The Electra of Euripides

by Euripides

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THE

ELECTRA

OF EURIPIDES

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH RHYMING VERSE WITH EXPLANATORY NOTES BY

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Introduction[1]

The Electra of Euripides has the distinction of being, perhaps, the best abused, and, one might add, not the best understood, of ancient tragedies. "A singular monument of poetical, or rather unpoetical perversity;" "the very worst of all his pieces;" are, for instance, the phrases applied to it by Schlegel. Considering that he judged it by the standards of conventional classicism, he could scarcely have arrived at any different conclusion. For it is essentially, and perhaps consciously, a protest against those standards. So, indeed, is the tragedy of The Trojan Women; but on very different lines. The Electra has none of the imaginative splendour, the vastness, the intense poetry, of that wonderful work. It is a close-knit, powerful, well-constructed play, as realistic as the tragic conventions will allow, intellectual and rebellious. Its psychology reminds one of Browning, or even of Ibsen.

To a fifth-century Greek all history came in the form of legend; and no less than

three extant tragedies, Aeschylus' Libation-Bearers (456 B.C.), Euripides' Electra (413 B.C.), and Sophocles' Electra (date unknown: but perhaps the latest of the three) are based on the particular piece of legend or history now before us. It narrates how the son and daughter of the murdered king, Agamemnon, slew, in due course of revenge, and by Apollo's express command, their guilty mother and her paramour.

Homer had long since told the story, as he tells so many, simply and grandly, without moral questioning and without intensity. The atmosphere is heroic. It is all a blood-feud between chieftains, in which Orestes, after seven years, succeeds in slaying his foe Aegisthus, who had killed his father. He probably killed his mother also; but we are not directly told so. His sister may have helped him, and he may possibly have gone mad afterwards; but these painful issues are kept determinedly in the shade.

Somewhat surprisingly, Sophocles, although by his time Electra and Clytemnestra had become leading figures in the story and the mother-murder its essential climax, preserves a very similar atmosphere. His tragedy is enthusiastically praised by Schlegel for "the celestial purity, the fresh breath of life and youth, that is diffused over so dreadful a subject." "Everything dark and ominous is avoided. Orestes enjoys the fulness of health and strength. He is beset neither with doubts nor stings of conscience." Especially laudable is the "austerity" with which Aegisthus is driven into the house to receive, according to Schlegel, a specially ignominious death!

This combination of matricide and good spirits, however satisfactory to the determined classicist, will probably strike most intelligent readers as a little curious, and even, if one may use the word at all in connection with so powerful a play, undramatic. It becomes intelligible as soon as we observe that Sophocles was deliberately seeking what he regarded as an archaic or "Homeric" style (cf. Jebb, Introd. p. xli.); and this archaism, in its turn, seems to me best explained as a

conscious reaction against Euripides' searching and unconventional treatment of the same subject (cf. Wilamowitz in Hermes, xviii. pp. 214 ff.). In the result Sophocles is not only more "classical" than Euripides; he is more primitive by far than Aeschylus.

For Aeschylus, though steeped in the glory of the world of legend, would not lightly accept its judgment upon religious and moral questions, and above all would not, in that region, play at make-believe. He would not elude the horror of this story by simply not mentioning it, like Homer, or by pretending that an evil act was a good one, like Sophocles. He faces the horror; realises it; and tries to surmount it on the sweep of a great wave of religious emotion. The mother-murder, even if done by a god's command, is a sin; a sin to be expiated by unfathomable suffering. Yet, since the god cannot have commanded evil, it is a duty also. It is a sin that must be committed.

Euripides, here as often, represents intellectually the thought of Aeschylus carried a step further. He faced the problem just as Aeschylus did, and as Sophocles did not. But the solution offered by Aeschylus did not satisfy him. It cannot, in its actual details, satisfy any one. To him the mother-murder—like most acts of revenge, but more than most—was a sin and a horror. Therefore it should not have been committed; and the god who enjoined it did command evil, as he had done in a hundred other cases! He is no god of light; he is only a demon of old superstition, acting, among other influences, upon a sore-beset man, and driving him towards a miscalled duty, the horror of which, when done, will unseat his reason.

But another problem interests Euripides even more than this. What kind of man was it—above all, what kind of woman can it have been, who would do this deed of mother-murder, not in sudden fury but deliberately, as an act of "justice," after many years? A "sympathetic" hero and heroine are out of the question; and Euripides does not deal in stage villains. He seeks real people. And few attentive readers of this

play can doubt that he has found them.

The son is an exile, bred in the desperate hopes and wild schemes of exile; he is a prince without a kingdom, always dreaming of his wrongs and his restoration; and driven by the old savage doctrine, which an oracle has confirmed, of the duty and manliness of revenge. He is, as was shown by his later history, a man subject to overpowering impulses and to fits of will-less brooding. Lastly, he is very young, and is swept away by his sister's intenser nature.

That sister is the central figure of the tragedy. A woman shattered in childhood by the shock of an experience too terrible for a girl to bear; a poisoned and a haunted woman, eating her heart in ceaseless broodings of hate and love, alike unsatisfied—hate against her mother and stepfather, love for her dead father and her brother in exile; a woman who has known luxury and state, and cares much for them; who is intolerant of poverty, and who feels her youth passing away. And meantime there is her name, on which all legend, if I am not mistaken, insists; she is A-lektra, "the Unmated."

There is, perhaps, no woman's character in the range of Greek tragedy so profoundly studied. Not Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, not Phaedra nor Medea. One's thoughts can only wander towards two great heroines of "lost" plays, Althaea in the Meleager, and Stheneboea in the Bellerophon.

G.M.

[Footnote 1: Most of this introduction is reprinted, by the kind permission of the Editors, from an article in the Independent Review vol. i. No. 4.]

ELECTRA

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

CLYTEMNESTRA, Queen of Argos and Mycenae; widow of Agamemnon.

ELECTRA, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

ORESTES, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, now in banishment.

A PEASANT, husband of Electra.

AN OLD MAN, formerly servant to Agamemnon.

PYLADES, son of Strophios, King of Phocis; friend to Orestes.

AEGISTHUS, usurping King of Argos and Mycenae, now husband of Clytemnestra.

The Heroes CASTOR and POLYDEUCES.

CHORUS of Argive Women, with their LEADER.

FOLLOWERS of ORESTES; HANDMAIDS of CLYTEMNESTRA.

The Scene is laid in the mountains of Argos. The play was first produced between the years 414 and 412 B.C.

ELECTRA

The scene represents a hut on a desolate mountain side; the river Inachus is visible in the distance. The time is the dusk of early dawn, before sunrise. The PEASANT is discovered in front of the hut.

PEASANT.

Old gleam on the face of the world, I give thee hail, River of Argos land, where sail on sail The long ships met, a thousand, near and far, When Agamemnon walked the seas in war; Who smote King Priam in the dust, and burned The storied streets of Ilion, and returned Above all conquerors, heaping tower and fane Of Argos high with spoils of Eastern slain.

So in far lands he prospered; and at home His own wife trapped and slew him. 'Twas the doom Aegisthus wrought, son of his father's foe.

Gone is that King, and the old spear laid low That Tantalus wielded when the world was young. Aegisthus hath his queen, and reigns among His people. And the children here alone, Orestes and Electra, buds unblown Of man and womanhood, when forth to Troy He shook his sail and left them—lo, the boy Orestes, ere Aegisthus' hand could fall, Was stolen from Argos—borne by one old thrall, Who served his father's boyhood, over seas Far off, and laid upon King Strophios' knees In Phocis, for the old king's sake. But here The maid Electra waited, year by year, Alone, till the warm days of womanhood Drew nigh and suitors came of gentle blood In Hellas. Then Aegisthus was in fear Lest she be wed in some great house, and bear A son to avenge her father. Close he wrought Her prison in his house, and gave her not To any wooer. Then, since even this Was full of peril, and the secret kiss Of some bold prince might find her yet, and rend Her prison walls, Aegisthus at the end Would slay her. Then her mother, she so wild Aforetime, pled with him and saved her child. Her heart had still an answer for her lord Murdered, but if the child's blood spoke, what word Could meet the hate thereof? After that day Aegisthus thus decreed: whoso should slay The old king's wandering son, should win rich meed Of gold; and for Electra, she must wed With me, not base of blood—in that I stand True Mycenaean—but in gold and land Most poor, which maketh highest birth as naught. So from a powerless husband shall be wrought A powerless peril. Had some man of might Possessed her, he had called perchance to light Her father's blood, and unknown vengeances Risen on Aegisthus yet. Aye, mine she is: But never yet these arms—the Cyprian knows My truth!—have clasped her body, and she goes A virgin still. Myself would hold it shame To abase this daughter of a royal name. I am too lowly to love violence. Yea, Orestes too doth move me, far away, Mine unknown brother! Will he ever now Come back and see his sister bowed so low?

Doth any deem me fool, to hold a fair Maid in my room and seek no joy, but spare Her maidenhood? If any such there be, Let him but look within. The fool is he In gentle things, weighing the more and less Of love by his own heart's untenderness.

[As he ceases ELECTRA comes out of the hut. She is in mourning garb, and carries a large pitcher on her head. She speaks without observing the PEASANT'S presence.

ELECTRA.

Dark shepherdess of many a golden star, Dost see me, Mother Night? And how this jar Hath worn my earth-bowed head, as forth and fro For water to the hillward springs I go? Not for mere stress of need, but purpose set, That never day nor night God may forget Aegisthus' sin: aye, and perchance a cry Cast forth to the waste shining of the sky May find my father's ear…. The woman bred Of Tyndareus, my mother—on her head Be curses!—from my house hath outcast me; She hath borne children to our enemy; She hath made me naught, she hath made Orestes naught….

[As the bitterness of her tone increases, the PEASANT comes forward.

PEASANT.

What wouldst thou now, my sad one, ever fraught With toil to lighten my toil? And so soft Thy nurture was! Have I not chid thee oft, And thou wilt cease not, serving without end?

ELECTRA (turning to him with impulsive affection).

O friend, my friend, as God might be my friend, Thou only hast not trampled on my tears. Life scarce can be so hard, 'mid many fears And many shames, when mortal heart can find Somewhere one healing touch, as my sick mind Finds thee…. And should I wait thy word, to endure A little for thine easing, yea, or pour My strength out in thy toiling fellowship? Thou hast enough with fields and kine to keep; 'Tis mine to make all bright within the door. 'Tis joy to him that toils, when toil is o'er, To find home waiting, full of happy things.

PEASANT.

If so it please thee, go thy way. The springs Are not far off. And I before the morn Must drive my team afield, and sow the corn In the hollows.—Not a thousand

prayers can gain A man's bare bread, save an he work amain.

[ELECTRA and the PEASANT depart on their several ways. After a few moments there enter stealthily two armed men, ORESTES and PYLADES.

ORESTES.

Thou art the first that I have known in deed True and my friend, and shelterer of my need. Thou only, Pylades, of all that knew, Hast held Orestes of some worth, all through These years of helplessness, wherein I lie Downtrodden by the murderer—yea, and by The murderess, my mother!… I am come, Fresh from the cleansing of Apollo, home To Argos—and my coming no man yet Knoweth—to pay the bloody twain their debt Of blood. This very night I crept alone To my dead father's grave, and poured thereon My heart's first tears and tresses of my head New-shorn, and o'er the barrow of the dead Slew a black lamb, unknown of them that reign In this unhappy land…. I am not fain To pass the city gates, but hold me here Hard on the borders. So my road is clear To fly if men look close and watch my way; If not, to seek my sister. For men say She dwelleth in these hills, no more a maid But wedded. I must find her house, for aid To guide our work, and learn what hath betid Of late in Argos.—Ha, the radiant lid Of Dawn's eye lifteth! Come, friend; leave we now This trodden path. Some worker of the plough, Or serving damsel at her early task Will presently come by, whom we may ask If here my sister dwells. But soft! Even now I see some bondmaid there, her death-shorn brow Bending beneath its freight of well-water. Lie close until she pass; then question her. A slave might help us well, or speak some sign Of import to this work of mine and thine.

[The two men retire into ambush. ELECTRA enters, returning from the well.

ELECTRA.

Onward, O labouring tread, As on move the years; Onward amid thy tears, O happier dead!

Let me remember. I am she, [Strophe 1. Agamemnon's child, and the mother of me Clytemnestra, the evil Queen, Helen's sister. And folk, I ween, That pass in the streets call yet my name Electra…. God protect my shame! For toil, toil is a weary thing, And life is heavy about my head; And thou far off, O Father and King, In the lost lands of the dead. A bloody twain made these things be; One was thy bitterest enemy, And one the wife that lay by thee.

Brother, brother, on some far shore [Antistrophe 1. Hast thou a city, is there a door That knows thy footfall, Wandering One? Who left me, left me, when all our pain Was bitter about us, a father slain, And a girl that wept in her room alone. Thou couldst break me this bondage sore, Only thou, who art far away, Loose our father, and wake once more…. Zeus, Zeus, dost hear me pray?… The sleeping blood and the shame and the doom! O feet that rest not, over the foam Of distant seas, come home, come home!

What boots this cruse that I carry? [Strophe 2. O, set free my brow! For the gathered tears that tarry Through the day and the dark till now, Now in the dawn are free, Father, and flow beneath The floor of the world, to be As a song in she house of Death: From the rising up of the day They guide my heart alway, The silent tears unshed, And my body mourns for the dead; My cheeks bleed silently, And these bruised temples keep Their pain, remembering thee And thy bloody sleep.

Be rent, O hair of mine head!

As a swan crying alone Where the river windeth cold, For a loved, for a silent one, Whom the toils of the fowler hold, I cry, Father, to thee, O slain in misery!

The water, the wan water, [Antistrophe 2. Lapped him, and his head Drooped in the bed of slaughter Low, as one wearièd; Woe for the edgèd axe, And woe for the heart of hate, Houndlike about thy tracks, O conqueror desolate, From Troy over land and sea, Till a wife stood waiting thee; Not with crowns did she stand, Nor flowers of peace in her hand; With Aegisthus' dagger drawn For her hire she strove, Through

shame and through blood alone; And won her a traitor's love.

[As she ceases there enter from right and left the CHORUS, consisting of women of Argos, young and old, in festal dress.

CHORUS.

Some Women.

Child of the mighty dead, [Strophe. Electra, lo, my way To thee in the dawn hath sped, And the cot on the mountain grey, For the Watcher hath cried this day: He of the ancient folk, The walker of waste and hill, Who drinketh the milk of the flock; And he told of Hera's will; For the morrow's morrow now They cry her festival, And before her throne shall bow Our damsels all.

ELECTRA.

Not unto joy, nor sweet Music, nor shining of gold, The wings of my spirit beat. Let the brides of Argos hold Their dance in the night, as of old; I lead no dance; I mark No beat as the dancers sway; With tears I dwell in the dark, And my thought is of tears alway, To the going down of the day. Look on my wasted hair And raiment…. This that I bear, Is it meet for the King my sire, And her whom the King begot? For Troy, that was burned with fire And forgetteth not?

CHORUS.

Other Women.

Hera is great!—Ah, come, [Antistrophe. Be kind; and my hand shall bring Fair raiment, work of the loom, And many a golden thing, For joyous robe-wearing. Deemest thou this thy woe Shall rise unto God as prayer, Or bend thine haters low? Doth God for thy pain have care? Not tears for the dead nor sighs, But worship and joy divine Shall win thee peace in thy skies, O daughter mine!

ELECTRA.

No care cometh to God For the voice of the helpless; none For the crying of ancient

blood. Alas for him that is gone, And for thee, O wandering one: That now, methinks, in a land Of the stranger must toil for hire, And stand where the poor men stand, A-cold by another's fire, O son of the mighty sire: While I in a beggar's cot On the wrecked hills, changing not, Starve in my soul for food; But our mother lieth wed In another's arms, and blood Is about her bed.

LEADER.

On all of Greece she wrought great jeopardy, Thy mother's sister, Helen,—and on thee.

[ORESTES and PYLADES move out from their concealment; ORESTES comes forward: PYLADES beckons to two ARMED SERVANTS and stays with them in the background.

ELECTRA.

Woe's me! No more of wailing! Women, flee! Strange armèd men beside the dwelling there Lie ambushed! They are rising from their lair. Back by the road, all you. I will essay The house; and may our good feet save us!

ORESTES (between ELECTRA and the hut).

Stay, Unhappy woman! Never fear my steel.

ELECTRA (in utter panic).

O bright Apollo! Mercy! See, I kneel; Slay me not.

ORESTES.

Others I have yet to slay Less dear than thou.

ELECTRA.

Go from me! Wouldst thou lay Hand on a body that is not for thee?

ORESTES.

None is there I would touch more righteously.

ELECTRA.

Why lurk'st thou by my house? And why a sword?

ORESTES.

Stay. Listen! Thou wilt not gainsay my word.

ELECTRA.

There—I am still. Do what thou wilt with me. Thou art too strong.

ORESTES.

A word I bear to thee… Word of thy brother.

ELECTRA.

Oh, friend! More than friend! Living or dead?

ORESTES.

He lives; so let me send My comfort foremost, ere the rest be heard.

ELECTRA.

God love thee for the sweetness of thy word!

ORESTES.

God love the twain of us, both thee and me.

ELECTRA.

He lives! Poor brother! In what land weareth he His exile?

ORESTES.

Not one region nor one lot His wasted life hath trod.

ELECTRA.

He lacketh not For bread?

ORESTES.

Bread hath he; but a man is weak In exile.

ELECTRA.

What charge laid he on thee? Speak.

ORESTES.

To learn if thou still live, and how the storm, Living, hath struck thee.

ELECTRA.

That thou seest; this form Wasted…

ORESTES.

Yea, riven with the fire of woe. I sigh to look on thee.

ELECTRA.

My face; and, lo, My temples of their ancient glory shorn.

ORESTES.

Methinks thy brother haunts thee, being forlorn; Aye, and perchance thy father, whom they slew…

ELECTRA.

What should be nearer to me than those two?

ORESTES.

And what to him, thy brother, half so dear As thou?

ELECTRA. His is a distant love, not near At need.

ORESTES.

But why this dwelling place, this life Of loneliness?

ELECTRA (with sudden bitterness).

Stranger, I am a wife…. O better dead!

ORESTES.

That seals thy brother's doom! What Prince of Argos…?

ELECTRA.

Not the man to whom My father thought to give me.

ORESTES.

Speak; that I May tell thy brother all.

ELECTRA.

'Tis there, hard by, His dwelling, where I live, far from men's eyes.

ORESTES.

Some ditcher's cot, or cowherd's, by its guise!

ELECTRA (struck with shame for her ingratitude).

A poor man; but true-hearted, and to me God-fearing.

ORESTES.

How? What fear of God hath he?

ELECTRA.

He hath never held my body to his own.

ORESTES.

Hath he some vow to keep? Or is it done To scorn thee?

ELECTRA.

Nay; he only scorns to sin Against my father's greatness.

ORESTES.

But to win A princess! Doth his heart not leap for pride?

ELECTRA.

He honoureth not the hand that gave the bride.

ORESTES.

I see. He trembles for Orestes' wrath?

ELECTRA.

Aye, that would move him. But beside, he hath A gentle heart.

ORESTES.

Strange! A good man…. I swear He well shall be requited.

ELECTRA.

Whensoe'er Our wanderer comes again!

ORESTES.

Thy mother stays Unmoved 'mid all thy wrong?

ELECTRA.

A lover weighs More than a child in any woman's heart.

ORESTES.

But what end seeks Aegisthus, by such art Of shame?

ELECTRA.

To make mine unborn children low And weak, even as my husband.

ORESTES.

Lest there grow From thee the avenger?

ELECTRA.

Such his purpose is: For which may I requite him!

ORESTES.

And of this Thy virgin life—Aegisthus knows it?

ELECTRA.

Nay, We speak it not. It cometh not his way.

ORESTES.

These women hear us. Are they friends to thee?

ELECTRA.

Aye, friends and true. They will keep faithfully All words of mine and thine.

ORESTES (trying her).

Thou art well stayed With friends. And could Orestes give thee aid In aught, if e'er…

ELECTRA.

Shame on thee! Seest thou not? Is it not time?

ORESTES (catching her excitement).

How time? And if he sought To slay, how should he come at his desire?

ELECTRA.

By daring, as they dared who slew his sire!

ORESTES.

Wouldst thou dare with him, if he came, thou too, To slay her?

ELECTRA.

Yes; with the same axe that slew My father!

ORESTES.

'Tis thy message? And thy mood Unchanging?

ELECTRA.

Let me shed my mother's blood, And I die happy.

ORESTES.

God!… I would that now Orestes heard thee here.

ELECTRA.

Yet, wottest thou, Though here I saw him, I should know him not.

ORESTES.

Surely. Ye both were children, when they wrought Your parting.

ELECTRA.

One alone in all this land Would know his face.

ORESTES.

The thrall, methinks, whose hand Stole him from death—or so the story ran?

ELECTRA.

He taught my father, too, an old old man Of other days than these.

ORESTES.

Thy father's grave… He had due rites and tendance?

ELECTRA.

What chance gave, My father had, cast out to rot in the sun.

ORESTES.

God, 'tis too much!… To hear of such things done Even to a stranger, stings a man…. But speak, Tell of thy life, that I may know, and seek Thy brother with a tale that must be heard Howe'er it sicken. If mine eyes be blurred, Remember, 'tis the fool that feels not. Aye, Wisdom is full of pity; and thereby Men pay for too much wisdom with much pain.

LEADER.

My heart is moved as this man's. I would fain Learn all thy tale. Here dwelling on the hills Little I know of Argos and its ills.

ELECTRA.

If I must speak—and at love's call, God knows, I fear not—I will tell thee all; my woes, My father's woes, and—O, since thou hast stirred This storm of speech, thou bear him this my word— His woes and shame! Tell of this narrow cloak In the wind; this grime and reek of toil, that choke My breathing; this low roof that bows

my head After a king's. This raiment … thread by thread, 'Tis I must weave it, or go bare—must bring, Myself, each jar of water from the spring. No holy day for me, no festival, No dance upon the green! From all, from all I am cut off. No portion hath my life 'Mid wives of Argos, being no true wife. No portion where the maidens throng to praise Castor—my Castor, whom in ancient days, Ere he passed from us and men worshipped him, They named my bridegroom!— And she, she!… The grim Troy spoils gleam round her throne, and by each hand Queens of the East, my father's prisoners, stand, A cloud of Orient webs and tangling gold. And there upon the floor, the blood, the old Black blood, yet crawls and cankers, like a rot In the stone! And on our father's chariot The murderer's foot stands glorying, and the red False hand uplifts that ancient staff, that led The armies of the world!… Aye, tell him how The grave of Agamemnon, even now, Lacketh the common honour of the dead; A desert barrow, where no tears are shed, No tresses hung, no gift, no myrtle spray. And when the wine is in him, so men say, Our mother's mighty master leaps thereon, Spurning the slab, or pelteth stone on stone, Flouting the lone dead and the twain that live: "Where is thy son Orestes? Doth he give Thy tomb good tendance? Or is all forgot?" So is he scorned because he cometh not….

O Stranger, on my knees, I charge thee, tell This tale, not mine, but of dumb wrongs that swell Crowding—and I the trumpet of their pain, This tongue, these arms, this bitter burning brain; These dead shorn locks, and he for whom they died! His father slew Troy's thousands in their pride; He hath but one to kill…. O God, but one! Is he a man, and Agamemnon's son?

LEADER.

But hold: is this thy husband from the plain, His labour ended, hasting home again?

Enter the PEASANT.

PEASANT.

Ha, who be these? Strange men in arms before My house! What would they at this

lonely door? Seek they for me?—Strange gallants should not stay A woman's goings.

ELECTRA.

Friend and helper!—Nay, Think not of any evil. These men be Friends of Orestes, charged with words for me!… Strangers, forgive his speech.

PEASANT.

What word have they Of him? At least he lives and sees the day!

ELECTRA.

So fares their tale—and sure I doubt it not!

PEASANT.

And ye two still are living in his thought, Thou and his father?

ELECTRA.

In his dreams we live. An exile hath small power.

PEASANT.

And did he give Some privy message?

ELECTRA.

None: they come as spies For news of me.

PEASANT.

Thine outward news their eyes Can see; the rest, methinks, thyself will tell.

ELECTRA.

They have seen all, heard all. I trust them well.

PEASANT.

Why were our doors not open long ago?— Be welcome, strangers both, and pass below My lintel. In return for your glad words Be sure all greeting that mine house affords Is yours.—Ye followers, bear in their gear!— Gainsay me not; for his sake

are ye dear That sent you to our house; and though my part In life be low, I am no churl at heart.

[The PEASANT goes to the ARMED SERVANTS at the back, to help them with the baggage.

ORESTES (aside to ELECTRA).

Is this the man that shields thy maidenhood Unknown, and will not wrong thy father's blood?

ELECTRA.

He is called my husband. 'Tis for him I toil.

ORESTES.

How dark lies honour hid! And what turmoil In all things human: sons of mighty men Fallen to naught, and from ill seed again Good fruit: yea, famine in the rich man's scroll Writ deep, and in poor flesh a lordly soul. As, lo, this man, not great in Argos, not With pride of house uplifted, in a lot Of unmarked life hath shown a prince's grace. [To the PEASANT, who has returned. All that is here of Agamemnon's race, And all that lacketh yet, for whom we come, Do thank thee, and the welcome of thy home Accept with gladness.—Ho, men; hasten ye Within!—This open-hearted poverty Is blither to my sense than feasts of gold.

Lady, thine husband's welcome makes me bold; Yet would thou hadst thy brother, before all Confessed, to greet us in a prince's hall! Which may be, even yet. Apollo spake The word; and surely, though small store I make Of man's divining, God will fail us not.

[ORESTES and PYLADES go in, following the SERVANTS.

LEADER.

O never was the heart of hope so hot Within me. How? So moveless in time past, Hath Fortune girded up her loins at last?

ELECTRA.

Now know'st thou not thine own ill furniture, To bid these strangers in, to whom for sure Our best were hardship, men of gentle breed?

PEASANT.

Nay, if the men be gentle, as indeed I deem them, they will take good cheer or ill With even kindness.

ELECTRA.

'Twas ill done; but still— Go, since so poor thou art, to that old friend Who reared my father. At the realm's last end He dwells, where Tanaos river foams between Argos and Sparta. Long time hath he been An exile 'mid his flocks. Tell him what thing Hath chanced on me, and bid him haste and bring Meat for the strangers' tending.—Glad, I trow, That old man's heart will be, and many a vow Will lift to God, to learn the child he stole From death, yet breathes.—I will not ask a dole From home; how should my mother help me? Nay, I pity him that seeks that door, to say Orestes liveth!

PEASANT.

Wilt thou have it so? I will take word to the old man. But go Quickly within, and whatso there thou find Set out for them. A woman, if her mind So turn, can light on many a pleasant thing To fill her board. And surely plenishing We have for this one day.—'Tis in such shifts As these, I care for riches, to make gifts To friends, or lead a sick man back to health With ease and plenty. Else small aid is wealth For daily gladness; once a man be done With hunger, rich and poor are all as one.

[The PEASANT goes off to the left; ELECTRA goes into the house.

* * * * *

CHORUS.

O for the ships of Troy, the beat [Strophe 1. Of oars that shimmered Innumerable,

and dancing feet Of Nereids glimmered; And dolphins, drunken with the lyre, Across the dark blue prows, like fire, Did bound and quiver, To cleave the way for Thetis' son, Fleet-in-the-wind Achilles, on To war, to war, till Troy be won Beside the reedy river.

Up from Euboea's caverns came [Antistrophe 1. The Nereids, bearing Gold armour from the Lords of Flame, Wrought for his wearing: Long sought those daughters of the deep, Up Pelion's glen, up Ossa's steep Forest enchanted, Where Peleus reared alone, afar, His lost sea-maiden's child, the star Of Hellas, and swift help of war When weary armies panted.

There came a man from Troy, and told [Strophe 2. Here in the haven, How, orb on orb, to strike with cold The Trojan, o'er that targe of gold, Dread shapes were graven. All round the level rim thereof Perseus, on wingèd feet, above The long seas hied him; The Gorgon's wild and bleeding hair He lifted; and a herald fair, He of the wilds, whom Maia bare, God's Hermes, flew beside him.

[Antistrophe 2. But midmost, where the boss rose higher, A sun stood blazing, And wingèd steeds, and stars in choir, Hyad and Pleiad, fire on fire, For Hector's dazing: Across the golden helm, each way, Two taloned Sphinxes held their prey, Song-drawn to slaughter: And round the breastplate ramping came A mingled breed of lion and flame, Hot-eyed to tear that steed of fame That found Pirênê's water.

The red red sword with steeds four-yoked [Epode. Black-maned, was graven, That laboured, and the hot dust smoked Cloudwise to heaven. Thou Tyndarid woman! Fair and tall Those warriors were, and o'er them all One king great-hearted, Whom thou and thy false love did slay: Therefore the tribes of Heaven one day For these thy dead shall send on thee An iron death: yea, men shall see The white throat drawn, and blood's red spray, And lips in terror parted.

[As they cease, there enters from the left a very old man, bearing a lamb, a wineskin, and a wallet.

OLD MAN.

Where is my little Princess? Ah, not now; But still my queen, who tended long ago The lad that was her father…. How steep-set These last steps to her porch! But faint not yet: Onward, ye failing knees and back with pain Bowed, till we look on that dear face again. [Enter ELECTRA. Ah, daughter, is it thou?—Lo, here I am, With gifts from all my store; this suckling lamb Fresh from the ewe, green crowns for joyfulness, And creamy things new-curdled from the press. And this long-storèd juice of vintages Forgotten, cased in fragrance: scant it is, But passing sweet to mingle nectar-wise With feebler wine.—Go, bear them in; mine eyes… Where is my cloak?—They are all blurred with tears.

What ails thine eyes, old friend? After these years Doth my low plight still stir thy memories? Or think'st thou of Orestes, where he lies In exile, and my father? Aye, long love Thou gavest him, and seest the fruit thereof Wasted, for thee and all who love thee!

OLD MAN.

All Wasted! And yet 'tis that lost hope withal I cannot brook. But now I turned aside To see my master's grave. All, far and wide, Was silence; so I bent these knees of mine And wept and poured drink-offerings from the wine I bear the strangers, and about the stone Laid myrtle sprays. And, child, I saw thereon Just at the censer slain, a fleeced ewe, Deep black, in sacrifice: the blood was new About it: and a tress of bright brown hair Shorn as in mourning, close. Long stood I there And wondered, of all men what man had gone In mourning to that grave.—My child, 'tis none In Argos. Did there come … Nay, mark me now… Thy brother in the dark, last night, to bow His head before that unadorèd tomb? O come, and mark the colour of it. Come And lay thine own hair by that mourner's tress! A hundred little things make likenesses In brethren born, and show the father's blood.

ELECTRA (trying to mask her excitement and resist the contagion of his).

Old heart, old heart, is this a wise man's mood?… O, not in darkness, not in fear of men, Shall Argos find him, when he comes again, Mine own undaunted … Nay, and if it were, What likeness could there be? My brother's hair Is as a prince's and a rover's, strong With sunlight and with strife: not like the long Locks that a woman combs…. And many a head Hath this same semblance, wing for wing, tho' bred Of blood not ours…. 'Tis hopeless. Peace, old man.

OLD MAN.

The footprints! Set thy foot by his, and scan The track of frame and muscles, how they fit!

ELECTRA.

That ground will take no footprint! All of it Is bitter stone…. It hath?… And who hath said There should be likeness in a brother's tread And sister's? His is stronger every way.

OLD MAN.

But hast thou nothing…? If he came this day And sought to show thee, is there no one sign Whereby to know him?… Stay; the robe was thine, Work of thy loom, wherein I wrapt him o'er That night and stole him through the murderers' door.

ELECTRA.

Thou knowest, when Orestes was cast out I was a child…. If I did weave some clout Of raiment, would he keep the vesture now He wore in childhood? Should my weaving grow As his limbs grew?… 'Tis lost long since. No more! O, either 'twas some stranger passed, and shore His locks for very ruth before that tomb: Or, if he found perchance, to seek his home, Some spy…

OLD MAN.

The strangers! Where are they? I fain Would see them, aye, and bid them answer plain…

ELECTRA.

Here at the door! How swift upon the thought!

Enter ORESTES and PYLADES.

OLD MAN.

High-born: albeit for that I trust them not. The highest oft are false…. Howe'er it be,

[Approaching them.

I bid the strangers hail!

ORESTES.

All hail to thee, Greybeard!—Prithee, what man of all the King Trusted of old, is now this broken thing?

ELECTRA.

'Tis he that trained my father's boyhood.

ORESTES.

How? And stole from death thy brother? Sayest thou?

ELECTRA.

This man was his deliverer, if it be Deliverance.

ORESTES.

How his old eye pierceth me, As one that testeth silver and alloy! Sees he some likeness here?

ELECTRA.

Perchance 'tis joy, To see Orestes' comrade, that he feels.

ORESTES.

None dearer.—But what ails the man? He reels Dizzily back.

ELECTRA.

I marvel. I can say No more.

OLD MAN (in a broken voice).

Electra, mistress, daughter, pray! Pray unto God!

ELECTRA.

Of all the things I crave, The thousand things, or all that others have, What should I pray for?

OLD MAN.

Pray thine arms may hold At last this treasure-dream of more than gold God shows us!

ELECTRA.

God, I pray thee!… Wouldst thou more?

OLD MAN.

Gaze now upon this man, and bow before Thy dearest upon earth!

ELECTRA.

I gaze on thee! O, hath time made thee mad?

OLD MAN.

Mad, that I see Thy brother?

ELECTRA.

My … I know not what thou say'st: I looked not for it…

OLD MAN.

I tell thee, here confessed Standeth Orestes, Agamemnon's son!

ELECTRA.

A sign before I trust thee! O, but one! How dost thou know…?

OLD MAN.

There, by his brow, I see The scar he made, that day he ran with thee Chasing thy fawn, and fell.

ELECTRA (in a dull voice).

A scar? 'Tis so. I see a scar.

OLD MAN.

And fearest still to throw Thine arms round him thou lovest?

ELECTRA.

O, no more! Thy sign hath conquered me…. (throwing herself into ORESTES' arms). At last, at last! Thy face like light! And do I hold thee fast, Unhoped for?

ORESTES.

Yea, at last! And I hold thee.

ELECTRA.

I never knew…

ORESTES.

I dreamed not.

ELECTRA.

Is it he, Orestes?

ORESTES.

Thy defender, yea, alone To fight the world! Lo, this day have I thrown A net, which once unbroken from the sea Drawn home, shall … O, and it must surely be! Else men shall know there is no God, no light In Heaven, if wrong to the end shall conquer right.

CHORUS.

Comest thou, comest thou now, Chained by the years and slow, O Day long sought? A light on the mountains cold Is lit, yea, a fire burneth, 'Tis the light of one that

turneth From roamings manifold, Back out of exile old To the house that knew him not.

Some spirit hath turned our way, Victory visible, Walking at thy right hand, Belovèd; O lift this day Thine arms, thy voice, as a spell; And pray for thy brother, pray, Threading the perilous land, That all be well!

ORESTES.

Enough; this dear delight is mine at last Of thine embracing; and the hour comes fast When we shall stand again as now we stand, And stint not.—Stay, Old Man: thou, being at hand At the edge of time, advise me, by what way Best to requite my father's murderers. Say, Have I in Argos any still to trust; Or is the love, once borne me, trod in dust, Even as my fortunes are? Whom shall I seek? By day or night? And whither turn, to wreak My will on them that hate us? Say.

OLD MAN.

My son, In thine adversity, there is not one Will call thee friend. Nay, that were treasure-trove, A friend to share, not faltering from love, Fair days and foul the same. Thy name is gone Forth to all Argos, as a thing o'erthrown And dead. Thou hast not left one spark to glow With hope in one friend's heart! Hear all, and know: Thou hast God's fortune and thine own right hand, Naught else, to conquer back thy fatherland.

ORESTES.

The deed, the deed! What must we do?

OLD MAN.

Strike down Aegisthus … and thy mother.

ORESTES.

'Tis the crown My race is run for. But how find him?

OLD MAN.

Not Within the city walls, however hot Thy spirit.

ORESTES.

Ha! With watchers doth he go Begirt, and mailèd pikemen?

OLD MAN.

Even so: He lives in fear of thee, and night nor day Hath slumber.

ORESTES.

That way blocked!—'Tis thine to say What next remains.

OLD MAN.

I will; and thou give ear. A thought has found me!

ORESTES.

All good thoughts be near, For thee to speak and me to understand!

OLD MAN.

But now I saw Aegisthus, close at hand As here I journeyed.

ORESTES.

That good word shall trace My path for me! Thou saw'st him? In what place?

OLD MAN.

Out on the pastures where his horses stray.

ORESTES.

What did he there so far?—A gleam of day Crosseth our darkness.

OLD MAN.

'Twas a feast, methought, Of worship to the wild-wood nymphs he wrought.

ORESTES.

The watchers of men's birth? Is there a son New born to him, or doth he pray for one That cometh? [Movement of ELECTRA.

OLD MAN.

More I know not; he had there A wreathed ox, as for some weighty prayer.

ORESTES.

What force was with him? Not his serfs alone?

OLD MAN.

No Argive lord was there; none but his own Household.

ORESTES.

Not any that aught know my face, Or guess?

OLD MAN.

Thralls, thralls; who ne'er have seen thy face.

ORESTES.

Once I prevail, the thralls will welcome me!

OLD MAN.

The slaves' way, that; and no ill thing for thee!

ORESTES.

How can I once come near him?

OLD MAN.

Walk thy ways Hard by, where he may see thee, ere he slays His sacrifice.

ORESTES.

How? Is the road so nigh?

OLD MAN.

He cannot choose but see thee, passing by, And bid thee stay to share the beast they kill.

ORESTES.

A bitter fellow-feaster, if God will!

OLD MAN.

And then … then swift be heart and brain, to see God's chances!

ORESTES.

Aye. Well hast thou counselled me. But … where is she?

OLD MAN.

In Argos now, I guess; But goes to join her husband, ere the press Of the feast.

ORESTES.

Why goeth not my mother straight Forth at her husband's side?

OLD MAN.

She fain will wait Until the gathered country-folk be gone.

ORESTES.

Enough! She knows what eyes are turned upon Her passings in the land!

OLD MAN.

Aye, all men hate The unholy woman.

ORESTES.

How then can I set My snare for wife and husband in one breath?

ELECTRA (coming forward).

Hold! It is I must work our mother's death.

ORESTES.

If that be done, I think the other deed Fortune will guide.

ELECTRA.

This man must help our need, One friend alone for both.

OLD MAN.

He will, he will! Speak on. What cunning hast thou found to fill Thy purpose?

ELECTRA.

Get thee forth, Old Man, and quick Tell Clytemnestra … tell her I lie sick, New-mothered of a man-child.

OLD MAN.

Thou hast borne A son! But when?

ELECTRA.

Let this be the tenth morn. Till then a mother stays in sanctity, Unseen.

OLD MAN.

And if I tell her, where shall be The death in this?

ELECTRA.

That word let her but hear, Straight she will seek me out!

OLD MAN.

The queen! What care Hath she for thee, or pain of thine?

ELECTRA.

She will; And weep my babe's low station!

OLD MAN.

Thou hast skill To know her, child; say on.

ELECTRA.

But bring her here, Here to my hand; the rest will come.

OLD MAN.

I swear, Here at the gate she shall stand palpable!

ELECTRA.

The gate: the gate that leads to me and Hell.

OLD MAN.

Let me but see it, and I die content.

ELECTRA.

First, then, my brother: see his steps be bent…

OLD MAN.

Straight yonder, where Aegisthus makes his prayer!

ELECTRA.

Then seek my mother's presence, and declare My news.

OLD MAN.

Thy very words, child, as tho' spoke From thine own lips!

ELECTRA.

Brother, thine hour is struck. Thou standest in the van of war this day.

ORESTES (rousing himself).

Aye, I am ready…. I will go my way, If but some man will guide me.

OLD MAN.

Here am I, To speed thee to the end, right thankfully.

ORESTES (turning as he goes and raising his hands to heaven).

Zeus of my sires, Zeus of the lost battle,

ELECTRA.

Have pity; have pity; we have earned it well!

OLD MAN.

Pity these twain, of thine own body sprung!

ELECTRA.

O Queen o'er Argive altars, Hera high,

ORESTES.

Grant us thy strength, if for the right we cry.

OLD MAN.

Strength to these twain, to right their father's wrong!

ELECTRA.

O Earth, deep Earth, to whom I yearn in vain,

ORESTES.

And deeper thou, O father darkly slain,

OLD MAN.

Thy children call, who love thee: hearken thou!

ORESTES.

Girt with thine own dead armies, wake, O wake!

ELECTRA.

With all that died at Ilion for thy sake …

OLD MAN.

And hate earth's dark defilers; help us now!

ELECTRA.

Dost hear us yet, O thou in deadly wrong, Wronged by my mother?

OLD MAN.

Child, we stay too long. He hears; be sure he hears!

ELECTRA.

And while he hears, I speak this word for omen in his ears: "Aegisthus dies, Aegisthus dies."… Ah me, My brother, should it strike not him, but thee, This wrestling with dark death, behold, I too Am dead that hour. Think of me as one true,

Not one that lives. I have a sword made keen For this, and shall strike deep. I will go in And make all ready. If there come from thee Good tidings, all my house for ecstasy Shall cry; and if we hear that thou art dead, Then comes the other end!—Lo, I have said.

ORESTES.

I know all, all.

ELECTRA.

Then be a man to-day!

[ORESTES and the OLD MAN depart.

O Women, let your voices from this fray Flash me a fiery signal, where I sit, The sword across my knees, expecting it. For never, though they kill me, shall they touch My living limbs!—I know my way thus much.

[She goes into the house.

* * * * *

CHORUS.

When white-haired folk are met [Strophe. In Argos about the fold, A story lingereth yet, A voice of the mountains old, That tells of the Lamb of Gold: A lamb from a mother mild, But the gold of it curled and beat; And Pan, who holdeth the keys of the wild, Bore it to Atreus' feet: His wild reed pipes he blew, And the reeds were filled with peace, And a joy of singing before him flew, Over the fiery fleece: And up on the basèd rock, As a herald cries, cried he: "Gather ye, gather, O Argive folk, The King's Sign to see, The sign of the blest of God, For he that hath this, hath all!" Therefore the dance of praise they trod In the Atreïd brethren's hall.

They opened before men's eyes [Antistrophe. That which was hid before, The chambers of sacrifice, The dark of the golden door, And fires on the altar floor. And bright was every street, And the voice of the Muses' tree. The carven lotus, was

lifted sweet; When afar and suddenly, Strange songs, and a voice that grew: "Come to your king, ye folk! Mine, mine, is the Golden Ewe!" 'Twas dark Thyestes spoke. For, lo, when the world was still, With his brother's bride he lay, And won her to work his will, And they stole the Lamb away! Then forth to the folk strode he, And called them about his fold, And showed that Sign of the King to be, The fleece and the horns of gold.

Then, then, the world was changed; [Strophe 2. And the Father, where they ranged, Shook the golden stars and glowing, And the great Sun stood deranged In the glory of his going.

Lo, from that day forth, the East Bears the sunrise on his breast, And the flaming Day in heaven Down the dim ways of the west Driveth, to be lost at even.

The wet clouds to Northward beat; And Lord Ammon's desert seat Crieth from the South, unslaken, For the dews that once were sweet, For the rain that God hath taken.

'Tis a children's tale, that old [Antistrophe 2. Shepherds on far hills have told; And we reck not of their telling, Deem not that the Sun of gold Ever turned his fiery dwelling,

Or beat backward in the sky, For the wrongs of man, the cry Of his ailing tribes assembled, To do justly, ere they die! Once, men told the tale, and trembled;

Fearing God, O Queen: whom thou Hast forgotten, till thy brow With old blood is dark and daunted. And thy brethren, even now, Walk among the stars, enchanted.

LEADER.

Ha, friends, was that a voice? Or some dream sound Of voices shaketh me, as underground God's thunder shuddering? Hark, again, and clear! It swells upon the wind.—Come forth and hear! Mistress, Electra!

ELECTRA, a bare sword in her hand, comes from the house.

ELECTRA.

Friends! Some news is brought? How hath the battle ended?

LEADER.

I know naught. There seemed a cry as of men massacred!

ELECTRA.

I heard it too. Far off, but still I heard.

LEADER.

A distant floating voice … Ah, plainer now!

ELECTRA.

Of Argive anguish!—Brother, is it thou?

LEADER.

I know not. Many confused voices cry…

ELECTRA.

Death, then for me! That answer bids me die.

LEADER.

Nay, wait! We know not yet thy fortune. Wait!

ELECTRA.

No messenger from him!—Too late, too late!

LEADER.

The message yet will come. 'Tis not a thing So light of compass, to strike down a king.

Enter a MESSENGER, running.

MESSENGER.

Victory, Maids of Argos, Victory! Orestes … all that love him, list to me!… Hath

conquered! Agamemnon's murderer lies Dead! O give thanks to God with happy cries!

ELECTRA.

Who art thou? I mistrust thee…. 'Tis a plot!

MESSENGER.

Thy brother's man. Look well. Dost know me not?

ELECTRA.

Friend, friend; my terror made me not to see Thy visage. Now I know and welcome thee. How sayst thou? He is dead, verily dead, My father's murderer…?

MESSENGER.

Shall it be said Once more? I know again and yet again Thy heart would hear. Aegisthus lieth slain!

ELECTRA.

Ye Gods! And thou, O Right, that seest all, Art come at last?… But speak; how did he fall? How swooped the wing of death?… I crave to hear.

MESSENGER.

Forth of this hut we set our faces clear To the world, and struck the open chariot road; Then on toward the pasture lands, where stood The great Lord of Mycenae. In a set Garden beside a channelled rivulet, Culling a myrtle garland for his brow, He walked: but hailed us as we passed: "How now, Strangers! Who are ye? Of what city sprung, And whither bound?" "Thessalians," answered young Orestes: "to Alpheüs journeying, With gifts to Olympian Zeus." Whereat the king: "This while, beseech you, tarry, and make full The feast upon my hearth. We slay a bull Here to the Nymphs. Set forth at break of day To-morrow, and 'twill cost you no delay. But come"—and so he gave his hand, and led The two men in—"I must not be gainsaid; Come to the house. Ho, there; set close at hand Vats of pure water, that the guests

may stand At the altar's verge, where falls the holy spray." Then quickly spake Orestes: "By the way We cleansed us in a torrent stream. We need No purifying here. But if indeed Strangers may share thy worship, here are we Ready, O King, and swift to follow thee."

So spoke they in the midst. And every thrall Laid down the spears they served the King withal, And hied him to the work. Some bore amain The death-vat, some the corbs of hallowed grain; Or kindled fire, and round the fire and in Set cauldrons foaming; and a festal din Filled all the place. Then took thy mother's lord The ritual grains, and o'er the altar poured Its due, and prayed: "O Nymphs of Rock and Mere, With many a sacrifice for many a year, May I and she who waits at home for me, My Tyndarid Queen, adore you. May it be Peace with us always, even as now; and all Ill to mine enemies"—meaning withal Thee and Orestes. Then my master prayed Against that prayer, but silently, and said No word, to win once more his fatherland. Then in the corb Aegisthus set his hand, Took the straight blade, cut from the proud bull's head A lock, and laid it where the fire was red; Then, while the young men held the bull on high, Slew it with one clean gash; and suddenly Turned on thy brother: "Stranger, every true Thessalian, so the story goes, can hew A bull's limbs clean, and tame a mountain steed. Take up the steel, and show us if indeed Rumour speak true," Right swift Orestes took The Dorian blade, back from his shoulders shook His broochèd mantle, called on Pylades To aid him, and waved back the thralls. With ease Heelwise he held the bull, and with one glide Bared the white limb; then stripped the mighty hide From off him, swifter than a runner runs His furlongs, and laid clean the flank. At once Aegisthus stooped, and lifted up with care The ominous parts, and gazed. No lobe was there; But lo, strange caves of gall, and, darkly raised, The portal vein boded to him that gazed Fell visitations. Dark as night his brow Clouded. Then spake Orestes: "Why art thou Cast down so sudden?" "Guest," he cried, "there be Treasons from whence I know not, seeking me. Of all my foes, 'tis Agamemnon's son; His hate is on my house, like war." "Have done!"

Orestes cried: "thou fear'st an exile's plot, Lord of a city? Make thy cold heart hot With meat.—Ho, fling me a Thessalian steel! This Dorian is too light. I will unseal The breast of him." He took the heavier blade, And clave the bone. And there Aegisthus stayed, The omens in his hand, dividing slow This sign from that; till, while his head bent low, Up with a leap thy brother flashed the sword, Then down upon his neck, and cleft the cord Of brain and spine. Shuddering the body stood One instant in an agony of blood, And gasped and fell. The henchmen saw, and straight Flew to their spears, a host of them to set Against those twain. But there the twain did stand Unfaltering, each his iron in his hand, Edge fronting edge. Till "Hold," Orestes calls: "I come not as in wrath against these walls And mine own people. One man righteously I have slain, who slew my father. It is I, The wronged Orestes! Hold, and smite me not, Old housefolk of my father!" When they caught That name, their lances fell. And one old man, An ancient in the house, drew nigh to scan His face, and knew him. Then with one accord They crowned thy brother's temples, and outpoured joy and loud songs. And hither now he fares To show the head, no Gorgon, that he bears, But that Aegisthus whom thou hatest! Yea, Blood against blood, his debt is paid this day.

[He goes off to meet the others—ELECTRA stands as though stupefied.

CHORUS.

Now, now thou shalt dance in our dances, Beloved, as a fawn in the night! The wind is astir for the glances Of thy feet; thou art robed with delight.

He hath conquered, he cometh to free us With garlands new-won, More high than the crowns of Alpheüs, Thine own father's son: Cry, cry, for the day that is won!

ELECTRA.

O Light of the Sun, O chariot wheels of flame, O Earth and Night, dead Night without a name That held me! Now mine eyes are raised to see, And all the doorways of my soul flung free. Aegisthus dead! My father's murderer dead! What

have I still of wreathing for the head Stored in my chambers? Let it come forth now To bind my brother's and my conqueror's brow.

[Some garlands are brought out from the house to ELECTRA.

CHORUS.

Go, gather thy garlands, and lay them As a crown on his brow, many-tressed, But our feet shall refrain not nor stay them: 'Tis the joy that the Muses have blest. For our king is returned as from prison, The old king, to be master again, Our belovèd in justice re-risen: With guile he hath slain… But cry, cry in joyance again!

[There enter from the left ORESTES and PYLADES, followed by some thralls.

ELECTRA.

O conqueror, come! The king that trampled Troy Knoweth his son Orestes. Come in joy, Brother, and take to bind thy rippling hair My crowns!…. O what are crowns, that runners wear For some vain race? But thou in battle true Hast felled our foe Aegisthus, him that slew By craft thy sire and mine. [She crowns ORESTES. And thou no less, O friend at need, O reared in righteousness, Take, Pylades, this chaplet from my hand. 'Twas half thy battle. And may ye two stand Thus alway, victory-crowned, before my face! [She crowns PYLADES.

ORESTES.

Electra, first as workers of this grace Praise thou the Gods, and after, if thou will, Praise also me, as chosen to fulfil God's work and Fate's.—Aye, 'tis no more a dream; In very deed I come from slaying him. Thou hast the knowledge clear, but lo, I bring More also. See himself, dead! [Attendants bring in the body of AEGISTHUS on a bier. Wouldst thou fling This lord on the rotting earth for beasts to tear? Or up, where all the vultures of the air May glut them, pierce and nail him for a sign Far off? Work all thy will. Now he is thine.

ELECTRA.

It shames me; yet, God knows, I hunger sore—

ORESTES.

What wouldst thou? Speak; the old fear nevermore Need touch thee.

ELECTRA.

To let loose upon the dead My hate! Perchance to rouse on mine own head The sleeping hate of the world?

ORESTES.

No man that lives Shall scathe thee by one word.

ELECTRA.

Our city gives Quick blame; and little love have men for me.

ORESTES.

If aught thou hast unsaid, sister, be free And speak. Between this man and us no bar Cometh nor stint, but the utter rage of war. [She goes and stands over the body. A moment's silence.

ELECTRA.

Ah me, what have I? What first flood of hate To loose upon thee? What last curse to sate My pain, or river of wild words to flow Bank-high between?… Nothing?… And yet I know There hath not passed one sun, but through the long Cold dawns, over and over, like a song, I have said them—words held back, O, some day yet To flash into thy face, would but the fret Of ancient fear fall loose and let me free. And free I am, now; and can pay to thee At last the weary debt. Oh, thou didst kill My soul within. Who wrought thee any ill, That thou shouldst make me fatherless? Aye, me And this my brother, loveless, solitary? 'Twas thou, didst bend my mother to her shame: Thy weak hand murdered him who led to fame The hosts of Hellas—thou, that never crossed O'erseas to Troy!… God help thee, wast thou lost In blindness, long ago, dreaming, some-wise, She would be true with thee, whose sin and lies

Thyself had tasted in my father's place? And then, that thou wert happy, when thy days Were all one pain? Thou knewest ceaselessly Her kiss a thing unclean, and she knew thee A lord so little true, so dearly won! So lost ye both, being in falseness one, What fortune else had granted; she thy curse, Who marred thee as she loved thee, and thou hers… And on thy ways thou heardst men whispering, "Lo, the Queen's husband yonder"—not "the King." And then the lie of lies that dimmed thy brow, Vaunting that by thy gold, thy chattels, Thou Wert Something; which themselves are nothingness. Shadows, to clasp a moment ere they cease. The thing thou art, and not the things thou hast, Abideth, yea, and bindeth to the last Thy burden on thee: while all else, ill-won And sin-companioned, like a flower o'erblown, Flies on the wind away. Or didst them find In women … Women?… Nay, peace, peace! The blind Could read thee. Cruel wast thou in thine hour, Lord of a great king's house, and like a tower Firm in thy beauty. [Starting back with a look of loathing. Ah, that girl-like face! God grant, not that, not that, but some plain grace Of manhood to the man who brings me love: A father of straight children, that shall move Swift on the wings of War.

So, get thee gone! Naught knowing how the great years, rolling on, Have laid thee bare, and thy long debt full paid. O vaunt not, if one step be proudly made In evil, that all Justice is o'ercast: Vaunt not, ye men of sin, ere at the last The thin-drawn marge before you glimmereth Close, and the goal that wheels 'twixt life and death.

LEADER.

Justice is mighty. Passing dark hath been His sin: and dark the payment of his sin.

ELECTRA (with a weary sigh, turning from the body).

Ah me! Go some of you, bear him from sight, That when my mother come, her eyes may light On nothing, nothing, till she know the sword…. [The body is borne into the hut. PYLADES goes with it.

ORESTES (looking along the road).

Stay, 'tis a new thing! We have still a word To speak…

ELECTRA.

What? Not a rescue from the town Thou seëst?

ORESTES.

'Tis my mother comes: my own Mother, that bare me. [He takes off his crown.

ELECTRA (springing, as it were, to life again, and moving where she can see the road).

Straight into the snare! Aye, there she cometh,—Welcome in thy rare Chariot! All welcome in thy brave array!

ORESTES.

What would we with our mother? Didst thou say Kill her?

ELECTRA (turning on him).

What? Is it pity? Dost thou fear To see thy mother's shape?

ORESTES.

'Twas she that bare My body into life. She gave me suck. How can I strike her?

ELECTRA.

Strike her as she struck Our father!

ORESTES (to himself, brooding).

Phoebus, God, was all thy mind Turned unto darkness?

ELECTRA.

If thy God be blind, Shalt thou have light?

ORESTES (as before).

Thou, thou, didst bid me kill My mother: which is sin.

ELECTRA.

How brings it ill To thee, to raise our father from the dust?

ORESTES.

I was a clean man once. Shall I be thrust From men's sight, blotted with her blood?

ELECTRA.

Thy blot Is black as death if him thou succour not!

ORESTES.

Who shall do judgment on me, when she dies?

ELECTRA.

Who shall do judgment, if thy father lies. Forgotten?

ORESTES (turning suddenly to ELECTRA).

Stay! How if some fiend of Hell, Hid in God's likeness, spake that oracle?

ELECTRA.

In God's own house? I trow not.

ORESTES.

And I trow It was an evil charge! [He moves away from her.

ELECTRA (almost despairing).

To fail me now! To fail me now! A coward!—O brother, no!

ORESTES.

What shall it be, then? The same stealthy blow …

ELECTRA.

That slew our father! Courage! thou hast slain Aegisthus.

ORESTES.

Aye. So be it.—I have ta'en A path of many terrors: and shall do Deeds horrible. 'Tis God will have it so…. Is this the joy of battle, or wild woe? [He goes into the house.

LEADER.

O Queen o'er Argos thronèd high, O Woman, sister of the twain, God's Horsemen, stars without a stain, Whose home is in the deathless sky, Whose glory in the sea's wild pain, Toiling to succour men that die: Long years above us hast thou been, God-like for gold and marvelled power: Ah, well may mortal eyes this hour Observe thy state: All hail, O Queen!

Enter from the right CLYTEMNESTRA on a chariot, accompanied by richly dressed Handmaidens.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Down from the wain, ye dames of Troy, and hold Mine arm as I dismount…. [Answering ELECTRA'S thought. The spoils and gold Of Ilion I have sent out of my hall To many shrines. These bondwomen are all I keep in mine own house…. Deemst thou the cost Too rich to pay me for the child I lost— Fair though they be?

ELECTRA.

Nay, Mother, here am I Bond likewise, yea, and homeless, to hold high Thy royal arm!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Child, the war slaves are here; Thou needst not toil.

ELECTRA.

What was it but the spear Of war, drove me forth too? Mine enemies Have sacked my father's house, and, even as these, Captives and fatherless, made me their prey.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

It was thy father cast his child away, A child he might have loved!… Shall I speak out? (Controlling herself) Nay; when a woman once is caught about With evil fame, there riseth in her tongue A bitter spirit—wrong, I know! Yet, wrong Or right, I charge ye look on the deeds done; And if ye needs must hate, when all is known,

Hate on! What profits loathing ere ye know? My father gave me to be his. 'Tis so. But was it his to kill me, or to kill The babes I bore? Yet, lo, he tricked my will With fables of Achilles' love: he bore To Aulis and the dark ship-clutching shore, He held above the altar-flame, and smote, Cool as one reaping, through the strainèd throat, My white Iphigenia…. Had it been To save some falling city, leaguered in With foemen; to prop up our castle towers, And rescue other children that were ours, Giving one life for many, by God's laws I had forgiven all! Not so. Because Helen was wanton, and her master knew No curb for her: for that, for that, he slew My daughter!—Even then, with all my wrong, No wild beast yet was in me. Nay, for long, I never would have killed him. But he came, At last, bringing that damsel, with the flame Of God about her, mad and knowing all: And set her in my room; and in one wall Would hold two queens!—O wild are woman's eyes And hot her heart. I say not otherwise. But, being thus wild, if then her master stray To love far off, and cast his own away, Shall not her will break prison too, and wend Somewhere to win some other for a friend? And then on us the world's curse waxes strong In righteousness! The lords of all the wrong Must hear no curse!—I slew him. I trod then The only road: which led me to the men He hated. Of the friends of Argos whom Durst I have sought, to aid me to the doom I craved?—Speak if thou wouldst, and fear not me, If yet thou deemst him slain unrighteously.

LEADER.

Thy words be just, yet shame their justice brings; A woman true of heart should bear all things From him she loves. And she who feels it not, I cannot reason of her, nor speak aught.

ELECTRA.

Remember, mother, thy last word of grace, Bidding me speak, and fear not, to thy face.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

So said I truly, child, and so say still.

ELECTRA.

Wilt softly hear, and after work me ill?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Not so, not so. I will but pleasure thee.

ELECTRA.

I answer then. And, mother, this shall be My prayer of opening, where hangs the whole: Would God that He had made thee clean of soul! Helen and thou—O, face and form were fair, Meet for men's praise; but sisters twain ye were, Both things of naught, a stain on Castor's star, And Helen slew her honour, borne afar In wilful ravishment: but thou didst slay The highest man of the world. And now wilt say 'Twas wrought in justice for thy child laid low At Aulis?… Ah, who knows thee as I know? Thou, thou, who long ere aught of ill was done Thy child, when Agamemnon scarce was gone, Sate at the looking-glass, and tress by tress Didst comb the twined gold in loneliness. When any wife, her lord being far away. Toils to be fair, O blot her out that day As false within! What would she with a cheek So bright in strange men's eyes, unless she seek Some treason? None but I, thy child, could so Watch thee in Hellas: none but I could know Thy face of gladness when our enemies Were strong, and the swift cloud upon thine eyes If Troy seemed falling, all thy soul keen-set Praying that he might come no more!… And yet It was so easy to be true. A king Was thine, not feebler, not in anything Below Aegisthus; one whom Hellas chose For chief beyond all kings. Aye, and God knows, How sweet a name in Greece, after the sin Thy sister wrought, lay in thy ways to win. Ill deeds make fair ones shine, and turn thereto Men's eyes.—Enough: but say he wronged thee; slew By craft thy child:—what wrong had I done, what The babe Orestes? Why didst render not Back unto us, the children of the dead, Our father's portion? Must thou heap thy bed With gold of murdered men, to buy to thee Thy strange man's arms?

Justice! Why is not he Who cast Orestes out, cast out again? Not slain for me whom doubly he hath slain, In living death, more bitter than of old My sister's? Nay, when all the tale is told Of blood for blood, what murder shall we make, I and Orestes, for our father's sake?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Aye, child; I know thy heart, from long ago. Thou hast alway loved him best. 'Tis oft-time so: One is her father's daughter, and one hot To bear her mother's part. I blame thee not…. Yet think not I am happy, child; nor flown With pride now, in the deeds my hand hath done…. [Seeing ELECTRA unsympathetic, she checks herself. But thou art all untended, comfortless Of body and wild of raiment; and thy stress Of travail scarce yet ended!… Woe is me! 'Tis all as I have willed it. Bitterly I wrought against him, to the last blind deep Of bitterness…. Woe's me!

ELECTRA.

Fair days to weep, When help is not! Or stay: though he lie cold Long since, there lives another of thy fold Far off; there might be pity for thy son?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

I dare not!… Yes, I fear him. 'Tis mine own Life, and not his, comes first. And rumour saith His heart yet burneth for his father's death.

ELECTRA.

Why dost thou keep thine husband ever hot Against me?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

'Tis his mood. And thou art not So gentle, child!

ELECTRA.

My spirit is too sore! Howbeit, from this day I will no more Hate him.

CLYTEMNESTRA (with a flash of hope).

O daughter!—Then, indeed, shall he, I promise, never more be harsh to thee!

ELECTRA.

He lieth in my house, as 'twere his own. 'Tis that hath made him proud.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Nay, art thou flown To strife again so quick, child?

ELECTRA.

Well; I say No more; long have I feared him, and alway Shall fear him, even as now!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Nay, daughter, peace! It bringeth little profit, speech like this… Why didst thou call me hither?

ELECTRA.

It reached thee, My word that a man-child is born to me? Do thou make offering for me—for the rite I know not—as is meet on the tenth night. I cannot; I have borne no child till now.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Who tended thee? 'Tis she should make the vow.

ELECTRA.

None tended me. Alone I bare my child.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What, is thy cot so friendless? And this wild So far from aid?

ELECTRA.

Who seeks for friendship sake A beggar's house?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

I will go in, and make Due worship for thy child, the Peace-bringer. To all thy need I would be minister. Then to my lord, where by the meadow side He prays the

woodland nymphs. Ye handmaids, guide My chariot to the stall, and when ye guess The rite draws near its end, in readiness Be here again. Then to my lord!… I owe My lord this gladness, too.

[The Attendants depart; CLYTEMNESTRA, left alone, proceeds to enter the house.

ELECTRA.

Welcome below My narrow roof! But have a care withal, A grime of smoke lies deep upon the wall. Soil not thy robe!… Not far now shall it be, The sacrifice God asks of me and thee. The bread of Death is broken, and the knife Lifted again that drank the Wild Bull's life: And on his breast…. Ha, Mother, hast slept well Aforetime? Thou shalt lie with him in Hell. That grace I give to cheer thee on thy road; Give thou to me—peace from my father's blood! [She follows her mother into the house.

CHORUS.

Lo, the returns of wrong. The wind as a changèd thing Whispereth overhead Of one that of old lay dead In the water lapping long: My King, O my King!

A cry in the rafters then Rang, and the marble dome: "Mercy of God, not thou, "Woman! To slay me now, "After the harvests ten "Now, at the last, come home!"

O Fate shall turn as the tide, Turn, with a doom of tears For the flying heart too fond; A doom for the broken bond. She hailed him there in his pride, Home from the perilous years,

In the heart of his wallèd lands, In the Giants' cloud-capt ring; Herself, none other, laid The hone to the axe's blade; She lifted it in her hands, The woman, and slew her king.

Woe upon spouse and spouse, Whatso of evil sway Held her in that distress! Even as a lioness Breaketh the woodland boughs Starving, she wrought her way.

VOICE OF CLYTEMNESTRA.

O Children, Children; in the name of God, Slay not your mother!

A WOMAN.

Did ye hear a cry Under the rafters?

ANOTHER.

I weep too, yea, I; Down on the mother's heart the child hath trod! [A death-cry from within.

ANOTHER.

God bringeth Justice in his own slow tide. Aye, cruel is thy doom; but thy deeds done Evil, thou piteous woman, and on one Whose sleep was by thy side!

[The door bursts open, and ORESTES and ELECTRA come forth in disorder. Attendants bring out the bodies of CLYTEMNESTRA and AEGISTHUS.

LEADER.

Lo, yonder, in their mother's new-spilt gore Red-garmented and ghastly, from the door They reel…. O horrible! Was it agony Like this, she boded in her last wild cry? There lives no seed of man calamitous, Nor hath lived, like this seed of Tantalus.

ORESTES.

O Dark of the Earth, O God, Thou to whom all is plain; Look on my sin, my blood, This horror of dead things twain; Gathered as one they lie Slain; and the slayer was I, I, to pay for my pain!

ELECTRA.

Let tear rain upon tear, Brother: but mine is the blame. A fire stood over her, And out of the fire I came, I, in my misery…. And I was the child at her knee. 'Mother' I named her name.

CHORUS.

Alas for Fate, for the Fate of thee, O Mother, Mother of Misery: And Misery, lo,

hath turned again, To slay thee, Misery and more, Even in the fruit thy body bore. Yet hast thou Justice, Justice plain, For a sire's blood spilt of yore!

ORESTES.

Apollo, alas for the hymn Thou sangest, as hope in mine ear! The Song was of Justice dim, But the Deed is anguish clear; And the Gift, long nights of fear, Of blood and of wandering, Where cometh no Greek thing, Nor sight, nor sound on the air. Yea, and beyond, beyond, Roaming—what rest is there? Who shall break bread with me? Who, that is clean, shall see And hate not the blood-red hand, His mother's murderer?

ELECTRA.

And I? What clime shall hold My evil, or roof it above? I cried for dancing of old, I cried in my heart for love: What dancing waiteth me now? What love that shall kiss my brow Nor blench at the brand thereof?

CHORUS.

Back, back, in the wind and rain Thy driven spirit wheeleth again. Now is thine heart made clean within That was dark of old and murder-fraught. But, lo, thy brother; what hast thou wrought…. Yea, though I love thee…. what woe, what sin, On him, who willed it not!

ORESTES.

Saw'st thou her raiment there, Sister, there in the blood? She drew it back as she stood, She opened her bosom bare, She bent her knees to the earth, The knees that bent in my birth…. And I … Oh, her hair, her hair…. [He breaks into inarticulate weeping

CHORUS.

Oh, thou didst walk in agony, Hearing thy mother's cry, the cry Of wordless wailing, well know I.

ELECTRA.

She stretched her hand to my cheek, And there brake from her lips a moan; 'Mercy, my child, my own!' Her hand clung to my cheek; Clung, and my arm was weak; And the sword fell and was gone.

CHORUS.

Unhappy woman, could thine eye Look on the blood, and see her lie, Thy mother, where she turned to die?

ORESTES.

I lifted over mine eyes My mantle: blinded I smote, As one smiteth a sacrifice; And the sword found her throat.

ELECTRA.

I gave thee the sign and the word; I touched with mine hand thy sword.

LEADER.

Dire is the grief ye have wrought.

ORESTES.

Sister, touch her again: Oh, veil the body of her; Shed on her raiment fair, And close that death-red stain. —Mother! And didst thou bear, Bear in thy bitter pain, To life, thy murderer?

[The two kneel over the body of CLYTEMNESTRA, and cover her with raiment.

ELECTRA.

On her that I loved of yore, Robe upon robe I cast: On her that I hated sore.

CHORUS.

O House that hath hated sore, Behold thy peace at the last!

* * * * *

LEADER.

Ha, see: above the roof-tree high There shineth … Is some spirit there Of earth or heaven? That thin air Was never trod by things that die! What bodes it now that forth they fare, To men revealèd visibly?

[There appears in the air a vision of CASTOR and POLYDEUCES. The mortals kneel or veil their faces.

CASTOR.

Thou Agamemnon's Son, give ear! 'Tis we. Castor and Polydeuces, call to thee, God's Horsemen and thy mother's brethren twain. An Argive ship, spent with the toiling main, We bore but now to peace, and, here withal Being come, have seen thy mother's bloody fall, Our sister's. Righteous is her doom this day, But not thy deed. And Phoebus, Phoebus … Nay; He is my lord; therefore I hold my peace. Yet though in light he dwell, no light was this He showed to thee, but darkness! Which do thou Endure, as man must, chafing not. And now Fare forth where Zeus and Fate have laid thy life. The maid Electra thou shalt give for wife To Pylades; then turn thy head and flee From Argos' land. 'Tis never more for thee To tread this earth where thy dead mother lies. And, lo, in the air her Spirits, bloodhound eyes, Most horrible yet Godlike, hard at heel Following shall scourge thee as a burning wheel, Speed-maddened. Seek thou straight Athena's land, And round her awful image clasp thine hand, Praying: and she will fence them back, though hot With flickering serpents, that they touch thee not, Holding above thy brow her gorgon shield. There is a hill in Athens, Ares' field, Where first for that first death by Ares done On Halirrhothius, Poseidon's son, Who wronged his daughter, the great Gods of yore Held judgment: and true judgments evermore Flow from that Hill, trusted of man and God. There shalt thou stand arraignèd of this blood; And of those judges half shall lay on thee Death, and half pardon; so shalt thou go free. For Phoebus in that hour, who bade thee shed Thy mother's blood, shall take on his own head The stain thereof. And ever from that strife The law shall hold, that when, for death or life Of

one pursued, men's voices equal stand, Then Mercy conquereth.—But for thee, the band Of Spirits dread, down, down, in very wrath, Shall sink beside that Hill, making their path Through a dim chasm, the which shall aye be trod By reverent feet, where men may speak with God. But thou forgotten and far off shalt dwell, By great Alpheüs' waters, in a dell Of Arcady, where that gray Wolf-God's wall Stands holy. And thy dwelling men shall call Orestes Town. So much to thee be spoke. But this dead man, Aegisthus, all the folk Shall bear to burial in a high green grave Of Argos. For thy mother, she shall have Her tomb from Menelaus, who hath come This day, at last, to Argos, bearing home Helen. From Egypt comes she, and the hall Of Proteus, and in Troy hath ne'er at all Set foot. 'Twas but a wraith of Helen, sent By Zeus, to make much wrath and ravishment. So forth for home, bearing the virgin bride, Let Pylades make speed, and lead beside Thy once-named brother, and with golden store Stablish his house far off on Phocis' shore. Up, gird thee now to the steep Isthmian way, Seeking Athena's blessèd rock; one day, Thy doom of blood fulfilled and this long stress Of penance past, thou shalt have happiness.

LEADER (looking up).

Is it for us, O Seed of Zeus, To speak and hear your words again! CASTOR. Speak: of this blood ye bear no stain. ELECTRA. I also, sons of Tyndareus,

My kinsmen; may my word be said? CASTOR. Speak: on Apollo's head we lay The bloody doings of this day. LEADER. Ye Gods, ye brethren of the dead,

Why held ye not the deathly herd Of Kêres back from off this home? CASTOR. There came but that which needs must come By ancient Fate and that dark word

That rang from Phoebus in his mood. ELECTRA. And what should Phoebus seek with me, Or all God's oracles that be, That I must bear my mother's blood?

CASTOR. Thy hand was as thy brother's hand, Thy doom shall be as his. One stain, From dim forefathers on the twain Lighting, hath sapped your hearts as sand.

ORESTES (who has never raised his head, nor spoken to the Gods).

After so long, sister, to see And hold thee, and then part, then part, By all that chained thee to my heart Forsaken, and forsaking thee!

CASTOR. Husband and house are hers. She bears No bitter judgment, save to go Exiled from Argos. ELECTRA. And what woe, What tears are like an exile's tears?

ORESTES. Exiled and more am I; impure, A murderer in a stranger's hand: CASTOR. Fear not. There dwells in Pallas' land All holiness. Till then endure! [ORESTES and ELECTRA embrace

ORESTES. Aye, closer; clasp my body well, And let thy sorrow loose, and shed, As o'er the grave of one new dead, Dead evermore, thy last farewell! [A sound of weeping.

CASTOR. Alas, what would ye? For that cry Ourselves and all the sons of heaven Have pity. Yea, our peace is riven By the strange pain of these that die.

ORESTES. No more to see thee! ELECTRA. Nor thy breath Be near my face! ORESTES. Ah, so it ends. ELECTRA. Farewell, dear Argos. All ye friends, Farewell! ORESTES. O faithful unto death,

Thou goest? ELECTRA. Aye, I pass from you, Soft-eyed at last. ORESTES. Go, Pylades, And God go with you! Wed in peace My tall Electra, and be true. [ELECTRA and PYLADES depart to the left.

CASTOR.

Their troth shall fill their hearts.—But on: Dread feet are near thee, hounds of prey, Snake-handed, midnight-visaged, yea, And bitter pains their fruit! Begone! [ORESTES departs to the right.

But hark, the far Sicilian sea Calls, and a noise of men and ships That labour sunken to the lips In bitter billows; forth go we,

Through the long leagues of fiery blue, With saving; not to souls unshriven; But whoso in his life hath striven To love things holy and be true,

Through toil and storm we guard him; we Save, and he shall not die!—Therefore, O praise the lying man no more, Nor with oath-breakers sail the sea: Farewell, ye walkers on the shore Of death! A God hath counselled ye. [CASTOR and POLYDEUCES disappear.

CHORUS.

Farewell, farewell!—But he who can so fare, And stumbleth not on mischief anywhere, Blessed on earth is he!

NOTES TO THE ELECTRA

The chief characters in the play belong to one family, as is shown by the two genealogies:—

I.

TANTALUS | Pelops _____|_____ | | Atreus Thyestes _____|_____ | | | | Agamemnon Menelaus Aegisthus (=Clytemnestra) (=Helen) (=Clytemnestra) _____|_____ | | | Iphigenia Electra Orestes

(Also, a sister of Agamemnon, name variously given, married Strophios, and was the mother of Pylades.)

II.

Tyndareus = Leda = Zeus _____| ____|_____ | | | | Clytemnestra Castor Polydeuces Helen

P. 1, l. 10, Son of his father's foe.]—Both foe and brother. Atreus and Thyestes became enemies after the theft of the Golden Lamb. See pp. 47 ff.

P. 2, l. 34, Must wed with me.]—In Aeschylus and Sophocles Electra is unmarried. This story of her peasant husband is found only in Euripides, but is not likely to have been wantonly invented by him. It was no doubt an existing legend—an

[Greek: ôn logos], to use the phrase attributed to Euripides in the Frogs (l. 1052). He may have chosen to adopt it for several reasons. First, to marry Electra to a peasant was a likely step for Aegisthus to take, since any child born to her afterwards would bear a stigma, calculated to damage him fatally as a pretender to the throne. Again, it seemed to explain the name "A-lektra" (as if from [Greek: lektron] "bed;" cf. Schol. Orestes, 71, Soph. El. 962, Ant. 917) more pointedly than the commoner version. And it helps in the working out of Electra's character (cf. pp. 17, 22, &c.). Also it gives an opportunity of introducing the fine character of the peasant. He is an [Greek: Autourgos] literally "self-worker," a man who works his own land, far from the city, neither a slave nor a slave-master; "the men," as Euripides says in the Orestes (920), "who alone save a nation." (Cf, Bac., p. 115 foot, and below, p. 26, ll. 367-390.) As Euripides became more and more alienated from the town democracy he tended, like Tolstoy and others, to idealise the workers of the soil.

P. 6, l. 62, Children to our enemy.]—Cf. 626. Soph. El. 589. They do not seem to be in existence at the time of the play.

Pp. 5-6.]—Electra's first two speeches are admirable as expositions of her character—the morbid nursing of hatred as a duty, the deliberate posing, the impulsiveness, the quick response to kindness.

P. 7, l. 82, Pylades.]—Pylades is a persona muta both here and in Sophocles' Electra, a fixed traditional figure, possessing no quality but devotion to Orestes. In Aeschylus' Libation-Bearers he speaks only once, with tremendous effect, at the crisis of the play, to rebuke Orestes when his heart fails him. In the Iphigenia in Tauris, however, and still more in the Orestes, he is a fully studied character.

P. 10, l. 151, A swan crying alone.]—Cf. Bacchae, p. 152, "As yearns the milk-white swan when old swans die."

P. 11, ll. 169 ff., The Watcher hath cried this day.]—Hera was an old Pelasgian goddess, whose worship was kept in part a mystery from the invading Achaeans or

Dorians. There seems to have been a priest born "of the ancient folk," i.e., a Pelasgian or aboriginal Mycenaean, who, by some secret lore—probably some ancient and superseded method of calculating the year—knew when Hera's festival was due, and walked round the country three days beforehand to announce it. He drank "the milk of the flock" and avoided wine, either from some religious taboo, or because he represented the religion of the milk-drinking mountain shepherds.

P. 13, ll. 220 ff.]—Observe Electra's cowardice when surprised; contrast her courage, p. 47, when sending Orestes off, and again her quick drop to despair when the news does not come soon enough.

P. 16, ll. 247 ff., I am a wife…. O better dead!]—Rather ungenerous, when compared with her words on p. 6. (Cf. also her words on pp. 24 and 26.) But she feels this herself, almost immediately. Orestes naturally takes her to mean that her husband is one of Aegisthus' friends. This would have ruined his plot. (Cf. above, p. 8, l. 98.)

P. 22, l. 312, Castor.]—I know no other mention of Electra's betrothal to Castor. He was her kinsman: see below on l. 990.

Pp. 22-23, ll. 300-337.]—In this wonderful outbreak, observe the mixture of all sorts of personal resentments and jealousies with the devotion of the lonely woman to her father and her brother. "So men say," is an interesting touch; perhaps conscience tells her midway that she does not quite believe what she is saying. So is the self-conscious recognition of her "bitter burning brain" that interprets all things in a sort of distortion.—Observe, too, how instinctively she turns to the peasant for sympathy in the strain of her emotion. It is his entrance, perhaps, which prevents Orestes from being swept away and revealing himself. The peasant's courage towards two armed men is striking, as well as his courtesy and his sanity. He is the one character in the play not somehow tainted with blood-madness.

P. 27, ll. 403, 409.]—Why does Electra send her husband to the Old Man? Not, I

think, really for want of the food. It would have been easier to borrow (p. 12, l. 191) from the Chorus; and, besides, what the peasant says is no doubt true, that, if she liked, she could find "many a pleasant thing" in the house. I think she sends for the Old Man because he is the only person who would know Orestes (p. 21, l. 285). She is already, like the Leader (p. 26, l. 401), excited by hopes which she will not confess. This reading makes the next scene clearer also.

Pp. 28-30, ll. 432-487, O for the Ships of Troy.]—The two main Choric songs of this play are markedly what Aristotle calls [Greek: embolima] "things thrown in." They have no effect upon the action, and form little more than musical "relief." Not that they are positively irrelevant. Agamemnon is in our minds all through the play, and Agamemnon's glory is of course enhanced by the mention of Troy and the praises of his subordinate king, Achilles.

Thetis, the Nereid, or sea-maiden, was won to wife by Peleus. (He wrestled with her on the seashore, and never loosed hold, though she turned into divers strange beings—a lion, and fire, and water, and sea-beasts.) She bore him Achilles, and then, unable permanently to live with a mortal, went back beneath the sea. When Achilles was about to sail to Troy, she and her sister Nereids brought him divine armour, and guided his ships across the Aegean. The designs on Achilles' armour, as on Heracles' shield, form a fairly common topic of poetry.

The descriptions of the designs are mostly clear. Perseus with the Gorgon's head, guided by Hermês; the Sun on a winged chariot, and stars about him; two Sphinxes, holding as victims the men who had failed to answer the riddles which they sang; and, on the breastplate, the Chimaera attacking Bellerophon's winged horse, Pêgasus. The name Pêgasus suggested to a Greek [Greek: pegê], "fountain;" and the great spring of Pirênê, near Corinth, was made by Pêgasus stamping on the rock.

Pp. 30-47.]—The Old Man, like other old family servants in Euripides—the extreme case is in the Ion—is absolutely and even morbidly devoted to his masters.

Delightful in this first scene, he becomes a little horrible in the next, where they plot the murders; not only ferocious himself, but, what seems worse, inclined to pet and enjoy the bloodthirstiness of his "little mistress."

Pp. 30-33, ll. 510-545.]—The Signs of Orestes. This scene, I think, has been greatly misunderstood by critics. In Aeschylus' Libation-Bearers, which deals with the same subject as the Electra, the scene is at Agamemnon's tomb. Orestes lays his tress there in the prologue. Electra comes bringing libations, sees the hair, compares it with her own, finds that it is similar "wing for wing" ([Greek: homopteros]—the same word as here), and guesses that it belongs to Orestes. She then measures the footprints, and finds one that is like her own, one not; evidently Orestes and a fellow-traveller! Orestes enters and announces himself; she refuses to believe, until he shows her a "woven thing," perhaps the robe which he is wearing, which she recognises as the work of her own hand.

The same signs, described in one case by the same peculiar word, occur here. The Old Man mentions one after the other, and Electra refutes or rejects them. It has been thought therefore that this scene was meant as an attack—a very weak and undignified attack—on Euripides' great master. No parallel for such an artistically ruinous proceeding is quoted from any Greek tragedy. And, apart from the improbability a priori, I do not think it even possible to read the scene in this sense. To my mind, Electra here rejects the signs not from reason, but from a sort of nervous terror. She dares not believe that Orestes has come; because, if it prove otherwise, the disappointment will be so terrible. As to both signs, the lock of hair and the footprints, her arguments may be good; but observe that she is afraid to make the comparison at all. And as to the footprint, she says there cannot be one, when the Old Man has just seen it! And, anyhow, she will not go to see it! Similarly as to the robe, she does her best to deny that she ever wove it, though she and the Old Man both remember it perfectly. She is fighting tremulously, with all her flagging strength, against the thing she longs for. The whole point of the scene

requires that one ray of hope after another should be shown to Electra, and that she should passionately, blindly, reject them all. That is what Euripides wanted the signs for.

But why, it may be asked, did he adopt Aeschylus' signs, and even his peculiar word? Because, whether invented by Aeschylus or not, these signs were a canonical part of the story by the time Euripides wrote. Every one who knew the story of Orestes' return at all, knew of the hair and the footprint. Aristophanes in the Clouds (534 ff.) uses them proverbially, when he speaks of his comedy "recognising its brother's tress." It would have been frivolous to invent new ones. As a matter of fact, it seems probable that the signs are older than Aeschylus; neither they nor the word [Greek: homopteros] particularly suit Aeschylus' purpose. (Cf. Dr. Verrall's introduction to the Libation-Bearers.) They probably come from the old lyric poet, Stesichorus.

P. 43, l. 652, New-mothered of a Man-Child.]—Her true Man-Child, the Avenger whom they had sought to rob her of! This pitiless plan was suggested apparently by the sacrifice to the Nymphs (p. 40). "Weep my babe's low station" is of course ironical. The babe would set a seal on Electra's degradation to the peasant class, and so end the blood-feud, as far as she was concerned. Clytemnestra, longing for peace, must rejoice in Electra's degradation. Yet she has motherly feelings too, and in fact hardly knows what to think or do till she can consult Aegisthus (p. 71). Electra, it would seem, actually calculates upon these feelings, while despising them.

P. 45, l. 669, If but some man will guide me.]—A suggestion of the irresolution or melancholia that beset Orestes afterwards, alternating with furious action. (Cf. Aeschylus' Libation-Bearers, Euripides' Andromache and Orestes.)

P. 45, l. 671, Zeus of my sires, &c]—In this invocation, short and comparatively unmoving, one can see perhaps an effect of Aeschylus' play. In the Libation-Bearers the invocation of Agamemnon comprises 200 lines of extraordinarily eloquent

poetry.

P. 47 ff., ll. 699 ff.]—The Golden Lamb. The theft of the Golden Lamb is treated as a story of the First Sin, after which all the world was changed and became the poor place that it now is. It was at least the First Sin in the blood-feud of this drama.

The story is not explicitly told. Apparently the magic lamb was brought by Pan from the gods, and given to Atreus as a special grace and a sign that he was the true king. His younger brother, Thyestes, helped by Atreus' wife, stole it and claimed to be king himself. So good was turned into evil, and love into hatred, and the stars shaken in their courses.

[It is rather curious that the Lamb should have such a special effect upon the heavens and the weather. It is the same in Plato (Polit. 268 ff.), and more definitely so in the treatise De Astrologia, attributed to Lucian, which says that the Golden Lamb is the constellation Aries, "The Ram." Hugo Winckler (Weltanschauung des alten Orients, pp. 30, 31) suggests that the story is a piece of Babylonian astronomy misunderstood. It seems that the vernal equinox, which is now moving from the Ram into the Fish, was in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. moving from the Bull into the Ram. Now the Bull, Marduk, was the special god of Babylon, and the time when he yielded his place to the Ram was also, as a matter of fact, the time of the decline of Babylon. The gradual advance of the Ram not only upset the calendar, and made all the seasons wrong; but seemed, since it coincided with the fall of the Great City, to upset the world in general! Of course Euripides would know nothing of this. He was apparently attracted to the Golden Lamb merely by the quaint beauty of the story.]

P. 50, l. 746, Thy brethren even now.]—Castor and Polydeuces, who were received into the stars after their death. See below, on l. 990.

P. 51, l. 757, That answer bids me die.]—Why? Because Orestes, if he won at all, would win by a surprise attack, and would send news instantly. A prolonged

conflict, without a message, would mean that Orestes and Pylades were being overpowered. Of course she is wildly impatient.

P. 51, l. 765, Who an thou? I mistrust thee.]—Just as she mistrusted the Old Man's signs. See above, p. 89.

P. 52 ff., ll. 774 ff.]—Messenger's Speech. This speech, though swift and vivid, is less moving and also less sympathetic than most of the Messengers' Speeches. Less moving, because the slaying of Aegisthus has little moral interest; it is merely a daring and dangerous exploit. Less sympathetic, because even here, in the first and comparatively blameless step of the blood-vengeance, Euripides makes us feel the treacherous side of it. A [Greek: dolophonia], a "slaying by guile," even at its best, remains rather an ugly thing.

P. 53, l. 793, Then quickly spake Orestes.]—If Orestes had washed with Aegisthus, he would have become his xenos, or guest, as much as if he had eaten his bread and salt. In that case the slaying would have been definitely a crime, a dishonourable act. Also, Aegisthus would have had the right to ask his name.—The unsuspiciousness of Aegisthus is partly natural; it was not thus, alone and unarmed, that he expected Orestes to stand before him. Partly it seems like a heaven-sent blindness. Even the omens do not warn him, though no doubt in a moment more they would have done so.

P. 56, l. 878, With guile he hath slain.]—So the MSS. The Chorus have already a faint feeling, quickly suppressed, that there may be another side to Orestes' action. Most editors alter the text to mean "He hath slain these guileful ones."

P. 58, l. 900, It shames me, yet God knows I hunger sore.]—To treat the dead with respect was one of the special marks of a Greek as opposed to a barbarian. It is possible that the body of Aegisthus might legitimately have been refused burial, or even nailed on a cross as Orestes in a moment of excitement suggests. But to insult him lying dead would be a shock to all Greek feeling. ("Unholy is the voice of loud

thanksgiving over slaughtered men," Odyssey xxii. 412.) Any excess of this kind, any violence towards the helpless, was apt to rouse "The sleeping wrath of the world." There was a Greek proverb, "Even an injured dog has his Erinys"— i.e., his unseen guardian or avenger. It is interesting, though not surprising, to hear that men had little love for Electra. The wonderful speech that follows, though to a conventional Greek perhaps the most outrageous thing of which she is guilty, shows best the inherent nobility of her character before years of misery had "killed her soul within."

P. 59, ll. 928 f., Being in falseness one, &c]—The Greek here is very obscure and almost certainly corrupt.

P. 61, l. 964, 'Tis my mother comes.]—The reaction has already begun in Orestes. In the excitement and danger of killing his enemy he has shown coolness and courage, but now a work lies before him vastly more horrible, a little more treacherous, and with no element of daring to redeem it. Electra, on the other hand, has done nothing yet; she has merely tried, not very successfully, to revile the dead body, and her hate is unsatisfied. Besides, one sees all through the play that Aegisthus was a kind of odious stranger to her; it was the woman, her mother, who came close to her and whom she really hated.

P. 63, l. 979, Was it some fiend of Hell?]—The likeness to Hamlet is obvious. ("The spirit that I have seen May be the Devil." End of Act II.)

P. 63, l. 983, How shall it be then, the same stealthy blow?…]—He means, I think, "the same as that with which I have already murdered an unsuspecting man to-day," but Electra for her own purposes misinterprets him.

P. 64, l. 990, God's horsemen, stars without a stain.]—Cf. above, ll. 312, 746. Castor and Polydeuces were sons of Zeus and Leda, brothers of Helen, and half-brothers of Clytemnestra, whose father was the mortal Tyndareus. They lived as knights without reproach, and afterwards became stars and demigods. The story is told that

originally Castor was mortal and Polydeuces immortal; but when Castor was fatally wounded Polydeuces prayed that he might be allowed to give him half his immortality. The prayer was granted; and the two live as immortals, yet, in some mysterious way, knowing the taste of death. Unlike the common sinners and punishers of the rest of the play, these Heroes find their "glory" in saving men from peril and suffering, especially at sea, where they appear as the globes of light, called St. Elmo's fire, upon masts and yards.

Pp. 64-71, ll. 998 ff.]—Clytemnestra. "And what sort of woman is this doomed and 'evil' Queen? We know the majestic murderess of Aeschylus, so strong as to be actually beautiful, so fearless and unrepentant that one almost feels her to be right. One can imagine also another figure that would be theatrically effective—a 'sympathetic' sinner, beautiful and penitent, eager to redeem her sin by self-sacrifice. But Euripides gives us neither. Perhaps he believed in neither. It is a piteous and most real character that we have here, in this sad middle-aged woman, whose first words are an apology; controlling quickly her old fires, anxious to be as little hated as possible. She would even atone, one feels, if there were any safe way of atonement; but the consequences of her old actions are holding her, and she is bound to persist…. In her long speech it is scarcely to Electra that she is chiefly speaking; it is to the Chorus, perhaps to her own bondmaids; to any or all of the people whose shrinking so frets her." (Independent Review, l.c.)

P. 65, l. 1011, Cast his child away.]—The Greek fleet assembled for Troy was held by contrary winds at Aulis, in the Straits of Euboea, and the whole expedition was in danger of breaking up. The prophets demanded a human sacrifice, and Agamemnon gave his own daughter, Iphigenîa. He induced Clytemnestra to send her to him, by the pretext that Achilles had asked for her in marriage.

P. 66, l. 1046, Which led me to the men he hated.]—It made Clytemnestra's crime worse, that her accomplice was the blood-foe.

Pp. 65-68. As elsewhere in Euripides, these two speeches leave the matter undecided. He does not attempt to argue the case out. He gives us a flash of light, as it were, upon Clytemnestra's mind and then upon Electra's. Each believes what she is saying, and neither understands the whole truth. It is clear that Clytemnestra, being left for ten years utterly alone, and having perhaps something of Helen's temperament about her, naturally fell in love with the Lord of a neighbouring castle; and having once committed herself, had no way of saving her life except by killing her husband, and afterwards either killing or keeping strict watch upon Orestes and Electra. Aegisthus, of course, was deliberately plotting to carry out his blood-feud and to win a great kingdom.

P. 72, l. 1156, For the flying heart too fond.]—The text is doubtful, but this seems to be the literal translation, and the reference to Clytemnestra is intelligible enough.

P. 73, l. 1157, The giants' cloud-capped ring.]—The great walls of Mycenae, built by the Cyclôpes; cf. Trojan Women, p. 64, "Where the towers of the giants shine O'er Argos cloudily."

P. 75, l. 1201, Back, back in the wind and rain.]—The only explicit moral judgment of the Chorus; cf. note on l. 878.

P. 77, l. 1225, I touched with my hand thy sword.]—i.e., Electra dropped her own sword in horror, then in a revulsion of feeling laid her hand upon Orestes' sword—out of generosity, that he might not bear his guilt alone.

P. 78, l. 1241, An Argive ship.]—This may have been the ship of Menelaus, which was brought to Argos by Castor and Polydeuces, see l. 1278. Helena 1663. The ships labouring in the "Sicilian sea" (p. 82, l. 1347) must have suggested to the audience the ships of the great expedition against Sicily, then drawing near to its destruction. The Athenian fleet was destroyed early in September 413 B.C.: this play was probably produced in the spring of the same year, at which time the last reinforcements were being sent out.

P. 78, l. 1249.]—Marriage of Pylades and Electra. A good example of the essentially historic nature of Greek tragedy. No one would have invented a marriage between Electra and Pylades for the purposes of this play. It is even a little disturbing. But it is here, because it was a fixed fact in the tradition (cf. Iphigenia in Tauris, l. 915 ff.), and could not be ignored. Doubtless these were people living who claimed descent from Pylades and Electra.

P. 79, l. 1253, Scourge thee as a burning wheel.]—At certain feasts a big wheel soaked in some inflammable resin or tar was set fire to and rolled down a mountain.

P. 79, l. 1258, There is a hill in Athens.]—The great fame of the Areopagus as a tribunal for man-slaying (see Aeschylus' Eumenides) cannot have been due merely to its incorruptibility. Hardly any Athenian tribunal was corruptible. But the Areopagus in very ancient times seems to have superseded the early systems of "blood-feud" or "blood-debt" by a humane and rational system of law, taking account of intention, provocation, and the varying degrees of guilt. The Erinyes, being the old Pelasgian avengers of blood, now superseded, have their dwelling in a cavern underneath the Areopagus.

P. 80, ll. 1276 ff.]—The graves of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra actually existed in Argos (Paus. ii. 16, 7). They form, so to speak, the concrete material fact round which the legend of this play circles (cf. Ridgeway in Hellenic Journal, xxiv. p. xxxix.).

P. 80, l. 1280.]—Helen. The story here adumbrated is taken from Stesichorus, and forms the plot of Euripides' play Helena (cf. Herodotus, ii. 113 ff.).

P. 80, l, 1295, I also, sons of Tyndareus.]—Observe that Electra claims the gods as cousins (cf. p. 22, l. 313), addressing them by the name of their mortal father. The Chorus has called them "sons of Zeus." In the same spirit she faces the gods, complains, and even argues, while Orestes never raises his eyes to them.

P. 80, l. 1300.]—Kêres. The death-spirits that flutter over our heads, as Homer says,

"innumerable, whom no man can fly nor hide from."

P. 82, l. 1329, Yea, our peace is riven by the strange pain of these that die.]—Cf. the attitude of Artemis at the end of the Hippolytus. Sometimes Euripides introduces gods whose peace is not riven, but then they are always hateful. (Cf. Aphrodite in the Hippolytus, Dionysus in the Bacchae, Athena in the Trojan Women.)

P. 82, l. 1336, O faithful unto death.]—This is the last word we hear of Electra, and it is interesting. With all her unlovely qualities it remains true that she was faithful—faithful to the dead and the absent, and to what she looked upon as a fearful duty.

* * * * *

Additional Note on the presence of the Argive women during the plot against the King and Queen. (Cf. especially p. 19, l. 272, These women hear us.)—It would seem to us almost mad to speak so freely before the women. But one must observe: 1. Stasis, or civil enmity, ran very high in Greece, and these women were of the party that hated Aegisthus. 2. There runs all through Euripides a very strong conception of the cohesiveness of women, their secretiveness, and their faithfulness to one another. Medea, Iphigenia, and Creusa, for instance, trust their women friends with secrets involving life and death, and the secrets are kept. On the other hand, when a man—Xuthus in the Ion—tells the Chorus women a secret, they promptly and with great courage betray him. Aristophanes leaves the same impression; and so do many incidents in Greek history. Cf. the murders plotted by the Athenian women (Hdt. v. 87), and both by and against the Lemnian women (Hdt. vi. 138). The subject is a large one, but I would observe: 1. Athenian women were kept as a rule very much together, and apart from men. 2. At the time of the great invasions the women of a community must often have been of different race from the men; and this may have started a tradition of behaviour. 3. Members of a subject (or disaffected) nation have generally this cohesiveness: in Ireland, Poland, and parts of Turkey the details

of a political crime will, it is said, be known to a whole country side, but not a whisper come to the authorities.

Of course the mere mechanical fact that the Chorus had to be present on the stage counts for something. It saved the dramatist trouble to make his heroine confide in the Chorus. But I do not think Euripides would have used this situation so often unless it had seemed to him both true to life and dramatically interesting.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ELECTRA OF EURIPIDES ***

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