

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Antiphony organizes the song into alternating strophes and antistrophes. Each strophic pair follows a principle of responson whereby the first verse of the strophe responds metrically with the first verse of the antistrophe, the second verse with the second verse, and so on. This arrangement is generally used to create a lyric dialogue between two voices. If Electra and the chorus had sung strophe and antistrophe respectively, the effect would have been one of shared thought or interwoven emotion. But Sophocles has chosen to further subdivide each strophe and antistrophe so that each six lines of Electra respond with another six lines of Electra, each six lines of the chorus respond with another six lines of the chorus. They are each talking to themselves. Musically, it is an anti-dialogue.

Conceptually also. Each time the chorus talk they send a drift of platitudes down over Electra who knocks them away with one hand. Each choral utterance attempts to steer the discussion towards general truths and perspectives wider than the individual life. Electra keeps pulling the focus back to herself with a resolute first-person pronoun or verb. The chorus talk strategies for going on with life, Electra declares life an irrelevancy. It is death that absorbs Electra's whole imagination and the darkness that is soaking out of this one fact seems to colour the music and reasoning of everything she says in the song, especially when we see these continually measured against the bright banalities of the chorus. And at the point where Electra's anger and despair finally boil over (236) she throws the metaphor of measure back at the chorus with a question as jagged as a scream:

kai ti metron kakotatos ephu?
καὶ τί μέτρον κακότατος ἔφυ;
"And at what point does the evil level off in my life, tell me that!"

Nobody answers her.

ANNE CARSON

ELECTRA

CHARACTERS

PAEDAGOGUS OR OLD MAN servant and former tutor of Orestes

ORESTES son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, king of Argos

CHRYSOTHEMIS daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon

ELECTRA daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon

CLYTEMNESTRA Queen of Argos

AEGISTHUS paramour of Clytemnestra

CHORUS of Mycenaean women

PYLADES Orestes' silent friend

Line numbers in the right-hand margin of the text refer to the English translation only, and the Notes on the text at p. 113 are keyed to these lines. The bracketed line numbers in the running head lines refer to the Greek text.

Scene: at Mycenae before the palace of Agamemnon.

Enter the OLD MAN and ORESTES with PYLADES

PAEDAGOGUS You are his son! Your father
marshaled the armies at Troy once—
child of Agamemnon: look around you now.
Here is the land you were longing to see all that time.
Ancient Argos. You dreamed of this place.
The grove of Io, where the gadfly drove her.
Look, Orestes. There is the marketplace
named for Apollo,
wolfkiller god.
And on the left, the famous temple of Hera. 10
But stop! There—do you know what that is?
Mycenae. Yes. Look at it. Walls of gold!
Walls of death. It is the house of Pelops.
I got you out of there
out of the midst of your father's murder,
one day long ago.
From the hands of your sister
I carried you off. Saved your life. Reared you up—
to this: to manhood. To avenge your father's death.
So, Orestes! And you, dear 20
Pylades—
Now is the time to decide what to do.
Already the sun is hot upon us.
Birds are shaking, the world is awake.
Black stars and night have died away.
So before anyone is up and about
let's talk.
Now is no time to delay.
This is the edge of action.

ORESTES I love you, old man. 30
The signs of goodness shine from your face.
Like a thoroughbred horse—he gets old,

but he does not lose heart,
 he pricks up his ears—so you
urge me forward
 and stand in the front rank yourself.
 Good. Now,
 I will outline my plan. You
 listen sharp.
 If I'm off target anywhere,
 set me straight.
 You see, I went to Pytho
 to ask the oracle how I could get justice
 from the killers of my father.
 Apollo answered:

*Take no weapons.
 No shield.
 No army.
 Go alone—a hand in the night.
 Snare them.
 Slaughter them.
 You have the right.*

That is the oracle.
 Here is the plan:
 you go into the house at the first chance.
 Find out all that is happening there.
 Find out and report to us. Be very clear.
 You're so old, they won't know you.
 And your garlands will fool them.
 Now this is your story:
 you're a stranger from Phocis,
 from the house of Phanoteus
 (he's the most powerful ally they have).
 Tell them on oath that Orestes is dead.
 An accident. Fatal:
 rolled out of his chariot on the racetrack at Delphi.
 Dragged to death under the wheels.
 Let that be the story.
 Meanwhile, we go to my father's grave,
 as Apollo commanded,
 to pour libation and crown the tomb
 with locks of hair cut from my head.

Then we'll be back
 with that bronzeplated urn
 (you know, the one I hid in the bushes).
 Oh yes, we'll fool them
 with this tale of me dead,
 burnt,
 nothing left but ash.
 What good news for them!

As for me—
 what harm can it do
 to die in words?
 I save my life and win glory besides!
 Can a mere story be evil? No, of course not—
 so long as it pays in the end.
 I know of shrewd men
 who die a false death
 so as to come home
 all the more valued.
 Yes, I am sure:
 I will stand clear of this lie
 and break on my enemies like a star.

O land of my fathers! O gods of this place!
 Take me in. Give me luck on this road.
 House of my father:
 I come to cleanse you with justice.
 I come sent by gods.
 Do not exile me from honor!
 Put me in full command
 of the wealth and the house!
 Enough talk.
 Old man, look to your task.
 We are off.
 This is the point on which everything hinges.
 This is the moment of proof.

ELECTRA *A cry from inside the house* IO MOI MOI DYSTENOS.

OLD MAN What was that? I heard
 a cry—some servant in the house?

ORESTES Can it be poor Electra? 110
Should we stay here and listen?

OLD MAN No. Nothing precedes the work of Apollo.
That is our first step: your father's libations.
That is the way to win: action.

*Exit OLD MAN and ORESTES with PYLADES. Enter ELECTRA
from the palace.*

ELECTRA O holy light!
And equal air shaped on the world—
you hear my songs,
you hear the blows fall.
You know the blood runs
when night sinks away. 120
All night I watch.
All night I mourn,
in this bed that I hate in this house I detest.
How many times can a heart break?
Oh father,
it was not killer Ares
who opened his arms
in some foreign land
to welcome you.
But my own mother and her lover Aegisthus: 130
those two good woodsmen
took an axe and split you down like an oak.
No pity for these things,
there is no pity
but mine,
oh father,
for the pity of your butchering rawblood death.

Never
will I leave off lamenting,
never. No. 140
As long as the stars sweep through heaven.
As long as I look on this daylight.
No.
Like the nightingale who lost her child
I will stand in his doorway

and call on his name.
Make them all hear.
Make this house echo.
O Hades!
Persephone! 150
Hermes of hell!
Furies, I call you!
Who watch
when lives are murdered.
Who watch when loves betray.
Come! Help me! Strike back!
Strike back for my father murdered!
And send my brother to me.
Because
alone, 160
the whole poised force of my life is nothing
against this.

Enter CHORUS

CHORUS Your mother is evil 170
but oh my child why
melt your life away in mourning?
Why let grief eat you alive?
It was long ago
she took your father:
her hand came out of unholy dark
and cut him down.
I curse the one
who did the deed
(if this is right to say).

ELECTRA You are women of noble instinct
and you come to console me
in my pain.
I know.
I do understand.
But I will not let go this man or this mourning.

He is my father. 180
I cannot not grieve.
Oh my friends,

Friendship is a tension. It makes delicate demands.
I ask this one thing:
let me go mad in my own way.

antistrophe 1

CHORUS Not from Hades' black and universal lake can you lift
him.

not by groaning, not by prayers.
Yet you run yourself out
in a grief with no cure,
no time-limit, no measure.
It is a knot no one can untie.
Why are you so in love with
things unbearable?

190

ELECTRA None but a fool or an infant
could forget a father
gone so far and cold.
No.

Lament is a pattern cut and fitted around my mind—
like the bird who calls Itys! Itys! endlessly,
bird of grief,
angel of Zeus.
O heartdragging Niobe,
I count you a god:
buried in rock yet
always you weep.

200

CHORUS You are not the only one in the world
my child, who has stood in the glare of grief.
Compare yourself:
you go too far.
Look at your sister, Chrysothemis:
she goes on living. So does Iphianassa.
And the boy—his secret years are sorrowful too,
but he will be brilliant
one day when Mycenae welcomes him home
to his father's place, to his own land
in the guidance of Zeus—
Orestes!

strophe 2

210

ELECTRA Him yes!
I am past exhaustion
in waiting for him—
no children,
no marriage,
no light in my heart.
I live in a place of tears.
And he
simply forgets.
Forgets what he suffered,
forgets what he knew.
Messages reach me, each one belied.
He is passionate—as any lover.
But his passion does not bring him here.

220

230

CHORUS Have courage,
my child.

antistrophe 2

Zeus is still great in heaven,
he watches and governs all things.
Leave this anger to Zeus: it burns too high in you.
Don't hate so much.
Nor let memory go.
For time is a god who can simplify all.
And as for Orestes
on the shore of Crisa
where oxen graze—
he does not forget you.
Nor is the king of death
on the banks of Acheron
unaware.

240

ELECTRA But meanwhile most of my life has slid by
without hope.
I sink.
I melt.
Father has gone and there is no man left
who cares enough to stand up for me.
Like some beggar
wandered in off the street,
I serve as a slave
in the halls of my father.

250

Dressed in these rags,
I stand at the table
and feast on air.

CHORUS One rawblood cry
on the day he returned,
one rawblood cry went through the halls
just as the axblade
rose
and fell.
He was caught by guile,
cut down by lust:
together they bred a thing shaped like a monster—
god or mortal
no one knows.

strophe 3 260

270

ELECTRA That day tore out the nerves of my life.
That night:
far too silent the feasting,
much too sudden
the silence.
My father looked up and saw
death coming out of their hands.
Those hands took my life hostage.
Those hands murdered me.
I pray
the great god of Olympus
give them pain on pain to pay for this!
And smother the glow
of deeds like these.

280

CHORUS Think again, Electra.
Don't say any more.
Don't you see what you're doing?
you make your own pain.
Why keep wounding yourself?
With so much evil stored up
in that cold dark soul of yours

you breed enemies everywhere you touch.
But you must not
clash with the people in power.

antistrophe 3

290

ELECTRA By dread things I am compelled. I know that.
I see the trap closing.
I know what I am.
But while life is in me
I will not stop this violence. No.
Oh my friends
who is there to comfort me?
Who understands?
Leave me be,
let me go,
do not soothe me.
This is a knot no one can untie.
There will be no rest,
there is no retrieval.
No number exists for
griefs like these.

300

310

CHORUS Yes but I speak from concern—
as a mother would: trust me.
Do not breed violence out of violence.

epode

ELECTRA Alright then, you tell me one thing—
at what point does the evil level off in my life?
You say ignore the deed—is that right?
Who could approve this?
It defies human instinct!
Such ethics make no sense to me.
And how could I nestle myself in a life of ease

320

while my father lies out in the cold,
outside honor?
My cries are wings:
they pierce the cage.
For if a dead man is earth and nothing,
if a dead man is void and dead space lying,
if a dead man's murderers
do not give
blood for blood
to pay for this,

330

then shame does not exist.
Human reverence
is gone.

CHORUS I came here, child, because I care
for your welfare as my own.
But perhaps I am wrong.
Let it be as you say.

ELECTRA Women, I am ashamed before you: I know
you find me extreme
in my grief. 340
I bear it hard.
But I tell you I have no choice.
It compels. I act because it compels.
Oh forgive me. But how could I—
how could a woman of any nobility
stand
and watch her father's house go bad?
There is something bad here,
growing. Day and night
I watch it. Growing. 350

My mother is where it begins.
She and I are at war.
Our relation is hatred.
And I live in this house
with my father's own killers:
they rule me. They dole out my life.
What kind of days do you think I have here?
I see my father's throne
with Aegisthus on it.
I see my father's robes 360
with Aegisthus in them.
I see my father's hearth with Aegisthus presiding—
right where he stood when he struck
my father down!
And the final outrage:
the killer tucked in my father's bed.
Behold the man who pleasures my mother—
should I call that thing 'mother' that lies at his side?
God! Her nerve astounds me.

She lives with that polluted object, 370
fearing no fury. No,
she laughs!
Celebrates
that day—the day she took my father
with dances and song and slaughter of sheep!
A monthly bloodgift to the gods who keep her safe.

I watch
all going dark in the rooms of my house.
I weep.
I melt. 380

I grieve
for the strange cruel feast made in my father's name.
But I grieve to myself:
not allowed even to shed the tears I would.
No—that creature
who calls herself noble
will shriek at me:
"Godcursed! You piece of hatred!
So you've lost your father—is that unique?
No mortal mourns but you? 390
Damn you.
May the gods of hell damn you
to groan perpetually there
as you groan
perpetually
here!"
That's her style—
and when she hears someone mention Orestes,
then she goes wild, comes screaming at me:
"Have I you to thank for this? 400

Isn't it your work? Wasn't it you
who stole Orestes out of my hands
and smuggled him away?
You'll pay for it.
I tell you, you will pay."
Howling bitch. And by her side
the brave bridegroom—
this lump of bad meat.

With women only
he makes his war.

410

And I wait.
I wait.
I wait
for Orestes.
He will come! He will end this.
But my life is dying out.
He is always on the verge of doing something
then does nothing.
He has worn out all the hopes I had or could have.
Oh my friends,
in times like these,
self-control has no meaning.
Rules of reverence do not apply.
Evil is a pressure that shapes us to itself.

420

CHORUS Is Aegisthus at home?

ELECTRA No. Do you think I'd be
standing outdoors?
He is gone to the fields.

CHORUS That gives me courage
to say what I came to say.

430

ELECTRA What is it you want?

CHORUS I want to know—your brother—
do you say he is coming? Or has a plan?

ELECTRA Yes, he says so. But he says a lot. Does nothing.

CHORUS A man who does a great deed may hesitate.

ELECTRA Oh? I saved his life without hesitating.

CHORUS Courage. His nature is good, he will not fail his kin.

ELECTRA That belief is what keeps me alive.

CHORUS Quiet now. Here is your sister come from the house,
Chrysothemis, of the same father
and mother as you. 440
She has offerings in her hands,
as if for the dead.

Enter CHRYSOTHEMIS carrying garlands and a vessel

CHRYSOTHEMIS Here you are again at the doorway, sister,
telling your tale to the world!
When will you learn?
It's pointless. Pure self-indulgence.
Yes, I know how bad things are.
I suffer too—if I had the strength
I would show what I think of them. 450
But now is not the right time.
In rough waters, lower the sail, is my theory.
Why pretend to be doing,
unless I can do some real harm?
I wish you would see this.
And yet,
it is true,
justice is not on my side.
Your choice is the right one. On the other hand,
if I want to live a free woman, 460
there are masters who must be obeyed.

ELECTRA You appall me.
Think of the father who sired you! But you do not.
All your thought is for her.
These sermons you give me are all learnt
from mother, not a word is your own.
Well it's time for you to make a choice:
quit being 'sensible'
or keep your good sense and betray your own kin.
Wasn't it you who just said, 470
"If I had the strength I would show how I hate them!"
Yet here I am doing everything possible
to avenge our father,
and do you help? No!
You try to turn me aside.

Isn't this simply cowardice added to evil?
 Instruct me—no! Let me tell you:
 what do I stand to gain if I cease my lament?
 Do I not live? Badly, I know, but I live.
 What is more,
 I am a violation to them.
 And so, honor the dead—
if any grace exists down there.
 Now
 you hate them, you say.
 But this hate is all words.
 In fact, you live with the killers.
 And I tell you,
 if someone were to give me
 all the gifts that make your days delicious,
 I would not bend. No.
 You can have your rich table
 and life flowing over the cup.
 I need one food:
 I must not violate Electra.
 As for your status, I couldn't care less.
 Nor would you, if you had any self-respect.
 You could have been called
 child of the noblest men!
 Instead they call you mother's girl,
 they think you base.
 Your own dead father,
 your own loved ones,
 you do betray.

CHORUS No anger I pray.
 There is profit for both
 if you listen to one another.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Her talk is no surprise to me, ladies.
 I'm used to this.
 And I wouldn't have bothered
 to speak at all, except—
 for the rumor I heard.
 There is very great evil coming this way,
 something to cut her long laments
 short.

ELECTRA Tell me what is the terrible thing?
 If it is worse than my present life,
 I give up.

CHRYSOTHEMIS I tell what I know:
 they plan,
 unless you cease from this mourning,
 to send you where you will not see the sun again.
 You'll be singing your songs
 alive
 in a room
 in the ground.
 Think about that.
 And don't blame me when you suffer.
 Too late then.
 Now is the time to start being sensible.

ELECTRA Ah. That is their intention, is it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS It is. As soon as Aegisthus comes home.

ELECTRA May he come soon, then.

CHRYSOTHEMIS What are you saying?

ELECTRA *Let him come, if he has his plan ready.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS What do you mean? Are you losing your mind?

ELECTRA I want to escape from you all.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Not go on living?

ELECTRA Living? Oh yes
 my life is a beautiful thing, is it not.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Well it could be, if you got some sense.

ELECTRA Don't bother telling me to betray those I love.

CHRYSOTHEMIS I tell you we have masters, we must bend.

ELECTRA *You bend—you go ahead and lick their boots.
It's not my way.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *Don't ruin your life in sheer stupidity.*

ELECTRA *I will ruin my life, if need be,
avenging our father.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *But our father, I know, forgives us for this.*

ELECTRA *Cowards' talk.*

550

CHRYSOTHEMIS *You won't listen to reason at all, will you?*

ELECTRA *No. My mind is my own.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *Well then I'll be on my way.*

ELECTRA *Where are you going? Whose offerings are those?*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *Mother is sending me to father's tomb,
to pour libation.*

ELECTRA *What? To her mortal enemy?*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *To her 'murder victim,' as you like to say.*

ELECTRA *Whose idea was this?*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *It came out of a dream in the night, I believe.*

560

ELECTRA *Gods of my father be with me now!*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *You take courage from a nightmare?*

ELECTRA *Tell the dream and I'll answer you.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *There is little to tell.*

ELECTRA *Tell it anyway.
Little words can mean
death or life sometimes.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS *Well the story is
she dreamed of our father
and knew him again
for he came back into the light.
Then she saw him take hold of his sceptre
and stick it in the hearth—
his own sceptre from the old days,
that Aegisthus carries now.
And from the sceptre sprang a branch
in full climbing leaf
which cast a shadow over the whole land of Mycenae.
That is as much as I got
from one who overheard her
telling the dream to the sun.
More I don't know, except
fear is her reason for sending me out today.
So I beg you, by the gods of our family,
listen to me.
Don't throw your life away on plain stupidity.
For if you spurn me now,
you'll come begging later
when the trouble starts.*

570

580

ELECTRA *Oh dear one, no.
You cannot touch this tomb
with any of those things you have in your hands.
It breaks the law. It would be unholy
to bring that woman's libations
to our father: she is the enemy.
No. Pitch them to the winds
or down a dark hole.
They shall come nowhere near his resting place.
But when she dies and goes below,
she will find them waiting.
Treasure keeps, down there.*

590

600

*God! Her nerve is astounding.
What woman alive would send gifts
to garnish her own murder victim?
And do you imagine
the dead man would welcome such
honors*

from the hand of the woman who butchered him—
think! To clean her blade she wiped it off on his head!
You astonish me—do you really believe
such gifts will cancel murder?
Throw them away.

610

Here, instead
cut a lock from your hair
and a lock of mine—meagre gifts
but it is all I have.
Take this to him, the hair
and this belt of mine,
though it's nothing elaborate.
Kneel down there and pray to him.
Pray he come up from the ground
to stand with us against our enemies.
Pray that his son Orestes live
to trample his enemies underfoot.
And someday you and I will go in better style than this
to crown his tomb.

620

But I wonder. You know
I wonder—
suppose he had some part
in sending her these cold unlucky dreams.

630

Well, never mind that.
Sister,
do this deed.
Stand up for yourself
and for me and for this man we love
more than anyone else in the world,
this dead man. Your father. My father.

CHORUS The girl speaks for human reverence.
And you,
if you have any sense, will do what she says.

640

CHRYSOTHEMIS I will do it. It is the right thing,
why dispute?
But please, my friends,
I need silence from you.
if my mother finds out,

the attempt will turn bitter for me,
I fear.

Exit CHRYSOTHEMIS

CHORUS Unless I am utterly wrong in my reading of omens *strophe*
unless I am out of my mind
Justice is coming
with clear signs before her
and righteousness in her hands. 650
She is coming down on us, child, coming now!
There is courage
whispering into me
when I hear tell of these sweetbreathing dreams.
He does not forget—
the one who begot you
the king of the Greeks.
She does not forget— 660
the jaw that bit him in two:
ancient and sharpened on both sides to butcher the meat!

Vengeance is coming—her hands like an army *antistrophe*
her feet as a host.

She will come out of hiding
come scorching down
on love that is filth
and beds that are blood
where marriage should never have happened!
Conviction 670

is strong in me:
visions like these are no innocent sign for killers.
I say no omens exist
for mortals to read
from the cold faces of dreams
or from oracles
unless this fragment of death steps into the daylight.

O horserace of Pelops, *epode*
once long ago
you came in the shape of a wide calamity 680

to this land.
And from the time when

Myrtilus pitched and sank in the sea
 his solid gold life
 sliced off at the roots—
 never
 since that time
 has this house
 got itself clear of
 rawblood
 butchery.

690

Enter CLYTEMNESTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA Prowling the streets again, are you?
 Of course, with Aegisthus away.
 He was always the one
 who kept you indoors where you couldn't embarrass us.
 Now that he's gone you pay no heed to me.
 Yet you love to make me the text of your lectures:
 What an arrogant bitchminded tyrant I am,
 a living insult to you and your whole way of being!
 But do I in fact insult you? No. I merely return
 the muck you throw at me.
 Father, father, father! your perpetual excuse—
 your father got his death from me. From me! That's right!
 I make no denial.
 It was Justice who took him, not I alone.
 And you should have helped if you had any conscience.
 For this father of yours,
 this one you bewail,
 this unique Greek,
 had the heart to sacrifice your own sister to the gods.

700

710

And how was that? Did he have some share
 in the pain of her birth? No—I did it myself!
 Tell me:
 why did he cut her throat? What was the reason?
 You say for the Argives?
 But they had no business to kill what was mine.
 To save Menelaus?
 Then I deserved recompense, wouldn't you say?
 Did not Menelaus have children himself—
 in fact two of them,

720

who ought to have died before mine
 in all fairness?
 Their mother, let's not forget,
 was the cause of the whole expedition!
 Or was it that Hades conceived some peculiar desire
 to feast on my children instead?
 Or perhaps
 that murdering thug your father,
 simply overlooked my children
 in his tender care for Menelaus'.
 Was that not brutal? Was that not perverse?

730

I say it was.
 No doubt you disagree.
 But I tell you one thing, that murdered girl
 would speak for me if she had a voice.
 Anyway, the deed is done.
 I feel no remorse.
 you think me degenerate?
 Here's my advice:
 perfect yourself
 before you blame others.

740

ELECTRA At least you can't say I started it this time;
 these ugly remarks are unprovoked.
 But I want to get a few things clear
 about the dead man and my sister as well.
 If you allow me.

CLYTEMNESTRA Go ahead, by all means. Begin this way more often
 and we won't need ugly remarks at all, will we?

ELECTRA All right then. Yes.
 You killed my father, you admit.
 What admission could bring more shame?
 Never mind if it was legal or not—did you care?
 Let's talk facts: there was only one reason you killed him.
 You were seduced by that creature you live with.
 Ask Artemis,
 goddess of hunters,
 why she stopped the winds at Aulis.
 No, I'll tell you:

750

my father one day, so I hear,
 was out in the grove of the goddess.
 The sound of his footfall startled a stag out from cover
 and, when he killed it, he let fall a boast.
 This angered the daughter of Leto.
 She held the Achaeans in check until,
 as payment for the animal,
 my father should offer his own daughter.
 Hence, the sacrifice. There was no other way.
 He had to free the army,
 to sail home or towards Troy.
 These were the pressures that closed upon him.

760

770

He resisted, he hated it—
 and then he killed her.
 Not for Menelaus' sake, no, not at all.
 But even if—let's say we grant your claim—
 he did these things to help his brother,
 was it right he should die for it at your hands?
 By what law?
 Watch out: this particular law
 could recoil upon your own head.
 If we made it a rule
 to answer killing with killing,
 you would die first,
 in all justice.
 Open your eyes! The claim is a fake.
 Tell me:
 why do you live this way?
 Your life is filth.
 You share your bed with a bloodstained man:
 once he obliged you by killing my father,
 now you put him to use making children.
 Once you had *decent* children from a *decent* father,
 now you've thrown them out.
 Am I supposed to praise that?
 Or will you say
 you do all this to avenge your child?
 The thought is obscene—
 to bed your enemies
 and use a daughter as an alibi!
 Oh why you go on? I can't argue with you.

780

790

You have your one same answer ready:
 'That's no way to talk to your mother!'

800

Strange.
 I don't think of you as mother at all.
 You are some sort of punishment cage
 locked around my life.
 Evils from you, evils from him
 are the air I breathe.
 And what of Orestes?—he barely escaped you.
 Poor boy.
 The minutes are grinding him away somewhere.
 You always accuse me
 of training him up to be an avenger—

810

Oh I would if I could, you're so right!
 Proclaim it to all!

Call me
 baseminded, blackmouthing bitch! if you like—
 for if this is my nature
 we know how I come by it, don't we?

CHORUS

(looking at Clytemnestra)

Look. Anger is breathing out of her.
 Yet she seems not to care
 about right and wrong.

820

CLYTEMNESTRA Right and wrong!
 What use is that in dealing with her?
 Do you hear her insults?
 And this girl is old enough to know better.
 The fact is, she would do *anything*,
 don't you see that?
 No shame at all.

ELECTRA Ah now there you mistake me.

Shame I do feel.
 And I know there is something all wrong about me—
 believe me. Sometimes I shock myself.

830

But there is a reason: you.
 You never let up
 this one same pressure of hatred on my life:
 I am the shape you made me.
 Filth teaches filth.

CLYTEMNESTRA You little animal.
 I and my deeds and my words draw
 far too much comment from you.

ELECTRA You said it, not I.
 For the deeds are your own.
 But deeds find words for themselves,
 don't they?

CLYTEMNESTRA By Artemis I swear, you will pay for this
 when Aegisthus comes home!

ELECTRA See? You're out of control.
 Though you gave me permission to say what I want,
 you don't know how to listen.

CLYTEMNESTRA Silence! If you allow me
 I will proceed with my sacrifice.
 You spoke your piece.

ELECTRA Please! By all means! Go to it.
 Not another word from me.

CLYTEMNESTRA *(to her attendant)* You there! Yes you—lift up
 these offerings for me.
 I will offer prayers to this our king
 and loosen the fears that hold me now.
 Do you hear me, Apollo?
 I call you my champion!
 But my words are guarded, for I am not among friends.
 It wouldn't do to unfold the whole tale
 with her standing here.
 She has a destroying tongue in her
 and she does love
 to sow wild stories all over town.

So listen, I'll put it this way:
 last night was a night of bad dreams
 and ambiguous visions.
 If they bode well for me, Lycian king, bring them to pass. 870
 Otherwise, roll them back on my enemies!
 And if there are certain people around
 plotting to pull me down
 from the wealth I enjoy,
 do not allow it.
 I want everything to go on as it is,
 untroubled.
 It suits me—this grand palace life
 in the midst of my loved ones
 and children—at least the ones 880
 who do not bring me hatred and pain.

These are my prayers, Apollo.
 Hear them.
 Apollo,
 grant them.
 Gracious to all of us as we petition you.
 And for the rest, though I keep silent,
 I credit you with knowing it fully.
 You are a god.
 It goes without saying,
 the children of Zeus see all things. 890
 Amen.

Enter OLD MAN

OLD MAN Ladies, can you tell me for certain
 if this is the house of Aegisthus the king?

CHORUS Yes, stranger, it is.

OLD MAN And am I correct that this is his wife?
 She has a certain royal look.

CHORUS Yes. That's who she is.

- OLD MAN Greetings, queen. I have come with glad tidings
for you and Aegisthus, from a friend of yours. 900
- CLYTEMNESTRA That's welcome news. But tell me
who sent you.
- OLD MAN Phanoteus the Phocian. On a mission of some
importance.
- CLYTEMNESTRA What mission? Tell me.
Insofar as I like Phanoteus,
I am likely to like your news.
- OLD MAN Orestes is dead. That is the sum of it.
- ELECTRA OI 'GO TALAINA.
My death begins now.
- CLYTEMNESTRA What are you saying, what are you saying?
Don't bother with her. 910
- OLD MAN Orestes—dead. I say it again.
- ELECTRA I am at the end. I exist no more.
- CLYTEMNESTRA (to ELECTRA) Mind your own affairs, girl.
But you, stranger—tell me the true story:
how did he die?
- OLD MAN Yes I was sent for this purpose, I'll tell the whole thing.
Well:
he had gone to the spectacle at Delphi,
where all Greece turns up for the games. 920
Things were just beginning to get under way
and the herald's voice rang out
announcing the footrace—first contest.
When he came onto the track
he was radiant. Every eye turned.
Well, he leveled the competition,
took first prize and came away famous.
Oh there's so much to tell—
I never saw anything like his performance!—but

- let me come straight to the point. 930
He won every contest the judges announced—
single lap, double lap, pentathlon, you name it.
- First prize every time.
He was beginning to take on an aura.
His name rang out over the track again and again:
"Argive Orestes,
whose father commanded the armies of Greece!"
So far so good.
But when a god sends harm,
no man can sidestep it, 940
no matter how strong he may be.
Came another day.
Sunrise: the chariot race.
He entered the lists.
What a pack:
there was one from Achaea,
a Spartan,
two Libyan drivers,
and he in the midst on Thessalian horses
stood fifth. 950
Sixth an Aetolian man, driving bays.
Seventh someone from Magnesia.
An Aenian man, riding white horses, had eighth place
and ninth a driver from godbuilt Athens.
Then a Boeotian.
Ten cars in all.
As they took their positions,
the judges cast lots to line up the cars.
A trumpet blast sounded.
They shot down the track. 960
All shouting together, reins tossing—
- a hard clatter filled the whole course
and a vast float of dust,
as they all streamed together,
each one lashing and straining ahead
to the next axle box, the next snorting lip,
and the horse-foam flying
back over shoulders and wheels as they pounded past.
Meanwhile Orestes

just grazing the post each time with his wheel,
 was letting his right horse go wide,
 reining back on the other.
 The cars were all upright at this point—

970

then all of a sudden
 the Aenian's colts go out of control
 and swerve off
 just as they round the seventh turn.
 They crash head-on into the Barcaeian team.
 Then one car after another comes ramming into the pile
 and the whole plain of Crisa
 fills with the smoke of wrecks.
 Now
 the Athenian driver was smart, he saw

980

what was happening.
 Drew offside and waited as
 the tide of cars went thundering by.
 Orestes
 was driving in last place,
 lying back on his mares.
 He had put his faith in the finish.
 But as soon as he sees
 the Athenian driver alone on the track

990

he lets out a cry that shivers his horses' ears
 and goes after him.
 Neck and neck
 they are racing,
 first one, then
 the other
 nosing ahead,
 easing ahead.

1000

Now our unlucky boy had stood every course so far,
 sailing right on in his upright car,
 but at this point he lets the left rein go slack
 with the horses turning,
 he doesn't notice,
 hits the pillar and
 smashes the axle box in two.

Out he flips
 over the chariot rail,
 reins snarled around him
 and as he falls
 the horses scatter midcourse.
 They see him down. A gasp goes through the crowd:
 "Not the boy!"
 To go for glory and end like this—
 pounded against the ground,
 legs beating the sky—
 the other drivers could hardly manage
 to stop his team and cut him loose.
 Blood everywhere.
 He was unrecognizable. Sickening.
 They burned him at once on a pyre
 and certain Phocians are bringing
 the mighty body back—
 just ashes,
 a little bronze urn—
 so you can bury him in his father's ground.
 That is my story.
 So far as words go,
 gruesome enough.
 But for those who watched it,
 and we did watch it,
 the ugliest evil I ever saw.

1010

1020

1030

CHORUS PHEU PHEU.

The whole ancient race
 torn off at the roots. Gone.

CLYTEMNESTRA Zeus! What now? Should I call this good news?
 Or a nightmare cut to my own advantage?
 There is something grotesque
 in having my own evils save my life.

1040

OLD MAN Why are you so disheartened at this news, my lady?

CLYTEMNESTRA To give birth is terrible, incomprehensible.
 No matter how you suffer,
 you cannot hate a child you've born.

OLD MAN My coming was futile then, it seems.

CLYTEMNESTRA Futile? Oh no. How—
if you've come with convincing proof of his death?
He was alive because I gave him life.
But he chose to desert my breasts and my care,
to live as an exile, aloof and strange.
After he left here he never saw me.
But he laid against me
the death of his father,
he made terrible threats.
And I had no shelter in sleep by night or sleep by day:
Time stood like a deathmaster over me,
letting the minutes drop.
Now I am free!
Today I shake loose from my fear
of her, my fear of him.
And to tell you the truth,
she did more damage.
She lived in my house
and drank
my lifeblood neat!
Now things are different.
She may go on making threats—but so what?
From now on, I pass my days in peace.

ELECTRA OIMOI TALAINA.
Now I have grief enough to cry out OIMOI—
Orestes! Poor cold thing.
As you lie in death
your own mother insults you.
What a fine sight!

CLYTEMNESTRA Well you're no fine sight.
But he looks as fine as can be.

ELECTRA Nemesis! Hear her!

CLYTEMNESTRA Nemesis *has* heard me. And she has answered.

ELECTRA Batter away. This is your hour of luck.

CLYTEMNESTRA And you think you will stop me, you and Orestes?

1080

ELECTRA It is we who are stopped. There's no stopping you.

CLYTEMNESTRA Stranger, you deserve reward
if you really have put a stop on her traveling tongue.

OLD MAN Then I'll be on my way, if all is well.

CLYTEMNESTRA Certainly not! You've earned better
of me and the man who dispatched you.
No, you go inside.
Just leave her out here
to go on with her evil litany.

Exit CLYTEMNESTRA and OLD MAN into house

ELECTRA Well how did she look to you—shattered by grief?
Heartbroken mother bewailing her only son?
No—you saw her—she went off laughing!
O TALAIN'EGO.
Orestes beloved,
as you die you destroy me.
You have torn away the part of my mind
where hope was—
my one hope in you
to live,
to come back,
to avenge us.
Now where can I go?
Alone I am.
Bereft of you. Bereft of father.
Should I go back into slavery?
Back to those creatures who cut down my father?
What a fine picture.
No.
I will not go back inside that house.
No. At this door
I will let myself lie
unloved.
I will wither my life.
If it aggravates them,

1090

1100

1110

ELECTRA

[820-845]

they can kill me.
Yes it will be a grace if I die.
To exist is pain.
Life is no desire of mine anymore.

CHORUS Where are you lightnings of Zeus!
Where are you scorching Sun!
In these dark pits you leave us dark!

strophe 1

1120

ELECTRA E E AIAI.

CHORUS Child, why do you cry?

ELECTRA PHEU.

CHORUS Don't make that sound.

ELECTRA You will break me.

CHORUS How?

ELECTRA If you bring me hope and I know he is dead,
you will harm my heart.

CHORUS But think of Amphiarus:
he was a king once,
snared by a woman in nets of gold.
Now under the earth

antistrophe 1 1130

ELECTRA E E IO.

CHORUS He is a king in the shadows of souls.

ELECTRA PHEU.

CHORUS Cry PHEU, yes! For his murderess—

ELECTRA was destroyed!

CHORUS Destroyed.

ELECTRA

[846-870]

ELECTRA I know—because an avenger arose.
I have no such person. That person is gone.

1140

CHORUS You are a woman marked for sorrow. *strophe 2*

ELECTRA Yes I know sorrow. Know it far too well.
My life is a tunnel
choked
by the sweepings of dread.

CHORUS We have watched you grieving.

ELECTRA Then do not try—

CHORUS What?

ELECTRA To console me.
The fact is,
there are no more hopes.
No fine brothers.
No comfort.

1150

CHORUS Death exists inside every mortal. *antistrophe 2*

ELECTRA Oh yes, but think of the hooves drumming down on him!
See that thing
dragging behind in the reins—

CHORUS Too cruel.

ELECTRA Yes. Death made him a stranger—

1160

CHORUS PAPA!

ELECTRA Laid out
somewhere
not by my hands.
Not with my tears.

Enter CHRYSOTHEMIS

CHRYSOTHEMIS I am so happy, I ran here to tell you—
 putting good manners aside!
 I have good news for you that spells release
 from all your grieving.

ELECTRA Where could you find anything to touch my grief?
 It has no cure.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Orestes is with us—yes! Know it from me—
 plain as you see me standing here!

ELECTRA You are mad.
 You are joking.

CHRYSOTHEMIS By the hearth of our father, this is no joke.
 He is with us. He is.

ELECTRA You poor girl.
 Who gave you this story?

CHRYSOTHEMIS No one gave me the story!
 I saw the evidence with my own eyes.

ELECTRA What evidence?
 My poor girl, what has set you on fire?

CHRYSOTHEMIS Well listen, for gods' sake.
 Find out if I'm crazy or not.

ELECTRA All right, tell the tale, if it makes you happy.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Yes, I will tell all I saw.
 Well
 When I arrived at father's grave
 I saw milk dripping down from the top of the mound
 and the tomb wreathed in flowers—
 flowers of every kind—what a shock!
 I peered all around—
 in case someone was sneaking up on me
 but no, the whole place was perfectly still.
 I crept near the tomb.

And there it was.
 Right there on the edge.
 A lock of hair, fresh cut.
 As soon as I saw it, a bolt went through me—
 almost as if I saw his face,
 I suddenly knew! Orestes.
 Beloved Orestes.
 I lifted it up. I said not a word.
 I was weeping for joy.
 And I know it now as I knew it then,
 this offering had to come from him.
 Who else would bother, except you or me?
 And I didn't do it. I'm sure of that.
 You couldn't do it—god knows you don't
 take a step from this house without getting in trouble.
 And certainly mother has no such inclinations.

If she did, we would hear of it.
 No, I tell you these offerings came from Orestes.
 Oh Electra, lift your heart!
 Bad luck can't last forever.
 Long have we lived in shadows and shuddering:
 today I think our future is opening out.

ELECTRA PHEU!
 Poor lunatic. I feel sorry for you.

CHRYSOTHEMIS What do you mean? Why aren't you happy?

ELECTRA You're dreaming, girl, lost in a moving dream.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Dreaming! How? I saw what I saw!

ELECTRA He is dead, my dear one.
 He's not going to save you.
 Dead, do you hear me? Dead. Forget him.

CHRYSOTHEMIS OIMO! TALAINA.
 Who told you that?

ELECTRA Someone who was there when he died.

CHRYSOthemis And where is this someone? It's all so strange. 1230

ELECTRA He's gone in the house. To entertain mother.

CHRYSOthemis I don't want to hear this. I don't understand.
who put those offerings on father's tomb?

ELECTRA I think, most likely, someone who wished
to honor Orestes' memory.

CHRYSOthemis What a fool I am—here I come racing for joy
to tell you my news, with no idea
how things really are.
The evils multiply.

ELECTRA Yes they do. But listen to me. 1240
You could ease our sorrow.

CHRYSOthemis How? Raise the dead?

ELECTRA That's not what I meant. I am not quite insane.

CHRYSOthemis Then what do you want? Am I capable of it?

ELECTRA All you need is the nerve—to do what I say.

CHRYSOthemis If it benefits us, I will not refuse.

ELECTRA But you know nothing succeeds without work.

CHRYSOthemis I do. I'll give you all the strength I have.

ELECTRA Good then, listen. Here is my plan.
You know, I think, our present contingent of allies: 1250
zero. Death took them.
We two are alone.
Up to now, while I heard that my brother was living
I cherished a hope
that he'd arrive one day to avenge his father.
But Orestes
no longer exists. I look to you.

You will not shrink back.
You will stand with your sister
and put to death the man who murdered your father: 1260
Aegisthus.
After all, what are you waiting for?
Let's be blunt, girl, what hope is left?
Your losses are mounting,
the property gone and
marriage
seems a fading dream at your age—
or do you still console yourself with thoughts of a
husband?
Forget it. Aegisthus is not so naive 1270
as to see children born from you or from me—
unambiguous grief for himself.
But now if you join in my plans,
you will win, in the first place,
profound and sacred respect from the dead below:
your father, your brother.
And second, people will call you noble.
That is your lineage, that is your future.
And besides, you will find a husband,
a good one: men like a woman with character. 1280
Oh don't you see? You'll make us famous!
People will cheer! They'll say
'Look at those two!' they'll say
'Look at the way they saved their father's house!
Against an enemy standing strong!
Risked their lives! Stood up to murder!
Those two deserve to be honored in public,
on every streetcorner and festival in the city—
there should be a prize for heroism like that!'
So they will speak of us. 1290
And whether we live or die doesn't matter:
that fame will stand.
Oh my dear one, listen to me.
Take on your father's work,
take up your brother's task,
make some refuge from evil for me
and for you.
Because you know,

there is a kind of excellence
in me and you—born in us—
and it cannot live in shame.

1300

CHORUS In times like these, speaking or listening,
forethought is your ally

CHRYSOTHEMIS Well yes—and if this were a rational woman
she would have stopped to think before she spoke.
She is, unfortunately, mad.
Tell me, what in the world do you have in mind
as you throw on your armor
and call me to your side?
Look at yourself! You are female,
not male—born that way.
And you're no match for them in strength or in luck.
They are flush with fortune;
our luck has trickled away.
Really, Electra,
who would think to topple a man of his stature?
Who could ever get away with it?
Be careful: this sort of blundering
might make things worse for us—
what if someone overhears!
And there is nothing whatever to win or to gain
if we make ourselves famous and die in disgrace.
Death itself is not the worst thing.
Worse is to live
when you want to die.
So I beg you,
before you destroy us
and wipe out the family altogether,
control your temper.
As for your words,
I will keep them secret—for your sake.
Oh Electra, get some sense! It is almost too late.
Your strength is nothing,

1310

1320

1330

you cannot beat them: give up.

CHORUS Hear that? Foresight!—
no greater asset a person can have
than foresight combined with good sense.

ELECTRA Predictable.
I knew you'd say no.
Well:
alone then.
One hand will have to be enough.
One hand *is* enough.

1340

Yes.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Too bad you weren't so resolved
on the day father died.
You could have finished the task.

ELECTRA Yes, I had the guts for it then, but no strategy.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Forget strategy—you'll live longer.

ELECTRA I gather you don't intend to help.

1350

CHRYSOTHEMIS Too risky for me.

ELECTRA You have your own strategy, I see.
I admire that.

But your cowardice appalls me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS One day you will say I was right.

ELECTRA Never.

CHRYSOTHEMIS The future will judge.

ELECTRA Oh go away. You give no help.

CHRYSOTHEMIS You take no advice.

ELECTRA Why not run off and tell all this to mother?

1360

CHRYSOTHEMIS I don't hate you that much.

ELECTRA At least realize you are driving me into dishonor.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Dishonor? No: foresight.

ELECTRA And I should conform to your version of justice?

CHRYSOTHEMIS When you are sane, you can think for us both.

ELECTRA Terrible to sound so right and be so wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Well put! You describe yourself to a fault.

ELECTRA Do you deny that I speak for justice?

CHRYSOTHEMIS Let's just say there are times
when justice is too big a risk.

1370

ELECTRA I will not live by rules like those.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Go ahead then. You'll find out I was right.

ELECTRA I *do* go ahead. You can not deter me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS So you won't change your plan?

ELECTRA Immorality isn't a plan. It is the enemy.

CHRYSOTHEMIS You don't hear a single word I say.

ELECTRA Oh it was all decided long ago.

CHRYSOTHEMIS Well I'll be off.
It's clear you could never bring yourself
to praise my words, nor I your ways.

1380

ELECTRA Yes. You do that. You be off.
But I will not follow you,
no.
Never.
Not even if you beg me.

When
I look in your eyes I see emptiness.

CHRYSOTHEMIS If that is your attitude,
that is your attitude.
When you're in deep trouble,
you'll say I was right.

1390

Exit CHRYSOTHEMIS

CHORUS Why is it— *strophe* 1

we look at birds in the air,
we see it makes sense
the way they care
for the life of those who sow and sustain them—
why
is it
we don't do the same?
No:
by lightning of Zeus,
by Themis of heaven,
not long

1400

free of pain!
O
sound going down
to the dead in the
ground,
take a voice,
take my voice,
take down
pity
below
to Atreus' dead:
tell them shame.
Tell them there is no dancing.

1410

Because *antistrophe* 1
here is a house falling sick
falling now
between two children battling,
and there is no more level of love in the days.

1420

Betrayed,
alone
she goes down in the waves:
Electra,
grieving for death,
for her father,
as a nightingale
grieving always.

Nor
does she think
to fear dying,
no!
she is glad
to go dark.
As a
killer
of furies,
as a pureblooded
child
of the father who sowed her.
No one well-born
is willing to live

with evil,
with shame,
with a name made nameless.
O child,
child,
you made your life a wall of tears
against dishonor:
you fought and you won.
For they call you
the child of his mind,

child of his excellence.
I pray you raise your hand
and crush the ones
who now
crush you!
For I see you subsisting
in mean part,
and yet

1430

1440

strophe 2

1450

antistrophe 2

1460

you are one who kept faith
with the living laws,
kept faith
in the clear reverence
of Zeus.

Enter ORESTES and servant with urn

ORESTES Tell me ladies, did we get the right directions?
Are we on the right road? Is this the place?

CHORUS What place? What do you want?

ORESTES The place where Aegisthus lives.

1470

CHORUS Well here you are. Your directions were good.

ORESTES Which one of you, then, will tell those within?
Our arrival will please them.

CHORUS Her—as nearest of kin, she is the right one to
announce you.

ORESTES Please, my lady, go in and tell them
that certain Phocians are asking for Aegisthus.

ELECTRA OIMOI TALAIN'.
Oh no. Don't say that. Don't say you have come with
evidence of the stories we heard.

1480

ORESTES I don't know what you heard.
Old Strophius sent me with news of Orestes.

ELECTRA Oh stranger, what news? Fear comes walking into me.

ORESTES We have his remains in a small urn here—
for he's dead, as you see.

ELECTRA OI 'GO TALAINA.
Oh no. No. Not this thing in your hands.
No.

ORESTES If you have tears to shed for Orestes,
this urn is all that holds his body now. 1490

ELECTRA Oh stranger, allow me, in god's name—
if this vessel does really contain him,
to hold it in my hands.
For myself, for the whole generation of us,
I have tears to keep,
I have ashes to weep.

ORESTES (*to servant with urn*): Bring it here, give it to her, whoever
she is.
It is no enemy asking this.
She is someone who loved him,
or one of his blood. 1500

ELECTRA If this were all you were, Orestes,
how could your memory
fill my memory,
how is it your soul fills my soul?
I sent you out, I get you back:
tell me
how could the difference be simply
nothing?
Look!
You are nothing at all. 1510
Just a crack where the light slipped through.
Oh my child,
I thought I could save you.
I thought I could send you beyond.
But there is no beyond.
You might as well have stayed that day
to share your father's tomb.
Instead, somewhere, I don't know where—
suddenly alone you stopped—
where death was. 1520
You stopped.
And I would have waited
and washed you
and lifted you
up from the fire,
like a whitened coal.

Strangers are so careless!
Look how you got smaller, coming back.
OIMOI TALAINA.
All my love 1530
gone for nothing.
Days of my love, years of my love.
Into your child's fingers I put the earth and the sky.
No mother did that for you.
No nurse.
No slave.
I. Your sister
without letting go,
day after day, year after year,
and you my own sweet child. 1540

But death was a wind too strong for that.

One day three people vanished.
Father. You. Me. Gone.
Now our enemies rock with laughter.
And she runs mad for joy—
that creature
in the shape of your mother—
how often you said you would come
one secret evening and cut her throat!
But our luck cancelled that, 1550
whatever luck is.
And instead my beloved,
luck sent you back to me
colder than ashes,
later than shadow.
OIMOI MOI.
Pity,
PHEU PHEU
oh beloved,
OIMOI MOI 1560
as you vanish down that road.
Oh my love
take me there.
Let me dwell where you are.
I am already nothing.
I am already burning.

ELECTRA

[1165-1188]

Oh my love, I was once part of you—
take me too!
Only void is between us.
And I see that the dead feel no pain.

1570

CHORUS Electra, be reasonable.
Your father was a mortal human being.
Orestes too—we all pay the same price for that.
Control yourself.

ORESTES PHEU PHEU.
What should I say? This is
impossible! I cannot hold my tongue much longer.

ELECTRA What is the matter? What are you trying to say?

ORESTES Is this the brilliant Electra?

ELECTRA This is Electra. Brilliant no more.

1580

ORESTES OIMOI TALAINES.
It hurts me to look at you.

ELECTRA Surely, stranger, you're not feeling sorry for me?

ORESTES It shocks me, the way you look: do they abuse you?

ELECTRA Yes, in fact. But who are you?

ORESTES PHEU
What an ugly, loveless life for a girl.

ELECTRA Why do you stare at me? Why are you so sympathetic?

ORESTES I had no idea how bad my situation really is.

ELECTRA And what makes you realize that? Something I said?

ORESTES Just to see the outline of your suffering.

1590

ELECTRA Yet this is only a fraction of it you see.

ELECTRA

[1189-1207]

ORESTES What could be worse than this?

ELECTRA To live in the same house with killers.

ORESTES What killers? What evil are you hinting at?

ELECTRA My own father's killers.
And I serve them as a slave. By compulsion.

ORESTES Who compels you?

ELECTRA Mother she is called. Mother she is not.

ORESTES How do you mean? Does she strike you? Insult you?

ELECTRA Yes. And worse.

1600

ORESTES But have you no one to protect you?
No one to stand in her way?

ELECTRA No. There was someone. Here are his ashes.

ORESTES Oh girl. How I pity the dark life you live.

ELECTRA No one else has ever pitied me, you know.

ORESTES No one else has ever been part of your grief.

ELECTRA Do you mean you are somehow part of my family?

ORESTES I'll explain—if these women are trustworthy.

ELECTRA Oh yes, you can trust them. Speak freely.

ORESTES Give back the urn, then, and you will hear everything.

1610

ELECTRA No! Don't take this from me, for god's sake,
whoever you are!

ORESTES Come now, do as I say. It is the right thing.

ELECTRA No! In all reverence no please—don't take this away.
It is all that I love.

ORESTES I forbid you to keep it.

ELECTRA O TALAIN'EGO SETHEN.
Orestes! What if
they take from me
even the rites of your death!

1620

ORESTES Hush, now. That language is wrong.

ELECTRA Wrong to mourn my own dead brother?

ORESTES Wrong for you to say that word.

ELECTRA How did I lose the right to call him brother?

ORESTES Your rights you have. Your brother you don't.

ELECTRA Do I not stand here with Orestes himself in my hands?

ORESTES No, in fact. That Orestes is a lie.

ELECTRA Then where in the world is the poor boy's grave?

ORESTES Nowhere. The living need no grave.

ELECTRA Child, what are you saying?

1630

ORESTES Nothing but the truth.

ELECTRA The man is alive?

ORESTES As I live and breathe.

ELECTRA You—?

ORESTES Look at this ring—our father's—

ELECTRA Father's!

ORESTES —and see what I mean.

ELECTRA Oh love, you break on me like light!

ORESTES Yes like light!

ELECTRA Oh voice, have you come out of nowhere?

1640

ORESTES Nowhere but where you are.

ELECTRA Do I hold you now in my hands?

ORESTES Now and forever.

ELECTRA Ladies, my friends, my people, look!
Here stands Orestes:
dead by device
now by device brought back to life!

ORESTES I see, child. And at this reversal,
my tears are falling for joy.

ELECTRA IO GONAI.

strophe 1650

You exist!
You came back,
you found me—

ORESTES Yes, I am here. Now keep silent a while.

ELECTRA Why?

ORESTES Silence is better. Someone inside might overhear.

ELECTRA By Artemis unbroken! I would not
dignify with fear
the dull surplus of females
who huddle in that house!

1660

ORESTES Carefull! There is war in women too,
as you know by experience, I think.

ELECTRA OTOTOTOTOI TOTOI.
You drive me back down my desperation—
that unclouded

incurable
never forgotten
evil
growing inside my life.

ORESTES I know, but we should talk of those deeds
when the moment is right. 1670

ELECTRA Every arriving moment of my life *antistrophe*
has a right
to tell those deeds!
And this chance to speak freely is hard won.

ORESTES Precisely. Safeguard it.

ELECTRA How?

ORESTES When the time is unsuitable, no long speeches.

ELECTRA But how could silence be the right way to greet
you— simply
coming
out of nowhere
like a miracle? 1680

ORESTES It was a miracle set in motion by the gods.

ELECTRA Ah.

That is a vast claim
and much more beautiful,
to think
some god
has brought you here.
Some god: yes! That must be true. 1690

ORESTES Electra, I do not like to curb your rejoicing
but I am afraid when you lose control.

ELECTRA Oh but my love—
now that you have travelled back down all those years

to meet my heart,
over all this grief of mine,
do not
oh love—

ORESTES What are you asking? 1700

ELECTRA Do not turn your face from me.
Don't take yourself away.

ORESTES Of course not. No one else will take me either.

ELECTRA Do you mean that?

ORESTES Yes I do.

ELECTRA Oh beloved,
I heard your voice
when I had no hope
and my heart leapt away from me
calling
you. 1710
I was in sorrow.
But now
I am holding you,
now you are visible—
light of the face I could never forget.

ORESTES Spare me these words.
You don't need to teach me my mother is evil
or how Aegisthus drains the family wealth,
pours it out like water,
sows it to the wind. 1720
We've no time for all that—talk is expensive.
What I need now are the practical details:
where we should hide, where we can leap out
and push that enemy laughter
right back down their throats!

But be careful she doesn't read
the fact of our presence
straight from the glow on your face.
You must keep on lamenting
my fictitious death.
Time enough
for lyres and laughter
when we've won the day.

1730

ELECTRA Your will and my will are one: identical, brother.
For I take all my joy from you,
none is my own.
Nor could I harm you ever so slightly
at any price: it would be a disservice
to the god who stands beside us now.
So. You know what comes next.
Aegisthus has gone out,
mother is home.
And don't worry:
she'll see no glow on my face.
Hatred put out the light in me a long time ago.
Besides, since I saw you
my tears keep running down—
tears, joy, tears all mixed up together.
How could I stop?
I saw you come down that road a dead man,
I looked again and saw you alive.
You have used me strangely.
Why—if father suddenly came back to life
I wouldn't call it fantastic.

1740

1750

Believe what you see.
But
now you have come,
I am yours to command.
Alone,
I would have done one of two things:
deliver myself or else die.

1760

ORESTES Quiet! I hear someone coming out.

ELECTRA Go inside, strangers.
You are bringing a gift
they can neither reject nor rejoice in.

Enter OLD MAN

OLD MAN Idiots! Have you lost your wits completely,
and your instinct to survive as well—
or were you born brainless?
You're not on the brink of disaster now,
you're right in the eye of it, don't you see that?
Why, except for me standing guard at the door here
this long while, your plans
would have been in the house
before yourselves!
Good thing I took caution.
Now cut short the speechmaking,
stifle your joy
and go in the house. Go!
Delay is disaster in things like this.
Get it over with: that's the point now.

1770

1780

ORESTES How will I find things inside?

OLD MAN Perfect. No one will know you.

ORESTES You reported me dead?

OLD MAN You are deep in hell, so far as they know.

ORESTES Are they happy at this?

OLD MAN I'll tell you that later. For now,
the whole plan is unfolding beautifully.
Even the ugly parts.

ELECTRA Who is this man, brother?

1790

ORESTES Don't you know him?

ELECTRA Not even remotely.

ORESTES You don't know the man into whose hands you put me,
once long ago?

ELECTRA What man? What are you saying?

ORESTES The man who smuggled me off to Phocia,
thanks to your foresight.

ELECTRA Him? Can it be? That man was
the one trustworthy soul I could find in the house,
the day father died!

1800

ORESTES That's who he is. Do not question me further.

ELECTRA (*to the OLD MAN*) I bless you like the light of day!
I bless you
as the savior of the house of Agamemnon!
How did you come? Is it really you—
who pulled us up from the pit that day?
I bless your hands,
I bless your feet,
I bless the sweet roads you walked!
How strange
you were beside me all that time and gave no sign.
Strange—to destroy me with lies
when you had such sweet truth to tell.
Bless you, father!—Yes, father.
That is who I see when I look at you now.

1810

There is no man on earth I have hated and loved like
you
on the one same day.

OLD MAN Enough, now. As for all the stories in between—
there will be nights and days
to unravel them, Electra.
But for you two, standing here,
I have just one word: act!
Now is the moment!
Now Clytemnestra is alone.
Now there is not one man in the house.

1820

If you wait you will have to fight others,
more skilled and more numerous. Think!

ORESTES Well, Pylades, no more speeches.
As quick as we can
into the house—after
we pay our respects
to the gods of this doorway.

1830

Exit ORESTES and PYLADES followed by the OLD MAN

ELECTRA King Apollo! Graciously hear them.
Hear me too! I have been devout,
I have come to you often,

bringing you gifts of whatever I had.
Now again I come with all that I have:
Apollo wolfkiller! I beg you!
I call out—
I fall to my knees!
please send your mind over us,
inform our strategies,
show
how the gods reward
unholy action!

1840

CHORUS Look where he comes grazing forward,
blood bubbling over his lips: Ares!
As a horizontal scream into the house
go the hunters of evil,
the raw and deadly dogs.
Not long now:
the blazing dream of my head is crawling out.

1850

Here he comes like a stealing shadow,
like a footprint of death into the rooms,
stalking the past

antistrophe

with freshcut blood in his hands.
It is Hermes who guides him
down a blindfold of shadow—
straight to the finish line: not long now!

ELECTRA My ladies! The men
are about to accomplish the deed—
be silent and wait.

1860

CHORUS How? What are they doing?

ELECTRA She is dressing the urn. They are standing beside her.

CHORUS But why did you come running out here?

ELECTRA To watch that Aegisthus doesn't surprise us.

CLYTEMNESTRA (*within*) AIAI IO.
Rooms
filled with murder!

ELECTRA Someone inside screams—do you hear?

1870

CHORUS Yes I hear. It makes my skin crawl.

CLYTEMNESTRA OIMOI TALAIN'.
Aegisthus, where are you?

ELECTRA There! Again! Someone calls out.

CLYTEMNESTRA Oh child my child, pity the mother who bore you!

ELECTRA Yet you had little enough pity for him
and none for his father!

CHORUS Alas for the city.
Alas for a whole race thrown and shattered:
the shape that followed you down the days
is dying now, dying away.

1880

CLYTEMNESTRA OMOI.
I am hit!

ELECTRA Hit her a second time, if you have the strength!

CLYTEMNESTRA OMOI MAL' AUTHIS.
Again!

ELECTRA If only Aegisthus could share this!

CHORUS The curses are working.
Under the ground
dead men are alive
with their black lips moving,
black mouths sucking
on the soles of killer' feet.

1890

Here they come,
hands soaked with red: Ares is happy!
Enough said.

ELECTRA Orestes, how does it go?

ORESTES Good, so far—at least so far as Apollo's oracle was
good.

ELECTRA Is the creature dead?

1900

ORESTES Your good mother will not insult you anymore.

CHORUS Stop! I see Aegisthus coming yes, it is him.

ELECTRA Children, get back!

ORESTES Where do you see him—

ELECTRA There—marching right down on us
full of joy.

CHORUS Go quick to the place just inside the front door.
You have won the first round. Now for the second.

ORESTES Don't worry. We will finish this.

ELECTRA Hurry. Go to it.

1910

ORESTES Yes I am gone.

ELECTRA And leave this part to me.

CHORUS Why not drop a few friendly words in his ear—
so his moment of justice may come
as a surprise.

Enter AEGISTHUS

AEGISTHUS Does anyone know where those Phocian strangers are?
People say they have news of Orestes
dead in a chariot crash.
You!
yes you!—you've never been shy
to speak your mind.
And obviously this matter most concerns you.

1920

ELECTRA Yes of course I know, for I do keep track
of the fortunes of the family.

AEGISTHUS Where are they then,
the strangers?—tell me.

ELECTRA Inside the house, for they've fallen upon
the perfect hostess.

AEGISTHUS And it's true they bring a report of his death?

ELECTRA No—better: they have evidence,
not just words.

1930

AEGISTHUS We can see proof?

ELECTRA You can, indeed, though it's no pretty sight.

AEGISTHUS Well this is good news. Unusual, coming from you.

ELECTRA Relish it while you can.

AEGISTHUS Silence! I say throw open the gates!
for every Mycenaean and Argive to see—
in case you had placed empty hopes
in this man—
take my bit on your tongue
or learn the hard way.

1940

ELECTRA As for me, I am playing my part to the end.
I've learned to side with the winners.

*A shrouded corpse is disclosed with ORESTES and PYLADES
standing beside it.*

AEGISTHUS O Zeus! I see here a man fallen by the jealousy of god
—but
if that remark offends,
I unsay it.

Uncover the eyes. Uncover it all.
I should pay my respects.

ORESTES Uncover it yourself.
This isn't my corpse—it's yours.
Yours to look at, yours to eulogize.

1950

AEGISTHUS Yes good point. I have to agree.
You there—Clytemnestra must be about in the house—
call her for me.

ORESTES She is right here before you. No need to look elsewhere.

AEGISTHUS OIMOI.
What do I see!

ORESTES You don't know the face?

AEGISTHUS Caught! But *who set the trap?*

1960

ORESTES Don't you realize yet
that you're talking to dead men alive?

AEGISTHUS OIMOI.
I do understand. You are Orestes.

ORESTES At last.

AEGISTHUS I'm a dead man. No way out.
But let me just say—

ELECTRA No!

Don't let him speak—
 by the gods! Brother—no speechmaking now!
 When a human being is so steeped in evil as this one
 what is gained by delaying his death?
 Kill him at once.
 Throw his corpse out
 for scavengers to get.
 Nothing less than this
 can cut the knot of evils
 inside me.

1970

ORESTES Get in with you, quickly.
 This is *no word game*:
 your life is at stake.

1980

AEGISTHUS Why take me inside?
 If the deed is honorable, what need of darkness?
 You aren't ready to kill?

ORESTES Don't give me instructions, just get yourself in:
 You will die on the spot
 where you slaughtered my father.

AEGISTHUS Must these rooms see
 the whole evil of Pelops' race,
 present and future?

1990

ORESTES They will see yours, I can prophesy.

AEGISTHUS That is no skill you got from your father!

ORESTES Your answers are quick, your progress slow.
 Go.

AEGISTHUS You lead the way.

ORESTES No you go first.

AEGISTHUS Afraid I'll escape?

ORESTES You shall not die on your own terms.
 I will make it bitter for you.
 And let such judgment fall
 on any who wish to break the law:
 kill them!
 The evil were less.

2000

*Exit ORESTES and AEGISTHUS, followed by ELECTRA, into
 the house*

CHORUS O seed of Atreus:
 you suffered and broke free,

 you took aim and struck;
 you have won your way through
 to the finish.

Exit CHORUS