

SOPHOCLES'

ELEKTRA

Written circa 410BCE

*Translated By
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Dramatis Personae

Orestes Elektra Old slave Chrysothemis Clytemnestra Aegisthus Chorus of Argive Women (*Older friends of Elektra*) Pylades (silent) Servant to Clytemnestra (female, silent) Two Attendants to Orestes (male, silent) One Attendant to Aegisthus (male, silent)

Before the main gate of the palace of Mycenae. A little to the Stage Left is Apollo's altar. Dawn. Sounds of birds. Enter Orestes, Pylades, his closest friend and Old Slave. All are bearded.

Old Slave:

Here we are Orestes, in front of the palace of Mycenae! You, Orestes are the only son of Agamemnon, the General who took the Greeks to Troy and fought the Trojans until that city fell. So, now that we are here, you can see all those things you've always wanted to see. There! There it is, the old city of Argos which you've missed so much and there, look, there, is the playground of Inahos' daughter, Io, who was turned into a cow before the gadfly stung her. And there! There, Orestes can you see Apollo's market? Apollo the wolf killer, the protector of our sheep. There, to our left is the famous temple of Hera.

He looks around him, ponderously.

This place here, Orestes, this is where, you may say, is Mycenae, replete with wealth and this, the palace of the sons of Pelops, Agamemnon and Menelaos, replete with disasters. From in there, during your father's murder, your sister, Elektra, snatched you away and gave you to me. Then I, in turn, took you far away and raised you to this age to be your father's avenger. You will bring him his due Justice.

Now, then, Orestes and you, Pylades, his dear friend, we must think quickly how we should go about accomplishing this deed. The bright rays of the sun are already clearly about us and so are the sounds of the morning birds. The dark night and her stars are now gone.

So, let's discuss the matter before any of the men emerge from their house. This place here is one for deed and not for hesitation.

Orestes:

My dearest friend. How many signs of your trust you've already shown me!

Like a trusty, pure-blood horse that no matter how old it is, when it senses danger, it doesn't lose its courage and pricks its ears for the attack. So, you, too, my friend, are the first to prod us on and support us.

Let me then tell you my thoughts. You listen carefully and if you find something wrong in what I'm saying, correct me.

I have gone to the Oracle of Apollo and asked the god how I should avenge the death of my father. His answer was that I should go about it on my own and with my own hand, without armies or shields and, secretly extract the bloody Justice.

Well then, since this is the will of the Oracle, let me send you into the palace when that is possible, so that you can find out whatever is going on in there and then give us a clear picture of the situation.

Have no fear: the many years that have passed since you left the palace and the many years that have

blossomed on your face will prevent anyone from recognising you.

Once inside, say that you're a stranger, sent by Phanoteas, the Phockian who's one of their greatest friends. Then, under oath tell them that Orestes met with a fatal accident at the Pythian Games. Tell them his chariot toppled at the race. Let that be the story.

We two will do as the oracle said. We'll go to my father's tomb and adorn it with libations and a lock of my hair. Then, we'll go and pick up the urn that you have hidden behind the bushes and come back here. The urn will help us tell them that Orestes is dead and that his ashes are contained in it. What a sweet piece of news that will be for them!

How can a fictional death hurt me? Dead in fiction, alive in truth and able to earn glory!

I don't believe that words that bring about good, even if they are lies, can be bad. I've seen that often in the past. Fiction declares men to be dead but they're alive and when they return home they're treated as heroes. It will be the same with me: A false story, yes but after it I shall shine like a bright star before my enemies.

Walks to the altar, kneels and prays

Gods and land of my fathers welcome me into your streets. And you, too, palace of my father, receive me well because I've come to you, sent by a god to cleanse you from all pollution. Don't send me away in shame but let me become a worthy ruler of my house and my estate.

Returns to the other two

I did my prayer. Now, you, old man, be very careful. Do what you have to. We two will leave now because it is the right moment to do so and the moment is the greatest ruler of every deed.

Within the palace

Elektra: *sighing*

Ah, poor, poor me!

Old servant:

I think Orestes, I've heard from behind the gates some young woman softly sighing.

Orestes:

Do you think it might be poor Elektra? Should we stay here and listen to her lament?

Old Servant:

No, absolutely not! We must obey Apollo's commands. Go to your father's grave and pour the libations first. If we want victory and strength in our deeds we must do that first.

Exit all

Enter Elektra from one of the side gates. She is grieving. Her clothes are old and tattered.

Elektra:

Oh, pure light and air! Air, spread equally over the whole earth!

How many of my dirges must you have heard?

How many times you must have seen me beat my bloody breasts once the dark night had passed?

My hateful bed in my mournful house is well acquainted with all my sleepless nights. It knows how much I cry for my father's bad lot. If only war god Ares had not welcomed him in Troy and there gave him a glorious death-bed! Instead, my own mother and her lover slashed hard through his skull with a double axe like woodmen fell an oak.

Such a dreadful death, such a pitiful death, father, and yet, and yet, you've only got me! Only from me do you receive your due of pity and song of loss.

Still, so long as my eyes can see the stars with their brilliant rays, so long as I can see this daylight, I won't stop my hateful crying and songs of misery. My crying will go on like that of Procne the nightingale who killed Itys, her very own chick. It will be loud crying, loud announcements of my pain, here, in front of the gates of my father's palace.

To you, Hades and Persephone, rulers of the underworld and you, dear Mistress Curse! You, too, daughters

of the gods, revered Spirits of the Justice who seek justice for those wrongfully murdered, for those whose marriage bed was secretly dishonoured –come all of you, bring me help, send my brother to avenge the murder of my father. The burden is getting far too heavy for me and I can no longer bear it alone.

Enter the chorus of Argive women.

Chorus:

Such grief, Elektra! Why? All this endless grief that tears you up so dreadfully! Grief brought to you by your ruthless mother! Grief that will never cease over your father, Agamemnon! He was murdered in such shameless way by the awful plotting of your cursed mother, Clytemnestra and by her own bloody hand! If I'd be allowed a word, let that word be, death to the murderer!

Elektra:

Dear friends, children of our nobles, I know, you've come to soften my sorrows. I understand your concern, it doesn't escape me; but no, I can't relent. I cannot let this grief leave me. How can I not go on lamenting my unhappy father's ill luck? But you, dear friends, you who give and take all the different dues of friendship with me, please let me suffer like this.

Chorus:

But, Elektra, you'll never raise him from Hades' Lakes of Eternity with tears and prayers! We all have to go there sooner or later, Elektra but your grief is abnormal, far more than moderation would allow. Such uncontrollable grief will be your ruin. This evil deed cannot be undone, so do unchain yourself from this misery. Why are you trying to undo what cannot be undone?

Elektra:

No. It's a foolish thing to forget the shameful murder of one's parents. Constantly in my mind I have Procne, Nereas' wife, the ever-lamenting one, the one who had killed her own child, Itys. She mourns her Itys ceaselessly. Zeus' sacred little messenger, Itys who brings us Spring. And you, too, Niobe! I also think of you. You, too, are a goddess. You, too, cry endlessly because of your endless suffering. You have been turned into stone over which your endless tears flow. A rocky tomb.

Chorus:

But, child, you're not alone in the world in this horrible grief! Don't forget, you share this house with your sisters Chrysothemis and Iphianasa and even Orestes who's a happy child because he's been hidden from all this anguish somewhere! But who one day he'll be guided here to famous Mycenae by Zeus and he will be received as the glorious son of his race that he is.

Elektra:

I wait for him. Day and night, tirelessly I wait for Orestes.

Poor woman, neither a married woman nor a mother, I sit here, withering, drenched in my own tears and with utter misery my only companion whereas he? He has forgotten what father has suffered and what he has been informed about me. And as for messages, what sort of messages does he send me? Lies! He "longs to return" he says but, of course, there's never enough "longing" to come!

Chorus:

Courage, my child. Almighty Zeus who oversees and governs everything is still in Heaven. Place all this huge but just anger of yours into his hand and do not be so angry at your enemies. By all means, don't forget them, but do remember that Time is a benevolent god. Because your brother –who lives in the fertile shores of the herd-roaming Crisa- will return. Agamemnon, the lord of the underworld will not forget.

Elektra:

I can't carry this pain any more. Most of my life has already gone without the slightest hope. I waste away without any children or without a man to stand beside me, to stand up for me and, like a disdained stranger in my own city, I go about doing the domestic work of my own father's rooms. Look at my dress! Such a shabby cloth and with it I wait for the people to finish eating before I can sit down for my meal but by then, all the food is gone. All the tables are empty.

Chorus:

And your father's cry, too! So pitiful! So pitiful was his cry when he returned to the rooms of his own fathers and the stroke of the bronze axe was delivered right upon his skull, straight and direct. Unfailing. A killing that was devised by sheer cunning and accomplished by utmost lust; and between the two of them, between cunning and lust they gave birth to a monstrous shape. Was it a mortal's hand or was it some god?

Elektra:

What dreadful day! Dreadful, hateful day, most hateful of all the days my bitter life had ever seen! What shocking night! What anguish, what pains my father had experienced during that unutterable banquet – unutterable death dealt to him by their two hands. Hands that deceived and took my own life away, hands that brought about my own death.

Zeus! Give them their due suffering! Let them not enjoy the fruits of their deed!

Chorus:

Hush, girl! Be careful now. Don't you know where all this has come from? All this excessive grief of yours brings about even deeper suffering for you. All this grief brought for you nothing more than wars for your own soul to fight. Be brave, child. Try and cope. You can't fight against those who are now in power.

Elektra:

Blame it on my unbearable suffering. My grief stems from it. I know my madness well and I don't deny it but even so, I shall not stop this grieving no matter how fatal it might be for as long as life will have me. Because, my dear friends, from whom would I hear a good word, a word of comfort? Who is there who can judge things fairly, as they really are? No, let me go, my friends. Console me no longer. Let me be. An illness such as mine has no cure and its suffering will never bring about the end of tears.

Chorus:

Yet, let me insist, Elektra –like a loving, dependable mother, let me insist: don't add suffering upon suffering.

Elektra:

Suffering? By what measure can I measure it fair or enough? Tell me please, by what measure can it be right to forget your dead? In whose heart has this thoughtlessness grew? I hope I'm never given the honour to be with them and I hope I'm never given enjoyment with anything if I am to leave behind the honour of my father by holding back the wings of my loud lamentations. Shall we have the dead simply lie there, their blood not having been avenged with the spilling of his murderer's blood? What then of shame? What of respect in the world?

Chorus:

Darling, I've come here for your own good –yours and mine, but if you find that my words are wrong then, by all means, do act as you wish. We will stand by you.

Elektra:

I feel ashamed, my dear friends. Ashamed because I fear that you may think that I'm overdoing all these tears and grief; but I act this way because of the terrible force of my misery. Please, my dear friends, bear with me. Because, how could a woman like me, born in her father's noble house, watch that house clogged with misery, a misery which I see by day and by night, ever growing, never decreasing? How could a woman like me watch all this and not act the way I do?

More than all of them my own mother, the woman who gave me life, did me the gravest wrongs. And then (*indicating the palace*) here I am, living in my own house under the same roof of my father's murderers and it is they who command my actions and who say what I may possess and what I must do without.

Imagine then how I go through my days when I see Aigisthus, dressed in regal gear and sitting on my father's throne just as my father used to do and pouring the sacred libations next to the hearth where he had done his murderous deed. And how also do you think I feel when I see them committing the ultimate outrage, that of sleeping together on the same bed, my father's bed, his murderer and my wretched mother –if one can call such a woman a "mother!" She sleeps with this polluter with all the audacity, all the arrogance of one who's not afraid of the Erinyes, the Avenging Spirits!

And even more still! She behaves as if the whole dreadful deed is a joke! She even gloats over it. She's

found out the exact date of their cruel act, the very day when she and her lover treacherously killed my father. She commemorates it with dances and monthly slaughters of cattle as sacrifices to the gods, praying they may preserve her.

And I, poor I, watch all this! I watch this wretched feast, raised in my father's name and I, I suffer violently alone. Alone because they won't allow me to grieve openly, openly and fully, until my heart empties all its pain.

This... this so called high-born woman, this noble woman, continuously shouts insults at me. Insults and curses like, "God-hated beast! Do you think it's only your father who has died? Do you not think that anyone else has a right to mourn? I hope your death is a vile one and the gods in Hades never release you from these tears."

That's how she curses me. And then when someone mentions that Orestes may be on his way, she charges at me and like a wild beast shouts, "And who is to blame for this? Wasn't it you who, with your hands took him from me?"

Was it not your own work that Orestes is hidden far away? Don't you worry, though and be certain of this: you will get what you deserve for it!"

That's the sort of howling she gives me, while her bed-mate stands next her encouraging her to howl some more. What a shameless man! What a coward! A plague to beat all plagues! A man whose battles are partnered with women!

And so I wait for Orestes. I wait for him to come and save me from this torment; and as I do, I ache in despair. And because my brother constantly puts off doing anything, he has erased all my hopes.

Faced with such evilness, my friends, it is not proper to behave towards them politely and with respect. In such hateful circumstances as these there's a need to behave and act quite differently.

Chorus:

Tell us, Elektra, while you're talking like this, is Aegisthus here or is he away from the palace?

Elektra:

Of course he's not in the palace. No, he's away at the farm. Do you really think I'd be able to get out of the house if he was here?

Chorus:

Well then, if that's the case, I, too, will be able to speak my mind more freely.

Elektra:

Go ahead, speak. Say what you like while he's away.

Chorus:

I was wondering about your brother. Do you really think he's coming or has he put it off again?

Elektra:

He says he'll come; but then again, none of the things he says he ever does.

Chorus:

It's quite common that there is a delay when a deed is momentous.

Elektra:

Yet I saved him with no delay whatsoever.

Chorus:

Courage, Elektra! He's a noble man and he'll help those close to him.

Elektra:

I believe you, otherwise I wouldn't be able to live this long.

Chorus:

Hush now. Don't speak at all because I can see your sister, Chrysothemis coming from the palace. The

same blood, the same father, the same mother. Look, she's carrying tomb offerings as our custom has it. Offerings for the dead.

Chrysothemis enters dressed in clothes and jewels, befitting a member of the palace and creating a most visible distinction of status. She has plats in her hair(see line 449). A female attendant follows her, carrying a basket with funereal items.

Chrysothemis:

Such language, my sister! You shout such things in front of our gates! Again!

You've been at this for so long and in vain, yet you won't tone down your anger!

I know all the facts, my sister. I know how dire the situation is but I wish I were brave enough to tell those two what I really think of them. But this situation is very troublesome and in such times... I think it's wise that I lower my sails and act as if I'm not doing a think. That way I wouldn't be hurting anyone.

How I wish you'd do the same, Elektra!

Even though I know that your thinking is correct, if I am to live as a free woman I'd need to obey my masters.

Elektra:

What a dreadful thing you are to forget your father –and such a father!- and to think only of your mother!

All this advice you're always giving me. These are not your words! These are her words!

Tell us, then: which of the two is it? Is it a failure of your memory when it comes to your dear ones or is it that you're badly lacking in logic? Not a minute ago you were telling us how if you had the courage you'd show them just how much you hate them, yet right now you're doing nothing to help me and in fact you're trying to hold me back as I try to get just and rightful revenge for our father.

Doesn't this add to your other faults, that of cowardice?

So tell me then. Teach me the right way. Either that or let me tell you. What good would it do for me to stop crying?

Do I not live? Badly, I know but it's good enough for me. Good enough and at the same time I give them a miserable time while I give joy to our beloved father, if there is such a thing as joy in the underworld.

Whereas you, your hatred is only a hatred in words and in fact you take sides with the murderers, whereas I, even if they gave me all those jewels you're wearing, I would still never obey them.

By all means, let your own table always be a feast for you and let your life be full of constant joy. As for me, let my joy consist of giving them misery.

And I don't seek your glory, either. A glory which, had you some logic in your head you wouldn't seek either. As well even though you could be called your father's daughter, a daughter legitimate and natural, you're now known as your mother's daughter, an illegitimate child. That's how everyone will regard you. "An evil woman who rejected her dead father and her own folk!"

Chorus:

By the gods! Don't be so angry at each other, girls! There's good advice in the words of both of you if only you agree to listen to each other!

Chrysothemis:

I know her words very well, ladies. I've heard them many times before and I wouldn't be saying anything or taking any notice of them if I didn't know that all these endless tears of hers will do her a great harm.

Elektra:

What harm? What is this great harm you're talking about? Is it greater than the one I'm suffering now? Because if it is, then I won't argue with you any more.

Chrysothemis:

I'll tell you every single thing I know.

They say that if you don't put an end to all this wailing they'll send you to a dark cave somewhere where you'll never see the light of the sun.

You'll be locked up alive, Elektra! Alive to mourn far from your own home!
Think about all this, and don't blame me later, when you begin to suffer that punishment.
It's time now for you to start behaving wisely.

Elektra:

So! That's what they've decided to do with me!

Chrysothemis:

Exactly. The moment Aigisthus comes back.

Elektra:

In that case, let him rush back!

Chrysothemis:

Poor creature! What a curse you've uttered!

Elektra:

Let him come! Let him hurry if that's what he's planning to do.

Chrysothemis:

Think, Elektra! Think what you're about to endure! Have you lost your mind?

Elektra:

This will also help me get away as far as possible from you lot!

Chrysothemis:

Have you no regard for the life you enjoy here?

Elektra: *(Sarcastically)*

What a brilliant life! Wonderful! I enjoy it enormously!

Chrysothemis:

It could be wonderful if you knew how to behave.

Elektra:

Don't try and tell me how to behave badly to my own folk.

Chrysothemis:

No, I won't do that, Elektra but you must bow to the mighty.

Elektra:

You can flatter them all you like. That's not my way.

Chrysothemis:

But, is it a good idea for you to fall through lack of common sense?

Elektra:

Let us fall for the sake of father's revenge.

Chrysothemis:

I know very well that father is quite relaxed about such matters.

Elektra:

These are excuses that evil men love to use.

Chrysothemis:

So, I can't persuade you, Elektra? Can you not agree with me?

Elektra:

No, not at all. I was never that heartless.

Chrysothemis:

In that case I'm leaving to do as I was told.

Elektra:

Where are you going? And for whom are these offerings?

Chrysothemis:

They are mother's offerings for our father.

Elektra:

What was that? She's sending offering to her worst enemy?

Chrysothemis:

You mean, because she killed him?

Elektra:

Was she told to do this by some friend or did she come up with the idea herself?

Chrysothemis:

I think she saw some dreadful dream last night.

Elektra:

O, gods of our fathers help me even now!

Chrysothemis:

Does this nightmare bring you some hope?

Elektra:

I could tell you better if you told me what it was she saw.

Chrysothemis:

I don't quite know the full thing. Just a few words, that's all.

Elektra:

Nevermind. There are times when with the utterance of a couple of words some men fall down an abyss and others are saved.

Chrysothemis:

The dream said that she saw our father as if he were here in the light of this world and as her husband again; and he took his sceptre from Aigisthus' hand and planted it hard next to the hearth. Immediately after that the sceptre shot out a branch whose blossoms covered the whole of Mycenae. Someone standing next to her heard her telling these words to Sun and I heard them from her.

I know nothing else except that this fear of hers made her send me to do this chore.

So now, I beg you. By the gods of our home, don't fall into a disaster through lack of thought. Listen to me, Elektra, because if you don't it'll be back to me that you'll be returning only this time, with much suffering.

Elektra:

Place none of these things you're holding upon the grave, my dear sister. It's disrespectful for you to do so and it is wrong for a female enemy to make offerings and libations to our father. Toss them to the wind or burry them deep into the ground so that none of it will get to our father's grave. Let her enjoy them. Let them be hidden mementos for her for when she dies.

Shameless woman! Born to be the most shameless of all women! That is why she makes these detestable offerings to the tomb of the man she has murdered.

Would you think that a dead man would accept such gifts from the woman who had murdered him? Do you think he'd receive them in a way that would please her? A woman who murdered him without honour, who murdered him as if he were an enemy of hers, who had cut his corpse up into pieces and then, and then for the act of ablution she wiped the blood off with his hair! Do you believe that these offerings will absolve her of such a heinous crime?

It cannot happen; so leave them please and cut a little from the tip of your platted hair and some of mine – the few that I have!

(She cuts a lock of her hair. The scissors are in the offerings basket)

Take these worthless objects and this simple, unadorned belt of mine and, with bent knees pray to him. Pray! Ask him kindly to come from below the earth, to our aid against our enemies. Ask him also to grant that his son, Orestes, come alive and brave to kill and trample upon our his enemy and so later, we may adorn him with gifts much richer than these. *(Thoughtfully)* I feel... I truly feel that there is something of our father's will in our mother's dream, as if he's sending her some sign of what evil may attend her.

Come, dear sister! Do these things for our own good and for the good of the man, most loved by all men, our father-in-common who is now in Hades' world.

Chorus:

Elektra's words are pious, Chrysothemis and if you have any sense you'd obey them.

Chrysothemis:

Yes, I shall do so. The just act requires a team, acting quickly upon the deed, without arguments. And you, my dear friends, for god's sake, stay silent! Say nothing to anyone about what I shall do because I'm afraid that if mother finds out about it, she'll turn this enterprise of mine into a bitter suffering.

Exit Chrysothemis

Chorus:

Perhaps...If I'm not a crazed prophet, lacking in wisdom,
then Vengeance will truly come, her hands full of the powers of Justice.
She comes, my dear girl, she comes, vengeance is never tardy.
My heart fluttered with joy a little earlier when I heard these
Most welcomed dreams, these sweetly received dreams
Because the King of the Greeks your father, will never forget you nor will he forget the ancient double-headed Axe of well-wrought bronze,
The axe that slew him with outrageous pain.
Vengeance will come! She's hidden now in her awesome vigil,
In waiting...
Stalking...
With legs of bronze
With many feet and
Many hands
Erinys shall come full of passion
Against the improper passion of the bed
And of the blood-soaked marriage
And against the polluted passion of an unloving couple.
Because of this I think the sign in the dream is faultless
and bad for those who did the evil deed as well as for their helpers.
If the prophesy in this dire dream is not fulfilled then let us say it:
Prophesies and oracles do not exist in dreams.
Ancient chariot race of Pelops! Full-gorged with torment for
This land!
From the moment Myrtilos, Ippodameia's father,
Drowned in the ocean
The moment he was thrown into his watery grave
By his golden chariot

Headlong,

From that very moment, this house was never free of

Suffering.

Enter Clytemnestra and her maid who is holding a basket of sacrificial items. Clytemnestra will sacrifice them upon Apollo's altar

Clytemnestra: *(She sees Elektra)*

So! Here you are again! Outside the house, free as a bird! And that's because Aegisthus isn't here! Huh! At least he is able to keep you in check - make it a little harder for you to shame your own folk outside your own gates.

Sure, now that he's away you show absolutely no respect for me and I'm certain that you'd have spread much gossip around, about what a terrible creature I am and how I rule you and your friends unjustly. And no doubt, you also tell them that I treat you harshly.

No, I don't treat you unjustly but I admit to being harsh occasionally, simply as a retort to your own harsh treatment of me. You use no other excuse than the fact that your father is dead that I'm being cruel to you. And why do you do that?

Because I killed him! I know that I've killed your father. I know that very well. I do not deny it. But it wasn't just I alone who killed him. Justice helped my hand and you would accept that, if only you had a bit of sense. Agamemnon! Huh! That father of yours for whom you have shed such endless tears, that father of yours, decided by himself and without consulting the rest of the Greeks to sacrifice your little sister, Iphigeneia, to the Goddess Artemis. He alone!

Alone! Have I not bore the greater burden of giving birth to her? What share was his pain in her birth?

What pain? What was his pain, Elektra?

Explain this, then Elektra: What was the point of the sacrifice? Who was to gain?

The Argives? What right did they have to demand the sacrifice of my own offspring?

His brother Menelaos? Where is my justice then?

Where is my justice?

And had not Menelaos two children of his own?

Would it not have been far more proper that they should bare the burden of the sacrifice since it was for HER, their mother, Helen, that the fleet was gathered together? They were the children of one brace of parents. They should have died! THEY should have died!

Was it Hades, then? Was it he who had a greater urge to gorge upon the souls of my children rather than hers?

Was it Agamemnon? Was it this god-hated father of yours? Did he feel more love for his brother's children than those of his own? Is this not the act of a mindless, a senseless father? You think not but I think yes.

She stomps her foot, indicating the underworld.

Ask HER! If she could get a voice her answer would be loud and certain. "Yes!" she would say, and "yes" again!

I feel no remorse for my deed; and as for you, I suggest that if you want to find fault in others, try and learn about Justice.

Elektra:

Well, now! You can't say I deserved this lengthy tirade because I had started whining!

You've got to at least let me speak now about both, my father and my sister.

Clytemnestra:

By all means! Had you always started your speeches with such an attitude, the burden to listen to them would not have been so great. Go ahead.

Elektra:

So, then! You accept that you have murdered my father. Rightly or wrongly, what deed is more foul than this? Then let me also prove to you that it was not justice that persuaded you to commit this murder but the words of this evil man who now has you as a wife.

Then, you can ask the huntress, Artemis herself! Ask her, why the punishment? What was the reason she held the many winds of Aulis? Whom did she want to punish?

Or, rather, let me. It is not proper to ask the gods to be accountable for their deeds.

My father, I am told, was walking in the huntress' forest when he saw a marvellous stag, its head adorned full with beautiful horns. My father killed it and, as he was slaughtering it he accidentally uttered a boastful word that offended Leto's daughter, the virgin Artemis.

So, she held the fleet at Aulis until, in exchange for the stag, my father sacrificed his daughter. There was no other way for the Achaians to go anywhere –forward to Troy or backward to their home. So it was because the Achaians put a great deal of pressure on him to sacrifice Iphigeneia that he did so, not as a favour for Menelaos.

And let me put your view forward as well: in any case, so what if he sacrificed her for the sake of Menelaos? Was that a just reason for you to kill him? According to what law? And by invoking this law of yours for all other mortals take care that you don't dig your own grave and suffer pain and remorse because of it.

Because if this law of yours existed, that is, that murder be repaid by murder, and you were taken to court by that law, you'd die. So be very careful you're not playing with fanciful excuses!

Come then, tell me! What justifies all these most foul acts of yours? To sleep next to the evil man with whom you've murdered my father and to have children with him while your own first and legal children you cast into exile? Legal from a legal marriage.

Who is there to approve of this behaviour? Or will you tell me that this is your own retribution for the loss of your daughter? You would be doing something dreadful if you tried! Ha! What a delightful excuse: I'm marrying an enemy because I've lost my daughter!

Can anyone even suggest anything to you? You shoot your words in every direction telling everyone that we speak ill of our mother!

In any case, I, in fact, consider you more a tyrant than a mother. I live a wretched life full of pain served to me by you and your partner-in-bed, Aegisthus.

And Orestes, too, who had just escaped your claws, lives a life of misery in exile and as for him, you've said a great deal that I keep him as your avenger. About this, know well that if I could bring him here now, I would. Go ahead, shout it to everyone, call me whatever insult you like about my wish to bring Orestes here. Call me evil, shameless, a gossip, whatever you like – I am your daughter and so I'm an expert at these deeds!

Chorus:(to Clytemnestra)

I can see her building up a frenzy without the slightest consideration that she may be wrong! Does anyone care?

Clytemnestra: (To the chorus)

But why should I care? Should I care about a daughter who at her age insults her mother like this? Isn't it obvious that she's capable of all sorts of disgraceful acts?

Elektra:

Well, now, you should know that I am indeed ashamed of this even though I don't show it to you. And I know only too well that my behaviour is bad for my age and quite unlike me.

But it's your belligerence towards me and your evil deeds that press me hard against my will that makes me behave like this. Why else? One learns shame from shameless people.

Clytemnestra:

Shameful woman! It's obvious. My words and actions make you say too much!

Elektra:

Your words, not mine. Your deeds not mine and it is your deeds that give birth to the words.

Clytemnestra: *(Very angry)*

Oh! By Lady Artemis! I swear, you'll be paying the consequences of this insolent behaviour when Aegisthus returns!

Elektra:

See? First you let me say what needs to be said but then you've no idea how to listen.

Clytemnestra: *(Turns towards the statue of Apollo)*

Well, now that I've let you say all you wanted to say, will you not let me even sacrifice without all these insults?

Elektra:

Please! By all means! I allow you, I allow you! Perform your sacrifice and stop blaming my words. I shall utter no more of them.

Clytemnestra: *(To her maid)*

Bring me here the tray of my many different fruits to sacrifice to the god and pray for relief of the many fears that grip me now.

She takes the basket and places the offerings on the altar. Then she kneels and prays:

Hear me, Phoebos Apollo! Protect my thoughts which I must keep secret because I'm not among friends, who may listen freely to everything I say.

Nor can I speak clearly since Elektra is by my side and with her hatred and gossiping tongue she's likely to spread uncouth and false words throughout the whole country. No, Phoebos, listen to me in this way. It is how I shall speak from now on.

I endured a disturbed sleep last night. Two dreams, both of nightmares here and there, my Lord. Lord Phoebos, if they are to come to some good, help them come to fruition but if they are to result in awful deeds, then let these deeds fall upon my enemies' heads.

And Lord, let no one conspire with others or plot against me to rob me of my livelihood, the wealth of the Atridae. Let me live, Phoebos this good life, the serene life as keeper of this royal sceptre. Grant that I go on living prosperously with the good friends I have now and with those children of mine who do not hate me or cause me bitterness and pain.

These are my words Oh, wise Apollo. Hear them and grant our wishes. As for the rest, even though I haven't uttered them, you're Zeus' child and a God so I know you'll hear them also. The children of Zeus can see everything.

Clytemnestra rises from the altar

Enter old Slave

Old slave:

Dear Ladies, can you tell me for certain if this is King Aegisthus' palace?

Chorus:

You've guessed well, stranger. This is the palace.

Old slave:

And, would I be right in guessing that this lady here is his Queen? She certainly looks as if she would be.

Chorus:

Absolutely right. The Lady before you is her.

Old slave:

Greetings my Queen! I bring sweet news for you and Aegisthus.

Clytemnestra:

Indeed! I accept the word. But first I need to know who has sent you.

Old slave:

Phanoteas has sent me, Phanoteas from Phockis. He has sent me to give you a very important message.

Clytemnestra:

Tell me the message stranger. I know Phanoteas, he's a good friend of ours so his news would be good.

Old slave:

To tell it in two words, Orestes is dead!

Elektra: (*screams in pain*)

Ahhh! Poor me! What a bitter day today is! I am lost!

Clytemnestra:

What? What was that, friend? Don't listen to her!

Old slave: (*Feigning surprise at Elektra's behaviour*)

I said Orestes is dead! I repeat, Orestes is dead!

Elektra:

O, I am lost! Wretched me! I exist no more!

Clytemnestra: (*To Elektra*)

Who cares about you?

(*To the slave*)

Go on, friend, tell me exactly how he died.

Old slave:

That's why I'm sent here, dear Lady. To tell you exactly how it happened.

Orestes went to the jewel of Greece, the famous Delphic games, to win one of the prizes.

The moment he heard the shrill call for the first race he went in and took his spot, a brilliant specimen of health to all the spectators; and just as the boy was first to get to his spot at the beginning of the race, so he rushed to the finish of it first, taking the coveted prize before he left! To cut a long story short, my dear Lady, I have never heard of such achievements. But you should know this: that all the prizes which an athlete could win –double track races, which are part of the tradition of the pentathlon- he received the first prize and everyone thought him a truly fortunate man. All the Argives called him by his name, "Orestes, son of Agamemnon, the man who gathered the famous army of Greece." That's what had happened that day; but if a God wants things to turn otherwise, so it will be and not even the strongest of men can escape. Take my word, that man will meet his ruin.

And I say this because on another day, at the break of Dawn, when it was the day of the chariot races, Orestes took his spot again among the many others. Among them was a man from Achaea, one from Sparta, two from Libya - experts at the four-horse chariot- and among them all, fifth, with Thessalian mares came Orestes. The sixth was an Aetolian with blond colts, seventh was one from Magnesia, the eighth was someone from Aeniana with a pair of white horses, the ninth was from god-built Athens and the tenth and final chariot was driven by a Boetian. Then the judges drew lots and the chariots were placed accordingly. Then came the sound of the brass trumpet and the horses dashed forward.

The drivers yelled at their horses and shook the reins and immediately the whole track was filled with the clouds of dust and noise which the loud chariots made. The dust rose high and the drivers, all close to one another goaded their horses, hoping to leave behind and get out of the way of the axles and the frenzied snorts of all the other chariots, because their wheels and their backs were covered with the froth of the breath of the other horses.

Orestes, now, being on the inside lane he kept his horses close to the pillar and scraping it each time he went past. He had his right hand trace-horse loose so that he could block off the horses behind him.

In the beginning all was going well and all the chariots were upright. But then, suddenly, Aenia's unruly horses kept running against Aenia's wish, dragging him and at the turning point of the end of the sixth round

and the beginning of the seventh, they crashed headlong against the chariot from Barce. That was the beginning of the disaster. One horse crashed and smashed itself into another and in no time the whole plain of Crissa was littered with the wreckage of the chariots.

The cunning Athenian saw this and being an expert at chariot racing, cuts down the speed of his horses and lets the others, who were in total confusion, surge away from him and run through the centre of the track.

In all this, Orestes was the last driver, holding onto his position in the rear and driving confidently, certain of the result. But then, when he saw the Athenian being on his own, he sent a shrill cry into the ears of his speedy horses and chased after him.

His horses brought the chariots next to each other and thus they drove on. One minute you could see the head of one projecting and the next minute that of the other.

Throughout the whole race, man and chariot were upright but then, suddenly, as the horse made to turn, Orestes relaxed the left-hand rein of the turning horse and it accidentally hit the edge of the post. He broke the axle edge and he, himself fell and slipped out of the chariot. He fell tangled into the reins and his horses scatter through the centre of the track.

When the crowd saw him as he fell, they broke out into tears of pity for him, realising what dreadful fortunes followed him after such good deeds. Here he was dragged about one minute, his limbs flying high the next, until finally, the other drivers managed with great difficulty to stop his horses. They released him, his body all battered and gored, a bloody mess so that none of his friends even could recognise his unfortunate body.

Some Phockians were appointed to burn his body on a pyre and put the ashes in a tiny bronze urn. They are bringing it here to the land of his fathers so as to be given a proper burial.

That's how it was. A dreadful story to tell and for us who saw it, it was the worst of all the disasters I ever saw.

Chorus:

Alas, alas! It looks like the whole generation of our masters is gone, destroyed, roots and all!

Clytemnestra:

O, Zeus, Zeus! What's all this? Which of the two should I call them, "joy" or "misery that brings happiness?" How awful that I should be saved by misery!

Old slave:

But my Lady, why do my words bring you unhappiness?

Clytemnestra:

Giving birth is a powerful thing! You feel no hatred towards them not even when they hurt you.

Old slave:

Well then, by the looks of things, my trip here was in vain.

Clytemnestra:

Vain? Not at all. How can you even say that? How can it be in vain if you've brought us certain proof of a dead man who sprung out of my own vitals, took himself away from my breast and my nurture so as to live as a foreigner and an exile, away from his own land? And once he left here, he never set eyes on me again. He would just threaten me with awful retribution, blaming me for his father's murder.

Sweet Sleep never came to shut my eyes –neither during the night nor the day- but all my hours I had spent waiting for them to bring me Death.

Today though, I'm saved from these two fears, from that of Orestes and from hers (*Indicating Elektra*) Sharing the house with this evil pestilence, meant that she'd endlessly suck my very own heart's blood. But from now on I'm freed from her threats and I'll be spending my days quietly.

Elektra:

Ah, dreadful, miserable Fate! Orestes! What Fate is this that your very own mother curses you? Ah, now I can indeed cry. (*To the chorus*) What now dear friends? What do you think of all this? Is this good?

Clytemnestra:

Good? Of course it's not good for you but as for Orestes, he's fine where he is!

Elektra:

Hear this, Nemesis! Hear how insolently she talks of the newly dead!

Clytemnestra:

Nemesis has already heard what she needed to hear and she had accomplished her deed well!

Elektra:

By all means, curse and insult us because right now it happens that you're ecstatic!

Clytemnestra:

Ecstasy! You and Orestes will never stop your supply of joy for me.

Elektra:

We've lost ours so that you may not lose yours.

Clytemnestra: *(to the old slave)*

Say what you like old man, your arrival would worth even more if you could shut this woman's uncontrollable mouth.

Old slave:

Well then! Since everything is wonderful, I can go now.

Clytemnestra:

O, no! Not at all! It wouldn't be proper at all for you or that friend of yours who's sent you, to treat you like this. Come inside and let this woman stand out here to shout away her ill whining. On and on they go about herself and her friends!

Exit Clytemnestra and Old Slave through the Palace central gate. Clytemnestra is happy and lets out a chuckle of joy as she leaves.

Elektra:

She laughs! You'd think she'd ache and cry, lament, feel sorry for the loss of her son, (*sarcastically*) the poor thing! The loss of her son who was lost in such a manner! No, she laughs, instead!

Ah, how miserable I am, my brother Orestes! Dear brother, your death has made me dead! You left and took with you the only few hopes I had that you'd return one day, alive, a true avenger of your father's murder. Your father's and mine, poor miserable woman.

Now, though, where could I possibly go? I am alone, deprived of you and of our father. Once again I must remain a slave to the most hated of people, those who have slaughtered my father. Could this be good for me? But no! I can no longer stay with them and so I shall stay here, outside the front gate of the palace. Here I shall throw myself and whither away alone. (*She does so*)

I don't care any more about life and if any one of that lot (*Indicating the palace*) wants to do away with me, let him. Death, for me would be a joyful thing.

Chorus:

Zeus! Where are your thunderbolts! Phoebos Apollo where are you? Do you see all this and don't care? Gods, do you bury what you see?

Elektra (*screams in pain and despair, her back towards the chorus and, thus, the audience*)

Ah! Such pain!

Chorus:

What is it, my daughter? Why weep so?

Elektra: (*continues to scream loudly and with deep grief, again with her back towards the audience*)

Ah! Miserable Fate!

Chorus:

Don't cry so loudly, Elektra! Show your grief wisely.

Elektra: (*turns around violently*)

You will kill me with –

Chorus:

With what child?

Elektra:

You will kill me by giving me hope and comfort about those who you know very well are dead because such a thing will be like trampling on my hopes as I and my hopes fade.

Chorus:

But... I've heard the story of lord Amphiaraus the famous seer, who was gobbled up by his wife's, Eriphyle's treachery, a golden chain, but even so, now beneath the earth...

Elektra:

Ah! Ah!

Chorus: (*from now till line 845, the Chorus and Elektra are speaking at cross-purposes: The chorus is talking about Amphiaraus who is dead but Elektra is talking about Agamemnon.*)

...he is ruling a whole throng of souls.

Elektra:

Ah!

Chorus:

You're quite right. Because that bitch...

Elektra:

...was punished

Chorus:

Precisely.

Elektra:

I know, I know, but that's because someone had come up to take care of lamenter of the ugly deed, whereas for me, there's no one left any more. The only one I had left, Earth took from me.

Chorus:

Your Fate, child, is indeed bleak! Bleak! Wretched.

Elektra:

You're right, I know this too. And I know it too well, because my life is an ocean of woes and miserable sufferings, constantly attacking me.

Chorus:

We've seen the causes of your tears.

Elektra:

Well then don't you go searching for that which does not exist.

Chorus:

What do you mean?

Elektra:

For hopes that are false. That my noble Orestes will come to my aid.

Chorus:

Every single man is made so as to die, Elektra.

Elektra:

Like this though? Like poor Orestes died, trampled beneath the shiny hooves of horses, snared within the reins?

Chorus:

The loss is immeasurable.

Elektra:

But of course, since he was an exile without my own hands to help him...

Chorus:

Ah, poor boy!

Elektra:

The earth has covered him without a proper funeral and lamentations.

Chrysothemis rushes in exuding joy.

Chrysothemis:

Ha, ha! Elektra, I've put aside every bit of shame and here I am running to bring you some respite from all these woes and grief that ailed you all this time.

Elektra:

How could you possibly bring respite to woes that cannot be cured?

Chrysothemis:

Orestes is near us, Elektra! Listen to me and know it clearly, as clearly as you can see me.

Elektra:

Poor creature! Obviously you've gone mad. You're mocking your own grief and mine.

Chrysothemis:

I swear by our father's hearth. I am not mocking anything. He is here, among us!

Elektra:

Ah, poor woman! From whom did you hear this piece of news which you believe so strongly?

Chrysothemis:

From whom? From me and from no one else, because I saw obvious signs, that's why I believe it.

Elektra:

What signs did you, poor pitiful wretch believe in? What was it that you saw that makes you set alight again a dead flame?

Chrysothemis:

By the Gods, Elektra! Well, listen and you'll see if I'm mad or not.

Elektra:

Well, then, talk. If that gives you any pleasure.

Chrysothemis:

I'll tell you then all I saw. As soon as I got to the ancient tomb of our father I saw that from the top of the tomb some newly-made streams of milk and all around it was adorned by all the flowers that earth can produce.

I was surprised by this and I took a look around in case someone might appear from near by.

The place was all quiet everywhere and so I approached the tomb even closer and there I saw on its top a newly cut lock of hair. The very moment I saw it, an old and well known image hit my soul, an image of the man I loved the most, that of our brother, Orestes. I picked it up in my hands without uttering a sound in case I ruined the omen and my eyes brimmed with tears. And I'm certain, Elektra, just as much now as then that this ornament is no one else's but his own because, who else other than you and I are obliged to do such a thing?

I know, I didn't do it and nor did you. How could you? You couldn't even walk away from the house for just a few steps without crying. Nor could this be something that our mother's heart would want to do. If she did, we'd know about it. So, it's obviously an offering from Orestes. Take courage my dear sister because man's Fate changes and so if it was bad before, this might be the day when good things are delivered to us.

Elektra:

O, my sweet sister! How I pity you your madness!

Chrysothemis:

But what is it, Elektra? Don't the news please you?

Elektra:

Chrysothemis, neither you nor your brain know where you're going!

Chrysothemis:

What do you mean? Can I not know what I saw with my own eyes?

Elektra:

He's dead, poor darling! Keep no hope that he'll ever come to rescue you. He is gone!

Chrysothemis:

Ah! Loathsome misfortune! Who told you that?

Elektra:

A man who was near him when he died.

Chrysothemis:

And where is this man now? I'm about to lose my mind!

Elektra:

Mother welcomed him inside.

Chrysothemis:

Ah! Loathsome, loathsome Fate!

There are so many offerings at the tomb of our father. Who could have brought them all there?

Elektra:

I think perhaps some friend of Orestes might have put them there as memorials for our dead brother.

Chrysothemis:

What a pitiful Fate I have! I've rushed here with joyful news, without knowing how terrible things really were. Now I find out that not only we have our old troubles but some more on top.

Elektra:

Yes, that's how it is but if you listen and do as I say, your pain will become lighter.

Chrysothemis:

Do you think I could raise the dead, perhaps, Elektra?

Elektra:

No, that's not what I said. I'm not that stupid.

Chrysothemis:

What then do you think I could do?

Elektra:

You could have the courage to do as I say.

Chrysothemis:

Sure, if there'll be some good that could come out of it, I won't say no.

Elektra:

Think! No joy is gained without some effort.

Chrysothemis:

I know that and I shall do all I can to help.

Elektra:

Well, then, listen to what I think we should do. You know now that there's no one who cares about us any more. All are taken by Hades and so now we are left all alone in the world.

For as long as I would hear that our brother was alive and strong, I had hopes that he would return and exact justice for the murder of our father. But now that Orestes is gone, you should work with me, be with me as we try to murder Aegisthus, the murderer of fathers. From you I shall hide nothing from now on.

For how long will you stand by and waiting? And for what? What kind of real hope is there still for you?

You have nothing left now except to grieve the loss of your father's wealth and to age, year by year, tormented, never having known love nor marriage.

Don't expect any of this to happen either, because Aegisthus is not so stupid so as to allow you or me to give birth to a generation which will destroy him.

Listen then to my advice! Firstly, for the sense of honour you'd have shown you would receive the respect of both, our father and our Orestes, both in Hades as well as here on earth.

You'll become free again just as you were from birth and you'll be married according to your proper status. Everyone loves virtue and that's the direction to which they turn their eyes.

As well can you not see what fame and glory I too, will receive if you listen to my advice? What stranger or Argive will not greet us with such praise as "look, friends! See there the two sisters who saved the house of their fathers and who, having no fear of the strength of their enemies, still killed them, putting in jeopardy their own lives. No wonder everyone loves them both for their bravery, and honours them at the festivals and the assemblies."

That's the sort of thing people will be saying about us so that we will always be famous, in death as well as in life.

Come then, my dear sister, help me for father's sake! Help our brother and save me from my torment and save yourself, too, because you know well that it is shameful for the noble to accept shame.

Chorus:

In this sort of matters careful planning is needed, Elektra, both by the person whose idea it is as well as by the person who receives the idea.

Chrysothemis:

Even before you spoke, ladies, if Elektra had her wits about her she would indeed be very careful! But, of course, she isn't! With what aim have you armed yourself, Elektra with such brashness? And you even ask me to help you? Can't you see? You are not a man!

You are a woman and one who is weak against our enemies and while all day long Fate gives them joy, for us Fate is gone, disappeared. Who then could tame a man like Aegisthus and escape trouble? Be careful, too, that nobody else hears of this, or we'll have even more troubles to deal with. Because what would be the point of gaining great fame in life if we die an infamous death?

Death is not such a dreadful thing but it is dreadful to seek it but not be able to attain it. Elektra, I implore you!

Take a grip of your anger or else you'll ruin everything and every one of us! Stop before you wipe out our whole generation! Don't worry about what was said here. I shall keep them quiet and think of them as if they've never happened. You, though, sister, begin to understand that you're a weak woman and learn to obey our masters.

Chorus:

Obeys her, Elektra! Nothing but good has ever come from wise words and wise thoughts.

Elektra:

Ha! I knew it! Now what a surprise that was! I knew all along you'd refuse! Still, I won't let this deed go unaccomplished. I alone, with my own hands shall perform it.

Chrysothemis:

What a pity you didn't have this sort of courage when our father was being murdered! Nothing could have stopped you from accomplishing it all then!

Elektra:

I did have the courage, it was the proper understanding of the situation that I didn't have.

Chrysothemis:

Try, then Elektra, try to gain this knowledge and keep it for ever.

Elektra:

So, you don't want to help me.

Chrysothemis:

Even your praises will mean nothing to me.

Elektra:

And those will never come from me.

Chrysothemis:

We'll see about that. The future is a long time.

Elektra:

Go away then! Go! There's no getting help from you!

Chrysothemis:

There could well have been but there's no way of telling you.

Elektra:

Run! Come on, go and tell all this to your mother!

Chrysothemis:

No, I don't hold such animosity towards you.

Elektra:

And yet look at what disgrace you're throwing me in.

Chrysothemis:

Not a disgrace but a protection for you.

Elektra:

So, whatever you say is correct? Is that right?

Chrysothemis:

Yes, Elektra. Be sensible and we could work together with your lead.

Elektra:

The words are good but the deeds are terrible! What a terrible bane it is!

Chrysothemis:

Terrible bane, indeed! How correctly you describe your own thoughts!

Elektra:

So, you think I'm not right?

Chrysothemis:

There are times, too, Elektra, when being right does one harm!

Elektra:

Ha! A life based on such laws is no life at all.

Chrysothemis:

Do as I say and not as you want and you'll remember me one day.

Elektra:

I'll do what I want. Your words do not bother me, Chrysothemis.

Chrysothemis:

So, then, you'll go ahead? You won't change your mind?

Elektra:

There's nothing worse than a bad advice.

Chrysothemis:

You're not listening to anything I'm saying.

Elektra:

It's been a long time since I've taken your advice, Chrysothemis.

Chrysothemis:

Since we can't agree about my words and your deeds, then I'm leaving.

Elektra:

Go! And I'll never call on you again even if you beg me. It's such a stupid thing to go chasing false hopes!

Chrysothemis:

Certainly. And if you, too, believe that your opinion is wise, stay with it. But when the disaster strikes you, remember my words.

Exit Chrysothemis. Elektra retreats to her corner.

Chorus:

Look how wise are the birds high above!
They nurture with tender care their young
From whom tender care will later come.

Why do we not learn from them and care in equal measure?

Ah! But by Zeus' lighting bolt and Themis' Justice, two gods who rule high in the sky, it will not be long before the Atridae suffer mighty troubles.

Ah! But the mouths of mortals spread their voices afar and they'll call out beneath the earth, the miserable fates of the house of Atridae; calls that carry news of much disgrace. News one cannot celebrate.

Tell them below, voices, tell them that their house, the house of Agamemnon, is ill!

Tell them below, voices, tell them that a battle splits asunder their children!

Tell them below, voices, that their hearts do not lie in harmony!

Tell them Elektra cries on alone and betrayed in a sea of wails!

Like the ever-mourning nightingale her sighs are deep but cannot save the pitiful fate of her father!

Bitter death does not concern her and she's ready to shut her eyes just so she can pursue her double Justice –one father, one brother! Who would ever be so brave?

Because, my dear, dear child no one who wants to stay a noble and who's fallen in bad times would want to destroy the honour of his name. Just like you who preferred the lot of the everlasting lament and armed yourself against the hard life just so you can gain a double praise: for your mind as well as your virtue.

How I wish that one day you'd live a life higher than that of your enemies by the same amount as you are now beneath theirs – much stronger, much wealthier.

Because I've known you to live in the bleakest misery, but you still stuck to the laws of Nature, the most sacred of all. You have virtue with you and you respect Zeus.

Enter Orestes, Pylades and two attendants. Pylades is carrying an urn

Orestes:

Ladies, have we been directed accurately for our destination?

Chorus:

What are you looking for and what is the purpose that brings you here?

Orestes:

I've been looking for Aegisthus' house for a long time now.

Chorus:

You're here. Whoever gave you the direction was right.

Orestes:

Which of you ladies then could go inside and give them the good news of our arrival?

Chorus: *(Indicating Elektra)*

She should, if there is a need for a member of the family to do so.

Orestes: *(To Elektra)*

Go inside, lady and tell them that some people from Phockis would like to speak with Aegisthus.

Elektra:

Ah, poor me! Could it be that you are bringing signs of proof of the news we've just received?

Orestes:

I don't know about that but we've been sent by old Strophios to tell news about Orestes.

Elektra:

What is it, friend? Ah, what sudden fear grips me! What is this news?

Orestes:

As you can see, we came carrying his few remains in this urn.

Elektra:

Ah! What a miserable fate I have! Here it is, in front of me. I can see my own calamity before me!

Orestes:

If it is Orestes you're lamenting, know that this urn contains his body.

Elektra:

By all the gods, friend, if this is true, let me hold this urn in my hands so that, with these ashes, I may mourn and cry for myself and for my whole generation.

Orestes: (*gives urn to Pylades*)

Give it to her whoever she is, Pylades. Offer it to her. I don't believe this is a request from an enemy but rather, a relative or a friend.

Elektra: (*takes the vessel and begins her lament to Orestes' ashes*)

Ah! Dearest, dearest memorial of my brother's life! The man whom I loved more than all the mortals on Earth. Ah, how differently I'm holding you in my arms now from the way my hopes ran the day I had sent you away!

You shone like the brilliant sun when you left the house but now, here you are, I'm holding you in my arms, a mere nothing.

How I wish that I had died myself that day instead of sending you into exile!

How I wish these hands didn't steal you away that day to save you!

How I wish I had let you die so that you, too, could now be lying in death in our father's tomb!

No doubt, you, too would have received your own lot of the slaughter that was meted out to your family, back then. Now you've suffered a miserable death, an exile in a foreign land, far from your home and far from your sister and I, wretched creature, wretched woman, I could neither wash you nor adorn you with my own hands – my own loving hands.

I could not pay my debt to you by raising your burnt remnants from the flames of the all-destroying fire.

And so, you came here, a tiny bundle of ashes in a tiny urn.

Despicable Fate! All lost are the cares and concerns I had for you and all lost is the fatigue I suffered raising you! Orestes, my brother, you were neither our mother's most beloved child nor anyone else's in the house. But mine alone!

I was the only one in the house who could hear the words, "sister" and "nanny" from you.

Now all this has finished. All finished in the one day when you died and, like a storm you rushed them along with you.

Our father is dead and now so am I because of you. Our enemies are laughing and our horrible mother is driven to distraction with joy. You've sent me so many secret messages, Orestes, telling me how you'd come soon to exact Justice. But there! You see? Our Spirit of Misfortune has taken it all. A spirit that brought to me instead of your much-suffered shape, a small bundle of ashes and a hollow shadow! Ah!

Oh, lamentable body! Oh lamentable Fate! Oh!

Your dire journey here, is my disaster, my true disaster! Come, Orestes! Take my body also. Take me, too within this urn: A nothing within a nothing and so, too, it will be, in the world below –there I'll have my home.

While you were alive, Orestes, the two of us had a common Fate but now, if I die, I hope that your bitter tomb won't separate us because as I see it, only the dead don't suffer.

Chorus:

Elektra, you're a mortal! Think about it. You and your father and Orestes. Unmeasured tears help no one. Death is a debt we all have to pay.

Orestes: (*To Pylades and attendants*)

Oh! What? Could this be true? All this confuses me. What could I possibly say to it? I can no longer

control my tongue!

Elektra:

What is it, friend? What worries you? Why say that?

Orestes:

Is this true? Is this the face of the noble Elektra?

Elektra:

I am Elektra, steeped in ill times and ill fortune.

Orestes:

Oh, what a disastrous sight is this?

Elektra:

It is for me you are sighing, stranger, not for you, is that right?

Orestes:

How badly they've treated you! How without the slightest respect!

Elektra:

It is for me you're distressed, stranger and not for some other woman, is this not so?

Orestes:

A bitter and unmarried life!

Elektra:

Stranger, why are you looking at me in this way and distress yourself?

Orestes:

Because I had no idea about the depth of your misfortune.

Elektra:

And from what words did you discover this?

Orestes:

Your torment is most obvious to my eyes.

Elektra:

And yet you see only little of my torment.

Orestes:

What? Is it possible that I could see even worse than this?

Elektra:

Yes, because I live with murderers.

Orestes:

With whom? What gave you the thought that you utter?

Elektra:

My father's murderers whose slave I am.

Orestes:

But who has put you in this awful situation?

Elektra:

Who? She who calls herself "mother" but has none of a mother's virtues.

Orestes:

How can that happen? By depriving you of food or by her hard hands? Is she beating you?

Elektra:

With her hands, with starvation and with all other means.

Orestes:

Is there no one to help you and hold them back?

Elektra:

No one. The only one I had, you've brought me his ashes.

Orestes:

Poor woman! All this time I've been here, what a desperate state I see you in!

Elektra:

You're the only one in the world who's shown me sympathy.

Orestes:

Because I am the only one who suffers from the same pain.

Elektra:

Are you perhaps a relative from abroad?

Orestes:

I would like to talk if these ladies are friends.

Elektra:

They're friends and you can trust them with whatever they hear.

Orestes: *(Tries to take the urn from her hand)*

Give me that urn and listen so that you may know everything.

Elektra:

I swear by all the gods, friend. Don't do this to me.

Orestes:

Listen to me and you won't be harmed.

Elektra:

Please, friend, by your beard, I beg you. It's the only thing I've got of Orestes. Don't take it from me.

Orestes:

It's not proper for me to let you keep it.

Elektra: *(To the urn)*

Poor wretch. I can't even bury you in your tomb.

Orestes:

Don't distress yourself unduly, Elektra but think. Think well!

Elektra:

How can I not feel distress with my brother in the underworld?

Orestes:

Don't utter those words, they are not proper for you.

Elektra:

You mean I am not worthy of my brother?

Orestes:

Quite the contrary but that utterance does not befit you.

Elektra:

No, I think it does, if this is the body of Orestes I'm holding in my arms.

Orestes:

No... it is not Orestes' body. That is a story we made up!

Elektra:

So where is poor misfortunate Orestes' body?

Orestes:

Orestes' grave does not exist. The living do not have graves.

Elektra:

What did you say, friend?

Orestes?

What I just said is not a lie.

Elektra:

Is the young man truly alive?

Orestes:

Can you see me alive?

Elektra: *(Puts the urn down gently)*

Are you Orestes?

Orestes: *(brings out of his garment a ring, wears it and shows it to Elektra)*

Look here. Father's ring. Am I not telling the truth?

Elektra:

Oh, bright light of my heart!

Orestes:

Light of my heart, indeed!

Elektra: *(She hugs him)*

You are here, oh, sweet voice?

Orestes:

Surely you don't want another witness?

Elektra:

Is that you I have in my arms?

Orestes:

For ever!

Elektra:

Dear ladies, look! Ladies of my city look at my Orestes whose idea it was to spread the rumour that he's dead, right up until this very moment. He's alive! He is newly born!

Chorus:

We can see! We can see him, darling daughter and from such joy our eyes are filled with tears.

Elektra:

Ah, birth! This is the birth of a person I love the most. Ah, my Orestes! You came only just now, you discovered, you left, you saw those you wanted to see!

Orestes:

I am here but... be quiet!

(From now on, Orestes is trying to restrict Elektra's effusive temperament. Elektra tries to hold him in her arms, or to touch his cheeks, etc, while Orestes moves back.)

Elektra:

Why? What's up?

Orestes:

Better be quiet in case someone inside hears us.

Elektra:

By Artemis, the unspoiled virgin, never! Never shall I accept the fear of that. The fear of the flock of these useless women ever living inside, burdening the earth.

Orestes:

Still, be careful. You know yourself that even women can be bloodthirsty

Elektra:

Ah! You've just unveiled our great misfortune, a misfortune that will never be solved, never forgotten and always in our heart.

Orestes:

I know all this well, but we must act when the time is right and not before.

Elektra:

But I think any time is the right time because even now I can feel my mouth free!

Orestes:

I agree, Elektra but this is why you should keep it under control.

Elektra:

Ah, but how?

Orestes:

By not saying words you don't need to say.

Elektra:

And exchange silence with your presence - the presence that I could have never hoped to have seen? Who could do such a thing?

Orestes:

It is a presence made by the gods at the time of their choosing.

Elektra:

Ah, a God's will! A God's will has brought you to our halls! If this is true than this is an even more wonderful piece of news than your presence itself.

Orestes:

I wish I didn't have to ask you to contain your delight for the time being, my sister but I truly must stop you from overdoing it.

Elektra:

Oh, darling, after so many years you thought fit to take this most wonderful journey to come to me, a creature of much suffering, Don't...

Orestes:

Don't what?

Elektra:

Don't deprive me of this pleasure of the sight of your features from close by.

Orestes:

I would be very angry at anyone who wished that!

Elektra:

So you accept?

Orestes:

I do not refuse.

Elektra:

The news, friends, that reached me about his death was intolerable! I stood speechless then, pushing back

and drowning my pain. Ah, but now look! Here I have you in front of me and see your dear face, a face that my heart will never forget even in my bleakest moments.

Orestes:

Come, forget the superfluous words for now, sister and stop telling me all this stuff about how our mother is evil and how Aegisthus squanders our family inheritance.

Too many words may lose us the opportunity to perform our deed. Instead tell me only what is useful for me to know this very hour. Tell me, for example, should we try and wipe the smile off the face of our enemies by approaching them openly or secretly?

And be careful, too, Elektra that, when we two enter the palace, our mother doesn't suspect you from that happy face of yours! Sigh a lot, as if for my appalling fate, which of course was a concocted piece of news. We will laugh with joy only after we have accomplished the deed.

Elektra:

Yes, my brother. I shall do as you please. Ah, you brought such joy to my heart! Not for the whole world would I displease you even for just a little.

Divine power is helping us – what sort of recompense would I be paying to it if I acted otherwise?

As for all things past? You're right, of course. You know them all! Now, you how things are here: Aegisthus is absent from the house but mother is inside. Don't worry about her ever seeing happiness on my face.

There is an old hatred etched hard and deep in my heart. And as for the tears of joy, now that I've seen you how could they ever stop? You arrived here and within the one, single day you've appeared both dead and alive. You've worked all these machinations so well that I am completely dazzled. So much so that even if our father suddenly appeared before me I would not for a moment think it was a miracle and I would truly believe my eyes.

But since this is the goal of your journey here, my brother, go ahead, walk your path. If I had tried this myself, I would have accomplished one of two things: either I would have succeeded in saving myself virtuously or I would have failed and died virtuously.

Orestes:

Hush! I can hear someone coming outside.

Elektra: *(changing tone: to Orestes and his retinue, feigning ignorance)*

Go inside, friends. You carry with you things that no one in the palace can either refuse nor would receive with pleasure.

That "someone" is the Old Slave who comes out of the central palace gate and is angry with Elektra and Orestes. However, he's using hushed tones in case he is heard inside. Elektra, not recognising him is quite disturbed by his admonitions. He, on the other hand, is also frustrated with their constant talking instead of going inside to perform the murders, so that a show of his near-comical "pulling" them towards the gate is made quite manifest.

Old slave:

Have you not the slightest bit of wit between you? Are you so bereft of it? Either that, or you mustn't have the slightest bit of care for your own life!

Do you not realise that you're not just near to danger but right in the midst of it? If I weren't guarding this here gate, everyone in the house would know about your deeds even before you had begun them yourselves! I just knew this would happen so I stood guard. Now cut the idle chatter and your effusive joy and go inside because, in such matters, being slow spells disaster. It's time we went ahead with the deed.

Orestes:

Tell me, how will I find matters when I go in, dear friend?

Old slave:

Well enough because I'm certain they won't recognise you.

Orestes:

You would have told them, of course, about my false death.

Old slave:

So far as they are concerned you are in the world of Hades.

Orestes:

Are they happy about this? What did they say?

Old slave:

I'll tell you all this after the deed is done. For now, whether they're happy or not about your death, is irrelevant. For them all goes well.

Elektra: (*Indicating the Old Slave*)

In god's name, brother who is this man?

Orestes:

You don't remember him?

Elektra:

No, I can't recall him at all.

Orestes:

In whose arms did you place me a long time ago? Do you not remember?

Elektra:

When? What are you saying?

Orestes:

Thanks to your love, these arms of his took me secretly all the way to Phockis.

Elektra:

You mean, this is the man who, out of all the others, stood by me, alone, during our father's murder?

Orestes:

Yes, that's him. But enough of your questions for now.

Elektra:

Oh, light of my eyes, the only, single saviour of the house of Agamemnon! How did you get here? You are the only one who has saved us two. (*Taking his hands in hers*) These dear hands and feet of yours that worked the sweetest of errands! How was it that, all this time among us I did not recognise you and you did not reveal the truth of the situation but tried hard to ruin me totally with words while your deeds are the very essence of sweetness itself.

Greetings my father. I'll call you father because I can recognise my father in you. You wouldn't be surprised to know that within the one day, I both hated you and loved you more than anyone else!

Old slave:

Elektra, that is enough! There will be plenty of days and nights for you to find out about everything that happened today. I'm telling you both: Don't just stand there. It's time you begun. Clytemnestra is alone and there's no man in the house but if you don't hurry up, then you'd better be prepared to do battle not only with those two but with many more besides who are even more practiced in the art.

Orestes:

Pylades, let's bow to the idols of the family gods out here first and then we'll hurry inside. Excessive talk helps no one.

Orestes and Pylades kneel before the altar for a couple of seconds before they get up. Then all men enter the palace.

Elektra: (*also goes to the altar, kneels and prays*)

O, Lord Apollo hear their prayer and mine too. I have spread open my arms in prayer to you often enough before.

And now Apollo, Sunlord, I kneel before you and beg you –offering you the single soul I have. Come, be our good-hearted helper in these our plans and show the mortals that the gods make them pay due recompense for disrespect.

Elektra follows the others into the palace.

Chorus: *(Loudly and quickly, as if following the speedy path of Ares. In musical terms, presto belicoso)*

Look! Look how the warlord spreads his kingdom! He groans heavily his breaths of blood from where battles are born.

Groans of pain from within

And now hear them! Hear the dogs of Justice speed through the palace halls, closely pursuing each and every appalling murderer. It won't be too long now, I'm certain of that, that my heart's dream will begin to become fulfilled.

In there! Look, look! Orestes, the cunning helper of the dead is heading for his father's throne, holding a dripping bloodthirsty sword. And Maia's son, Hermes, look! The herald to the gods helps him, hiding his plot within shadows so that the deed may be accomplished with no delay.

Enter Elektra excited

Elektra:

Dear ladies, this very moment the men are performing the deed... But hush and wait.

Chorus:

How? What are they doing this minute?

Elektra:

She's preparing the urn for burial and others are standing around her.

Chorus:

But why are you out here?

Elektra:

To stand guard, in case Aegisthus comes.

From within the palace

Clytemnestra:

Ah! A palace bereft of friends! A palace full of murderers!

Elektra:

Hear that? Someone inside is shouting.

Chorus:

I heard, I heard –things no ear should hear. I am shuddering!

Clytemnestra:

Ah! Poor, poor me! Aegisthus where are you?

Elektra:

There! Again someone shouts!

Clytemnestra:

Come child, do you not feel for the mother who bore you?

Elektra:

As much as you felt for him and his father!

Chorus:

Ah, Argos! Ah abominable generation. Your old way of life is perishing.

Clytemnestra:

Ahhh! I am wounded!

Elektra:

Strike her twice as hard, if you can!

Clytemnestra:

Ahhhh! I am wounded again!

Elektra:

Ah, how I wish it were like this for Aegisthus as well.

Chorus:

The curses are being fulfilled and those beneath the earth from long ago live again. The blood of the murderers runs like water as they are struck.

Enter Orestes and the rest. Orestes is holding his sword high.

Here they are. Their hands drip from the sacrifice to Ares. What can one say?

Elektra:

How are things, Orestes?

Orestes:

If Apollo dictated correctly, all things within the palace go well.

Elektra:

Is the bitch dead?

Orestes:

Don't ever be afraid any more of your mother's ill treatment.

Chorus:

Hold on, I can clearly see Aegisthus coming,

Elektra:

Men, quickly, go back inside.

Orestes:

Where is he? Where can you see him?

Elektra:

There! Full of joy, he's heading towards us. He's been abroad.

Chorus:

Quickly, hide behind the gate and you can talk about this later.

Orestes:

Courage, ladies and this, too will be done.

Elektra:

Hurry, then, go where you must!

Orestes:

Gone!

Elektra:

I'll take care of matters out here.

Chorus:

It would be wise if you spoke a couple of words softly and sweetly in his ear, to entangle him in the trap, now that it's open and then revenge will be taken.

Enter Aegisthus with an attendant

Aegisthus:

Does anyone of you know where the strangers from Phockis are? They brought news of Orestes' death,

how he was entangled in the straps of his horses. (*Turning to Elektra*) You! Yes you! I'm asking you. Your mouth couldn't be silenced until now. You'd be the one who'd be more interested than all the others and you'd be in a better position to know.

Elektra:

Of course I know. If I didn't you could call me a stranger to the man I love the most.

Aegisthus:

Well then? Tell me where are these strangers?

Elektra:

They have found accommodation inside. (*Sarcastically*) The hostess is most generous.

Aegisthus:

So it's true then? They did say Orestes is dead?

Elektra:

Not just "say it" but "show it!" Proof, as well as words.

Aegisthus:

So... it's here? I can see it with my own eyes?

Elektra:

Yes, you can see that appalling sight with your own eyes.

Aegisthus:

Ha! The more you talk the more joy you give me! Quite the unusual thing for you.

Elektra:

By all means, Aegisthus. Be happy if such news brings you happiness.

Aegisthus (*very angry*)

Shut up! I order you to shut up! Open wide the palace gates, so that all may see –everyone! From Mycenae and from Argos.

And whoever had any false hopes about this man's return, whoever was happy thinking that he was alive, let him see Orestes' corpse and accept humility and his neck's yoke. They cannot find me guilty of his death now. Let him understand this whether he likes it or not.

Elektra:

There! By all means, let me obey you.

Elektra opens the gates slowly, knowingly. A bier is brought forward (via Deus ex machina) whereupon lies Clytemnestra fully covered with a funereal cloth. Orestes and Pylades stand on either side. Elektra bows knowingly again)

I have done my duty because, after such a long time, I have finally learnt to obey my superiors.

Aegisthus:

Ah! I see a sight that could not have appeared without divine intervention but, God, if you are to punish me for my words, I take them back. (*To Orestes and Pylades*) Lift the covering! It hides my relative's eyes, let me see them so that I too, may mourn him.

Orestes:

That is something that you must do. It isn't proper for me to do it. The onus is on you to look upon this and mourn.

Aegisthus:

Your advice is correct and I shall accept it. (*To his attendant*) You! Go into the palace and call Clytemnestra.

Exit attendant.

Orestes:

She's near you. Don't look for her anywhere else!

Aegisthus: (*Lifts the cloth and the fearful shock makes him retreat*)

Ah! Gods, what do I see?

Orestes: (*Draws his sword*)

What is it, Aegisthus? What are you afraid of? What are you looking at?

Aegisthus:

Ah! Gods! In whose nets have I fallen?

Orestes:

Have you not realised all this time, Aegisthus that you were holding a dialogue with a dead man?

Aegisthus: (*thinks for a moment*)

Yes! Yes! I understand now. This can be no other than Orestes.

Orestes:

Ha! You took your time but you finally guessed perfectly!

Aegisthus:

Ah, here is my life's end! But, Orestes, let me say a couple of words to you. Let me explain.

Elektra:

For God's sake, brother, shut his mouth for him. Don't let him carry on with worthless chatter. What is the point of giving the condemned just a few extra moments of living? Hurry up. Kill him now! Kill him and throw him to the dogs and the vultures, far from our eyes, which is what he deserves. Kill him because that's the only appropriate recompense I can get for all he's done to me.

Orestes:

Hurry up, get inside! This is not the time for your speech but for your death!

Aegisthus:

What? You're taking me inside? A great deed needs the shadows and you are ready for the kill!

Orestes:

You talk too much. Now walk to the same spot where you've murdered my father. There, you too, will fall!

Aegisthus: (*His final plea*)

After all that the house of Pelops has suffered, is there a need for this as well?

Orestes:

For your own deeds there is. About this I am certain I prophesy correctly.

Aegisthus:

Prophesy! This was not your father's skill.

Orestes:

All this talking back delays the deed. Go!

Aegisthus:

Lead the way.

Orestes:

No, you must enter first.

Aegisthus:

Are you afraid I might run away?

Orestes:

Not at all. I simply want to make sure your death is a bitter one and not how you would prefer it. (*To the audience*) He who sins against the laws should receive the same punishment swiftly. Death! Then the

murderers would be fewer.

Exit all

Chorus:

Brave child of Atreus! Finally, after so much suffering you have gained your liberty.