

THE VESUVIUS PROPHECIES

CLYTEMNESTRA

(A Comic Tragedy)

by

Menander

adapted by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS
(2 women, 3 men)

CLYTEMNESTRA, 50s, queen of Mycenae

SLAVE WOMAN, 30s-40s, played by a man, also plays

PAEDAGOGUS, 50s-60s, tutor

CHRYSOTHEMIS, 20s, daughter of CLYTEMNESTRA

ORESTES, 20s, son of CLYTEMNESTRA

ELECTRA, 20s, daughter of CLYTEMNESTRA

AEGISTHUS, 40s-50s, husband of CLYTEMNESTRA

The play takes place in ancient Argos before the palace of CLYTEMNESTRA and AEGISTHUS.

SETTING: An ancient Greek palace facade and altar. Could be performed in a traditional Greek theatre.

NOTE: The speeches of the SLAVE WOMAN (Chorus) may be chanted or sung.

Before the doors of the palace of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. A tomb altar stands nearby, with a large snake coiled on or around it. CLYTEMNESTRA, visibly pregnant and regally dressed, approaches the altar followed by a SLAVE WOMAN, much more simply attired, who carries a pitcher. CLYTEMNESTRA sees the snake and is horrified.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Just as I dreamt, there is a snake asleep
And coiled around the altar like a noose!
Quick, kill it!

SLAVE WOMAN just stares at her.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Now, before it bites someone!
(Finds a stick.)
I'd hit the thing myself, but I'm the queen.
I can't be seen committing such an act--
It's too undignified! Are you afraid?
(Whacks the snake.)
--See, there--one whack--It didn't even move!
Here, take the stick and pulverize it now.

SLAVE WOMAN just stares at her.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I stunned it for you--finish up the job.
Don't tremble there, you silly little wimp.
Sometimes a woman rides to battle like
A man--can't wait for them to fight all foes,
Especially those that have no arms or legs.

SLAVE WOMAN just stares at her.

CLYTEMNESTRA

No, then? You just can't get good help these days.
(Whacks the snake repeatedly.)
Well, better safe than sorry, as they say!
(Punctuating with whacks.)
I had a dream last night, a nightmare vile,
That I gave birth in wretched pain, much worse
Than pangs I had with my four precious babes.
I felt a monstrous cave between my legs
Disgorge a writhing mass that stretched me till
I ripped. And there, upon the floor I saw
A hideous creature, long and thick and black,
Red-glistened with my blood. It coiled as if
To strike, the venom dripping from its fangs.
I should have screamed and run away, but no,
Instead I felt the strangest urge to pick

The hydra up and clutch it to my breast.
 A mother's natural impulse for her child
 Extended to this foul, unnatural spawn.
 It suckled there a while, my milk a rich,
 Life-giving flow. And I felt happy for
 A moment, much more joyful and fulfilled
 Than ever in my life. But then the snake
 Did what envenomed reptiles must, and pierced
 My swollen nipple with its hollow teeth,
 Injecting poison deep into my breast.
 I felt the fatal liquor surge straight to
 My heart, which pumped the venom into all
 My veins, then shriveled in my chest and died.
 I woke awash in sweat and peed the bed.

CLYTEMNESTRA steps back, having beaten
 the hell out of the snake.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I feel better now. Clean up this mess.

SLAVE WOMAN goes to the dead snake,
 picks it up tenderly, and begins to
 dance with it. CLYTEMNESTRA watches,
 awestruck. SLAVE WOMAN chants or sings
 as she crosses, dancing.

SLAVE WOMAN

Oh, horned viper, have you come
 To taint my mistress with your tongue
 Of poison, or to pierce her numb
 And frozen heart that hasn't sung
 Since she her husband murdered in
 The bath? Are you an adder or
 A viper of the Cyclades?
 It's hard to tell--your once-smooth skin
 Is so beat up and stained in gore.
 Or are you truly none of these?

(Dances the other direction.)

Perhaps a boa, not imbued
 With venom, but a snake that waits
 To coil your prey, embracing lewd,
 Until your victim suffocates.
 Forgive this woman's human urge
 To kill what she can't understand.
 For serpents terrify the mind,
 Inspire our sins to re-emerge.
 And we forget snakes purge the land
 Of rodents, helping humankind.

(Dances the other direction.)

I mourn you, snake, O creature sly,
 For in reality or dream
 Your kind oft comes to prophesy.
 You witnessed Clytemnestra's scheme

Avenging her first daughter's death,
 Poor Iphigenia's sacrifice,
 Killed by a loving father's hand.
 The queen then stole his final breath,
 But killing him did not suffice:
 He first was cuckolded, then damned.
 (Dances the other direction.)

It's been some years now since he died.
 His orphaned children all are grown,
 And in her dream you've prophesied
 That she'll be bitten by her own.
 Their son, Orestes, exiled long
 Will now return, and duty-bound,
 His father's vengeance in his brain,
 Will slit her throat to right her wrong.
 Her lover, too, her son will hound
 Until Aegisthus lies here slain.

SLAVE WOMAN dances around altar,
 finally draping the dead snake on it.

SLAVE WOMAN

The House of Atreus is cursed,
 Three generations damned to die.
 The parents kill the children, then
 More children must commit the worst
 Of all foul crimes, must satisfy
 The gods' demands, and kill again.
 But Clytemnestra has one chance
 To cheat the curse, defeat the dance
 Of death, and break this cord--

(Raises the pitcher.)

Libations on this tomb outpoured.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I never liked you. I should have you killed.

SLAVE WOMAN

I only tell the truth, my mistress queen.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I don't believe a word. What gods? What curse?
 Absurd interpretation of my dream!
 He sacrificed my daughter, I killed him.
 No holy obligation--I was pissed.

SLAVE WOMAN

And yet you built his tomb, this altar here,
 Right at your door, where you must walk each day.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I killed him, but I loved him even so.
 I don't expect the world to understand,
 But that's how marriage works.

SLAVE WOMAN

It's very sad.

CLYTEMNESTRA

How sweet--I've earned the pity of a slave.
But I'll not be a slave myself, to gods that curse
Us just for fun. Lustrate that altar if
You must, but leave me out--I'll chant no prayers.

SLAVE WOMAN pours water on the altar.
Blood from the snake drips down the
sides.

SLAVE WOMAN

I wonder if there is another way.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You needn't worry. It's all figured out.

SLAVE WOMAN

If we forgave each other, would the gods
In turn forgive our sins, and lift the curse?

ORESTES appears, sees CLYTEMNESTRA, and
withdraws, signaling to someone unseen
that they should observe out of sight.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Orestes, if he lives, is now of age. When I
Avenged my darling daughter's death, my boy
Was stolen from me, whisked away by his
Old pedophilic pedagogue, and hid
In far Parnassus where my husband had
Alliances with those who'd shield his son.
Electra whines that someday he'll return,
Just as you say, and take my life because
I shortened Agamemnon's stay on earth.
I'm not the type to wait around for death
To snatch me unawares. I'd rather plan
A confrontation on my terms, so here's--

(Pats pregnancy.)

The tender babe I've used to bait the hook.
Fell prophecy or no, Orestes won't
Be able to resist his siblings' cry:
Electra's bitching, or this infant's screech.
The unborn holler louder than we do,
Especially when Aegisthus is the sire.

SLAVE WOMAN

So you intend to lure him here, to death?

CLYTEMNESTRA

I miss my son. Whatever it might take.
I own your soul, on pain of death you must

This secret keep. If we succeed, if I
Am satisfied, you shall go free. I'll have
No need of you.

SLAVE WOMAN

So many years I've dreamed
But never hoped--

CLYTEMNESTRA

Are you quite done? I want
You to prepare for my dear boy's return:
A homecoming he will not soon forget.

SLAVE WOMAN goes into the palace.

CLYTEMNESTRA

O Agamemnon, what have we become?
You'd think as king and queen our lives would be
Above the toils of men. But our travails
Are worse than anyone's. A war, a curse,
A cannibal, a whore, a murdered child,
A husband slaughtered by his wife who loved
Him even as she stabbed his flesh, alas.
Mute witness of our son's return, I ask
That you this family reunion bless.
That's bold of me, I know, as I'm the one
Who put you in this tomb. Forgive me, love.

CLYTEMNESTRA touches the altar
reverently then goes into the palace.
ORESTES and PAEDAGOGUS come out of
hiding.

PAEDAGOGUS

I'm not a pedophile, you know.

ORESTES

I know.
But what about that time--?

PAEDAGOGUS

That doesn't count.
Don't be distracted. Focus on the task
At hand. I nourished you on vengeance, boy,
And now the time has come. Your mother's throat
Lies bare, as if to tempt your thirsty knife.
Her lover, rank Aegisthus, soils her bed
In ignorance of impending reckoning.

ORESTES

The Oracle at Delphi said I must
Avenge my father's murder at their hands
Or suffer worse than death. What could that be?

PAEDAGOGUS

The shame, betrayal of your royal blood.

ORESTES

But those who murder often die themselves.

PAEDAGOGUS

Do you fear death?

ORESTES

More than embarrassment!

PAEDAGOGUS

Blasphemer! When Apollo says to kill,
You kill!

ORESTES

But morally--

PAEDAGOGUS

What's moral and
What's not is what the gods decide. Obey!

ORESTES

That sounds like bad advice--

PAEDAGOGUS

But from a god!

ORESTES

I hardly even knew my father. What
Does Agamemnon mean to me? He was--

PAEDAGOGUS

The king! As you will be once you dispatch
Your foe. Aegisthus stole your father's wife
And his usurping ass sits on your throne.

ORESTES

So then I'd be both murderer and king?

PAEDAGOGUS

Don't be naive--that's how succession works!

ORESTES

I'm overwhelmed. I wish that Pylades
Was here.

PAEDAGOGUS

I'm here, young friend, young prince, young king!
And happy to advise. We must proceed
By stealth. The queen expects you soon, so in
Disguise we will appear.

ORESTES

To throw her off
Our scent?

PAEDAGOGUS

I know--we'll say you're dead.

ORESTES

I'm dead?
Now, that's a good disguise. But then they'll want
To bury me, which would be pretty bad.

PAEDAGOGUS

Don't be so literal--we'll say you're dead.
Reporting from Parnassus.

ORESTES

Oh!

PAEDAGOGUS

As good Parnassians we must wear skins
Of wolves, traditional, authentic and
Exotic, so we may deceive the court.

ORESTES

So we must lie?

PAEDAGOGUS

They killed your father, boy!

ORESTES

I'm not so good at telling tales.

PAEDAGOGUS

I am.
The key to lying is embellishment.
The more detailed, the more believable.
Let's plan it out as we walk back to camp.
I have the perfect wolfskins waiting there.

ORESTES

I think it's just you like to wear that shit.

PAEDAGOGUS

I look especially good in wolf. Let's go.

ORESTES

Here lies my father's grave--is that correct?

PAEDAGOGUS

(Pointing.)

Great Agamemnon's tomb--it says right there.

ORESTES

Then I would like to spend some private time
Communing with this man I barely knew.

PAEDAGOGUS

You should! Of course! Insensitive of me!
And while you're here you should cut off a lock
Of hair, an offering.

ORESTES

That's kind of gross.

PAEDAGOGUS

Traditional!

ORESTES

Especially with the snake.
What's that about?

PAEDAGOGUS

Young people turn their backs--
So very sad.

ORESTES

All right, I'll do it then.

PAEDAGOGUS

I'll see you back at camp where we can change.

ORESTES

Lycanthropize.

PAEDAGOGUS

The wolves of vengeance, yes!

PAEDAGOGUS leaves. ORESTES takes out a
knife.

ORESTES

My father, how I hope that you'll be proud
When I've avenged your death. This killing thing
Is not my natural bent. I know you led
A thousand ships against the man who stole
Your brother's wife, so honor means a lot
To you, I guess. You sacrificed the child
You loved the most--I do remember that--
You favored her. Yet when the gods shut off
The wind to fill your sails and said you must
Put your own daughter to the knife, obeyed.

(Hacks his hair.)

I don't know what the hair is for, but here.

(Puts lock on altar.)

A sacrifice symbolic, I assume.

Much better than somebody killed, I think.

I'm sorry mother bumped you off. I would
 Have liked to know you. Think that you'd like me?
 Could I be king? I bet I'd really suck.
 Just thinking of it makes my stomach hurt.
 I can't do this without my Pylades.
 He's my best friend. Too bad that you can't meet.
 I'm going to get him now. So wish me luck.

ORESTES leaves. SLAVE WOMAN appears
 from hiding.

SLAVE WOMAN

(Dancing.)

A curse it is to know too much.
 But when you are a slave, who cares?
 So slippery the straws at which we clutch
 To save ourselves from moral snares.
 I've served this family so long--
 I who am soft while they are strong--
 That I've become a part of them
 No longer judge, cannot condemn,
 Just wondering which of these heirs
 Condemn themselves, caught unawares.

ELECTRA rushes in.

ELECTRA

Oh there you are! I need your help to--
 (Sees the snake.)
 --Aagh!

SLAVE WOMAN

Don't worry, dear, it's dead as dead can be.

ELECTRA

(Cradling the snake.)

My poor sweet baby! This is where you were!

SLAVE WOMAN

That creature's yours?

ELECTRA

I raised him from a worm.

SLAVE WOMAN

For gods' sake, where?

ELECTRA

The bath where father died.
 No one goes in there now. It's safe. Or was.

SLAVE WOMAN

Oh, so he's harmless, then.

ELECTRA

He's harmless now.
But when he lived, his very glance could kill.
Most toxic breed of viper in the world.
A nice surprise for mother was my plan.
Now that's all shot to hell!

SLAVE WOMAN

I have some news.

ELECTRA

My mother killed him, didn't she? Then left
Him on my father's altar just to mock
My failed attempt at justice. You poor thing!

SLAVE WOMAN

Wait till you hear--you'll be amazed, I'm sure.

ELECTRA

Aegisthus did this for her, didn't he?
Roused his voluptuous ass out of the bed
He stains adulterously with mother dear.

SLAVE WOMAN

Your troubles may be over now--

ELECTRA

The gall!
How dare they kill my snake, my only friend!

SLAVE WOMAN

Aren't I your friend?

ELECTRA

I have no friends these days!
Who wants a friendship with an orphan girl,
A royal daughter treated like a slave?

SLAVE WOMAN

A little better than a slave, I think.

ELECTRA

If only my brave brother would return!

SLAVE WOMAN

In fact--

ELECTRA

It takes a king to kill a queen.
And now's the time to do it, too, while she's
So lumbering and slow, weighed down by lust
And its result, that bastard embryo.
Obscene homunculus, that if it lives
Will steal our palace, fortune, country, throne.

SLAVE WOMAN

You're right, your brother could--

ELECTRA

Oh, father, howl
From Hades at the horror of it all!
The hospitality of home betrayed as soon
As you set foot upon the royal rugs!
A loving wife turned Gorgon while you're gone--
I mourn you every night as if the crime
Took place today--

SLAVE WOMAN

That's true, you do. But it's
Ten years ago at least.

ELECTRA

Perhaps she'll die
In childbirth, she's so old. It's nasty that
She lets him put it in her wrinkled hole--
Indecorous--a doxy dowager!

SLAVE WOMAN

If you'd but let me speak--

ELECTRA

Historic whore!

SLAVE WOMAN

Orestes--

ELECTRA

Hasbeen harlot--

SLAVE WOMAN

He is here!

ELECTRA

A superannuated strumpet--what?

SLAVE WOMAN

Your brother got your message and he's come.

ELECTRA

(After a moment.)

Naw!

SLAVE WOMAN

True! I saw him here myself, I swear.

ELECTRA

You're such a liar.

SLAVE WOMAN

(Indicating altar.)

No, look over there--

ELECTRA

Begone, you'll break my heart with hope, you witch!

SLAVE WOMAN

Came with his tutor, that old man--

ELECTRA

Enough!

If he has come, then bring him here to me.

SLAVE WOMAN

He was here.

ELECTRA

Ah! But can't be found?

SLAVE WOMAN

Perhaps--

They said that they'd be back.

ELECTRA

Then fetch him please.

SLAVE WOMAN runs off.

ELECTRA

You can't believe a single word she says.
 There's something just a little off with her.
 I don't know why we haven't sold her yet--
 She's not so pretty as she was, with strange
 And foreign customs, bouts of raving, shrieks!
 Not known for tolerance, my mother sells
 Most of our slaves within a year but keeps
 This one around quite inexplicably.
 Perhaps because she's lost her looks she's not
 A threat, hard work has made her masculine,
 And therefore not so tempting to the king.

CHRYSOTHEMIS appears.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra, there you are! What's with the snake?

ELECTRA

Oh, sister, he is dead, my friend!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Perhaps

You'll cultivate some human friendships now.

ELECTRA

A serpent bites but never lies.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

They lie!
That's all they do! They cannot sit or stand.

ELECTRA

Don't be an idiot, Chrysothemis.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Dear sister, you're in danger if you do
Not change your ways. Our dear stepfather plans
To seal you in a cave with wild dogs,
A bitch as bait for bitches, so he says.
I just now heard him plead for mother's leave
To bind you, split your tongue and haul you off.

ELECTRA

Our dear stepfather!?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

See! You're so divorced
From human ways you fail to recognize
Sarcastic speech. He's on his way. I came
To warn you to amend your words before
He gags your mouth with your own blood.

ELECTRA

Chrysothemis, because you were a child,
Too young the day our father died, you're spared
That memory of murder, lust and shame.
You go along to get along. That works
For you but isn't to my taste at all.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

It's only bile you taste, and bitterness.
Why live if that's the wretched life you choose?
Look out, Aegisthus comes!

AEGISTHUS comes out of the palace.
He's carrying a knife, but when he sees
ELECTRA and CHRYSOTHEMIS he hides it.

AEGISTHUS

Electra, sweet!
I thought I heard your dulcet notes, your soft
And pleasing voice. What is that bloody mess
You're cradling there?

ELECTRA

A sacred serpent like
The Ophion that incubated the
Primordial egg from which all life first sprang.

AEGISTHUS

A snake creation myth! But this one's days
Of incubating anything are done.
Chrysothemis, you're looking well today.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Why, thank you, father. You look well as well.

ELECTRA

He's not our father!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Only one I know.

AEGISTHUS

Forgive your sister, dear. Her face was made
For tears, it's all she knows. She's mourned
So long her smile has atrophied. You see?
She tried to smile just now--it didn't work.

ELECTRA

I cannot smile as long as you're alive.

AEGISTHUS

Such charming aphorisms from your lips!
Your father's dead--get over it. The man
Deserved to die. If I believed in gods
I'd say they sentenced him to death themselves.
What kind of wretch would kill his first-born child?

ELECTRA

The gods declared that she must die! It broke
His heart but he was pious and obeyed.

AEGISTHUS

So pious that he broke the natural law
By sacrificing his own seed? Could not a child
Of Menelaus been the choice since his
Wife Helen was the whore who caused the war?

ELECTRA

My mother would have understood the death
My sister died had you not whispered vile
Seductions in her ear, debauched her heart,
Inciting murder so you could be king.

AEGISTHUS

Electra, you were but a child yourself
When Iphigenia lost her life so ships
Could sail so men could die, so mighty Troy
Could be erased. An innocent was killed
For lust, but not for mine. The story is
More complicated than you'll ever know.

ELECTRA

I know you turned my mother from the gods:
Impiety, impurity are all
That you impart!

AEGISTHUS

She's still too pious. Look:
This awful altar right outside the house,
So we're reminded every day how gods
Destroy the minds then lives of men!

VOICE

(Off.)

Excuse me, keep it down there, would you, please?

For a moment ELECTRA, CHRYSOTHEMIS and
AEGISTHUS look confused.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Who's that?

ELECTRA

The neighbors here!

AEGISTHUS

There's no respect!

ELECTRA

I'd confiscate their property if I
Were you. Perhaps you lack authority.

AEGISTHUS

I'm not the tyrant that your father was.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

(At the altar.)

Electra, what is this?

AEGISTHUS

A bit of snake?

ELECTRA

(Picking up ORESTES' hair.)

A lock of hair.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Left as an offering?

ELECTRA

Yours?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

No. Yours?

ELECTRA

No.

AEGISTHUS

Don't look at me!

ELECTRA

(Holding it up to
CHRYSOTHEMIS.)

A match

To yours--yes, very similar, just look.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

(Holding it up to ELECTRA.)

No, more like yours, much more exact than mine.

ELECTRA

Orestes' hair!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

You think?

AEGISTHUS

You're off your nut.

ELECTRA

It means he's back! That slave girl told the truth!

AEGISTHUS

That makes no sense! How could a clump of hair
Cut from a man look like a woman's?

ELECTRA

Yes!

(Searches around the altar.)

Prepare to die, usurper!

AEGISTHUS

Such a stretch!
Your brother's never coming back.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

He might.

AEGISTHUS

How would you recognize him, really, dear?
You were so young.

ELECTRA

And look at this!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What's there?

ELECTRA

A footprint shaped exactly like my own!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Does that confirm it's him?

AEGISTHUS

It might, if he
Had never grown an inch in these ten years.
If he were very small, with girlie feet.

ELECTRA

Like you should talk, you sedentary prick.
When all of Greece marched off to war, you sat
At home, ate sweetmeats in our mother's bed.
A cynical effeminate, that's you!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra, please!

ELECTRA

I shouldn't make him mad?
He's got my death already planned--immure
Me in a cave with dogs? At least the dogs
Are better company! My brother may
Or may not come to take your throne, but I
Will take your life! The two--

(Grabs CHRYSOTHEMIS.)

Of us, in fact!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

(Pulling away.)

Speak for yourself! I am a woman, not
An executioner--I've not the strength!

AEGISTHUS

Until today you've been annoying, but
No cause for great concern. These open threats,
However, sound like treason, don't they, dear?
I thank you for your clarity. Just wait
Till mother hears.

(Calling.)

Oh, Clytemnestra! Now--

Do take your snake and go. But not too far.

ELECTRA

(Gathering up the snake.)

I'm not afraid of death, but you should be.

AEGISTHUS

Come, Clytemnestra! Hear your daughter's plans!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

She doesn't mean it, really.

ELECTRA

Yes, I do!

AEGISTHUS

(As ELECTRA and CHRYSOTHEMIS
leave.)

Queen Clytemnestra, come defend your throne!

CLYTEMNESTRA bursts out of the palace,
irritated.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What's all this shouting? I'm the kitchen slave?

AEGISTHUS

It's for effect. You'll be amused to know
The threat of your arrival scatters all
Your children to the winds.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Orestes, here?

AEGISTHUS

(Touching her belly.)

Our child has yet to bring him forth. I called
You now because Electra's smoldering hate
Has burst into full flame. She's so on fire
Her patience has been burnt away. She's bored
Herself as much as us with mourning all
The day her father's death and conjuring
At night her brother's fatal homecoming.

CLYTEMNESTRA

We all lost patience with her long ago.
I'm glad to know that she's caught up at last.

AEGISTHUS

She means to murder us herself.

CLYTEMNESTRA

She does?
The spunky little thing!

AEGISTHUS

Her mother's child.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Don't be unkind.

AEGISTHUS

I'm being kind to you.
(Produces a vial.)
Electra's health is delicate--

CLYTEMNESTRA

It's not!
She has the constitution of a bull!

AEGISTHUS

Go with me here. Her mourning's worn her out,
Ten years of whining sapped her strength, so when
She suddenly collapses, who's surprised?

CLYTEMNESTRA

What is that?

AEGISTHUS

Undetectable. And works
On boys as well as girls.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Give that to me.

AEGISTHUS

She's threatened us outright! The time is now!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Agreed. I want to do her in myself.

AEGISTHUS

All daughters think their mothers ruined their lives.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I'm far too literal. Pathetic, no?
The poison, please.

(AEGISTHUS hesitates.)

Or don't you think I can?

AEGISTHUS hands her the vial.

AEGISTHUS

You've stabbed a husband, so I know you can.
A daughter's not so easily replaced.

CLYTEMNESTRA

One daughter down, one yet to go.

AEGISTHUS

Or two?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Chrysothemis has done no wrong.

AEGISTHUS

(Hand on her belly.)

Our child
Will not survive his siblings if they live.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Ah! First things first. Please send Electra here
To me, and then you'll see what I can do.

AEGISTHUS

An errand I've been waiting for for years!

AEGISTHUS fairly dashes off. ORESTES
and PAEDAGOGUS appear wearing
wolfskins. They see CLYTEMNESTRA and
hide.

CLYTEMNESTRA

It's all about the children, isn't it?
(To Agamemnon's tomb.)
When I killed you, I did it to avenge
My daughter's death. Black rage had blinded me
To any other reason you should die. But then
I suddenly was queen, not just in name,
A queen who makes decisions, head of state.
Aegisthus, as the king, defers to me.
He just now asked permission to dispatch
My darling daughter and our fiercest foe.
But if Electra dies, I am a fraud.
I save my life at her expense and lose
Another child. Which means your death was not
Revenge for Iphigenia's sacrifice,
But merely lust for power, greed, debauchery.
Unlawful butchery, not righteous rage.
Electra dead, and next Orestes if
He shows, then I become a monster, not
A mother any more. Pathetic and
A despot, not a queen. Eye for
An eye, tooth for a tooth--when does revenge
Run out its course? Five thousand years from now
Will men still be so primitive, so cursed?
Now where's some wine to put this poison in?

When CLYTEMNESTRA leaves, ORESTES and
PAEDAGOGUS come out of hiding. ORESTES
carries an urn.

ORESTES

My mother is one complicated bitch!

PAEDAGOGUS

She knows you're here--it's good we're in disguise.

ORESTES

She plans to kill us, but she's having doubts.
Her mother-love is warring with her fear.

PAEDAGOGUS

No wavering, my boy! Whatever she
Imagines now, the truth is that she killed
Your father, sealed her fate ten years ago.

ORESTES

It's easier to hate her in abstract.
Now that I see her vulnerable--

PAEDAGOGUS

Stand fast!
These women know just how to unman men.
With pity you will weaken, seeing tears.
Do not go soft, young man! Stay strong and hard!

ORESTES

That wasn't for our benefit, you know.
We merely overheard her private thoughts.

PAEDAGOGUS

A woman's private thoughts can still deceive,
As she lies to herself within her mind.

ORESTES

(To the urn.)
O Pylades, I wish that you were here!
You always used to know just what to do.

PAEDAGOGUS

(Aside.)
This family likes conversing with the dead.
(To ORESTES.)
Your friend cannot advise you now--I'm here!

ORESTES

My tragedy compounded when he died!
He was supposed to aid me in this task.
Instead, he had to run in one last race,
And frightened horses tore him from my arms.
O noble friend! I wonder do you see
My father there among the shades?

PAEDAGOGUS

Let's send
Your mother there and she can ask as well.
(Trying unsuccessfully to pry
the urn from ORESTES.)
Now, come, cremating him delayed our trip.

ORESTES

His death unmanned me as no woman could.

PAEDAGOGUS

(Aside.)

He unmanned you a lot when still alive.

ORESTES

At least I'll have you always by my side.

PAEDAGOGUS

(Aside.)

They say the dead can be our burden, but
In this case--literally. A little weird.

ELECTRA appears with the snake and lays
it on the altar.

ELECTRA

My mother sent for me, but she's not here.
You are Parnassians. I know you by
Your pelts.

ORESTES

Are you Electra?

ELECTRA

Yes.

PAEDAGOGUS

You're right--
Parnassus is our home.

ELECTRA

Do you bring news?

ORESTES

The greatest news--!

PAEDAGOGUS

Be careful, friend--

ELECTRA

About?

ORESTES

Whom do you long to see?

ELECTRA

Orestes.

ORESTES

Yes!

AEGISTHUS enters from the palace.

AEGISTHUS

What news of young Orestes do you bring?
You're from Parnassus, for I recognize
Your lupine scent.

ORESTES

Orestes--!

PAEDAGOGUS

Peace.
Who are you, sir?

AEGISTHUS

I am the king.

ELECTRA

He's not!
He is a mere pretender to the throne.
Aegisthus is the wretch's cursed name.

AEGISTHUS

I see my gracious stepdaughter you've met.

PAEDAGOGUS

Our news then, is for all of you, and sad.

ELECTRA

Orestes?!

PAEDAGOGUS

Dead.

ORESTES

It's true.

AEGISTHUS

Sad news indeed.

ELECTRA

I don't believe it--no, I won't!

AEGISTHUS

Your proof?

PAEDAGOGUS

Our proof? Is not our word enough? The king--
Old Strophius himself--has sent us here.

AEGISTHUS

Parnassus was an ally of the king
You know as Agamemnon, not of mine.
Substantiation, please.

PAEDAGOGUS
 (Grabbing the urn from
 ORESTES.)

Well, here you go:
 Orestes' ashes.

ORESTES AND ELECTRA

No!

AEGISTHUS

You brought them here?

PAEDAGOGUS

In case you needed proof.

AEGISTHUS

They could be anyone's. They could be dirt.
 How did he die?

PAEDAGOGUS

An accident.

(To ORESTES.)

You tell.

ORESTES

It was a chariot race!

PAEDAGOGUS

Give more detail.

ORESTES

He was renowned throughout Parnassus for
 His skill at racing, also for his form.
 His grace, his beauty--sculptors sought him out
 As his proportions were Apollo's own.

PAEDAGOGUS

The race?

ORESTES

It was a cloudless day. The air
 Was crisp upon the mountain as a breeze
 Gave animation to the banners of
 Each chariot, the colors floating on
 The wind: cerulean and sea foam green,
 Bright fuchsia, and the sanguine shade of blood,
 Vermilion, turquoise, indigo,
 Sweet safflower, alizarin and lake--

AEGISTHUS

The accident?

ORESTES

Fair Pylades--

PAEDAGOGUS

You mean
Orestes--

ORESTES

Yes!--was in the lead, ahead
By several lengths, just past the dolphin mark
And full-on toward the eagle when the--what?

PAEDAGOGUS

The bridle.

ORESTES

Broke--one bridle broke, the horse--
A handsome mount, so spirited and strong,
With muscles coursing under gleaming coat
As black as men from Nubia--

PAEDAGOGUS

It veered--

ORESTES

I'm telling this! It veered. So he pulled out
His leather whip, thick-handled, stained with sweat,
And lubricated with fresh blood--he struck
The virile beast, who veered again just as
They came into the turn. With one horse right,
The other left, the--

ELECTRA

Axel?

ORESTES

--Splintered in
The strain.

(Starting to cry.)

The brave and noble driver flung
Into the air and then again to earth
Like Icarus. The other chariots
Soon turned the post, some steered away from him,
But others saw too late.

(Touching himself to
illustrate.)

The first one crushed
His mighty arm, the next his powerful thigh,
A third his muscled, flawless chest, and then
A horse hoof smashed into his--

ELECTRA

Stop! I won't
Survive another word!

AEGISTHUS

Then please go on.

ORESTES

(Sobbing.)

So after all the chariots had passed,
The dust began to settle, sticking to
His gory but still glorious limbs. From where
I stood I saw his *xystis*--that's the long
And manly tunic drivers wear--was torn,
Its Tyrian purple blackened with his blood!

An embarrassing moment of ORESTES'
quiet sobbing, then ELECTRA bursts out.

ELECTRA

Alas, we're doomed! My only brother's dead!

AEGISTHUS

I don't quite understand. How could the way
The horses went precipitate this kind
Of axel crack?

PAEDAGOGUS

The physics--

ELECTRA

Gone!

ORESTES

It may
Have been some other cause--

ELECTRA

(Taking the urn.)

Orestes gone!

AEGISTHUS

What kind of cause?

PAEDAGOGUS

Poor workmanship, perhaps?

ELECTRA

What man on earth will help me now?!

AEGISTHUS

I doubt
The chariot of a prince gets made so cheap
It leads to axel crack.

ORESTES

Do you dispute
My word? I saw his axel crack!

PAEDAGOGUS

Me, too!

ELECTRA

Stop saying axel crack!

AEGISTHUS

Ignore her. She
Just loves to mourn.

ELECTRA

(To the urn.)

I clutch you to my breast and to my heart!

PAEDAGOGUS

We must fulfill our dreadful charge and tell
This fell news to the queen.

AEGISTHUS

No need of that.
I'm more than glad to tell the queen myself.
Please take your ease.

ELECTRA

O gods! See how he gloats!

ELECTRA pries at the lid of the urn.

AEGISTHUS

I mean such devastating words must come
From one she loves. From one who knows her heart.

ORESTES

But we know the details.

AEGISTHUS

Too much detail.

(To PAEDAGOGUS.)

Come with me so I'm accurate. I know
Just how to tenderly transmit the gist.

ORESTES

And I'll come with you!

AEGISTHUS

No, the lady needs
You here.

PAEDAGOGUS

There's more that you must tell her, too.

Just as AEGISTHUS and PAEDAGOGUS
disappear into the palace, ORESTES
turns to see ELECTRA dump the ashy
contents of the urn all over herself.

ELECTRA
Sackcloth and ashes! We must mourn!

ORESTES
Oh, no!

He rushes to her, tries to dust her off.

ELECTRA
Leave me alone! In tribute to the dead
I wear his ashes on my clothes and grind
His dust into my flesh!
(She does so.)

ORESTES
That's not his dust!

ELECTRA
Of course it is! You just told how he died!

ORESTES
You have no right to mourn--Orestes lives!

ELECTRA
(Indicating the ashes.)
Then who is this?

ORESTES
That's Pylades, the brave
And noble charioteer.

ELECTRA
Don't lie to me!
(Rubs more ashes.)
Orestes, enter in!

ORESTES
That's really gross. I bet you could get sick.

ELECTRA
He is my brother--I absorb his pith!

ORESTES
There's no pith here, it's dry.

ELECTRA
His pith, his core,
His essence!

ORESTES
I'm your brother!

ELECTRA

What? Oh, no,
He'd never wear a wolf.

ORESTES

(Pulling back the wolfskin.)

It's a disguise
To fool Aegisthus and the queen. Look here--
I cut a lock of hair--an offering--

ELECTRA produces the lock of hair,
matches it to the missing patch on his
head.

ELECTRA

I thought at first: a strange Parnassus style--
But anyone can cut a lock of hair.
This is no proof.

ORESTES

It matches yours!

ELECTRA

It's just
Been pointed out to me how matching locks
Do not a reconciliation prove.

ORESTES

Then see our feet--they're just the same, exact!

ELECTRA

You do have girlie feet. But none of this
Corroborates. My hope's flown up and crashed
Too many times today.

CHRYSOTHEMIS runs out of the palace.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra, I just heard--Orestes, dead!

ORESTES

And who is this strong, healthy girl?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Oh, dear!

ELECTRA

Chrysothemis, my sister, maybe yours.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra, is that make-up? Way too much!

ELECTRA

The ashes of Orestes or that--

ORESTES

--Brave
And dashing Pylades, reduced to dust.
I am Orestes, but she won't believe.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

She'd rather mourn. It's all she knows. And if
There were good news, she wouldn't want to hear.

ELECTRA

That's harsh. I just want proof that you are he
And then you'll see Electra dance and sing.

ORESTES

I don't expect you'd recognize me now
That I am grown, but what about the man
You gave me to, that Paedagogus who
Just went into the palace?

ELECTRA

No, he's not!
He's way too old!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Makes sense--it's been ten years.

ORESTES rummages in his pack.

ORESTES

You sent Orestes to Parnassus with
Two tokens of the House of Atreus.

ELECTRA

I did. They're from a set of heirlooms we
Still have, except for two I gave to him.
Unless you show me those, I won't believe.

ORESTES

How great the faith of those who need not see
In order to believe.

(Hesitates to pull it out.)

But first: what kind
Of object?

ELECTRA

Gold.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

A chalice handed down
Through generations of our royal House.

ORESTES

And the design?

ELECTRA

You're testing us?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

When you're
The one who needs to show us proof?

ORESTES

(Produces a gold chalice.)

Then here it is!

CHRYSOTHEMIS gasps, then looks to
ELECTRA for confirmation. ELECTRA
gives a scream of joy, and her sister
joins in.

ELECTRA

That's it!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

That's it?

ELECTRA

The cup of Atreus!

(Throws her arms around
ORESTES.)

Oh, brother, dear, forgive my cautiousness.
Life teaches us not to expect the thing
We crave the most.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

(Joining group hug.)

It's really him? You're him?

ORESTES

And you my loving sisters! Joyful day!

ELECTRA

My life has led me to this day alone.
What we do now--together!--signifies
Our essence, who we are within, both now
And evermore. The past evaporates,
The future's but a dream. What happens in
This instant is what matters from now on.
Don't fuck it up!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What must we do?

ELECTRA

We kill.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Oh, now you're ruined everything! I was
So happy for about ten seconds there.

ELECTRA

The gods spared us, so we could have revenge
Against our mother and Aegisthus for
Our father's death.

(Turning to the altar.)

O Agamemnon, King!

ORESTES

(To the altar.)

O father of us all, we pray to you!

ELECTRA

Though to the realm of Hades you withdrew

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Most holy, blessed and sacred be your name

ORESTES

Your royal kingdom here we now proclaim

ELECTRA

Your will be done as if you were alive

ORESTES

And here upon this earth again do
thrive

CHRYSOTHEMIS

And please give us this day our daily bread

ORESTES

Forgive us our worst sins, the ones we dread

CHRYSOTHEMIS

As we forgive those who against us sin

ELECTRA

Wait, no!

ORESTES

We can't forgive--

ELECTRA

We can't forget--

ORESTES

I didn't come this far for that!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

For peace?
A reconciliation, think of that!

ELECTRA

Think of your father whom they killed!

ORESTES

A king!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Who left his country for ten years!

ELECTRA

The bold
Decisive general who defeated Troy!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Retrieving a lost slut!

ORESTES

A husband--

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Whose
Poor wife was as abandoned as his land.

ELECTRA

Your father who loved you--!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

His love was strong
For Iphigenia, too--how'd that turn out?
And what if one of us had been with him
In Aulis when the winds all held their breath?

ORESTES

The Oracle at Delphi ordered this
Revenge!

ELECTRA

If we don't follow through, we're cursed!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

As cursed as we will be for matricide?
(They don't have an answer.)
I'm not the vengeful type, as you well know.
I can't help out, but love you, sister, and
Our new-found brother, too. I won't betray
Your plot as that would mean your deaths. But if
I don't, our mother dies. Unless you change
Your minds and then your hearts. I pray you will
As that's the only way to end this curse.

CHRYSOTHEMIS goes into the palace.

ORESTES

She's going to spill the beans!

ELECTRA

I don't think so.

ORESTES

We'll have to kill her first, or our plan fails.

ELECTRA

She's honest. We can trust her silence.

ORESTES

No!

We've given her a wretched choice. Betray
Our mother if she holds her tongue, and us
If she but breathes a word.

ELECTRA

Each one of us
Is trapped. That's just how curses work.
To make you do the very thing you hate,
Destroy the ones you love and you die, too.

ORESTES

But you don't love our mother--you spit out
Her name as if it tastes of blackest bile.

ELECTRA

I could not hate so much if love was not
There first. Before our sister died, I was
Our mother's favorite child--

ORESTES

Our father was
More fond of our lost sister than of us.
And mother loved you most? Then he killed her
And she hates you--oh, woe is love, and love
Is woe. Chrysothemis and I fair best
Because we are the children loved the least!

SLAVE WOMAN rushes out of the palace.

ELECTRA

Be quiet, now. This slave is full of lies--
Let's hear her news--the opposite is true.

SLAVE WOMAN

Queen Clytemnestra's fainted dead away!

ELECTRA

That means she's wide awake.

ORESTES

Oh, surely not!

SLAVE WOMAN

Aegisthus told her of Orestes' death,
She blanched and moaned, and tumbled to the floor.

ELECTRA

She danced and sang with joy!

ORESTES

Perhaps she loves
Her long-lost son and truly mourns his death!

ELECTRA

She faints on cue--it's all an act!

SLAVE WOMAN

I've seen
Into her heart. She loves Orestes but
She fears him even more.

ORESTES

How do you know?

SLAVE WOMAN

She gave birth to a snake in a dream.

She picks up the snake and dances with
it, almost an Irish jig.

SLAVE WOMAN

And offered her breastmilk and cream.
It did more than just tipple.
And bit off her nipple.
Whereupon she awoke with a scream.

ELECTRA

That's much too crazy to be true. I told
You she's out of her head.

ORESTES

Did she predict
I was alive?

SLAVE WOMAN

I did!

ORESTES

And that came true.

ELECTRA

Perhaps you're right. The world has changed today.
What once were lies have now become the truth.

ORESTES

It is an omen for our plan!

ELECTRA

Rejoice!

(Joins the snake dance.)

I interpret this dream as a sign
 She'll be killed by a man in her line
 That's you, my dear brother
 Who'll murder our mother
 And retrieve for us what's yours and mine

ORESTES

(Joins the snake dance.)

Our mother, therefore, means us malice
 So before she returns from the palace
 Let's milk this snake's venom
 And use it agin' 'em

(Picks up the chalice.)

To poison some wine in this chalice

ELECTRA

Orestes, brilliant!

ORESTES

Thanks--

(Shrugs.)

Use what you have.

ELECTRA

Go fetch the king and queen.

SLAVE WOMAN

I will make haste.

SLAVE WOMAN disappears into the palace
 while ORESTES and ELECTRA milk the
 snake's venom into the chalice.

ELECTRA

And now, my serpent friend, taste your revenge!

ORESTES

Be sure to save some for Aegisthus, too.

ELECTRA

If only we could find the other cup!

ORESTES

My Paedagogus has it in his pack!

ELECTRA reverently coils the snake on
 the ground. ORESTES pours wine from a
 goatskin into the chalice.

ELECTRA

Rest peacefully and witness justice done.

ORESTES

But how shall we persuade the queen to drink?

ELECTRA

I'll think of something good.

ORESTES

Libation in
My memory?

AEGISTHUS backs out of the palace.

AEGISTHUS

My friends, a toast--
(Turns around revealing two
identical chalices.)
--To death!

ELECTRA and ORESTES look at each other,
then ORESTES turns around to reveal his
chalice. It's exactly like the two
AEGISTHUS bears.

ORESTES

Coincidence! I just proposed the same.

They stare at the three chalices for a
moment, each knowing that one of them
is poisoned.

ELECTRA

A drink to celebrate my brother's life
Is what you mean, I'm sure.

AEGISTHUS

Exactly, yes!
(Handing ORESTES a chalice.)
Friend from Parnassus, this was to be mine,
But I will give to you, while I go fetch
The third libation I prepared.

ELECTRA

Then that
One's mine?

AEGISTHUS

Indeed it is!
(Hands his second chalice to
her.)

ORESTES

(Hands the chalice he prepared
to AEGISTHUS.)
This one's for you.

AEGISTHUS accepts the chalice, then
tries to give it back.

AEGISTHUS

It's not our custom here to drink the wine
Brought by our guests. I have one more--

He gestures toward the palace.

ORESTES

We cannot waste the wine we brought so far!

AEGISTHUS

(Reaching for ORESTES chalice.)

Of course. Then trade me back.

ORESTES

Alas, for in
My country we would be remiss were we
Not to provide the host our finest grape!
I have your wine, and you have mine. It is
Reciprocal, so custom's met!

AEGISTHUS

(Cautiously.)

I see
Your point. No harm in that. Let's raise a glass
To our dear, lost Orestes, then.

ELECTRA

Long may
He live!

(Off AEGISTHUS' suspicious
look.)

Within our hearts!

ORESTES

Forever more!

They start to drink, but AEGISTHUS
interrupts.

AEGISTHUS

My friend, I must apologize. The wine
You hold is not our best. You've brought the grape
Renowned throughout your land. Embarrassed I
Would be to serve you mediocre swill.

(Grabs ORESTES' chalice.)

Take back your fine and noble vintage here!

ELECTRA

It's good enough for me but not for him?

AEGISTHUS

You grew up on our wine, Electra, sweet.

ORESTES

(Switching chalices with
ELECTRA.)

Then I'll take hers, and she'll drink mine.

AEGISTHUS

No, don't do that!

ELECTRA

Aren't they the same?

ORESTES

(Switching them back.)

That's right. It matters not, as long as you
Taste our delicious offering. Drink up!

AEGISTHUS smiles nervously. They all
start to drink. But ELECTRA has now
become suspicious of AEGISTHUS'
behavior and doesn't raise her chalice.

AEGISTHUS

Electra, don't be disrespectful to
Your brother's memory. Please drain your cup!

ELECTRA

I'm overcome just thinking of his death.
My tears have drowned my thirst.

AEGISTHUS

If you won't drink
It's not polite I should imbibe.

ORESTES

(To ELECTRA.)

With all
Respect, the king must drink, so you should too!

AEGISTHUS

In fact, I won't until you've finished yours.

ELECTRA

I don't like wine that much. Do we have beer?

ORESTES

We all must drink, or we offend the gods!

They start to drink. PAEDAGOGUS comes
out of the palace. They stop before
they have a sip, relieved.

PAEDAGOGUS

The queen is still recovering, but says
She'll join us soon--

(Sees them all frozen.)
 You are in mourning, too.
 I'm sorry to disturb your ritual.

Starts to go back into the palace.

AEGISTHUS
 Oh, no, my friend, Parnassian, you must
 Not go. A solemn toast of great respect
 In poor Orestes' memory. Here, take
 This goblet--

ELECTRA
 No, take mine!

PAEDAGOGUS
 (Fending off both.)
 No need, my friends!
 (Opens his pack.)
 We all may drink a drop of wine today!
 (Pulls out an identical
 chalice.)
 I brought my own--and look!--it matches yours!

He sets the chalice on the altar and
 fills it from his own goatskin.

PAEDAGOGUS
 Wine red as blood, drunk in remembrance of
 Orestes' shortened life. Don't wait for me--
 I'll catch up with you soon enough!

ELECTRA
 (Setting her chalice on the
 altar.)
 We'll wait.

AEGISTHUS
 (Setting his chalice on the
 altar.)
 It's impolite to drink before you do.

PAEDAGOGUS
 (Finishes pouring.)
 Then let me top this off--

AEGISTHUS and ELECTRA both grab the
 chalice PAEDAGOGUS has just filled.

AEGISTHUS
 I'll take this one.

ELECTRA
 I'd like to try Parnassian wine.

Oh, no!

ORESTES

ORESTES sets his own chalice on the altar and picks up the chalices AEGISTHUS and ELECTRA have set there. He tries to hand them back to AEGISTHUS and ELECTRA, but he's mixed them up.

ORESTES

We each must take the wine first given or
We violate the gods' command.

ELECTRA

And which
Command was that? Which god?

AEGISTHUS

(Grabbing the chalice ORESTES
set down.)

I'll take this one.

ORESTES

If I drink this one, I'll be cursed, so says
The Oracle.

ELECTRA

It did?

PAEDAGOGUS

I don't recall.

PAEDAGOGUS switches his chalice with
one of the ones ORESTES holds.

PAEDAGOGUS

But here, I'll save you from the curse. A wine's
A wine, I always say!

Reluctantly, ORESTES accepts the
chalice from PAEDAGOGUS and gives the
other to ELECTRA.

PAEDAGOGUS

(Raises his chalice.)

Orestes, here's
To you from all of us! Let's spill the grapes!

PAEDAGOGUS drinks in ignorance.
AEGISTHUS and ORESTES drink, confident
they've gotten a non-poisoned chalice.

ELECTRA fakes like she's chugging
 (because she's gotten suspicious),
 quite a bit of the wine spilling on
 her. They all wait a moment, gauging
 if they've made the right choice.
 PAEDAGOGUS strides in front of the
 palace pontificating.

PAEDAGOGUS

I find myself quite moved. Orestes' death
 Destroyed his mother Clytemnestra's heart.
 But his demise to her salvation brings,
 For he had sworn to take her life, she said.
 The tears she sheds spring from clear-sighted eyes
 That see both joy and sadness in his grave.
 This wine's exactly what I needed now!

PAEDAGOGUS suddenly clutches his belly
 and doubles over.

PAEDAGOGUS

Or maybe not! Orestes, drink no more!

PAEDAGOGUS falls over dead and out of
 sight behind a plinth or greenery.
 ORESTES rushes to him.

ORESTES

My dearest tutor!

AEGISTHUS

You're Orestes?!

ELECTRA

Yes!
 The poison he just drank was meant for you!

ORESTES

He's dead! The man who raised me from a child!
 More father than my royal sire!

AEGISTHUS

You won't
 Have long to celebrate this prodigal's
 Return. For your own mother mixed the wine
 You guzzled now, and it was poisoned, too.
 Lost tolerance for your perpetual gloom
 And open threats, at last she ordered you
 Be killed. Oh, Clytemnestra, come and see!

ORESTES

Was my wine poisoned, too?

AEGISTHUS

Until just now
You were our honored guest, so no.
(Pulls a knife.)

But there's
A dozen ways to skin a wolf!

ORESTES

(Pulls a knife.)

Then I'll
Repay your courtesy by skinning you
As well, conniving jackal!

They circle each other.

AEGISTHUS

Half-grown cub!
See to your sister first, as she will soon
Be Hades bound. A tender last farewell!

ELECTRA

The only one who needs to say farewell is you,
You murderer, usurper, pampered pig!
You forced your tainted wine upon me but
I never drank a drop.

AEGISTHUS

This knife will drink
Your blood, then, after it has tasted his.

ORESTES

But you have tasted wine yourself today.

AEGISTHUS

The wine of victory!

ORESTES

No, death! That snake
Was drained of venom in the chalice that
You drank. The viper's poison courses through
Your veins.

AEGISTHUS

I'm standing yet, with no effect. It's you
Ingested your own toxic brew, the dank
Wine those who seek revenge are doomed to drink!

ELECTRA

Aegisthus drank it, didn't he?

AEGISTHUS

You can't
Be sure!

ORESTES

O gods, the pain!
(Doubles over.)

ELECTRA

(Going to him.)
Orestes, no!

ORESTES whispers to her while AEGISTHUS
gloats.

AEGISTHUS

It seems my knife will only taste your blood
Today, Electra. Step aside and let
The poison retribution do its work!

ELECTRA steps away from ORESTES, and
AEGISTHUS moves closer to taunt him.
ORESTES remains doubled over.

ORESTES

The gods will punish you, Aegisthus!

AEGISTHUS

No.
Revenge is poison in the soul. Not mine,
But yours, and yours. For every breath you've drawn
The ten years since your father's death was fouled
With noisome, festering hate. Your brain was boiled
In raging brew of rancor and of spite. And all that time
I ate and drank, enjoyed your mother's love,
While you were tortured by your very thoughts.
It's merciful of me to end your torment now.

(Raises the dagger to strike

ORESTES.)

Come, queen, and bid your son farewell!

(Staggers.)

What's this?

ELECTRA

Some venom is slow-acting, so
I hear.

AEGISTHUS

I'm dizzy only, nothing more. It's been
A stressful day--

(Drops to his knees.)

O Clytemnestra!

ORESTES

Now!

ELECTRA grabs AEGISTHUS from behind, getting the knife from his weakened grip. ORESTES, not poisoned at all, leaps upon AEGISTHUS, stabbing him.

AEGISTHUS

A curse upon your curse! No need for gods
To punish you--your crime condemns itself!

AEGISTHUS falls down dead as ELECTRA and ORESTES step back. CHRYSOTHEMIS runs in from the palace.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What's all this shouting? Clytemnestra's--oh!

ELECTRA

At last.

ORESTES

Aegisthus is no more.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I see.
The queen is on her way. Shall we...clean up?

ORESTES

No--she must see.

ELECTRA

(Snarling at the corpse.)

It's time to drink again.
But now we celebrate the worms who'll eat
Your putrefying flesh. The flesh that once
Seduced my mother into murderous lust.

(Prodding and even kicking a
little.)

The dainty hands, the painted lips, the smooth,
Unsunburned brow that witnessed neither work
Nor war.

CHRYSOTHEMIS and ORESTES get a blanket
or sheet from his pack.

ELECTRA

The milk-white thighs, the flaccid calves,
The tiny feet that never walked when they
Could ride. Was this a man? Was this a king?
A pale, repulsive reproduction--no!--
Homunculus it was, not man at all!

ORESTES

Electra, we have won.

CHRYSOthemis

That's right--no need
To taunt the dead!

(Covers the body.)

Until someone can clear away the mess--
Where is that slave when she's most needed here?

CLYTEMNESTRA flings open the palace
doors.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Aegisthus?!

CHRYSOthemis

He's not here.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I heard him call.

ELECTRA

And then he left.

CHRYSOthemis

He went to fetch you.

ELECTRA

He
Has news.

CLYTEMNESTRA

(Seeing the covered body.)

And what is that?

ORESTES

(Courtly.)

Dear lady, that's
The news.

CLYTEMNESTRA

And who are you?

ORESTES

I come from far
Parnassus--

CLYTEMNESTRA

Hence the wolf-wear, yes, I see.
Aegisthus said--my son--

(Chokes up.)

ORESTES

Yes, mistress, here
He lies.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I fail to understand.

ORESTES

He's dead.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Killed in an accident some weeks ago.
And nothing left but ashes. Is that right?

CHRYSOthemIS

No, not exactly.

ELECTRA

Killed, it's true.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What is
Exactly true then? We are speaking of
My only son, my heir. Don't hesitate--
Speak plainly to your mother and your queen.

ORESTES

I am an ally of Aegisthus sent
To intercept your son. To Delphi he
Departed when he came of age and sought
A prophecy. Apollo's Oracle
Declared he must avenge his father's death--
I was dispatched to make sure he did not.
Now he's dispatched as well.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You killed my son?
You stand before me, say those words as if
I would be pleased? Your death, and instantly,
Is your reward!

CHRYSOthemIS

It was an accident!

CLYTEMNESTRA

A chariot? An axel crack? Right here?
My son this close and still alive? How long
Has he been dead?

ORESTES

Mere moments--

ELECTRA

You just missed
Him.

CLYTEMNESTRA goes to the body.

ORESTES

Don't!

CLYTEMNESTRA touches the body.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Still warm. Still human flesh, not clay.
Come, child, to your mother's arms!

CLYTEMNESTRA starts to embrace the
body. ORESTES keeps the covering from
falling off.

ORESTES

Stay back!
You wouldn't want to see him now, all blood
And broken bones.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I saw my husband whom
I dearly loved far bloodier than this!

ELECTRA

At your own hand!

ORESTES

You mourn him in your heart?

CLYTEMNESTRA

He suckled at my breast! This is my heart,
My blood, my bone, my flesh!

ELECTRA

She's faking it.

ORESTES

You loved Orestes then? Though he was sent
To take your life?

CLYTEMNESTRA

A mother always loves
Her child, no matter what crime he commits.

ELECTRA

But me you hate.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You are my burden, but
If you should slit my throat, I'd fondly stroke
Your hair as I bleed out.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Dear mother, if
You love your son, then love this man!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Love him?

(Finds AEGISTHUS' knife.
Brandishes it.)

The foreign wretch who killed my only boy?

CHRYSOthemis

No, he's--

ORESTES

I am the killer of this man.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Then you shall die.

CHRYSOthemis

But first learn who he is!

ELECTRA

Indecorous! A queen with knife in hand
Rough brawling with a messenger, a man
Who knows you not.

ORESTES

She is a mother, that
I know. And I believe she loved her son.
Though she kill me, I cannot strike against
A mother mourning--

ELECTRA

Weeping, wailing! Lies!
She is deceiving you with poison tears.

ORESTES

And she's with child!

ELECTRA

More reason still!
Learn who this woman is before you throw
Yourself upon her blade.

ORESTES

Yes, I would like
To know her better.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Then
I am to you a lioness with cubs,
Ferocious bitch protecting her young pups,
A mother! What is fiercer in the world?
My life lived for my children, nothing else!

ELECTRA

Then may your children speak?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Yes, testify.
Tell how I killed the man I loved because
He dared to sacrifice our child.

ELECTRA

She did.
That was her great excuse in any case.
But long before our father's ships were stalled
At Aulis, no, before they disappeared
Below our own horizon on the day
They sailed, this faithless queen in greedy lust
Seduced our father's cousin in the bed
Wherein we were conceived.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Not true! My need
Was for an ally when our child was killed.
But please, go on. Let's hear your point of view.

ELECTRA

When fortune went in favor of the foe,
When Trojans gloried, she rejoiced. When Greece
Had setbacks, she was happy that the war
Went on and on. Ten years she reveled in
Aegisthus' rude embrace, her sagging tits
The old whore's only currency. He did
Not care--this royal slut had made him king!

CLYTEMNESTRA

I will admit, Aegisthus is a king
In bed, much better than your father was!

VOICE

(Off.)

I asked politely once before: shut up!

CLYTEMNESTRA

What's that?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

The gods?

ELECTRA

They are offended by
The recitation of your bloody crimes
As well as your pathetic, false defense.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I won't defend myself. I would have killed
Your father if the victim had been you,
Or you--

(To the body.)

--Or you. I had no choice.

ELECTRA

The gods
Made Agamemnon choose between the death
Of his own daughter and the fate of all
Of Greece. As king he had no choice as well.

CLYTEMNESTRA

How quickly you condemn a mother's wrath,
As natural a rage as wind and storm!
While in the same breath you defend a most
Unnatural father's murder of his child!

ORESTES

Upon the order of the gods!

CLYTEMNESTRA

What gods?

ELECTRA

Chaste Artemis, offended by a boast
Our father made about his hunting skills--

CLYTEMNESTRA

A boast? A mere faux pas?

ORESTES

Against a god!

CLYTEMNESTRA

What kind of petty god demands a death
In penitence for insults?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Gods are gods.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Oh, are they so? Did Artemis appear
In person to demand my daughter's life?

ELECTRA

The seer Calchas said that was her will.

CLYTEMNESTRA

A man.

ELECTRA

A famous augur!

CLYTEMNESTRA

But a man.
No god, no goddess made this sacrifice!
One man spoke lies, another held the knife.
Just human hands in this. There are no gods!
We don't need gods to sin--we're born for it!

ORESTES

Why would a father sacrifice his child
Unless commanded by the gods?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Now that's
The question none of you has asked till now.
Ask it of me. You were but children then.
I knew what you did not.

CHRYSOthemis

What was it then?

CLYTEMNESTRA

As children you would not have found it strange
That Agamemnon took our daughter off
With him to war. She was his favorite--

ELECTRA

We knew that.

CLYTEMNESTRA

But why? Did she have virtues you did not?

CHRYSOthemis

She was a beauty--!

ELECTRA

--Even very young!

CLYTEMNESTRA

And though you all are comely, she was fair
Beyond imagining. A treasure not to be
Left home, behind. I begged him not to take
Our first-born child away across the sea.
But he had need of her, a need I did
Not understand nor think was possible.
But then Achilles--

ELECTRA

Him? A thorn stuck deep
Within our father's side throughout the war!

CLYTEMNESTRA

And this is why: Achilles heard a cry
One night and found your father--yes, the man
Whom you revere!--atop your sister in
Her tent. Achilles drove him from her bed,
And Agamemnon fled into the night.
Achilles told Odysseus, who then--
The subtle bastard--threatened to reveal
To everyone the Mycenaean king
Betrayed his blood, his wife, his child, the most
Unholy sin. If I believed in gods,

I'd say that Artemis would be enraged
 By violating innocence instead
 Of one small boast! So Agamemnon, caught,
 Decided he could seal our daughter's lips,
 Divert suspicion by blood sacrifice.
 The seer saw what he was paid to see.
 A cold and cornered man, no god did this.

ORESTES

(After a moment.)

It can't be true!

ELECTRA

Yes, how would you have heard?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Odysseus, not one to hesitate
 To stir the pot, sent word to me straight off.
 That's when I begged Aegisthus for his help.
 So judge your parents, children, as you will,
 But wait until you have the sum of facts.

ORESTES

But then why was Orestes sent to kill
 You by Apollo's Oracle?

ELECTRA

That's right!
 The gods' omniscience proves your tale a lie!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Then let the gods come tell you so themselves.

They wait a moment.

CLYTEMNESTRA

If they are so omniscient, then they know
 You need their confirmation, their own words.

CLYTEMNESTRA looks around as if for the
 gods.

CLYTEMNESTRA

No gods appear. Just me. Your mother who
 Reveals the bitter truth, your father's sin.

ELECTRA

He never would--!

CLYTEMNESTRA

He did.

ELECTRA

Our sister raped--!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

We knew he loved her more--

ELECTRA

But not that way!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Don't tell me that you're jealous of her fate.

ORESTES

Electra, it explains a lot.

ELECTRA

I can't
Believe this lie and live! Our sister soiled
Then slain by her own father--ours! The king!
For this alone--this slander--you should die!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Does any of this matter now? My son
Lies at our feet. The curse has run its course.

ELECTRA

(Taking CLYTEMNESTRA to the
body.)

Yes, see what you have wrought! My brother's corpse,
The House of Atreus, our line's dead end.

ORESTES

Perhaps she shouldn't look--

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Her heart will break!

ELECTRA

I want it broken, crushed! As she crushed mine
When they our father bloodied in the bath.

CLYTEMNESTRA

(Kneeling by the body.)

I haven't seen his face since he was but
A child. One time an infant at my breast,
And now he is a man.

ELECTRA

No longer man,
But curdled clay.

(Touches the body.)

Yes, cooling now, for life
From him has flown.

CLYTEMNESTRA

My son, my son! Embrace
Me with your lifeless arms--

ELECTRA

And kiss her with
Your bloody lips!

ELECTRA whisks the covering away just
as CLYTEMNESTRA bends toward the body.
She is suddenly face-to-face with the
dead AEGISTHUS. Everyone freezes for a
moment.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Aegisthus!

ELECTRA

Yes! He's stabbed
And poisoned, too, a double death as he
Deserved!

CLYTEMNESTRA

(Embracing the body.)

No pulse of life in him, no breath?

ELECTRA

His sensuous limbs lie senseless, slack and still!
His touch will never thrill your soul again!
His lifeless loins lost lust, soon turn to
dust!

CLYTEMNESTRA

My heart is sundered. One I love is dead.
But does this mean that one I love as well
Yet lives? Aegisthus lies here in my arms--
May I embrace a living son? Where is
Orestes?

ORESTES

Here.

ELECTRA

Embrace your son, embrace
Your death!

ELECTRA nods to ORESTES who reluctantly
pulls his knife.

CLYTEMNESTRA

My boy's become a man. Come home
At last.

ORESTES

My heart is sundered, too. A boy
Must love his mother, even when he's been
Apart from her so long he doesn't know
Her face, her voice, her touch. I missed you all

My life, and these last moments with you now
Fulfill my life-long dream.

CLYTEMNESTRA

And mine as well.

ELECTRA

(Coaching.)

But...

ORESTES

I must take your life or mine is cursed.

CLYTEMNESTRA

The Oracle at Delphi told you so.

ELECTRA

That's right! So kill her, now!

CLYTEMNESTRA

But killing me
Is matricide, so you'll be cursed anew.

ORESTES

That isn't true!

ELECTRA

You can't pronounce a curse!

CLYTEMNESTRA

That's for the gods.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

That's so.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What if the gods,
The Oracle, were false?

ELECTRA

The sacred words
Straight from Apollo--

ORESTES

Yes, the priestess said--

CLYTEMNESTRA

The priestess is a seer, is she not?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

She is.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I learned from Agamemnon that
A prophecy can be contrived, a seer
Is bribable. The Oracle craves gold
As much as Calchas did. A little threat
To seal the deal, and now my son is here.

ORESTES

But charged with killing you!

ELECTRA

That makes no sense!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I'm so confused!

ELECTRA

Why would you plant a lie
That leads to your own death?

CLYTEMNESTRA

I love my son.
Your Paedagogus trained you your whole life,
Preparing you for vengeance and my death.
You needed but a summons from a god
To bring you quickly home to mother's arms.

ELECTRA

So you could poison both of us at once!
You sent Aegisthus out with venomous cups!

CLYTEMNESTRA

But only one was toxic, and I lied
To him about which one was safe to drink.

ORESTES

You poisoned your own lover?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Why?

CLYTEMNESTRA

For you.

ELECTRA

You lied to father, to Aegisthus, and
To us--you're lying once again!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Aegisthus feared you all his life, and thought
He'd found a way to justify your death
At last. He helped me pay my husband back
For killing my first-born, but couldn't know
A mother's heart. He thought his terror was

The same as mine, but I feared losing you
More than my life or his. You kids come first.

ELECTRA

Then why have you abused me all these years?
Much less a daughter than a servant in
Your house.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I've treated you as you treat me.
Of course, you don't believe me, but I have
A witness. Sweet Chrysothemis, go fetch
That slave who prophesies--she's been a good
And faithful confidante. She knows the truth
And will corroborate.

CHRYSOTHEMIS goes into the palace.

ELECTRA

Her tongue is lies.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Interrogate her as you will, you'll find
I choose my children every time.

ELECTRA

You made
A fatal choice, queen bitch.

ORESTES

Or maybe not.

ELECTRA

Her motive is irrelevant! She stabbed
Our father!

ORESTES

But she saved our lives just now
By sacrificing him for us. You love
Us, don't you?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Mothers have no choice.

ELECTRA

Bullshit!
No wavering! No sentiment! You have
A holy obligation!

ORESTES

That's a lie!
A fabricated prophecy!

ELECTRA

She lies
 Again, this time to save her life! The gods
 Declare her guilty, and the sentence must
 Be carried out by you!

CLYTEMNESTRA

You haven't heard
 A single word I've said! The gods belong
 To no one but the very young and those
 So old they're almost dead. The young believe
 The world has order, governance, but once
 You've lived a little while you see it makes
 No sense. The world is chaos, randomness!
 And youthful vanity to think that gods
 Care what you do! The dying, fearing death,
 Seek comfort supernatural, that life
 Goes on perpetually another place
 That's justly ruled by gods. Imagine that--
 Another vanity, reward for what
 We've done in life, when life itself rewards
 Or punishes. And ruled by gods? Those weak
 And vain lascivious Olympians?
 How dare they curse us? They're the ones at fault!
 For Zeus and Hermes interfered between
 Thyestes and his brother Atreus,
 Then Artemis, offended by a boast,
 Demanded that your sister die. And now
 Apollo, false or otherwise, commands
 My son to kill. This is insanity.
 For who has seen a god? Who's heard them speak?
 We have enslaved ourselves to gods who don't
 Exist. We made them up! Now let them die
 And we shall taste our freedom when they're gone!

ELECTRA

There are no gods? How can you say that when
 Your father is the king of gods? Zeus came
 And took your mother, with your sister and
 Yourself the offspring, demigods!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Raped by
 A swan? What kind of crap is that? The sort
 Of nonsense one can only blame on gods!
 An inconvenient pregnancy that she
 Explained as oversexed divinity!
 Do I have feathers, webbed feet or a beak?
 Poor Leda wasn't first to try this trick--
 Canace said Poseidon raped her as
 A dolphin. Danae said a shower of gold
 Got her with Zeus's child. The list of girls
 In trouble telling lies goes on and on!

ELECTRA

But your own pregnancy comes not from gods.
Aegisthus is the father of that brat
You're bearing now. An infant that usurps
Our patrimony just as much as he,
And more than reason you should die.

CLYTEMNESTRA

My dears!
I'm far too old to be with child again!
By adding to my padding week by week,
I gave you cause to call your brother here.

CLYTEMNESTRA pulls out her pregnancy
pad.

ELECTRA

There's still a bump.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I'm middle-aged and fat.

SLAVE WOMAN

(Appearing from the palace.)

You summoned me? What is your will?

CLYTEMNESTRA

These two
Do not believe me when I say I lured
Orestes here because of mother love.

SLAVE WOMAN

It's true.
(Picking up the pad.)
This child was fabricated just
To spur you on your way.

ELECTRA

I don't believe.

ORESTES

Nor I. You could have just invited me.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Would you have come? You would suspect a trap.
Much better that you think you're tricking me.

(Pause.)

Have I exhausted all your arguments?
Or do you still demand my death?

SLAVE WOMAN

Oh, no!
You cannot kill your mother or the curse
Goes on and on!

ELECTRA

Defended by a slave!

SLAVE WOMAN

(Dances.)

I saw the Furies in my mind,
The hideous women that are sent
By gods to torment humankind,
To sinful men who won't repent.
Red gouts of blood drip from their eyes.
Their hands are talons, mouths like beaks.
They wing across the countryside
A-stalking sinners with harsh cries.
They sound worse than they look, with shrieks
They hunt down every matricide.

CLYTEMNESTRA

There are no Furies, rest assured. I hope
You'll spare my life but not from fear of gods
Or other mythical malevolence!

SLAVE WOMAN

(Dances the other direction.)

Don't tempt the gods with blasphemies
Or worse than Furies you'll offend,
A fire of rage you can't appease,
Dark black and sulphurous clouds descend.
The gods demand belief, their due,
And punish those without respect.
Make offerings like other men's,
Acknowledge that the gods are true,
For at your peril you reject
The Furies and Olympians.

ELECTRA

I'm loyal to the gods, but prophecies
Of fiery death if Clytemnestra dies
Are too extreme and crazy to believe.

SLAVE WOMAN

(Dancing, still.)

So don't believe--I'm used to it.
My curse is that I tell the truth
But everybody thinks I rave.
In Troy I used to give a shit,
When I had riches, beauty, youth.
But not since I became a slave.
As Agamemnon's concubine
My only job was to recline.
With him gone I now serve his wife
The woman who once spared my life.

ORESTES

You're Cassandra? Weren't you killed? They said--

CLYTEMNESTRA

These rumors drive me crazy! No, she was
Not killed. What fault of hers if she was raped
And kidnapped from her native land? I saw
An innocent abused and took her side.

ELECTRA

Then kept her as a slave.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Appearances.
As slave she's still a concubine, but if
I set her free she'd be a rival for
My throne, a second widow of the king.

ELECTRA

That's hardly fair.

SLAVE WOMAN

I've dreamt of freedom all
These years, but horrors like today's events
Have shown me freedom means but little in
This world of constant pain and sudden loss.
Because I see the future, I cannot
Be free. I have no choice. It all leads to
Predictable and wretched death.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I keep
Her here to cheer me up. I suffered from
The murders, incest, and the war. But next
To her, I live a life more charmed than cursed.

ORESTES

It's pity that you felt.

CLYTEMNESTRA

She's pitiful,
What can I say?

SLAVE WOMAN

It hasn't been that bad.

ORESTES

Most blessed are the merciful, for they
Shall obtain mercy.

ELECTRA

No! What mercy did
She show our father? Don't forget she killed
Aegisthus just now, too. Oh, woe to those
This woman loves! Best now to slit her throat
Before she loves the rest of us to death!

CLYTEMNESTRA

I love your father and Aegisthus both,
A love defeating death eternally.
But children always come between a man
And wife. You hold my heart within your hands.

ORESTES

She does love us! Her children are her life!

ELECTRA

But you must be her death. False Oracle
Or true, you must avenge our father's loss!

ORESTES

And risk the wrath of Furies screaming round
My ears, the anger of the gods like clouds
Of fiery thunder falling on my head?!

ELECTRA

You mama's boy! I waited all these years
To see a hero coming home--instead
A coward drags his sorry ass in here.
(Grabs his knife.)
Then never mind, I'll do the deed myself!

VOICE

Goddammit, that's enough! We're trying to sleep!

ELECTRA

You shut the fuck up!

ORESTES AND CLYTEMNESTRA

Asshole!

ALL

Get a life!

Silence for a moment as they turn back
toward each other. CLYTEMNESTRA raises
the knife.

CLYTEMNESTRA

This knife I plunged into your father's neck
While he was writhing in my net.

ORESTES

No, don't!

ELECTRA

You hypocrite! Defend your children, then,
When threatened, cut the cord!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Do you not fear
The curse? The Furies can as easily
Pursue a girl as a boy. The gods
Can rain down brimstone retribution on
A female matricide as if she were
A man!

ELECTRA

My life so far has been a curse!
What's one more plague upon this haunted house?

CLYTEMNESTRA

(Laughs.)

Indeed! What more disgusting acts can we
Commit? A comedy that's overstuffed
With tragic gags--that is our family!
Revenge is nothing but a joke! The gods--
If they in fact exist--are laughing at
Us now. A mother versus daughter armed
With knives--what could be funnier than that?

ELECTRA

Then you'll die laughing, bitch!

ELECTRA lunges at CLYTEMNESTRA, but
ORESTES grabs ELECTRA from behind,
arresting her assault. At the same
time CLYTEMNESTRA lunges toward ELECTRA
but SLAVE WOMAN holds her back.

ORESTES

Let's end this now!
This curse! This hatred that we nurture at
Our breasts as tenderly as if a child.
This infant succubus that drains our hearts
Of life and love! Could we forgive, if not
Forget, and save the House of Atreus?

CLYTEMNESTRA

There never was a curse, just bitterness.
The gods, the Furies--only in our minds,
We see them with the bloody eyes made blind
By raging, vengeful, pious thoughts! The gods
We once imagined now are dead. We are
The gods and bear responsibility
For all our deeds. Can't hide behind a curse!

ELECTRA

(Struggling.)

You can't hold me forever. She will die
The moment you let go!

CLYTEMNESTRA

We're still enslaved
 By gods and curses mythical. I see
 That one of us must die to broker peace--
 (Struggles in SLAVE WOMAN'S
 grip.)
 She's really strong!

ELECTRA

You weakling, let me go!

CLYTEMNESTRA elbows SLAVE WOMAN hard,
 momentarily breaking her grip as SLAVE
 WOMAN falls. At the same time, ELECTRA
 kicks herself free of ORESTES, who also
 trips and falls backward. Both ELECTRA
 and CLYTEMNESTRA raise their knives.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Come, pierce the breasts that gave you suck!
 (Throws open her dress,
 exposing her breasts.)

ELECTRA

How joyfully I end your wretched life!

But she does not. In ELECTRA'S moment
 of hesitation, CLYTEMNESTRA takes
 matters into her own hands.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You hesitate! Oh, my dear girl! I'll save
 You both from sin against your mother's flesh!

CLYTEMNESTRA looks like she's about to
 kill ELECTRA, but instead stabs herself
 in the chest. Lots of blood really
 fast. ORESTES and SLAVE WOMAN leap to
 their feet. ELECTRA is frozen.

ORESTES

Oh, Mother, no!

SLAVE WOMAN

You've thwarted prophecy!

CLYTEMNESTRA

So ends the curse, no matricide.
 (Falls next to AEGISTHUS.)

ELECTRA

Mama!

CLYTEMNESTRA

For by your mother's hand you are set free!
No curse!

ORESTES AND ELECTRA

No curse!

CLYTEMNESTRA

No gods!

ORESTES AND ELECTRA

No gods!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Be free!

Suddenly there is a thunderous roar and a vibration like an earthquake. The sound is loud and intense, coming from above. All of them turn to look into the sky and are transfixed by what they see.

ORESTES

Now what the fuck?

ELECTRA

A giant cloud! So black!

SLAVE WOMAN

And deep inside the cloud--let there be light!
Behold the rosy fingers of the dawn!

Sound of many women screaming all at once, very screechy, birdlike, panicked and horrifying. While ELECTRA stares at the sky, transfixed, everyone else turns to look at the audience, confused, frightened. then, suddenly, One-by-one they decide how to respond.

SLAVE WOMAN

The vengeance of the gods! The Furies come!

ORESTES

I didn't kill--you can't
hound innocents!

ELECTRA

It's not the Furies!
It's the end of the world!

CLYTEMNESTRA

(Embracing AEGISTHUS.)

My love, wake up!

ELECTRA turns to look at
CLYTEMNESTRA and AEGISTHUS.

SLAVE WOMAN

(Pulling on ORESTES.)

The curse is thwarted but
We must get out of here!

ELECTRA

(Pulling on CLYTEMNESTRA.)

Oh, Mother, run!

A few small stones fall
from the sky.

ORESTES

This punishment is wrong!
No matricide!

ELECTRA

Whatever this
Is—it's real!
Wake him up!

ORESTES

She stabbed herself! Our hands are clean! No sin!
Stay back, you bloody Furies! See how sharp
Their talons and ferocious claws!

(Ducks as if dive-bombed.)

Look out!

CLYTEMNESTRA

My place is here with him.

ELECTRA

But is he...gone?

ORESTES

(Pulling ELECTRA from CLYTEMNESTRA.)
Electra, come!

ELECTRA

(Overlapping.)

No!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Perhaps his heart still beats--go save yourselves!

SLAVE WOMAN

Don't look at them!

CLYTEMNESTRA

They're only in your mind!

ORESTES

I don't believe in you! You don't exist!

ELECTRA

Don't sacrifice yourself!

CLYTEMNESTRA

He's really dead.

ORESTES

(Stoops to pick CLYTEMNESTRA
up.)

Give me your hand.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Already cold.

ORESTES

Get up!
We'll carry you--!

CLYTEMNESTRA

I'll slow you down!
(Slashes at him with knife.)
Let go!

ELECTRA

We cannot leave--

CLYTEMNESTRA

Do as your mother says!
This cataclysm is my death, not yours!

SLAVE WOMAN pulls ELECTRA and ORESTES
away from CLYTEMNESTRA up into the
tiers of the audience. The birdlike
screams intensify, as does the
thunderous roar.

SLAVE WOMAN

You're my responsibility, despite
My slavery to your house!

CLYTEMNESTRA

You're free! You're free!
From vengeance, paltry gods, the curse, and me!

CLYTEMNESTRA begins to gasp as if
choking on poison gas. Many more
stones fall from the sky.

SLAVE WOMAN

(As they move to the highest
level in the audience.)

Oh, Mistress, come with us!

CLYTEMNESTRA

I must stay with
Your father--! Didn't get to tell him that--

ORESTES

He's not our father!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Lost my chance to say

I love you for all time.
(Embraces AEGISTHUS.)
Embrace me, death!

ORESTES

Please, Mother--!

ELECTRA

I forgive you everything!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Go now! I die so you may live! Begone!

SLAVE WOMAN

Invisible yet deadly rage
Of Furies will pursue us now
With shrieks and piercing angry cries.
So we must flee and end this age
Of worshiping the gods who vow
With their last breath to terrorize
Our souls, our bodies, and our minds.
For wisdom comes to she who finds
Revenge will never end once it begins
Till we forgive the unjust gods their sins.

SLAVE WOMAN pulls a reluctant ORESTES
and ELECTRA out of sight on the top
tier of the audience as CLYTEMNESTRA
collapses atop the dead AEGISTHUS. The
unearthly bird shrieks and volcano-like
roar reach a deafening pitch as stones
rain down.

THE END