answer is obvious. Thanatos is the servant of Hades, a "priest" or sacrificer, who is sent to fetch the appointed victims.

The other characters speak for themselves. Certainly Pheres can be trusted to do so, though we must remember that we see him at an unfortunate moment. The aged monarch is not at his best, except perhaps in mere fighting power. I doubt if he was really as cynical as he here professes to be.

* * * * *

In the above criticisms I feel that I may have done what critics are so apt to do. I have dwelt on questions of intellectual interest and perhaps thereby diverted attention from that quality in the play which is the most important as well as by far the hardest to convey; I mean the sheer beauty and delightfulness of the writing.

It is the earliest dated play of Euripides which has come down to us. True, he was over forty when he produced it, but it is noticeably different from the works of his old age. The numbers are smoother, the thought less deeply scarred, the language more charming and less passionate. If it be true that

poetry is bred out of joy and sorrow, one feels as if more enjoyment and less suffering had gone to the making of the *Alcestis* than to that of the later plays.

CHARACTERS OF THE PLAY

Admêtus, King of Pherae in Thessaly.

Alcestis, daughter of Pelias, his wife.

Pherês, his father, formerly King but now in retirement.

Two Children, his son and daughter.

A Manservant in his house.

A Handmaid.

The Hero Heracles.

The God Apollo.

Thanátos or Death.

Chorus, consisting of Elders of Pherae.

The play was first performed when Glaukînos was Archon, in the 2nd year of the 85th Olympiad (438 B.C.). Sophocles was first, Euripides second with the Cretan Women, Alcmaeon in Psophis, Telephus and Alcestis.... The play is somewhat Satyric in character.

ALCESTIS

The scene represents the ancient Castle of Admetus near Pherae in Thessaly. It is the dusk before dawn; Apollo, radiant in the darkness, looks at the Castle.

Apollo: Admetus' House! 'Twas here I bowed my head Of old, and chafed not at the bondman's bread, Though born in heaven. Aye, Zeus to death had hurled My son, Asclepius, Healer of the World, Piercing with fire his heart; and in mine ire I slew his Cyclop churls, who forged the fire. Whereat Zeus cast me forth to bear the yoke Of service to a mortal. To this folk I came, and watched a stranger's herd for pay, And all his house I have prospered to this day. For innocent was the Lord I chanced upon And clean as mine own heart, King Pheres' son, Admetus. Him I rescued from the grave, Beguiling the Grey Sisters till they gave A great oath that Admetus should go free, Would he but pay to Them Below in fee Another living soul. Long did he prove All that were his, and all that owed him love, But never a soul he found would yield up life And leave the sunlight for him, save his wife: Who, even now, down the long galleries Is borne, death-wounded; for this day it is She needs must pass out of the light and die. And, seeing the stain of death must not come nigh My radiance, I must leave this house I love. But ha! The Headsman of the Pit, above Earth's floor, to ravish her! Aye, long and late He hath watched, and cometh at the fall of fate.

Enter from the other side Thanatos; a crouching black-haired and winged figure, carrying a drawn sword. He starts in revulsion on seeing Apollo.

Thanatos: Aha! Why here? What mak'st thou at the gate, Thou Thing of Light? Wilt overtread The eternal judgment, and abate And spoil the portions of the dead? 'Tis not enough for thee to have blocked In other days Admetus' doom With craft of magic wine, which mocked The three grey Sisters of the Tomb; But now once more I see thee stand at watch, and shake That arrow-armed hand to make This woman thine, who swore, who swore, To die now for her husband's sake.

Apollo: Fear not. I bring fair words and seek but what is just.

Thanatos, *sneering* And if words help thee not, an arrow must?

Apollo: 'Tis ever my delight to bear this bow.

Thanatos: And aid this house unjustly? Aye, 'tis so.

Apollo: I love this man, and grieve for his dismay.

Thanatos: And now wilt rob me of my second prey!

Apollo: I never robbed thee, neither then nor now.

Thanatos: Why is Admetus here then, not below?

Apollo: He gave for ransom his own wife, for whom ...

Thanatos, *interrupting*. I am come; and straight will bear her to the tomb.

Apollo: Go, take her.--I can never move thine heart.

Thanatos, *mocking*. To slay the doomed?--Nay; I will do my part.

Apollo: No. To keep death for them that linger late.

Thanatos, *still mocking*. 'Twould please thee, so?... I owe thee homage great.

Apollo: Ah, then she may yet ... she may yet grow old?

Thanatos, *with a laugh*. No!... I too have my rights, and them I hold.

Apollo: 'Tis but one life thou gainest either-wise.

Thanatos: When young souls die, the richer is my prize.

Apollo: Old, with great riches they will bury her.

Thanatos: Fie on thee, fie! Thou rich-man's lawgiver!

Apollo: How? Is there wit in Death, who seemed so blind?

Thanatos: The rich would buy long life for all their kind.

Apollo: Thou will not grant me, then, this boon? 'Tis so?

Thanatos: Thou knowest me, what I am: I tell thee, no!

Apollo: I know gods sicken at thee and men pine.

Thanatos: Begone! Too many things not meant for thine Thy greed hath conquered; but not all, not all!

Apollo: I swear, for all thy bitter pride, a fall Awaits thee. One even now comes conquering Towards this house, sent by a southland king To fetch him four wild coursers, of the race Which rend men's bodies in the winds of Thrace. This house shall give him welcome good, and he Shall wrest this woman from thy worms and thee. So thou shalt give me all, and thereby win But hatred, not the grace that might have been.

Exit Apollo.

Thanatos: Talk on, talk on! Thy threats shall win no bride From me.--This woman, whatso'er betide, Shall lie in Hades' house. Even at the word I go to lay upon her hair my sword. For all whose head this grey sword visiteth To death are hallowed and the Lords of death.

Thanatos goes into the house. Presently, as the day grows lighter, the Chorus enters: it consists of Citizens of Pherae, who speak severally.

Chorus:

Leader: Quiet, quiet, above, beneath!

Second Elder: The house of Admetus holds its breath.

Third Elder: And never a King's friend near, To tell us either of tears to shed For Pelias' daughter, crowned and dead; Or joy, that her eyes are clear. Bravest, truest of wives is she That I have seen or the world shall see.

Divers Citizens, conversing. The dash -- indicates a new speaker.

--Hear ye no sob, or noise of hands Beating the breast? No mourners' cries For one they cannot save? --Nothing: and at the door there stands No handmaid.--Help, O Paian; rise, O star beyond the wave!

--Dead, and this quiet? No, it cannot be. --Dead, dead!--Not gone to burial secretly!

--Why? I still fear: what makes your speech so brave? --Admetus cast that dear wife to the grave Alone, with none to see?

--I see no bowl of clear spring water. It ever stands before the dread Door where a dead man rests. --No lock of shorn hair! Every daughter Of woman shears it for the dead. No sound of bruised breasts!

--Yet 'tis this very day ...--This very day? --The Queen should pass and lie beneath the clay. --It hurts my life, my heart!--All honest hearts Must sorrow for a brightness that departs, A good life worn away.

Leader: To wander o'er leagues of land, To search over wastes of sea, Where the Prophets of Lycia stand, Or where Ammon's daughters three Make runes in the rainless sand, For magic to make her free-- Ah, vain! for the end is here; Sudden it comes and sheer. What lamb on the altar-strand Stricken shall comfort me?

Second Elder: Only, only one, I know: Apollo's son was he, Who healed men long ago. Were he but on earth to see, She would rise from the dark below And the gates of eternity. For men whom the Gods had slain He pitied and raised again; Till God's fire laid him low, And now, what help have we?

Others: All's done that can be. Every vow Full paid; and every altar's brow Full crowned with spice of sacrifice. No help remains nor respite now.

Enter from the Castle a Handmaid, almost in tears.

Leader: But see, a handmaid cometh, and the tear Wet on her cheek! What tidings shall we hear?... Thy grief is natural, daughter, if some ill Hath fallen to-day. Say, is she living still Or dead, your mistress? Speak, if speak you may.

Maid: Alive. No, dead.... Oh, read it either way.

Leader: Nay, daughter, can the same soul live and die?

Maid: Her life is broken; death is in her eye.

Leader: Poor King, to think what she was, and what thou!

Maid: He never knew her worth.... He will know it now.

Leader: There is no hope, methinks, to save her still?

Maid: The hour is come, and breaks all human will.

Leader: She hath such tendance as the dying crave?

Maid: For sure: and rich robes ready for her grave.

Leader: 'Fore God, she dies high-hearted, aye, and far In honour raised above all wives that are!

Maid: Far above all! How other? What must she, Who seeketh to surpass this woman, be? Or how could any wife more shining make Her lord's love, than by dying for his sake? But thus much all the city knows. 'Tis here, In her own rooms, the tale will touch thine ear With strangeness. When she knew the day was come, She rose and washed her body, white as foam, With running water; then the cedarn press She opened, and took forth her funeral dress And rich adornment. So she stood arrayed Before the Hearth-Fire of her home, and prayed: "Mother, since I must vanish from the day, This last, last time I kneel to thee and pray; Be mother to my two children! Find some dear Helpmate for him, some gentle lord for her. And let not them, like me, before their hour Die; let them live in happiness, in our Old home, till life be full and age content." To every household altar then she went And made for each his garland of the green Boughs of the wind-blown myrtle, and was seen Praying, without a sob, without a tear. She knew the dread thing coming, but her clear Cheek never changed: till suddenly she fled Back to her own chamber and bridal bed: Then came the tears and she spoke all her thought. "O bed, whereon my laughing girlhood's knot Was severed by this man, for whom I die, Farewell! 'Tis thou ... I speak not bitterly.... 'Tis thou hast slain me. All alone I go Lest I be false to him or thee. And lo, Some woman shall lie here instead of me-- Happier perhaps; more true she cannot be." She kissed the pillow as she knelt, and wet With flooding tears was that fair coverlet. At last she had had her fill of weeping; then She tore herself away, and rose again, Walking with downcast eyes; yet turned before She had left the room, and cast her down once more Kneeling beside the bed. Then to her side The children came, and clung to her and cried, And her arms hugged them, and a long good-bye She gave to each, like one who goes to die. The whole house then was weeping, every slave In sorrow for his mistress. And she gave Her hand to all; aye, none so base was there She

gave him not good words and he to her. So on Admetus falls from either side Sorrow. 'Twere bitter grief to him to have died Himself; and being escaped, how sore a woe He hath earned instead--Ah, some day he shall know!

Leader: Surely Admetus suffers, even to-day, For this true-hearted love he hath cast away?

Maid: He weeps; begs her not leave him desolate, And holds her to his heart--too late, too late! She is sinking now, and there, beneath his eye Fading, the poor cold hand falls languidly, And faint is all her breath. Yet still she fain Would look once on the sunlight--once again And never more. I will go in and tell Thy presence. Few there be, will serve so well My master and stand by him to the end. But thou hast been from olden days our friend. *The Maid goes in.*

Chorus:

Third Elder: O Zeus, What escape and where From the evil thing? How break the snare That is round our King?

Second Elder: Ah list! One cometh?... No. Let us no more wait; Make dark our raiment And shear this hair.

Leader: Aye, friends! 'Tis so, even so. Yet the gods are great And may send allayment. To prayer, to prayer!

All, praying. O Paian wise! Some healing of this home devise, devise! Find, find.... Oh, long ago when we were blind Thine eyes saw mercy ... find some healing breath! Again, O Paian, break the chains that bind; Stay the red hand of Death!

Leader: Alas! What shame, what dread, Thou Pheres' son, Shalt be harvested When thy wife is gone!

Second Elder: Ah me; For a deed less drear Than this thou ruest Men have died for sorrow; Aye, hearts have bled.

Third Elder: Tis she; Not as men say dear, But the dearest, truest, Shall lie ere morrow Before thee dead!

All: But lo! Once more! She and her husband moving to the door! Cry, cry!
And thou, O land of Pherae, hearken! The bravest of women sinketh,
perisheth, Under the green earth, down where the shadows darken, Down
to the House of Death!

During the last words Admetus and Alcestis have entered. Alcestis is supported by her Handmaids and followed by her two children.

Leader: And who hath said that Love shall bring More joy to man than fear
and strife? I knew his perils from of old, I know them now, when I behold
The bitter faring of my King, Whose love is taken, and his life Left evermore
an empty thing.

Alcestis: O Sun, O light of the day that falls! O running cloud that races along
the sky!

Admetus: They look on thee and me, a stricken twain, Who have wrought no
sin that God should have thee slain.

Alcestis: Dear Earth, and House of sheltering walls, And wedded homes of
the land where my fathers lie!

Admetus: Fail not, my hapless one. Be strong, and pray The o'er-mastering
Gods to hate us not alway.

Alcestis, faintly, her mind wandering. A boat two-oared, upon water; I see, I
see. And the Ferryman of the Dead, His hand that hangs on the pole, his
voice that cries; "Thou lingerest; come. Come quickly, we wait for thee." He
is angry that I am slow; he shakes his head.

Admetus: Alas, a bitter boat-faring for me, My bride ill-starred.--Oh, this is
misery!

Alcestis, as before. Drawing, drawing! 'Tis some one that draweth me ... To
the Palaces of the Dead. So dark. The wings, the eyebrows and ah, the
eyes!... Go back! God's mercy! What seekest thou? Let me be!...
Recovering Where am I? Ah, and what paths are these I tread?

Admetus: Grievous for all who love thee, but for me And my two babes
most hard, most solitary.

Alcestis: Hold me not; let me lie.-- I am too weak to stand; and Death is near, And a slow darkness stealing on my sight. My little ones, good-bye. Soon, soon, and mother will be no more here.... Good-bye, two happy children in the light.

Admetus: Oh, word of pain, oh, sharper ache Than any death of mine had brought! For the Gods' sake, desert me not, For thine own desolate children's sake. Nay, up! Be brave. For if they rend Thee from me, I can draw no breath; In thy hand are my life and death, Thine, my beloved and my friend!

Alcestis: Admetus, seeing what way my fortunes lie, I fain would speak with thee before I die. I have set thee before all things; yea, mine own Life beside thine was naught. For this alone I die.... Dear Lord, I never need have died. I might have lived to wed some prince of pride, Dwell in a king's house.... Nay, how could I, torn From thee, live on, I and my babes forlorn? I have given to thee my youth--not more nor less, But all--though I was full of happiness. Thy father and mother both--'tis strange to tell-- Had failed thee, though for them the deed was well, The years were ripe, to die and save their son, The one child of the house: for hope was none, If thou shouldst pass away, of other heirs. So thou and I had lived through the long years, Both. Thou hadst not lain sobbing here alone For a dead wife and orphan babes.... 'Tis done Now, and some God hath wrought out all his will. Howbeit I now will ask thee to fulfill One great return-gift--not so great withal As I have given, for life is more than all; But just and due, as thine own heart will tell. For thou hast loved our little ones as well As I have.... Keep them to be masters here In my old house; and bring no stepmother Upon them. She might hate them. She might be Some baser woman, not a queen like me, And strike them with her hand. For mercy, spare Our little ones that wrong. It is my prayer.... They come into a house: they are all strife And hate to any child of the dead wife.... Better a serpent than a stepmother! A boy is safe. He has his father there To guard him. But a Little Girl! *Taking the Little Girl to her* What good And gentle care will guide thy maidenhood? What woman wilt thou find at father's side? One evil word from her, just when the tide Of youth is full, would wreck thy hope of love. And no more mother near, to stand above Thy marriage-bed, nor comfort thee pain-tossed In travail, when one needs a

mother most! Seeing I must die.... 'Tis here, across my way, Not for the morrow, not for the third day, But now--Death, and to lie with things that were. Farewell. God keep you happy.--Husband dear, Remember that I failed thee not; and you, My children, that your mother loved you true.

Leader: Take comfort. Ere thy lord can speak, I swear, If truth is in him, he will grant thy prayer.

Admetus: He will, he will! Oh, never fear for me. Mine hast thou been, and mine shalt ever be, Living and dead, thou only. None in wide Hellas but thou shalt be Admetus' bride. No race so high, no face so magic-sweet Shall ever from this purpose turn my feet. And children ... if God grant me joy of these, 'Tis all I ask; of thee no joy nor ease He gave me. And thy mourning I will bear Not one year of my life but every year, While life shall last.... My mother I will know No more. My father shall be held my foe. They brought the words of love but not the deed, While thou hast given thine all, and in my need Saved me. What can I do but weep alone, Alone always, when such a wife is gone?... An end shall be of revel, and an end Of crowns and song and mirth of friend with friend, Wherewith my house was glad. I ne'er again Will touch the lute nor ease my heart from pain With pipes of Afric. All the joys I knew, And joys were many, thou hast broken in two. Oh, I will find some artist wondrous wise Shall mould for me thy shape, thine hair, thine eyes, And lay it in thy bed; and I will lie Close, and reach out mine arms to thee, and cry Thy name into the night, and wait and hear My own heart breathe: "Thy love, thy love is near." A cold delight; yet it might ease the sum Of sorrow.... And good dreams of thee will come Like balm. 'Tis sweet, even in a dream, to gaze On a dear face, the moment that it stays. O God, if Orpheus' voice were mine, to sing To Death's high Virgin and the Virgin's King, Till their hearts failed them, down would I my path Cleave, and naught stay me, not the Hound of Wrath, Not the grey oarsman of the ghostly tide, Till back to sunlight I had borne my bride. But now, wife, wait for me till I shall come Where thou art, and prepare our second home. These ministers in that same cedar sweet Where thou art laid will lay me, feet to feet, And head to head, oh, not in death from thee Divided, who alone art true to me!

Leader: This life-long sorrow thou hast sworn, I too, Thy friend, will bear with thee. It is her due.

Alcestis: Children, ye heard his promise? He will wed No other woman nor forget the dead.

Admetus: Again I promise. So it shall be done.

Alcestis, *giving the children into his arms one after the other.* On that oath take my daughter: and my son.

Admetus: Dear hand that gives, I accept both gift and vow.

Alcestis: Thou, in my place, must be their mother now.

Admetus: Else were they motherless--I needs must try.

Alcestis: My babes, I ought to live, and lo, I die.

Admetus: And how can I, forlorn of thee, live on?

Alcestis: Time healeth; and the dead are dead and gone.

Admetus: Oh, take me with thee to the dark below, Me also!

Alcestis: 'Tis enough that one should go.

Admetus: O Fate, to have cheated me of one so true!

Alcestis, *her strength failing.* There comes a darkness: a great burden, too.

Admetus: I am lost if thou wilt leave me.... Wife! Mine own!

Alcestis: I am not thy wife; I am nothing. All is gone.

Admetus: Thy babes! Thou wilt not leave them.--Raise thine eye.

Alcestis: I am sorry.... But good-bye, children; good-bye.

Admetus: Look at them! Wake and look at them!

Alcestis: I must go.

Admetus: What? Dying!

Alcestis: Farewell, husband! *She dies.*

Admetus, *with a cry.* Ah!... Woe, woe!

Leader: Admetus' Queen is dead!

While Admetus is weeping silently, and the Chorus veil their faces, the Little Boy runs up to his dead Mother.

Little Boy: Oh, what has happened? Mummy has gone away, And left me and will not come back any more! Father, I shall be lonely all the day.... Look! Look! Her eyes ... and her arms not like before, How they lie ... Mother! Oh, speak a word! Answer me, answer me, Mother! It is I. I am touching your face. It is I, your little bird.

Admetus, *recovering himself and going to the Child.* She hears us not, she sees us not. We lie Under a heavy grief, child, thou and I.

Little Boy: I am so little, Father, and lonely and cold Here without Mother. It is too hard.... And you, Poor little sister, too. Oh, Father! Such a little time we had her. She might have stayed On till we all were old.... Everything is spoiled when Mother is dead.

The Little Boy is taken away, with his Sister, sobbing.

Leader: My King, thou needs must gird thee to the worst. Thou shalt not be the last, nor yet the first, To lose a noble wife. Be brave, and know To die is but a debt that all men owe.

Admetus: I know. It came not without doubts and fears, This thing. The thought hath poisoned all my years. Howbeit, I now will make the burial due To this dead Queen. Be assembled, all of you; And, after, raise your triumph-song to greet This pitiless Power that yawns beneath our feet. Meantime let all in Thessaly who dread My sceptre join in mourning for the dead With temples sorrow-shorn and sable weed. Ye chariot-lords, ye spurrers of the steed, Shear close your horses' manes! Let there be found Through all my realm no lute, nor lyre, nor sound Of piping, till twelve moons are at an end. For never shall I lose a closer friend, Nor braver in my need. And worthy is she Of honour, who alone hath died for me.

The body of Alcestis is carried into the house by mourners; Admetus follows it.

Chorus: Daughter of Pelias, fare thee well, May joy be thine in the Sunless Houses! For thine is a deed which the Dead shall tell Where a King black-

browed in the gloom carouses; And the cold grey hand at the helm and oar
Which guideth shadows from shore to shore, Shall bear this day o'er the
Tears that Well, A Queen of women, a spouse of spouses.

Minstrels many shall praise thy name With lyre full-strung and with voices
lyreless, When Mid-Moon riseth, an orbèd flame, And from dusk to dawning
the dance is tireless; And Carnos cometh to Sparta's call, And Athens shineth
in festival; For thy death is a song, and a fullness of fame, Till the heart of the
singer is left desireless.

Leader: Would I could reach thee, oh, Reach thee and save, my daughter,
Starward from gulfs of Hell, Past gates, past tears that swell, Where the
weak oar climbs thro' The night and the water!

Second Elder: Belovèd and lonely one, Who feared not dying: Gone in
another's stead Alone to the hungry dead: Light be the carven stone Above
thee lying!

Third Elder: Oh, he who should seek again A new bride after thee, Were
loathed of thy children twain, And loathed of me.

Leader: Word to his mother sped, Praying to her who bore him; Word to his
father, old, Heavy with years and cold; "Quick, ere your son be dead! What
dare ye for him?"

Second Elder: Old, and they dared not; grey, And they helped him never!
'Twas she, in her youth and pride, Rose up for her lord and died. Oh, love of
two hearts that stay One-knit for ever....

Third Elder: 'Tis rare in the world! God send Such bride in my house to be;
She should live life to the end, Not fail through me.

*As the song ceases there enters a stranger, walking strongly, but travel-
stained, dusty, and tired. His lion-skin and club show him to be Heracles.*

Heracles: Ho, countrymen! To Pherae am I come By now? And is Admetus in
his home?

Leader: Our King is in his house, Lord Heracles.-- But say, what need brings
thee in days like these To Thessaly and Pherae's wallèd ring?

Heracles: A quest I follow for the Argive King.

Leader: What prize doth call thee, and to what far place?

Heracles: The horses of one Diomedes, in Thrace.

Leader: But how...? Thou know'st not? Is he strange to thee?

Heracles: Quite strange. I ne'er set foot in Bistony.

Leader: Not without battle shalt thou win those steeds.

Heracles: So be it! I cannot fail my master's needs.

Leader: 'Tis slay or die, win or return no more.

Heracles: Well, I have looked on peril's face before.

Leader: What profit hast thou in such manslaying?

Heracles: I shall bring back the horses to my King.

Leader: 'Twere none such easy work to bridle them.

Heracles: Not easy? Have they nostrils breathing flame?

Leader: They tear men's flesh; their jaws are swift with blood.

Heracles: Men's flesh! 'Tis mountain wolves', not horses' food!

Leader: Thou wilt see their mangers clogged with blood, like mire.

Heracles: And he who feeds such beasts, who was his sire?

Leader: Ares, the war-lord of the Golden Targe.

Heracles: Enough!--This labour fitteth well my large Fortune, still upward, still against the wind. How often with these kings of Ares' kind Must I do battle? First the dark wolf-man, Lycaon; then 'twas he men called The Swan; And now this man of steeds!... Well, none shall see Alcmena's son turn from his enemy.

Leader: Lo, as we speak, this land's high governor, Admetus, cometh from his castle door.

Enter Admetus from the Castle.

Admetus: Zeus-born of Perseid line, all joy to thee!

Heracles: Joy to Admetus, Lord of Thessaly!

Admetus: Right welcome were she!--But thy love I know.

Heracles: But why this mourning hair, this garb of woe?

Admetus, in a comparatively light tone. There is a burial I must make to-day.

Heracles: God keep all evil from thy children!

Admetus: Nay, My children live.

Heracles: Thy father, if 'tis he, Is ripe in years.

Admetus: He liveth, friend, and she Who bore me.

Heracles: Surely not thy wife? 'Tis not Alcestis?

Admetus, his composure a little shaken. Ah; two answers share my thought,
Questioned of her.

Heracles: Is she alive or dead?

Admetus: She is, and is not; and my heart hath bled Long years for her.

Heracles: I understand no more. Thy words are riddles.

Admetus: Heard'st thou not of yore The doom that she must meet?

Heracles: I know thy wife Has sworn to die for thee.

Admetus: And is it life, To live with such an oath hung o'er her head?

Heracles, relieved. Ah, Weep not too soon, friend. Wait till she be dead.

Admetus: He dies who is doomed to die; he is dead who dies.

Heracles: The two are different things in most men's eyes.

Admetus: Decide thy way, lord, and let me decide The other way.

Heracles: Who is it that has died? Thou weapest.

Admetus: 'Tis a woman. It doth take My memory back to her of whom we spake.

Heracles: A stranger, or of kin to thee?

Admetus: Not kin, But much beloved.

Heracles: How came she to be in Thy house to die?

Admetus: Her father died, and so She came to us, an orphan, long ago.

Heracles, as though about to depart. 'Tis sad. I would I had found thee on a happier day.

Admetus: Thy words have some intent: what wouldst thou say?

Heracles: I must find harbour with some other friend.

Admetus: My prince, it may not be! God never send Such evil!

Heracles: 'Tis great turmoil, when a guest Comes to a mourning house.

Admetus: Come in and rest. Let the dead die!

Heracles: I cannot, for mere shame, Feast beside men whose eyes have tears in them.

Admetus: The guest-rooms are apart where thou shalt be.

Heracles: Friend, let me go. I shall go gratefully.

Admetus: Thou shalt not enter any door but mine. *To an Attendant* Lead in our guest. Unlock the furthest line Of guest-chambers; and bid the stewards there Make ready a full feast; then close with care The midway doors. 'Tis unmeet, if he hears Our turmoil or is burdened with our tears.

The Attendant leads Heracles into the house.

Leader: How, master? When within a thing so sad Lies, thou wilt house a stranger? Art thou mad?

Admetus: And had I turned the stranger from my door, Who sought my shelter, hadst thou praised me more? I trow not, if my sorrow were thereby

No whit less, only the more friendless I. And more, when bards tell tales,
were it not worse My house should lie beneath the stranger's curse? Now he
is my sure friend, if e'er I stand Lonely in Argos, in a thirsty land.

Leader: Thou callest him thy friend; how didst thou dare Keep hid from him
the burden of thy care?

Admetus: He never would have entered, had he known My grief.--Aye, men
may mock what I have done, And call me fool. My house hath never learned
To fail its friend, nor seen the stranger spurned.

Admetus goes into the house

Chorus: Oh, a House that loves the stranger, And a House for ever free! And
Apollo, the Song-changer, Was a herdsman in thy fee; Yea, a-piping he was
found, Where the upward valleys wound, To the kine from out the manger
And the sheep from off the lea, And love was upon Othrys at the sound.

And from deep glens un beholden Of the forest to his song There came
lynxes streaky-golden, There came lions in a throng, Tawny-coated, ruddy-
eyed, To that piper in his pride; And shy fawns he would embolden, Dappled
dancers, out along The shadow by the pine-tree's side.

And those magic pipes a-blowing Have fulfilled thee in thy reign By thy Lake
with honey flowing, By thy sheepfolds and thy grain; Where the Sun turns
his steeds To the twilight, all the meads Of Molossus know thy sowing And
thy ploughs upon the plain. Yea, and eastward thou art free To the portals
of the sea, And Pelion, the unharboured, is but minister to thee.

He hath opened wide his dwelling To the stranger, though his ruth For the
dead was fresh and welling, For the loved one of his youth. Tis the brave
heart's cry: "I will fail not, though I die!" Doth it win, with no man's telling,
Some high vision of the truth? We may marvel. Yet I trust, When man
seeketh to be just And to pity them that wander, God will raise him from the
dust.

*As the song ceases the doors are thrown open and Admetus comes before
them: a great funeral procession is seen moving out.*

Admetus: Most gentle citizens, our dead is here Made ready; and these youths to bear the bier Uplifted to the grave-mound and the urn. Now, seeing she goes forth never to return, Bid her your last farewell, as mourners may.

The procession moves forward, past him.

Leader: Nay, lord; thy father, walking old and grey; And followers bearing burial gifts and brave Gauds, which men call the comfort of the grave.

Enter Pheres with followers bearing robes and gifts.

Pheres: I come in sorrow for thy sorrow, son. A faithful wife indeed thou hast lost, and one Who ruled her heart. But, howso hard they be, We needs must bear these griefs.--Some gifts for thee Are here.... Yes; take them. Let them go beneath The sod. We both must honour her in death, Seeing she hath died, my son, that thou mayst live Nor I be childless. Aye, she would not give My soul to a sad old age, mourning for thee. Methinks she hath made all women's life to be A nobler thing, by one great woman's deed. Thou saviour of my son, thou staff in need To our wrecked age, farewell! May some good life Be thine still in the grave.--Oh, 'tis a wife Like this man needs; else let him stay unwed!

The old man has not noticed Admetus's gathering indignation.

Admetus: I called not thee to burial of my dead, Nor count thy presence here a welcome thing. My wife shall wear no robe that thou canst bring, Nor needs thy help in aught. There was a day We craved thy love, when I was on my way Deathward--thy love, which bade thee stand aside And watch, grey-bearded, while a young man died! And now wilt mourn for her? Thy fatherhood! Thou wast no true begetter of my blood, Nor she my mother who dares call me child. Oh, she was barren ever; she beguiled Thy folly with some bastard of a thrall. Here is thy proof! This hour hath shown me all Thou art; and now I am no more thy son. Fore God, among all cowards can scarce be one Like thee. So grey, so near the boundary Of mortal life, thou wouldst not, durst not, die To save thy son! Thou hast suffered her to do Thine office, her, no kin to me nor you, Yet more than kin! Henceforth she hath all the part Of mother, yea, and father in my heart. And what a glory had been

thine that day, Dying to save thy son--when, either way, Thy time must needs be brief. Thy life has had Abundance of the things that make men glad; A crown that came to thee in youth; a son To do thee worship and maintain thy throne-- Not like a childless king, whose folk and lands Lie helpless, to be torn by strangers' hands. Wilt say I failed in duty to thine age; For that thou hast let me die? Not so; most sage, Most pious I was, to mother and to thee; And thus ye have paid me! Well, I counsel ye. Lose no more time. Get quick another son To foster thy last years, to lay thee on Thy bier, when dead, and wrap thee in thy pall. *I will not bury thee.* I am, for all The care thou hast shown me, dead. If I have found Another, true to save me at the bound Of life and death, that other's child am I, That other's fostering friend, until I die. How falsely do these old men pray for death, Cursing their weight of years, their weary breath! When Death comes close, there is not one that dares To die; age is forgot and all its cares.

Leader: Oh, peace! Enough of sorrow in our path Is strewn. Thou son, stir not thy father's wrath.

Pheres: My son, whom seekest thou ... some Lydian thrall, Or Phrygian, bought with cash?... to affright withal By cursing? I am a Thessalian, free, My father a born chief of Thessaly; And thou most insolent. Yet think not so To fling thy loud lewd words at me and go. I got thee to succeed me in my hall, I have fed thee, clad thee. But I have no call To die for thee. Not in our family, Not in all Greece, doth law bid fathers die To save their sons. Thy road of life is thine None other's, to rejoice at or repine. All that was owed to thee by us is paid. My throne is thine. My broad lands shall be made Thine, as I had them from my father.... Say, How have I wronged thee? What have I kept away? "Not died for thee?" ... I ask not thee to die. Thou lovest this light: shall I not love it, I?... 'Tis age on age there, in the dark; and here My sunlit time is short, but dear; but dear. Thou hast fought hard enough. Thou drawest breath Even now, long past thy portioned hour of death, By murdering her ... and blamest my faint heart, Coward, who hast let a woman play thy part And die to save her pretty soldier! Aye, A good plan, surely! Thou needst never die; Thou canst find alway somewhere some fond wife To die for thee. But, prithee, make not strife With other friends, who will not save thee so.

Be silent, loving thine own life, and know All men love theirs!... Taunt others, and thou too Shalt hear much that is bitter, and is true.

Leader: Too much of wrath before, too much hath run After. Old man, cease to revile thy son.

Admetus: Speak on. I have spoken.... If my truth of tongue Gives pain to thee, why didst thou do me wrong?

Pheres: Wrong? To have died for thee were far more wrong.

Admetus: How can an old life weigh against a young?

Pheres: Man hath but one, not two lives, to his use.

Admetus: Oh, live on; live, and grow more old than Zeus!

Pheres: Because none wrongs thee, thou must curse thy sire?

Admetus: I blest him. Is not life his one desire?

Pheres: This dead, methinks, is lying in thy place.

Admetus: A proof, old traitor, of thy cowardliness!

Pheres: Died she through me?... That thou wilt hardly say.

Admetus, *almost breaking down.* O God! Mayst thou but feel the need of me some day!

Pheres: Go forward; woo more wives that more may die.

Admetus: As thou wouldst not! Thine is the infamy.

Pheres: This light of heaven is sweet, and sweet again.

Admetus: Thy heart is foul. A thing unmeet for men.

Pheres: Thou laugh'st not yet across the old man's tomb.

Admetus: Dishonoured thou shalt die when death shall come.

Pheres: Once dead, I shall not care what tales are told.

Admetus: Great Gods, so lost to honour and so old!

Pheres: She was not lost to honour: she was blind.

Admetus: Go! Leave me with my dead.... Out from my mind!

Pheres: I go. Bury the woman thou hast slain.... Her kinsmen yet may come to thee with plain Question. Acastus hath small place in good Men, if he care not for his sister's blood.

Pheres goes off, with his Attendants. Admetus calls after him as he goes.

Admetus: Begone, begone, thou and thy bitter mate! Be old and childless-- ye have earned your fate-- While your son lives! For never shall ye be From henceforth under the same roof with me.... Must I send heralds and a trumpet's call To abjure thy blood? Fear not, I will send them all....

Pheres is now out of sight; Admetus drops his defiance and seems like a broken man.

But we--our sorrow is upon us; come With me, and let us bear her to the tomb.

Chorus: Ah me! Farewell, unflinchingly brave! Farewell, thou generous heart and true! May Pluto give thee welcome due, And Hermes love thee in the grave. Whate'er of blessed life there be For high souls to the darkness flown, Be thine for ever, and a throne Beside the crowned Persephonê.

The funeral procession has formed and moves slowly out, followed by Admetus and the Chorus. The stage is left empty, till a side door of the Castle opens and there comes out a Servant, angry and almost in tears.

Servant: Full many a stranger and from many a land Hath lodged in this old castle, and my hand Served them; but never has there passed this way A scurvier ruffian than our guest to-day. He saw my master's grief, but all the more In he must come, and shoulders through the door. And after, think you he would mannerly Take what was set before him? No, not he! If, on this day of trouble, we left out Some small thing, he must have it with a shout. Up, in both hands, our vat of ivy-wood He raised, and drank the dark grape's burning blood, Strong and untempered, till the fire was red Within him; then put myrtle round his head And roared some noisy song. So had we there Discordant music. He, without a care For all the affliction of Admetus' halls,

Sang on; and, listening, one could hear the thralls
 In the long gallery weeping for the dead. We let him see no tears. Our master made
 That order, that the stranger must not know. So here I wait in her own house, and do
 Service to some black thief, some man of prey; And she has gone, has gone
 for ever away. I never followed her, nor lifted high My hand to bless her;
 never said good-bye.... I loved her like my mother. So did all The slaves. She
 never let his anger fall Too hard. She saved us alway....And this wild beast
 Comes in our sorrow when we need him least!

During the last few lines Heracles has entered, unperceived by the Servant. He has evidently bathed and changed his garments and drunk his fill, and is now revelling, a garland of flowers on his head. He frightens the Servant a little from time to time during the following speech.

Heracles: Friend, why so solemn and so cranky-eyed? 'Tis not a henchman's office, to show pride To his betters. He should smile and make good cheer. There comes a guest, thy lord's old comrade, here; And thou art all knitted eyebrows, scowls and head Bent, because somebody, forsooth, is dead! Come close! I mean to make thee wiser.

The Servant reluctantly comes close.

So. Dost comprehend things mortal, how they grow?... 'To himself *I suppose not. How could he?...* Look this way! Death is a debt all mortal men must pay; Aye, there is no man living who can say If life will last him yet a single day. On, to the dark, drives Fortune; and no force Can wrest her secret nor put back her course.... I have told thee now. I have taught thee. After this Eat, drink, make thyself merry. Count the bliss Of the one passing hour thine own; the rest Is Fortune's. And give honour chiefliest To our lady Cypris, giver of all joys To man. 'Tis a sweet goddess. Otherwise, Let all these questions sleep and just obey My counsel.... Thou believest all I say? I hope so.... Let this stupid grieving be; Rise up above thy troubles, and with me Drink in a cloud of blossoms. By my soul, I vow the sweet plash-music of the bowl Will break thy glumness, loose thee from the frown Within. Let mortal man keep to his own Mortality, and not expect too much. To all your solemn dogs and other such Scowlers--I tell thee truth, no more nor less-- Life is not life, but just unhappiness.

He offers the wine-bowl to the Servant, who avoids it.

Servant: We know all this. But now our fortunes be Not such as ask for mirth or revelry.

Heracles: A woman dead, of no one's kin; why grieve So much? Thy master and thy mistress live.

Servant: Live? Man, hast thou heard nothing of our woe?

Heracles: Yes, thy lord told me all I need to know.

Servant: He is too kind to his guests, more kind than wise.

Heracles: Must I go starved because some stranger dies?

Servant: Some stranger?--Yes, a stranger verily!

Heracles, his manner beginning to change. Is this some real grief he hath hid from me?

Servant: Go, drink, man! Leave to us our master's woes.

Heracles: It sounds not like a stranger. Yet, God knows...

Servant: How should thy revelling hurt, if that were all?

Heracles: Hath mine own friend so wronged me in his hall?

Servant: Thou camest at an hour when none was free To accept thee. We were mourning. Thou canst see Our hair, black robes...

Heracles, suddenly, in a voice of thunder. Who is it that is dead?

Servant: Alcestis, the King's wife.

Heracles, overcome. What hast thou said? Alcestis?... And ye feasted me withal!

Servant: He held it shame to turn thee from his hall.

Heracles: Shame! And when such a wondrous wife was gone!

Servant, breaking into tears. Oh, all is gone, all lost, not she alone!

Heracles: I knew, I felt it, when I saw his tears, And face, and shorn hair. But he won mine ears With talk of the strange woman and her rite Of burial. So in mine own heart's despite I crossed his threshold and sat drinking--he And I old friends!--in his calamity. Drank, and sang songs, and revelled, my head hot With wine and flowers!... And thou to tell me not, When all the house lay filled with sorrow, thou! *A pause; then suddenly* Where lies the tomb?--Where shall I find her now?

Servant, frightened. Close by the straight Larissa road. The tall White marble showeth from the castle wall.

Heracles: O heart, O hand, great doings have ye done Of old: up now, and show them what a son Took life that hour, when she of Tiryns' sod, Electryon's daughter, mingled with her God! I needs must save this woman from the shore Of death and set her in her house once more, Repaying Admetus' love.... This Death, this black And wingèd Lord of corpses, I will track Home. I shall surely find him by the grave A-hungered, lapping the hot blood they gave In sacrifice. An ambush: then, one spring, One grip! These arms shall be a brazen ring, With no escape, no rest, howe'er he whine And curse his mauled ribs, till the Queen is mine! Or if he escape me, if he come not there To seek the blood of offering, I will fare Down to the Houses without Light, and bring To Her we name not and her nameless King Strong prayers, until they yield to me and send Alcestis home, to life and to my friend: Who gave me shelter, drove me not away In his great grief, but hid his evil day Like a brave man, because he loved me well. Is one in all this land more hospitable, One in all Greece? I swear no man shall say He hath cast his love upon a churl away!

He goes forth, just as he is, in the direction of the grave. The Servant watches a moment and goes back into the hall.

The stage is empty; then Admetus and the Chorus return.

Admetus: Alas! Bitter the homeward way, Bitter to seek A widowed house; ah me, Where should I fly or stay, Be dumb or speak? Would I could cease to be!

Despair, despair! My mother bore me under an evil star. I envy them that are perished; my heart is there. It dwells in the Sunless Houses, afar, afar.

I take no joy in looking upon the light; No joy in the feel of the earth beneath my tread. The Slayer hath taken his hostage; the Lord of the Dead Holdeth me sworn to taste no more delight.

He throws himself on the ground in despair.

Chorus: *Each member of the Chorus speaks his line severally, as he passes Admetus, who is heard sobbing at the end of each line.*

--Advance, advance; Till the house shall give thee cover. --Thou hast borne heavy things And meet for lamentation. --Thou hast passed, hast passed, Thro' the deepest of the River. --Yet no help comes To the sad and silent nation. --And the face of thy beloved, it shall meet thee never, never!

Admetus: Ye wrench my wounds asunder. Where Is grief like mine, whose wife is dead? My wife, whom would I ne'er had wed, Nor loved, nor held my house with her....

Blessed are they who dare to dwell Unloved of woman! 'Tis but one Heart that they bleed with, and alone Can bear their one life's burden well.

No young shall wither at their side, No bridal room be swept by death.... Aye, better man should draw his breath For ever without child or bride.

Chorus, as before. --'Tis Fate, 'tis Fate: She is strong and none shall break her. --No end, no end, Wilt thou lay to lamentations? --Endure and be still: Thy lamenting will not wake her. --There be many before thee, Who have suffered and had patience. --Though the face of Sorrow changeth, yet her hand is on all nations.

Admetus: The garb of tears, the mourner's cry: Then the long ache when tears are past!... Oh, why didst hinder me to cast This body to the dust and die With her, the faithful and the brave? Then not one lonely soul had fled, But two great lovers, proudly dead, Through the deep waters of the grave.

Leader: A friend I knew, In whose house died a son, Worthy of bitter rue, His only one. His head sank, yet he bare Stilly his weight of care, Though grey was in his hair And life nigh done.

Admetus: Ye shapes that front me, wall and gate, How shall I enter in and dwell Among ye, with all Fortune's spell Dischanted? Aye, the change is great.

That day I strode with bridal song Through lifted brands of Pelian pine; A hand beloved lay in mine; And loud behind a revelling throng

Exalted me and her, the dead. They called us young, high-hearted; told How princes were our sires of old, And how we loved and we must wed....

For those high songs, lo, men that moan, And raiment black where once was white; Who guide me homeward in the night, On that waste bed to lie alone.

Second Elder: It breaks, like strife, Thy long peace, where no pain Had entered; yet is life, Sweet life, not slain. A wife dead; a dear chair Empty: is that so rare? Men live without despair Whose loves are ta'en.

Admetus, erect and facing them. Behold, I count my wife's fate happier, Though all gainsay me, than mine own. To her Comes no more pain for ever; she hath rest And peace from all toil, and her name is blest. But I am one who hath no right to stay Alive on earth; one that hath lost his way In fate, and strays in dreams of life long past.... Friends, I have learned my lesson at the last. I have my life. Here stands my house. But now How dare I enter in? Or, entered, how Go forth again? Go forth, when none is there To give me a parting word, and I to her?... Where shall I turn for refuge? There within, The desert that remains where she hath been Will drive me forth, the bed, the empty seat She sat in; nay, the floor beneath my feet Unswept, the children crying at my knee For mother; and the very thralls will be In sobs for the dear mistress that is lost. That is my home! If I go forth, a host Of feasts and bridal dances, gatherings gay Of women, will be there to fright me away To loneliness. Mine eyes will never bear The sight. They were her friends; they played with her. And always, always, men who hate my name Will murmur: "This is he who lives in shame Because he dared not die! He gave instead The woman whom he loved, and so is fled From death. He counts himself a man

withal! And seeing his parents died not at his call He hates them, when himself he dared not die!" Such mocking beside all my pain shall I Endure.... What profit was it to live on, Friend, with my grief kept and mine honour gone?

Chorus: I have sojourned in the Muse's land, Have wandered with the wandering star, Seeking for strength, and in my hand Held all philosophies that are; Yet nothing could I hear nor see Stronger than That Which Needs Must Be. No Orphic rune, no Thracian scroll, Hath magic to avert the morrow; No healing all those medicines brave Apollo to the Asclepiad gave; Pale herbs of comfort in the bowl Of man's wide sorrow. She hath no temple, she alone, Nor image where a man may kneel; No blood upon her altar-stone Crying shall make her hear nor feel. I know thy greatness; come not great Beyond my dreams, O Power of Fate! Aye, Zeus himself shall not unclothe His purpose save by thy discerning. The chain of iron, the Scythian sword, It yields and shivers at thy word; Thy heart is as the rock, and knows No ruth, nor turning.

They turn to Admetus.

Her hand hath caught thee; yea, the keeping Of iron fingers grips thee round. Be still. Be still. Thy noise of weeping Shall raise no lost one from the ground. Nay, even the Sons of God are parted At last from joy, and pine in death.... Oh, dear on earth when all did love her, Oh, dearer lost beyond recover: Of women all the bravest-hearted Hath pressed thy lips and breathed thy breath.

Let not the earth that lies upon her Be deemed a grave-mound of the dead. Let honour, as the Gods have honour, Be hers, till men shall bow the head, And strangers, climbing from the city Her slanting path, shall muse and say: "This woman died to save her lover, And liveth blest, the stars above her: Hail, Holy One, and grant thy pity!" So pass the wondering words away.

Leader: But see, it is Alcmena's son once more, My lord King, cometh striding to thy door.

Enter Heracles; his dress is as in the last scene, but shows signs of a struggle. Behind come two Attendants, guiding between them a veiled Woman, who

seems like one asleep or unconscious. The Woman remains in the background while Heracles comes forward.

Heracles: Thou art my friend, Admetus; therefore bold And plain I tell my story, and withhold No secret hurt.--Was I not worthy, friend, To stand beside thee; yea, and to the end Be proven in sorrow if I was true to thee? And thou didst tell me not a word, while she Lay dead within; but bid me feast, as though Naught but the draping of some stranger's woe Was on thee. So I garlanded my brow And poured the gods drink-offering, and but now Filled thy death-stricken house with wine and song. Thou hast done me wrong, my brother; a great wrong Thou hast done me. But I will not add more pain In thine affliction. Why I am here again, Returning, thou must hear. I pray thee, take And keep yon woman for me till I make My homeward way from Thrace, when I have ta'en Those four steeds and their bloody master slain. And if--which heaven avert!--I ne'er should see Hellas again, I leave her here, to be An handmaid in thy house. No labour small Was it that brought her to my hand at all. I fell upon a contest certain Kings Had set for all mankind, sore buffetings And meet for strong men, where I staked my life And won this woman. For the easier strife Black steeds were prizes; herds of kine were cast For heavier issues, fists and wrestling; last, This woman.... Lest my work should all seem done For naught, I needs must keep what I have won; So prithee take her in. No theft, but true Toil, won her.... Some day thou mayst thank me, too.

Admetus: 'Twas in no scorn, no bitterness to thee, I hid my wife's death and my misery. Methought it was but added pain on pain If thou shouldst leave me, and roam forth again Seeking another's roof. And, for mine own Sorrow, I was content to weep alone. But, for this damsel, if it may be so, I pray thee, Lord, let some man, not in woe Like mine, take her. Thou hast in Thessaly Abundant friends.... 'Twould wake sad thoughts in me. How could I have this damsel in my sight And keep mine eyes dry? Prince, why wilt thou smite The smitten? Griefs enough are on my head. Where in my castle could so young a maid Be lodged--her veil and raiment show her young: Here, in the men's hall? I should fear some wrong. 'Tis not so easy, Prince, to keep controlled My young men. And thy charge I fain would hold Sacred.--If not, wouldst have me keep her in The women's chambers ... where my dead hath

been? How could I lay this woman where my bride Once lay? It were dishonour double-dyed. These streets would curse the man who so betrayed The wife who saved him for some younger maid; The dead herself ... I needs must worship her And keep her will.

During the last few lines Admetus has been looking at the veiled Woman and, though he does not consciously recognize her, feels a strange emotion overmastering him. He draws back.

Aye. I must walk with care.... O woman, whosoe'er thou art, thou hast The shape of my Alcestis; thou art cast In mould like hers.... Oh, take her from mine eyes! In God's name!

Heracles signs to the Attendants to take Alcestis away again. She stays veiled and unnoticed in the background.

I was fallen, and in this wise Thou wilt make me deeper fall.... Meseems, meseems, There in her face the loved one of my dreams Looked forth.--My heart is made a turbid thing, Craving I know not what, and my tears spring Unbidden.--Grief I knew 'twould be; but how Fiery a grief I never knew till now.

Leader: Thy fate I praise not. Yet, what gift soe'er God giveth, man must steel himself and bear.

Heracles, *drawing Admetus on.* Would God, I had the power, 'mid all this might Of arm, to break the dungeons of the night, And free thy wife, and make thee glad again!

Admetus: Where is such power? I know thy heart were fain; But so 'tis writ. The dead shall never rise.

Heracles: Chafe not the curb, then: suffer and be wise.

Admetus: Easier to give such counsel than to keep.

Heracles: Who will be happier, shouldst thou always weep?

Admetus: Why, none. Yet some blind longing draws me on...

Heracles: 'Tis natural. Thou didst love her that is gone.

Admetus: 'Tis that hath wrecked, oh more than wrecked, my life.

Heracles: 'Tis certain: thou hast lost a faithful wife.

Admetus: Till life itself is dead and wearies me.

Heracles: Thy pain is yet young. Time will soften thee,

The veiled Woman begins dimly, as though in a dream, to hear the words spoken.

Admetus: Time? Yes, if time be death.

Heracles: Nay, wait; and some Woman, some new desire of love, will come.

Admetus, indignantly. Peace! How canst thou? Shame upon thee!

Heracles: Thou wilt stay Unwed for ever, lonely night and day?

Admetus: No other bride in these void arms shall lie.

Heracles: What profit will thy dead wife gain thereby?

Admetus: Honour; which finds her wheresoe'er she lies.

Heracles: Most honourable in thee: but scarcely wise!

Admetus: God curse me, if I betray her in her tomb!

Heracles: So be it!... And this good damsel, thou wilt take her home?

Admetus: No, in the name of Zeus, thy father! No!

Heracles: I swear, 'tis not well to reject her so.

Admetus: 'Twould tear my heart to accept her.

Heracles: Grant me, friend, This one boon! It may help thee in the end.

Admetus: Woe's me! Would God thou hadst never won those victories!

Heracles: Thou sharest both the victory and the prize.

Admetus: Thou art generous.... But now let her go.

Heracles: She shall, If go she must. Look first, and judge withal.

He takes the veil off Alcestis.

Admetus, *steadily refusing to look.* She must.--And thou, forgive me!

Heracles: Friend, there is A secret reason why I pray for this.

Admetus, *surprised, then reluctantly yielding.* I grant thy boon then--though it likes me ill.

Heracles: 'Twill like thee later. Now ... but do my will.

Admetus, *beckoning to an Attendant.* Take her; find her some lodging in my hall.

Heracles: I will not yield this maid to any thrall.

Admetus: Take her thyself and lead her in.

Heracles: I stand Beside her; take her; lead her to thy hand.

He brings the Woman close to Admetus, who looks determinedly away. She reaches out her arms.

Admetus: I touch her not.--Let her go in!

Heracles: I am loth To trust her save to thy pledged hand and oath.

He lays his hand on Admetus's shoulder.

Admetus, *desperately.* Lord, this is violence ... wrong ...

Heracles: Reach forth thine hand And touch this comer from a distant land.

Admetus, *holding out his hand without looking.* Like Perseus when he touched the Gorgon, there!

Heracles: Thou hast touched her?

Admetus, *at last taking her hand.* Touched her?... Yes.

Heracles, *a hand on the shoulder of each.* Then cling to her; And say if thou hast found a guest of grace In God's son, Heracles! Look in her face; Look; is she like...?

Admetus looks and stands amazed. Go, and forget in bliss Thy sorrow!

Admetus: O ye Gods! What meaneth this? A marvel beyond dreams! The face ... 'tis she; Mine, verily mine! Or doth God mock at me And blast my vision with some mad surmise?

Heracles: Not so. This is thy wife before thine eyes.

Admetus, *who has recoiled in his amazement.* Beware! The dead have phantoms that they send...

Heracles: Nay; no ghost-raiser hast thou made thy friend.

Admetus: My wife ... she whom I buried?

Heracles: I deceive Thee not; nor wonder thou canst scarce believe.

Admetus: And dare I touch her, greet her, as mine own Wife living?

Heracles: Greet her. Thy desire is won.

Admetus, *approaching with awe,* Beloved eyes; beloved form; O thou Gone beyond hope, I have thee, I hold thee now?

Heracles: Thou hast her: may no god begrudge your joy.

Admetus, *turning to Heracles.* O lordly conqueror, Child of Zeus on high, Be blessèd! And may He, thy sire above, Save thee, as thou alone hast saved my love!

He kneels to Heracles, who raises him.

But how ... how didst thou win her to the light?

Heracles: I fought for life with Him I needs must fight.

Admetus: With Death thou hast fought! But where?

Heracles: Among his dead I lay, and sprang and gripped him as he fled.

Admetus, *in an awed whisper, looking towards Alcestis.* Why standeth she so still? No sound, no word!

Heracles: She hath dwelt with Death. Her voice may not be heard Ere to the Lords of Them Below she pay Due cleansing, and awake on the third day. To the Attendants So; guide her home.

They lead Alcestis to the doorway.

And thou, King, for the rest Of time, be true; be righteous to thy guest, As he would have thee be. But now farewell! My task yet lies before me, and the spell That binds me to my master; forth I fare.

Admetus: Stay with us this one day! Stay but to share The feast upon our hearth!

Heracles: The feasting day Shall surely come; now I must needs away.

Heracles departs.

Admetus: Farewell! All victory attend thy name And safe home-coming! Lo, I make proclaim To the Four Nations and all Thessaly; A wondrous happiness hath come to be: Therefore pray, dance, give offerings and make full Your altars with the life-blood of the Bull! For me ... my heart is changed; my life shall mend Henceforth. For surely Fortune is a friend.

He goes with Alcestis into the house.

Chorus: There be many shapes of mystery; And many things God brings to be, Past hope or fear. And the end men looked for cometh not, And a path is there where no man thought. So hath it fallen here.
