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ELECTRA
HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL
TRANSLATED BY
ARTHUR SYMONS



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ELECTRA

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ELECTRA
A TRAGEDY IN ONE ACT
BY
HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL
TRANSLATED BY
ARTHUR SYMONS



NEW YORK
BRENTANO'S
1908

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CLYTEMNESTRA

ELECTRA

CHRYSOthemis

} *Her daughters*

AEGISTHUS

ORESTES

THE FOSTER FATHER OF ORESTES

THE WAITING WOMAN

THE TRAIN BEARER

A YOUNG SERVING MAN

AN OLD SERVING MAN

THE COOK

THE OVERSEER OF THE SERVING WOMEN

THE SERVING WOMEN

ELECTRA

The scene represents the inner court, bounded by the back of the Palace and by low buildings in which the Servants live.

SERVING WOMEN *at the draw-well, in front on the left.* OVERSEERS *among them.*

FIRST SERVING WOMAN, *raising her pitcher*

WHERE does Electra bide?

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

It is her hour,
The hour when she cries out upon her father,
Till all the walls ring with it.

[ELECTRA comes running out of the door of the inner hall, which is already dark. ALL turn towards her. She springs back like a wild beast into its lair, one arm before her face.]

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

Did you see how she stared upon us?

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

She is, as a wild cat.

Spiteful

ELECTRA

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

Just now she lay
And groaned —

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

She always lies and groans like that
When the sun 's low.

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

And then we went too far
And came too close to her.

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

She cannot stand it
If one but merely looks at her.

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

We came
Too close to her. Then she screeched out like a cat
Upon us: "Off, you flies, begone!" she cried.

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

"Muck-flies, begone!"

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

"Settle not on my wounds!"
And struck out at us with a wisp of straw.

ELECTRA

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

“Muck-flies, begone!”

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

“You shall not feed upon
The sweetness of the torment. You shall not snatch
The foam from off my agony.”

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

“Crawl away!”
She cried upon us. “Eat sweet and eat fat,
And sneak to bed, you and your men,” cried she.
And you —

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

I was not idle —

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

Gave her her answer.

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

Yes: “If you ’re hungry,” was my answer to her,
“So do you too”; then leapt she and shot out
A horrid scowl, and crooked her finger at us
Like a big claw, and cried: “I feed,” she cried,
“A vulture in my body!”

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

What did you say?

ELECTRA

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

“That ’s why,” I gave her back, “you always squat
Where carrion ’s to be smelt, and why you scratch
After a long-dead body!”

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

What did she say?

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

She only screamed and cast
Back to her corner.

[*THEY have finished drawing the water.*

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

That the Queen should let
This sort of demon free in house and court
To live there as it likes her!

SECOND SERVING WOMAN

Her own child!

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

Were she my child, by God, I ’d put her soon
Safe under bolt and bar.

FOURTH SERVING WOMAN

Do you not think
They are hard enough on her? Do they not set

ELECTRA

Her platter with the dogs? (*In a low voice.*)
Have you not seen
The master strike her?

FIFTH SERVING WOMAN, *a quite young one,
with a tremulous, sensitive voice*

Surely I will cast
Myself before her, I will kiss her feet.
Is she not a king's daughter, and endures
So sore an outrage! Surely I will anoint
Her feet and I will wipe them with my hair.

OVERSEER

In with you! (*Pushes her.*)

FIFTH SERVING WOMAN

There is nothing in the world
So royal as she is. She lies in rags
Upon the threshold, ay, but there is none (*she
shouts*),
None in the house that can endure to look
Into her eyes.

OVERSEER

In with you! (*Pushes her in through the open door
to L.*)

FIFTH SERVING WOMAN, *caught in the door*

You are not worthy
To breathe the air she breathes. Would I could see

ELECTRA

The lot of you strung up here by the neck
In any dark old granary, for all this
You have done here to Electra!

OVERSEER, *shuts the door and sets her back
against it*

Do you hear that?
We, to Electra? When they bade her sit
And eat with us, she thrust her bowl away,
She spat upon us, and she called us dogs.

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

Eh! what she said was: there is not any dog
A man could make so abject; and that we
With water, always with fresh water, wash
The eternal blood of murder from the floor.

THIRD SERVING WOMAN

And that we sweep the offence, she said, the offence
That comes again, day by day, night by night,
Into its corner.

FIRST SERVING WOMAN

And our bodies, cried she,
Stiffen to the dirt we are in bondage to.
*[They carry their pitchers into the house
to L.]*

OVERSEER, *who has fastened the door after them*
And if she sees us with our children: nought,
Nought can be so accursed, she cries on us,

ELECTRA

As children, we have littered in this house,
Slipping in blood upon the stairs like dogs.
Did she say this or not?

SERVING WOMEN, *within*

Yes, yes!

ONE, *from within*

They strike me!

[*The OVERSEER goes in.*

[*ELECTRA comes out of the house. She is alone with the red flickerings of light which fall through the branches of the fig-trees and drop like blood-stains on the ground and on the walls.*

ELECTRA

Alone! Woe's me, alone! My father gone,
Thrust down in his cold pit. (*Towards the ground.*)

Where are you, father? Have you not the strength
To lift your face and look on me again?

It is the hour, father, it is our hour;

The hour when these two slaughtered you, your wife
And he who lay in the same bed with her,

Your kingly bed. They struck you in your bath,

Dead: and your blood ran over both your eyes,

And all the bed steamed with the blood; then he,

The coward, took you by your shoulders, dragged
you

ELECTRA

Out of the room, head foremost, and both legs
After it trailing; and your eyes, wide open,
Staring behind them, saw into the house.
Thus you return, and set (*she sees him*) foot before
foot,

And suddenly you are here, with both your eyes
Wide open, and a royal diadem
Of purple is about your brow, and feeds
Upon the open wound there. Father! I will
See you: O, leave me not to-day alone,
Were it no more than yesterday, come back,
A shadow in yonder corner, to your child!
Father, your day will come. Time is cast down
By the sure stars, so surely shall the blood
Out of a hundred throats cast down your grave
As from a pitcher spilt upon the ground
It streams out of the shackled murderers
And round the naked bodies of their helpers,
Like marble pitchers, all, women and men;
And in one wave, in one wide swollen stream,
Shall their life's life gush out of them; and we
Will slaughter your horses for you and gather them
About your grave, and they shall snuff up death
And neigh in the wind of death, and die; and we
Will slaughter the dogs for you, because the dogs
Are litter of the litter of that pack
That hunted with you, and would lick your feet
And you would cast them morsels; therefore must
Their blood be shed for you, and we, your blood,
Your son Orestes and your daughters, we
These three, when all is done, and there arises
Canopied purple from your streaming blood,
The sun sucks upward, then we three, your blood,

ELECTRA

Will dance about your grave; and I will lift
Knee after knee above the heap of dead
Step by step higher, and all who see me dance,
Yea, all who see my shadow from afar
Dancing, shall say: Behold how great a king
Here holds high festival of his flesh and blood,
And happy is he about whose mighty grave
His children dance so royal a dance of triumph!

[CHRYSOTHEMIS, *the younger sister,*
stands in the doorway of the inner court.
She looks anxiously at ELECTRA, and calls
softly.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra!

[ELECTRA *turns round, like a night-wan-*
derer, who hears his name called. She stag-
gers. Her eyes look about her as if she saw
nothing as it was. Her face distorts as
she sees the anxious look of her sister.
CHRYSOTHEMIS *stands squeezed in the*
door.

ELECTRA

Ah, the face!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Is my face then
So hateful to you?

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

What do you want? Speak out,
Say it, empty it all, then go away
And leave me.

[CHRYSTHEMIS *puts up her hands as if
to ward off a blow.*

ELECTRA

Why do you lift up your hands?
So lifted up our father both his hands
When the axe fell on them and clove his flesh.
What do you want, daughter of my mother?

CHRYSTHEMIS

They are about to do some dreadful thing.

ELECTRA

Both women?

CHRYSTHEMIS

Who?

ELECTRA

Why, one of them's my mother,
And there's that other woman, the coward one,
The valiant murder-monger, why, Ægisthus,
The doer of heroic deeds, in bed,
What are they going to do?

ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS

To shut you up
In a dark tower, where you would never see
The light of sun or moon.

[ELECTRA *laughs*.
They will, I know,

For I have heard it.

ELECTRA

I seem to have heard it too.
Was it not said when the last dish went round
At table? Then he is wont to raise his voice
And brag about his bravery, and, I wager,
'T is good for his digestion.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Not at table
He did not brag about it. He and she
Spoke of it all alone.

ELECTRA

Alone? how then
Could you have heard it?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

At the door, Electra.

ELECTRA

Let there be no doors opened in this house!
Laboring breath, pah! and the gasp of
strangling:

ELECTRA

There's nothing in these rooms but that. Let be
The door, when there's a groaning heard within.
It cannot be that they are always killing,
Sometimes they are alone together, even!
Open no doors here. Do not prowl about.
Sit on the ground, like me, and wish for death.
And judgment upon her and upon him.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I cannot sit and stare into the dark,
As you do; there is a fire within my breast
That drives me all about the house, and not
A room is tolerable to me, but I from one
To another threshold must go up, go down;
Each seems to call to me, and as I come,
An empty room stares back at me. I have
So sore a torment in me that my knees
Shake under me by day and night, my throat
Is tightened and I cannot even weep.
All turns to stone. Sister, have pity!

ELECTRA

On whom?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

You it is who have welded me to the ground
With iron clamps. If it were not for you
They would have let us out. But for your hate,
Your sleepless and immitigable mind,
That makes them tremble, they would have let us
out,
Out of this prison, sister! I will go out.

ELECTRA

I will not sleep here every night till death,
And I will live before I come to die,
I will bear children, ere my body withers,
And though they mate me with a peasant, yet
I will bear him children, and warm them with my
body

In the cold night when storms are on the hut.
But this will I endure no more, to herd
With menials, being no kin of theirs, shut in
With very pangs of death by day and night.
Do you hear me, sister! Speak!

ELECTRA

Poor creature!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Nay!

Have pity on yourself and me. Who profits,
Electra, from this anguish? Not our father.
Our father is dead. Our brother does not come.
You see that all this time he does not come.
Time graves its token on your face and mine
Day after day, and, there, without, the sun
Rises and sets and women I have known
When they were slender are now big with blessing,
And at the well can scarcely lift their jars;
Then, in a little, their burdens being off,
Come to the well again, and out of them
Runs a sweet draught, and on them sucks and
hangs

A young life, and they see their children grow;
But we sit all alone upon our perch

ELECTRA

Like captive birds, and turn our heads to left
And right, and no man comes, no brother comes,
No news of any brother, and no news
Of any news, nothing. Better be dead
Than living and not live. No, no, I am
A woman, and I would have a woman's lot.

ELECTRA

Shame on the thought of it, shame to speak of it!
To be the hollow where the murderer
After the murder takes his rest; to play
The beast that one may give a worse beast pleasure!
She slept with one, ah, and she laid her breast
Across his eyes, and nodded to another
That from behind the bed with axe and net
Crept out.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

You are too horrible, Electra!

ELECTRA

Why am I horrible? Are you such a woman?
You will become one.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Can you not forget?
My head is all a void. I can remember
Nothing out of day until to-morrow.
Sometimes I lie so, then am I again
What I was once, and cannot make out why

ELECTRA

I am no longer young. Where is it all?
This is not water, that runs always past,
This is no thread which on the shuttle flies,
Hither and thither, it is I, yes, I.
I would fain pray some god to set a light
Within my breast that I might find myself
Again within me. Were I but away
How soon would I forget all these bad dreams!

ELECTRA

Forget? what, am I then a beast? Forget?
The beast will fall to sleep, within its mouth
Its prey half eaten; the beast forgets itself
And sets a-chewing while death throttles it;
The beast forgets what came out of its body
And stays its hunger on its young; but I,
I am no beast, and I cannot forget.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

O must my soul forever on this food
Be fed, this food it loathes, it loathes so much
It shudders at the smell of it; this food
It should not ever touch, nor ever know
That there was anything so full of horror;
Not see it with the eyes, not hearken to it.
This terror is too dreadful for men's hearts.
When it draws near to us and takes hold on us,
Then must we flee away into the houses,
Into the vineyards, up into the hills,
And if it follow us into the hills
We must come down and burrow in the houses;

ELECTRA

Not dare abide with it, not be with it
In the same house. I will go, I will go away,
I will conceive and I will bring forth children,
That shall know nothing of it, I will wash
My body in that water, plunge deep, deep
My body in that water, wash all over,
Wash clean both my eye-sockets; they shall not
fear
When they look up into their mother's eyes.

ELECTRA, *scornfully*

When they look up into their mother's eyes!
How will you look our father in the eyes?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Stop!

ELECTRA

May your children, when you have them, do
So unto you as you unto our father.

[CHRYSOTHEMIS *cries out.*

Why do you cry? Get in. Your place is there.
I hear a noise. Is it your wedding-feast
They set in order? I can hear them running.
Why, the whole house is up. They are in birth-
pangs
Or at a murder. They must be at a murder
When they have no dead body for a bed.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Stop! That is past and over.

[22]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Past and over?

They fall to some new matter there within.
Do you think I do not know the sound when bodies
Are trailed upon the stairs, and there is whispering
And wringing out of cloths that drop with blood?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Sister, let us begone from here.

ELECTRA

This time

I will be by, and not as I was then.
I am strong this time. I will cast myself
Upon her, wrest the axe out of her hand,
Swing the axe over her —

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Go, hide yourself,
Lest she should see you. Do not cross her path
To-day. She scatters death in every glance.
She has been dreaming.

*[The noise of many PEOPLE approaching
comes nearer.]*

Go away from here,
Go, they are coming through the corridor.
They are coming by this way. She has been
dreaming;
I know not what, I heard it from her women,
I do not know, sister, if it is true;
They say she has been dreaming of Orestes,

ELECTRA

And that she has been crying in her sleep,
As one cries out being strangled.

ELECTRA

It is I,
I, that have sent him to her. From my breast
I sent the dream to her. I lie and hear
The feet of him who follows her. I hear
His feet go through the room, I hear him lift
The curtain of the bed; crying, she leaps forth,
But he is after her; and down the stairs
Through vault and vault and vault the hunt goes
on.

It is much darker now than night, and much
Darker and much more quiet than the grave;
She pants and staggers in the darkness, yet
He is still after her; he shakes the torch
On this side and on that side of the axe.
And I am like a hound upon her heels;
And if she seeks a hole I spring upon her
Sideways, and so we drive her on and on
Till a wall shuts upon us, and there, deep
In that dense darkness (yet I see him there,
A shadow, and his limbs and eyeballs) sits
Our father, and he heeds not, yet it must
Be done; we drive her in before his feet;
Then falls the axe.

*[Torches and FIGURES fill the corridor to
L. of door.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS

They are here already, and she drives her women
Before her, all with torches, and they drag

ELECTRA

Beasts with them and the sacrificial knife.
She is most deadly, sister, when she trembles,
As she does now. O do not cross her path
For this one day, only for this one hour!

ELECTRA

I have a mind to speak now with my mother
As I have never spoken.

[Against the brightly lighted corridor shuffles and clatters a hurrying PROCESSION. There is a tugging and hauling of beasts, a smothered chiding, a quickly stifled cry, the swish of a whip, a pulling back and staggering forward.]

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I will not hear it.

[She goes in through the door of the court.]

[CLYTEMNESTRA appears in the wide window. In the glare of the torches her sallow and bloated face looks whiter above her scarlet dress. She leans on her WAITING WOMAN, who is dressed in dark violet, and on an ivory staff incrustated with precious stones. A yellow FIGURE with dark hair combed back, like an Egyptian, and a smooth face like an erect snake, bears her train. The QUEEN is bedecked all over with precious stones and talismans. Her arms are covered by bracelets, her fingers glitter with rings. Her eyelids seem unnaturally heavy, and she seems to keep them

ELECTRA

open with a great effort. ELECTRA stands rigid and still, her face turned towards the window. CLYTEMNESTRA suddenly opens her eyes and, trembling with anger, goes to the window and points with her staff at ELECTRA.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *at the window*

What do you want? See it now, how it rears
Its swollen neck and darts its tongue at me!
See what I have let loose in my own house.
If she could only kill me with her eyes!
O Gods, why do ye weigh on me so sore,
Why do ye waste me so intolerably?
Why must my strength be sacrificed in me? Why
Is this my living body like a field
Wasted with weeds, and nettles grow in it,
And I have not the strength to pluck them up?
Why is this done to me, immortal gods?

ELECTRA

The gods! but are you not yourself a goddess?
You are as they are.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Do you understand
What she is saying?

WAITING WOMAN

That you also are of
The seed of gods.

ELECTRA

TRAIN BEARER, *whispers*

She meant it knavishly.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *dropping her heavy eyelids*

It sounds familiar, and like a thing
Forgotten long ago. She knows me well,
Yet what she harbors in her no man knows.

[*The WAITING WOMAN and TRAIN
BEARER whisper together.*]

ELECTRA

You are yourself no longer. Reptiles hang
Upon you, what they hiss into your ear
Sunders your thought within you, and you fall
Into an ecstasy, and always now
You are as in a dream.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I will go down.
Leave me, for I will speak with her. To-day
She is not so curst. She speaks like a physician.
The hours have all things mortal in their hand.
In everything one aspect may be found
Bearable even in things least bearable.

[*She leaves the window and comes to the
door, the WAITING WOMAN by her side,
the TRAIN BEARER behind her, torches be-
hind them.*]

(*From the threshold.*) Why did you call me a
goddess? Did you say it

ELECTRA

In malice? Have a care. This day may be
The last when you shall ever see the light
Of day and breathe in freely the free air.

ELECTRA

If you are not a goddess, of a truth,
Who are the gods? There is nothing in the world
That fills me with such shuddering as to think
That body the dark door through which I crept
Into the light of the world. Have I then lain
Naked upon that lap, and to that breast
Have you indeed lifted me? Then have I
Crept from my father's grave, and played about
In winding-sheets upon his judgment-place.
Then you are a colossus, from whose hands
Of brass I never issued. You have me hard
Upon the bridle and you fetter me
To what you will. You have cast up like the sea
A father and a sister and a life.
And you have sucked down under like a sea
A father and a sister and a life.
I know not how, unless you died before me,
I should have leave to die.

CLYTEMNESTRA

So much do you honor me? Is there yet a little
Respect in you?

ELECTRA

Much, much! What troubles you
Troubles me likewise. Look you, why it irks me
To see Ægisthus, who is your husband, wear

ELECTRA

The cloak my father, who is dead, you know,
And was the late king, wore. It irks me truly;
I find it sits not well on him; it is
Too wide across the shoulders.

WAITING WOMAN

The thing she says
Is not the thing she means.

TRAIN BEARER

False, every word.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *to them scornfully*

I will hear nothing. That which comes from you
Is but Ægisthus' breath. I will not check
At all things. And if you will say to me
What pleases me to hear, then will I hearken
To what you say. The very truth of things
That no man brings to light. There is on earth
No man that knoweth how deep-hid a thing
The truth is. Are there not in prison those
That call Ægisthus murder-monger, me
Murderess? And if I wake you in the night
Do you not each give answer otherwise?
Do you not cry out that my lids are swollen
And I am sick within, and that all this
Is but that I am sick? And then you whimper
Into my other ear that you have seen
Demons with long, sharp-pointed beaks suck out
My blood, and point the marks out on my body.

ELECTRA

And I, believing you, slay, slay, and slay
Sacrifice upon sacrifice? Do you not
Tear me to death with sayings and answerings?
I will hear no more! This is truth, this is falsehood.
If any should say pleasant things to me,
Were it my daughter even, were it she there,
Then will I from my soul take off all veils,
And let the stir of the soft airs come in,
Come whence it may come, as sick people do
Who sit about a pool at eventide,
Letting the cool air come upon their bodies,
Fevered and foul, thinking about nothing
Except about the comfort. So will I
Begin now to make shift for my own self.
Leave me alone with her.

[She points the way into the house with her stick, impatiently, to her WAITING WOMEN and TRAIN BEARERS. THEY disappear lingeringly through the doorway.

[The torches disappear with them; and only a faint light falls from inside the house across the inner court, and casts bars of shadow over the figures of the TWO WOMEN.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *after a pause*

I cannot sleep at night. Do you not know
Some remedy for dreams?

ELECTRA, *coming nearer*

I, mother, I?

ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Have you no other word to comfort me?
Unloose your tongue. Ah, yes, I dream. We age,
And as we age we dream. But that indeed
Can be cast out. Why do you stand in the dark?
We must make profit of the powers in us
That now lie scattered. There are certain rites,
There must be proper rites for everything.
On how one utters a mere word or sentence
Much may depend. And also on the hour,
And whether one be full or fasting. Much
Has come to pass because at the wrong hour
One stepped into the bath.

ELECTRA

Are you thinking then
About my father?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Therefore I am so
Behung with precious stones. In every stone
There lives for sure a virtue. But one needs
To know the uses of them. If you would,
I know that you could tell me what would aid me.

ELECTRA

I, mother, I?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Yes, you! For you are wise,
Your head is sound and strong. You talk about
Old things as if they happened yesterday.
But I decay. I think. But one thought heaps

ELECTRA

Itself upon another. And if I open
My mouth, then cries Ægisthus, and what he cries
Is hateful to me, and I would fain rise up,
Be stronger than his words, and I find nothing.
I find nothing! I do not even know
Whether it was to-day he said that thing
Which shook my soul with fury, or long ago.
Then I grow dizzy and know nothing more,
Not even who I am; and 't is that terror
That hailes me living into the abyss.
And he, Ægisthus, mocks me, and I find
Nothing. I find not some unspeakable thing
To strike him silent and as pale as I
Staring into the fire. But you have words.
You could speak many things to bring me help.
What if a word be nothing but a word?
What is a breath? And yet there creeps a some-
thing
Over me as I lie, 'twixt night and day,
With open eyes, and it is not a word,
And not an agony, it does not crush,
It does not choke me, but it lets me lie
As I am lying, and beside me there
Ægisthus lies and there — the curtain is.
And all things look at me as if it were
Out of eternity in to eternity,
And it is nothing, not a nightmare even,
And yet it is so terrible that my soul
Hungers to hang itself, and every nerve
Pants after death; and yet I live the while
And am not even sick; look on me now:
Am I like a sick woman? Can one perish
Living, like a foul carcase, and decay,

ELECTRA

Not being sick in anyway? Decay —
With waking mind, like garments moths have
eaten?

And then I sleep, and then I dream, and dream
That all the marrow is molten in my bones
And still I stagger on, and not the tenth
Of an hour's running water has run out,
And that which grins in underneath the curtain
Is not yet the dun morning, no, but always
Only the torch before the door, that starts
Horribly like a living thing, and lies
In wait against my sleep.

I know not who they are that thus oppress me,
And whether over us or under us

Be their abode; but when I see you stand

As now you stand before me, I can but think
That you are also in the game with them.

Only who are you then? You have not a word
To say, now when one listens to you. How
Shall it be help or hurt to any man

Whether you live or die? Why do you look
So hard upon me? I will not have you look
Upon me so. These dreams must have an end.
Whatever demon has been sent, shall leave us
When the right blood is spilt.

ELECTRA

Whatever demon?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Though I should let the blood of every beast
That creeps and flies, and in the steam of the
blood

ELECTRA

Stand up and go to sleep there as folk do
In ultimate Thule in a blood-red mist,
Yet will I dream no more.

ELECTRA

When there shall fall
Under the axe the right blood-offering
Then you shall dream no more.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *coming nearer*

Ah, then you know —
With what horned beast —

ELECTRA

With an unhorned beast.

CLYTEMNESTRA

That lies within there bound?

ELECTRA

No, it goes free.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *eagerly*

And with what rites?

ELECTRA

Marvellous rites, that ask
A strict observance.

ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Speak them!

ELECTRA

Can you not

Divine them?

CLYTEMNESTRA

No, and therefore you I ask.

The name then of the offering?

ELECTRA

A woman.

CLYTEMNESTRA, *eagerly*

One of my women? Or a child? A maiden?
A woman that has known men?

ELECTRA

Yes, known men:

That's it!

CLYTEMNESTRA

How then the offering, and what hour,
And where?

ELECTRA

In any place, in any hour
Of day or night.

ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Tell me the rites, and tell me
How they are served. Must I myself —

ELECTRA

This time
You go not to the hunt with net and axe.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who then? Who offers it?

ELECTRA

A man.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Ægisthus?

ELECTRA, *laughs*

I said a man!

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who? Answer. Of the house?
Or must he be a stranger?

ELECTRA, *looking as if absently on the ground*

Yes, yes, a stranger.
But surely of the house.

ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Read me no riddles.

Electra, hear me. You are not so stubborn
To-day, and I am glad of it. When parents
Are hard upon the child, it is the child
That goads them into hardness. No harsh word
Is quite irrevocable, and no mother
If she sleeps ill, but would the rather think
That her child lay in marriage-bed than bonds.

ELECTRA, *to herself*

How different with the child! that fain would think
Her mother dead rather than in her bed.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What are you muttering? I say that there is
nothing
Irrevocable. Do not all things pass
Before our eyes and vanish like a mist?
And we ourselves, we too, we and our deeds,
Deeds! We and deeds! And what mere words
are those!
Am I still she who did it? And if I am?
Done, done! What kind of empty word is this
You cast into my teeth? There stood he, whom
You speak of always, there stood he and there
Stood I and there Ægisthus, and from our eyes
Our glances struck upon each other; yet
Nothing had come to pass, and then there changed
So slowly and so horribly in death
Your father's eyes, still hanging upon mine;

ELECTRA

And it had come to pass ; nothing between !
First it was coming, then it had gone by,
And I had done, between coming and going,
Nothing.

ELECTRA

No, that which lies between, the act,
That did the axe alone.

CLYTEMNESTRA

How you cut in
With words!

ELECTRA

Yet not so fit nor yet so fast
As you axe-thrust on axe-thrust.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I will hear
No more of this. Be silent. If your father
Came to me here this day — as I with you
So would I speak with him. It may well be
That I would shudder, yet it may well be
That I would weep and be as kind to him
As if we were old friends that met together.

ELECTRA, *to herself*

Horrible! she speaks of murder as if it were
A squabble before supper.

ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Tell your sister
She need not run away into the dark
Out of my sight, like any frightened dog.
Tell her to greet me in more friendly wise,
And talk with me in quiet. For in truth
I know not why I should not give you both
In marriage before winter.

ELECTRA

And our brother?
Will you not let our brother come home, mother?

CLYTEMNESTRA

I have forbidden you to speak of him.

ELECTRA

You are afraid of him.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who says it?

ELECTRA

Now you are trembling.

Mother,

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who could be afraid
Of a half-witted fellow?

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

What?

CLYTEMNESTRA

They say
He stammers, lies about among the dogs,
And cannot tell a wild beast from a man.

ELECTRA

The child was sound enough.

CLYTEMNESTRA

They say he has
A wretched dwelling, and the beasts of the yard
For his companions.

ELECTRA

Ah!

CLYTEMNESTRA, *with lowered eyelids*

I sent much gold
And yet more gold that they should use him well,
In all things as the son of a King.

ELECTRA

You lie!
You sent the gold that they might choke him
with it.

ELECTRA

CLYTEMNESTRA

Who told you that?

ELECTRA

I see it in your eyes,
I see by how you tremble that he lives,
And that you think of nothing, day or night,
Except of him, and that your heart dries up
With deathly dread because you know he comes.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Lie not. What 's that to me who bides without
The house? I live here and am mistress. Servants
Enough I have, that watch before the doors
And when I please I set by day and night
Before my chamber door three watchers armed
With open eyes. All this you tell me of
I do not even hear. I do not even
Know of what man you speak. And I shall never
See him again: what is it to me to know
If he be dead or living? In very deed
I have had enough with dreaming of him. Dreams
Are like a sickness, and break down the strength,
And I will live and be the mistress here.
I will not have such seizures of the soul
As send me hither like a pedlar-woman
To blab my nights out to you. I am as good
As sick, and sick folk tattle of their ailments,
That 's all. But now I will be sick no longer.
And I will wring one or another way (*she shakes
her staff at ELECTRA*)

ELECTRA

The right word out of you. You have already
Told me you know the right blood-offering
And the due rites to heal me. Say it not
Free, you shall say it fettered. Say it not
Full, you shall say it fasting. Dreams are things
That we must rid ourselves of. He that suffers
And finds no means of healing for himself
Is nothing but a fool. I will find out
Whose blood it is must flow, that I may sleep.

*ELECTRA, with a leap out of the darkness upon
her, drawing nearer and nearer to her, more
and more menacing*

What blood must flow? Out of your neck, your
neck,
When that is caught into the hunter's noose.
He catches you, yet only in the chase,
Who offers up a sacrifice in sleep?
He hunts you on, he drives you through the house;
And if you turn to right, there stands the bed,
And if you turn to left, there foams the bath
Like blood; the darkness and the torches cast
Black-blood-red nets, the death-nets, over you!

*[CLYTEMNESTRA, shaking with speechless
horror, would go into the house. ELEC-
TRA pulls her towards her by her robe.
CLYTEMNESTRA draws back towards the
wall. Her eyes are wide open. Her staff
falls from her trembling hands.*

You would cry out, but the air strangles dead
The unborn cry, and noiseless lets it fall
Upon the ground, as in imagination

ELECTRA

You reach your neck and feel the edge of the blade
Draw near the seat of life. Yet still the blow
Lingers; not yet are all the rites fulfilled.
He draws you by the tresses of your hair,
And all is silent, and your own heart you hear
Knock at your ribs; this time (it widens out
Before you like a dark abyss of years)
This time is given that you may taste and know
What agony is that of shipwrecked men
When their vain cry devours the night of clouds
And death; this time is given that you may envy
All that are chained to prison-walls and cry
In darkness from the bottom of a well
For death as for deliverance; because you,
You lie imprisoned in yourself as in
The glowing belly of a brazen beast,
And, even as now, cannot cry out. And I
Stand there beside you, and you cannot take
Your eyes from mine, and that which racks you is
That you would read a word upon my face,
A word that there stands silent; and you roll
Your eyes, and you would catch at any thought,
Would have the gods grin down out of the clouds;
The gods, they are at supper, now as when
You slew my father, still they sit at supper,
And still they are deaf to any death-rattle.
Only the half-crazed God of Laughter staggers
In at the door; he thinks you would make sport,
You and Ægisthus, at the shepherd's hour;
But when he sees his error, of a sudden
He laughs, loud-shrilling, and is gone in a trice.
Then have you had your fill; then on your heart
The gall drops bitter, then at the last gasp

ELECTRA

You would call up one word, any mere word,
A word only, instead of bloody tears
The beast is not denied in death; and there
I stand before you, and you read too late
With rigid eyes the word unspeakable
Written upon my face; because my face
Is mingled of your features and my father's,
And with my silent presence have I brought
To nought your last word, for your soul indeed
Has hanged itself within its self-slung noose,
And now the axe falls crashing, and I stand
Before you and I see you die at last.
Then do you dream no more, then do I need
To dream no more; whoever is living then,
Let him rejoice because he is alive!

[They stand eye to eye, ELECTRA in the wildest intoxication, CLYTEMNESTRA breathing horribly with fear. At this moment the entrance hall is lighted up, and the WAITING WOMAN comes out running. She whispers something in CLYTEMNESTRA'S ear. At first she seems not to understand. Gradually she comes to herself. She beckons: lights! SERVING WOMEN with torches come out and station themselves behind CLYTEMNESTRA. She beckons more lights! More come out and station themselves behind her, so that the court is full of light, and a red-gold glare floods the walls. Now the features of CLYTEMNESTRA slowly change, and their shuddering tension relaxes in an evil triumph. She lets the message be whispered to her

ELECTRA

again, without taking her eyes off ELECTRA. Then the WAITING WOMAN lifts her staff, and, leaning on both, hurriedly, eagerly, catching up her robe from the step, she runs into the house. The SERVING WOMEN with the lights follow her, as if pursued.

ELECTRA, *during this*

What are they saying to her? Why does she rejoice?

O my head! I can think of nothing. What can give the woman pleasure?

[CHRYSOTHEMIS *comes running to the door of the court, crying aloud like a wounded animal.*

Chrysothemis!

Quick! Your help! Tell me something in the world

That can give some one pleasure!

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *shrieking*

Orestes! Orestes!

Is dead.

ELECTRA, *motions her away, as if beside herself*
Be silent!!

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *close to her*

Orestes is dead.

[ELECTRA *moves her lips.*

ELECTRA

I came out, they all know it already. All
Are standing round, and they all know it already.
Only not we.

ELECTRA

No one knows it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

All know it.

ELECTRA

No one can know it, for it is not true.

[CHRYSOTHEMIS *flings herself on the
ground.*

(*Raising her.*) It is not true! I tell you so; I
tell you
It is not true.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

The strangers stood beside the wall, the strangers
Sent to bring tidings of it; there are two,
An old man and a young man. They have told it
To all of them already, and they all stand
About them in a circle, and they all
Know it already.

ELECTRA

It is not true.

[46]

ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS

To us

Only they do not tell it, only of us
Does no man think. Dead, Electra, dead!

[A YOUNG SERVING MAN comes hurriedly out of the house, and stumbles over those lying before the threshold.]

YOUNG SERVING MAN

Room there! who hangs about a door like that?
Would one have thought it? Hey there, grooms,
I say!

[The COOK comes from a doorway on R.]

COOK

What is it?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

'T is a groom I split my lungs for,
And lo! when some one crawls out of his kennel
Why, it's the cook!

[An OLD SERVING MAN with a gloomy face, appearing at the door of the court.]

OLD SERVING MAN

What's wanted in the stable?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

Saddling's what's wanted, and as soon as may be.
Do you hear? A nag, a mule, for aught I care
A cow, but quickly.

ELECTRA

OLD SERVING MAN

Who for?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

Why, for him

That orders it. No gapes! For me, but quick!
At once! For me! Trot, trot! For I must out
And off to field to fetch the master home;
I have news for him, great news, weighty enough
To ride a jade of yours to death for it.

[*The OLD SERVING MAN disappears.*]

COOK

What is the news? A word?

YOUNG SERVING MAN

A word, good cook,
Would certainly instruct you little. Also
To put it altogether in one word
All that I know, and all I have to tell
The master, would be difficult: enough
To tell you that the news has newly come
Of matters of the highest moment, news —
The old fossil takes his time to saddle up! —
Which, as a faithful servant of the household
Should give you joy, whether you know 't or not,
It's all one, it should give you joy.

[*Shouting in the hall.*]

A whip,
Rascal! do you think one rides without a whip?
You keep me waiting and not I the nag. (*To the*
COOK, preparing to rush out.)

ELECTRA

Well, in a word, then: the young lad Orestes,
The son of the house, who never was at home,
And thus as good as dead: this he, in short,
Who, so to speak, was dead already, is
Now, so to speak, really and truly dead. (*He
rushes out.*)

[*The COOK, turning to ELECTRA and
CHRYSOTHEMIS, who lie pressed to each
other like one body, which the sobs of
CHRYSOTHEMIS shake, and from which
ELECTRA raises her death-pale silent face.*

COOK

Ah! now I have it! Dogs howl to the moon
When she is at her full; you howl because
For you 't is always new-moon. Dogs, when they
Trouble the peace of the house, are driven out.
Take heed, lest it be so with you.

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *half raising herself*

Dead in a strange land, dead, and in his grave
In a strange land! Struck from his horse, dragged
Along the ground! Ah, and his face, they say,
Not to be known. But that we never saw
His face; for when we think of him we see him
As when he was a child. He was a man.
And did he long for us before he died?
I could not question, there were so many
Standing all round about them. Now, Electra,
We must go in and talk with these two men.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA, to herself

Now must the deed be done by us.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra,

We will go in; there are two of them, one old
And one much younger; when they come to know
That we are the two sisters, the poor sisters,
Then they will tell us all.

ELECTRA

What is there now
That it can profit us to know? We know
That he is dead.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

That they should not have brought us even one
look,
One little lock of hair! As if we were
No longer in the world, now, you and I!

ELECTRA

Therefore must we now show them that we are.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra?

ELECTRA

We! we both must do it.

[50]

ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra?

What,

ELECTRA

Best to-day, and best to-night.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What, sister?

ELECTRA

What? The work that now on us
Falls, because now he cannot come, and that
Which is to do may not remain undone.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What is the work then?

ELECTRA

Now must you and I
Go in and slay the woman and her husband.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Sister, you do not mean our mother?

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Her,
And also him. This thing must now be done
Without delay.

[CHRYSOTHEMIS *remains speechless.*
Be silent. There is nothing
To say, nothing to think, but how? But how
We are to do it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I?

ELECTRA

Yes, you and I.
Who else then? Has our father other children
Hidden here in the house, and will they come
And help us? No. So much at least I know.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Must both of us go in? Both of us two?
And with our both hands?

ELECTRA

Let me look to that.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

If you had even a knife —

ELECTRA

ELECTRA, *contemptuously*

A knife —

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Or even

An axe —

ELECTRA

An axe! The axe wherewith our father —

CHRYSOTHEMIS

You terror! What, you have it?

ELECTRA

I kept it. Now must we make use of it. For our brother

CHRYSOTHEMIS

You, you, Electra! These arms slay Ægisthus?

ELECTRA

First him, then her: first her, then him; no matter.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I am afraid. You are beside yourself.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

They have no man to sleep before their door.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What, murder them in sleep, and then live on?

ELECTRA

The question is of him and not of us.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What can have put this madness in your head?

ELECTRA

A sleeping man is a bound offering.
If these sleep not together I can do it.
But you must come too.

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *thrusting her away*

O Electra!

ELECTRA

You!

For you are strong. (*Close to her.*)

How strong you are! To you
Have virgin nights given strength. How lithe and
slim

Your loins are, you can slip through every cranny,
Creep through the window. Let me feel your arms;
How cool and strong they are! What arms they
are

ELECTRA

I feel when thus you thrust me back with them.
Could you not stifle one with their embrace?
Could you not clasp one to your cool firm breast
With both your arms until one suffocated?
There is such strength about you everywhere.
It streams like cool close water from a rock,
It flows in a great flood with all your hair
Down your strong shoulders.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Let me go.

ELECTRA

No, no!

I hold you, and with my poor wasted arms
I clasp your body, and if you resist
You only draw the knot tighter about you.
I will wind myself about you, I will sink
My roots into you, and ingraft my will
Into your blood.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Let me go! (*Escapes a few steps.*)

ELECTRA, *wildly after her, clinging to her dress*

No!

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra!

Let me go!

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

I will not let you go.
We must so grow together, that the knife
That would cut off your life from mine, must deal
Death to us both, for now are we alone
Together in this world.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra, hear me,
You are so wise, help us to get free away,
Help us to get free.

ELECTRA, *without hearing her*

You are full of strength.
You have sinews like a colt, your feet are slender,
And I can halter you with both my arms:
I feel through all the coolness of your skin
The warm blood flowing, and against my cheek
The down on your young arms: you are as a fruit
The day it ripens. I will be your sister
As I have never been your sister yet!
I will sit beside you in your room
And wait upon your bridegroom, and for him
Will I anoint you, and you like a young swan
Shall plunge into an odorous bath and hide
Your head upon my breast, till he shall draw you
With his strong arms (you glowing like a torch
Through all your veils) into the marriage-bed.

ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *shutting her eyes*

No, sister, no, speak no such words as that
Within this house.

ELECTRA

Yes, I will from this day
Be more than sister to you, I will serve you
And I will be a slave to you. And if
You be in travail I will stand beside
Your bed by day and night, and I will ward
The flies from off you, draw cool water for you:
And if some day there lie upon your bosom
A living thing, half fearful, I will lift it
So high above you that its smile shall fall
Into the deepest and most secret clefts
Of your sad soul, and the last icy horror
Shall melt before that sun and you shall weep
Bright tears.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

O take me out of it! I die,
I die in this house.

ELECTRA, *kneeling before her*

Your mouth is beautiful,
Although it open only to be angry.
Out of your clean, strong mouth there must come
forth
A terrible cry, terrible as the cry
Of the Death goddess, when a man shall lie

ELECTRA

As close to you as I do; when a man
Wakening shall see you standing at his head
Like the Death goddess; when a man shall lie
Bound under you, and so look up at you,
Up at your slender body with his eyes
Rigid and set, as shipwrecked men look up
At the high cliff above them, ere they die.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

What are you saying?

ELECTRA, *rising*

What you have to do
Before you escape this house and me.

[CHRYSOTHEMIS *tries to speak.*

(*Putting her hand over her mouth.*) No way
But this way. And I will not let you go
Till you have sworn to me, mouth upon mouth,
That you will do it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *freeing herself*

Let me go!

ELECTRA, *seizing her again*

Then swear
You will come to-night, when all is still, to the foot
Of the staircase.

ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Let me go!

ELECTRA

Girl, no denial!

There 's not a drop of blood that shall be left
Upon your body; swiftly shall you slip
Out of the bloody garment with clean body
Into the bridal garment.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Let me go!

ELECTRA

Do not be such a coward! That which now
Shakes you with shudderings shall reward you then
With shudderings of rapture, night for night.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I cannot.

ELECTRA

Say that you will come.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I cannot.

ELECTRA

See, see, I lie before you. I kiss your feet.

ELECTRA

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *rushing to the inner door*

I cannot!

ELECTRA, *after her*

Be accursed!

(*To herself with determination.*) Then alone!

[*She begins to dig hurriedly at the wall of the house, beside the threshold, noiselessly, like an animal. She pauses, looks about her, and goes on digging.*

[*ORESTES stands in the door of the court, showing black against the last rays. He comes in. ELECTRA looks at him. He turns slowly, until his glance falls upon her. ELECTRA starts violently and trembles.*

What would you, stranger? What has sent you here

At the hour of dark to spy what others do?

It may be you have something in your mind

You would not any other spied upon.

Therefore leave me in peace. I have a thing

To do here. What is that to you? Go hence,

And let me root about among the earth.

Do you not follow me? or have you then

A mind too curious? I bury nothing

But something I dig up again. And not

The death bones of a little child I buried

A day or two ago. No, my good fellow,

I have given life to nothing, I have nothing

ELECTRA

To kill or bury. If the body of the earth
Have taken anything out of my hands
'T is what I have come forth from, nothing, truly,
That had come forth from me. I dig up something,
And you shall scarcely pass out of this light
Before I have and hug and kiss it over
As if I held in it both my dear brother
And my dear son, and both of them in one.

ORESTES

Have you then nothing dear to you on earth
That thus you scratch a something out of earth
That you may kiss it? Are you quite alone?

ELECTRA

I am no mother, and I have no mother,
No sister am I, and I have no sister,
I lie at the door and yet am not a watch-dog,
I speak, and yet I hold no speech, I live
And live not, have long hair and therewithal
Feel nothing that they say all women feel;
In short, I pray you, go and leave me! Leave me!

ORESTES

I have to wait here.

ELECTRA

Wait?

[*A pause.*

ELECTRA

ORESTES

You are of the house?

One of the maids?

ELECTRA

I serve here in the house.

But what have you to do here? Go your way.

ORESTES

Did I not tell you I have to wait here
Until they call for me?

ELECTRA

The folk within?

You lie. I know the master is from home.
And what should *she* want with you?

ORESTES

I and one
Here with me have an errand to the lady.

[ELECTRA *is silent.*

We are sent to her because we can bear witness
That we have seen her son Orestes die,
Before our eyes, for his own horses killed him.
I was as old as he, and his companion
By day and night; the other, an old man,
Who comes with me, had charge of both of us.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Why is it you I look on? Why must you
Into my poor, sad corner trail yourself,
O herald of misfortune? Can you not
Trumpet your tidings forth where men rejoice?
You live, and he, that was a better man
And nobler thousandfold and thousandfold
Wiser and weightier when he lived, is gone.
Your both eyes stare at me and his are clay;
Your mouth opens and shuts, and his is stopped
With earth. Would I could stop yours with my
curses!

Get you out of my sight.

ORESTES

What would you have?

Here in the house they welcome it with joy.
Let then the dead be dead. Let be Orestes.
Orestes is now dead, and death must come
To all, as to Orestes. He in his life
Joyed over much; and the gods over us
May not endure too clear a sound of joy,
Too loud a rush of wings at evening
They will not suffer, and they seize an arrow
And nail the creature fast to the dim tree
Of his dark fate, that has been long time growing
For him in quiet. Thus had he to die.

ELECTRA

How he can talk to one of Death, this fellow!
As if he had tasted it, and spat it forth.
But I, but I, that lie here and that know

ELECTRA

The child will never come again, but they
That are within, these live now and rejoice
And all their breed shall live on in its hole
And eat and drink and sleep and multiply,
Whilst the child down in his deep pit of clay
Longs for his father, and no father comes.
And only I am here above, and not
A beast in all the forest lives as I do,
So monstrous and so lonely.

ORESTES

Who then are you?

ELECTRA

What's that to you who *I* am? have I asked
Who *you* are?

ORESTES

I can only think one thing;
You are of kindred blood with those who died
With Agamemnon and Orestes?

ELECTRA

Kindred?
I am that blood, that brutishly spilt blood
Of the King Agamemnon. I am called
Electra.

ELECTRA

ORESTES

No!

ELECTRA

Why, he denies it me.

He flouts me and he takes from me my name.
Because I have no father and no brother
I am the laughing-stock of boys, the butt
Of every fool that comes my way, and now
They will not leave me even my name.

ORESTES

Electra

Is younger by ten years than you. Electra
Is tall; her eyes are sad, yet soft, but yours
Are full of blood and hatred. Electra dwells
Apart from men, and all her day goes over
In tending of a grave. Two or three women
She has about her, silent helpers, beasts
Glide shyly round her dwelling, and creep up
Against her garment as she goes.

ELECTRA, *clapping her hands*

True! true!

Tell me more pretty stories of Electra
And I will tell them to her, when — (*with choking
voice*) I see her.

ORESTES

Do I then see her? Do I really see her?
You! (*Hurriedly.*)

Have they let you starve then? Beaten you?

[65]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

Who are you with your many questions?

ORESTES

Tell me!

Tell me! Speak!

ELECTRA

Both! both! both! Queens do not thrive
Fed on the refuse of the kitchen-heap,
And priestesses were never made to bound
Under the lash, and in such short poor rags
Instead of flowing garments. Let my dress be;
You shall not wallow in it with your eyes.

ORESTES

Electra!

What have you done, what have you done with your
nights?

Your eyes are terrible.

ELECTRA, *sullenly*

Go into the house.

I have a sister in there, who may by now
Be ready for the feast.

ORESTES

Electra, hear me!

[66]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

I will not know who you are! you shall come
No nearer to me. I will see no man. (*She cowers
with her face against the wall.*)

ORESTES

Listen! I have no time. Listen, I dare not
Speak loud. Listen to me: Orestes lives.
[ELECTRA *flings herself round.*
Utter no sound. If you but make a movement
You will betray him.

ELECTRA

Is he free? where is he?
You know where he is hidden? he is caught,
And in some corner somewhere waits for death?
I am to see him die, and you are sent
That you may draw my soul as on a rack
Up with a rope, and dash it to the ground.

ORESTES

He is as sound as I am.

ELECTRA

Then deliver him
Before they kill him. Can you not give a sign?
I kiss your feet; give him a sign, a sign!

ELECTRA

I charge you by your father's corpse you run
As swiftly as you can run and bring him forth.
The child would die if he should pass one night
Within this house.

ORESTES

Nay, by my father's corpse,
For this thing came the child into the house
That they this night should die who are to die.

ELECTRA, *struck by his tone*

Who *are* you?

[The gloomy-faced OLD SERVANT comes noiselessly into the court, throws himself down before ORESTES, kisses his feet, rises, looks anxiously round, and goes noiselessly back.]

ELECTRA, *scarcely controlling herself*

O, who *are* you? I am afraid.

ORESTES, *softly*

Do the dogs know me that are in the yard,
And not my sister?

ELECTRA, *cries out*

Orestes! (*Throws herself in his arms and sobs.*)

ELECTRA

ORESTES, *feverishly*

If any man
Has heard you in the house, he holds my life
Within his hand.

ELECTRA, *quite low, quiveringly*

Orestes! no man heard.
O let my eyes look on you! Do not touch me.
Go on your way. I am ashamed before you.
I do not know how you can look at me.
I am nothing but the corpse now of your sister,
My poor child, and I know you shudder at me.
And yet I was the daughter of a King.
I think that I was beautiful; and when
At night before my mirror, I blew out
The lamp, I felt, and with a maiden thrill
My naked body through the heavy night
Shine, as a godly thing immaculate.
I felt myself, as the thin moonbeams wrapt
Me round in their white nakedness, as in
A consecration, and my hair, such hair
As men might tremble at, this hair now soiled
And draggled and brought low: this! See, my
brother,
How I have offered up unto my father
This thrill of soft delight. Do you think if I
Had pleasure of my body, that his sighs
Would not throng on me and his groans not
throng
About my bed? For jealous are the dead,
And he has sent me hatred for a bridegroom,

ELECTRA

Hollow-eyed hatred. And that horrible thing,
Breathing a viperous breath, had I to take
Into my sleepless bed, that it might teach me
All that is done between a man and wife.
The nights, woe's me, the nights when that I
fathomed!

Then was my body cold as ice, yet charred
As if with fire, and burning inwardly.
And when at last, at last I knew it all,
Then I was wise, and then the murderers —
My mother, I mean, and he that is with her —
Could not endure to look into my eyes.
Why do you gaze at me so anxiously?
Speak to me, speak! Why, your whole body
trembles.

ORESTES

My body? Let it tremble. Do you not think
That he would tremble otherwise than this
Could he but guess the way I mean to send him?

ELECTRA

Then you will do it! You will do it alone?
O you poor child, have you no friend with you?

ORESTES

Speak nothing more of it. My foster father
Is with me. Yet the doer shall be I.

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

I have never seen the gods, only I know
They will be with you there, and they will help you.

ORESTES

What the gods are, I know not. Yet I know
That they have laid this deed upon my soul,
And they will spurn me if I shudder at it.

ELECTRA

Then you will do it?

ORESTES

Yes. I must not look
My mother in the eyes before I do it.

ELECTRA

Look upon me, what she has made of me.

[ORESTES *looks at her sadly.*

O child, O child, stealthily have you come,
And speaking of yourself as of one dead,
And yet you are alive!

ORESTES, *softly*

Take heed!

ELECTRA

Who then
Am I that you should cast such loving-looks
Upon me? See, I am nothing. All I was

ELECTRA

I have had to cast away: even that shame
Which is more sweet than all things, and like a mist
Of milky silver round about the moon
Is about every woman, and wards off
Things evil from her soul and her. My shame
I have offered up, and I am even as one
Fallen among thieves, who rend off from my body
Even my last garment. Not without bridal-night
Am I, as other maidens are; I have felt
The pangs of child-bearing; yet have brought
forth

Nothing into the world, and I am now
Become a prophetess perpetually,
And nothing has come forth out of my body
But curses and despair. I have not slept
By night, I have made my bed upon the tower,
Cried in the court, and whined among the dogs.
I have been abhorred, and have seen everything,
I have seen everything as the watchman sees
Upon the tower, and day is night and night
Is day again, and I have had no pleasure
In sun or stars, for all things were to me
As nothing for his sake, for all things were
A token to me, and every day to me
A milestone on the road.

ORESTES

O my sister!

ELECTRA

What will you do?

ELECTRA

ORESTES

Sister, is not our mother

Like you?

ELECTRA, *wildly*

Like me? No, no. But you are not
To look her in the face. When she is dead
We'll look into her face together. Brother,
She cast a white shirt round about our father
And then she struck at that which lay before her
Helpless and without eyesight, and his face
He could not turn to her nor set his arms free—
Do you hear me?—*that* she struck with axe
uplifted
High over him.

ORESTES

Electra!

ELECTRA

What her face is
Her deeds have made it.

ORESTES

I will do the deed,
And I will do it quickly.

ELECTRA

Happy is he
Dares do the deed! The deed is like a bed
On which the soul reposes, like a bed

ELECTRA

Of balsam, where the soul can take its rest,
The soul that is a wound, that is a blight,
A-running and a-burning.

[*The FOSTER FATHER of ORESTES stands
in the door of the inner hall, a strong gray-
beard with flashing eyes.*

Brother, who is this?

FOSTER FATHER, *hastily to them*

Are you both mad? You do not better bridle
Your lips, when now a breath, a noise, a nothing
Might ruin us and our work.

ELECTRA

Who is this man?

ORESTES

You do not know him? If you love me, thank him.
Thank him that I am here. This is Electra.

ELECTRA

You! You! O now it is all real, and all
Safe and fast-knotted! Let me kiss your hands.
I know not if the gods are, I know not
Anything of the gods: therefore the rather
I kiss your hands.

FOSTER FATHER

Be still, be still, Electra.

[74]

ELECTRA

ELECTRA

No, I will make rejoicing over you,
Because you have brought him hither. When I
hated

Then I kept ample silence. Hate is nothing,
It wastes and wastes itself away, and love
Is lesser even than hate, it grasps at all things
And can take hold on nothing, and its hands
Are flames that take no hold on anything;
All thought is nothing, and as the powerless air
Is everything that comes out of the mouth:
Blessed alone is he that does his deed,
Blessed is he who touches him, and digs
The axe out of the earth for him, and holds
The torch for him, and opens the door wide
For him, and he who listens at the door.

FOSTER FATHER, *seizes her roughly and lays
his hand over her mouth*

Silence! (*To ORESTES, precipitately.*)

She waits for you. Her women come
To seek you. There is no man in the house,
Orestes!

[*ORESTES draws himself up, subduing his
dread. The door of the house is lighted
up, and a SERVING WOMAN appears
with a torch; behind her the WAITING
WOMAN. ELECTRA has sprung back, and
stands in the darkness. The WAITING
WOMAN makes obeisance before the TWO
STRANGERS, and signs to them to follow*

ELECTRA

her. The SERVING WOMAN fastens the torch into an iron ring in the door-post. ORESTES and his FOSTER FATHER go in. ORESTES shuts his eyes for a moment, as if dizzy; the FOSTER FATHER is close behind him, they exchange a quick glance.

[The door shuts behind them.

[ELECTRA is left alone in intolerable suspense. She runs to and fro before the door with bowed head, like a wild beast in its cage. Suddenly she stands still and says

ELECTRA

I have not given him the axe.

They have gone in, and I have not given him the axe!

There are no gods in heaven.

[Once more a fearful waiting. There is heard from within, shrilly, the cry of CLYTEMNESTRA. ELECTRA shrieks like a demon.

Strike again!

[A second cry from within. From the SERVANTS' quarters on L. comes CHRYSOTHEMIS and a troop of SERVING WOMEN. ELECTRA stands in the door, her back against it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Something has happened!

ELECTRA

FIRST WAITING WOMAN

She cries out in her sleep

Like that.

SECOND WAITING WOMAN

There must be men within. I hear
The feet of men.

THIRD WAITING WOMAN

They have bolted all the doors.

FOURTH WAITING WOMAN

It is murder, there is murder in the house.

FIRST WAITING WOMAN, *cries out*

O!

ALL

What is it?

FIRST WAITING WOMAN

Don't you see!
There is some one at the door.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

It is Electra. O, it is Electra!

[77]

ELECTRA

SECOND WAITING WOMAN

Why then does n't she speak?

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra, why

Do you not speak?

FIRST WAITING WOMAN

I will go and fetch men. (*Runs out to L.*)

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra,

Open the door.

OTHERS

Let us into the house,

Electra!

[FIRST WAITING WOMAN, coming back
through the door of the court.

FIRST WAITING WOMAN

Back!

[ALL start.

Ægisthus! Back to our quarters,
Quickly. Ægisthus is coming through the court.
If he finds us and finds out what has happened
In the house, he will kill us.

ELECTRA

ALL

Back, quickly, come back!
[ÆGISTHUS at the entrance on R.]

ÆGISTHUS

Is no one here to light me? None of all
The rascals stirring? Shall we never teach
These people manners?

[ELECTRA takes the torch out of the ring,
runs down towards him, and bows before
him.]

(Starting at the indistinct figure in the flickering
light and stepping back.) What is this weird
woman?

I have forbidden any unknown face
To come into my presence.

(Recognizing her, angrily.) What, is it you?
Who bade you come to meet me?

ELECTRA

May I not light you?

ÆGISTHUS

Well, well, this news concerns you more than any.
Where shall I find the strangers who have brought
These tidings of Orestes?

ELECTRA

They are within.
A kindly hostess have they found, and find
Their entertainment with her.

[79]

ELECTRA

ÆGISTHUS

Have they brought
True tidings of his death, tidings that are
Not to be doubted?

ELECTRA

Lord, these tidings are
No hollow words but tokens bodily,
Tokens it is impossible to doubt.

ÆGISTHUS

What have you in your voice, what has come to you
That you will speak to me out of your mouth?
Why do you stagger about there with your light?

ELECTRA

Merely for this, that I have become wise
At last, and turn to them that are the stronger.
Have I your leave to light you?

ÆGISTHUS

To the door.
Why are you dancing? Have a care, there!

*ELECTRA, circling him in a weird dance, and
suddenly making a deep bow to him*

The steps! You'll fall.

Mind,

ELECTRA

ÆGISTHUS

Why is there no light here?

Who are these?

ELECTRA

They are those, Lord, that desire
To wait on you in person. . And I, who have
By my unseasonable and bold approach
Often been irksome to you, now at last
Will learn, at the right moment, to withdraw.

[ÆGISTHUS goes into the house.

*[A short silence. At the same moment
ÆGISTHUS, at a little window on R., tears
away the curtain and cries*

ÆGISTHUS

Help! murder! help your master! murder! murder!
Help! they are murdering me!

*[He is dragged away.
Does no one hear me?*

No one hear me?

[His face appears again at the window.

ELECTRA, *drawing herself up*

Agamemnon hears you!

ÆGISTHUS, *dragged away*

Woe's me!

*[ELECTRA stands back breathing fear-
fully, turned towards the house. The*

ELECTRA

WOMEN *run out wildly.* CHRYSOTHEMIS
among them. Unwittingly they run for-
ward to the door of the outer court. Then
they stop suddenly and turn back.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Electra! Sister! come with us!
Come with us now! Our brother is in the house,
Is it Orestes who has done it?

[*Confusion of VOICES, turmoil without.*

Come!

He is in the outer hall, they are all about him,
They kiss his feet; and all of them that hated
Ægisthus in their hearts have fallen upon
The others, everywhere in all the court
The dead are lying, all who live are drenched
With blood, they wound themselves, they beam,
they all
Embrace each other —

[*Outside the noise increases, the WOMEN
run out. CHRYSOTHEMIS is left alone.
Light from without penetrates within.*

And shout with joy and kindle
A thousand torches. Do you hear? Do you hear?

ELECTRA, *crouching on the threshold*

Do you think I do not hear? Do I not hear
Music within me? The thousands who bear torches
And whose unbounded myriad footsteps make
A hollow rumbling over all the earth,

ELECTRA

All wait upon me, and well I know they wait
That I may lead the dance; and yet I cannot
Because the ocean, the vast manifold
Ocean, lays all its weight on every limb;
I cannot raise myself from under it.

CHRYSOTHEMIS, *almost shrieking with excitement*

Do you not hear, they carry, they carry him
Upon their hands, their faces are all changed,
All eyes, and the old cheeks glisten with tears.
All weep, do you not hear them? — Ah!

[*She runs out.*

[*ELECTRA has raised herself. She steps down from the threshold, her head thrown back like a Mænad. She lifts her knees, stretches out her arms; it is an incredible dance in which she steps forward.*

[*CHRYSOTHEMIS appearing again at the door, behind her torches, a THRONG, faces of MEN and WOMEN.*

Electra!

ELECTRA, *stands still, gazing at her fixedly*

Be silent and dance. Come hither all of you!
Join with me all! I bear the burden of joy,
And I dance before you here. One thing alone
Remains for all who are as happy as we;
To be silent and dance.

[*She does a few more steps of tense triumph, and falls a-heap.* CHRYSOTHEMIS

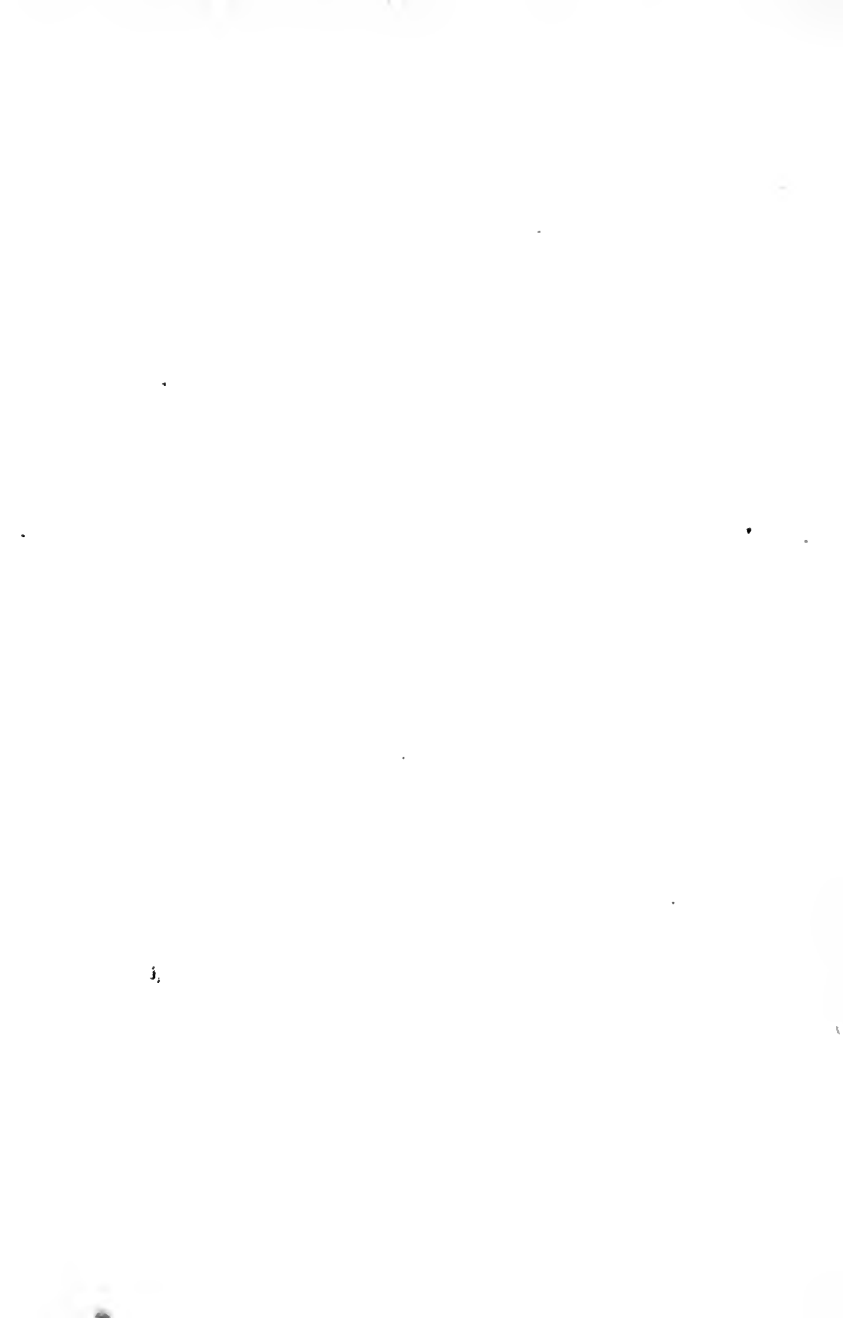
ELECTRA

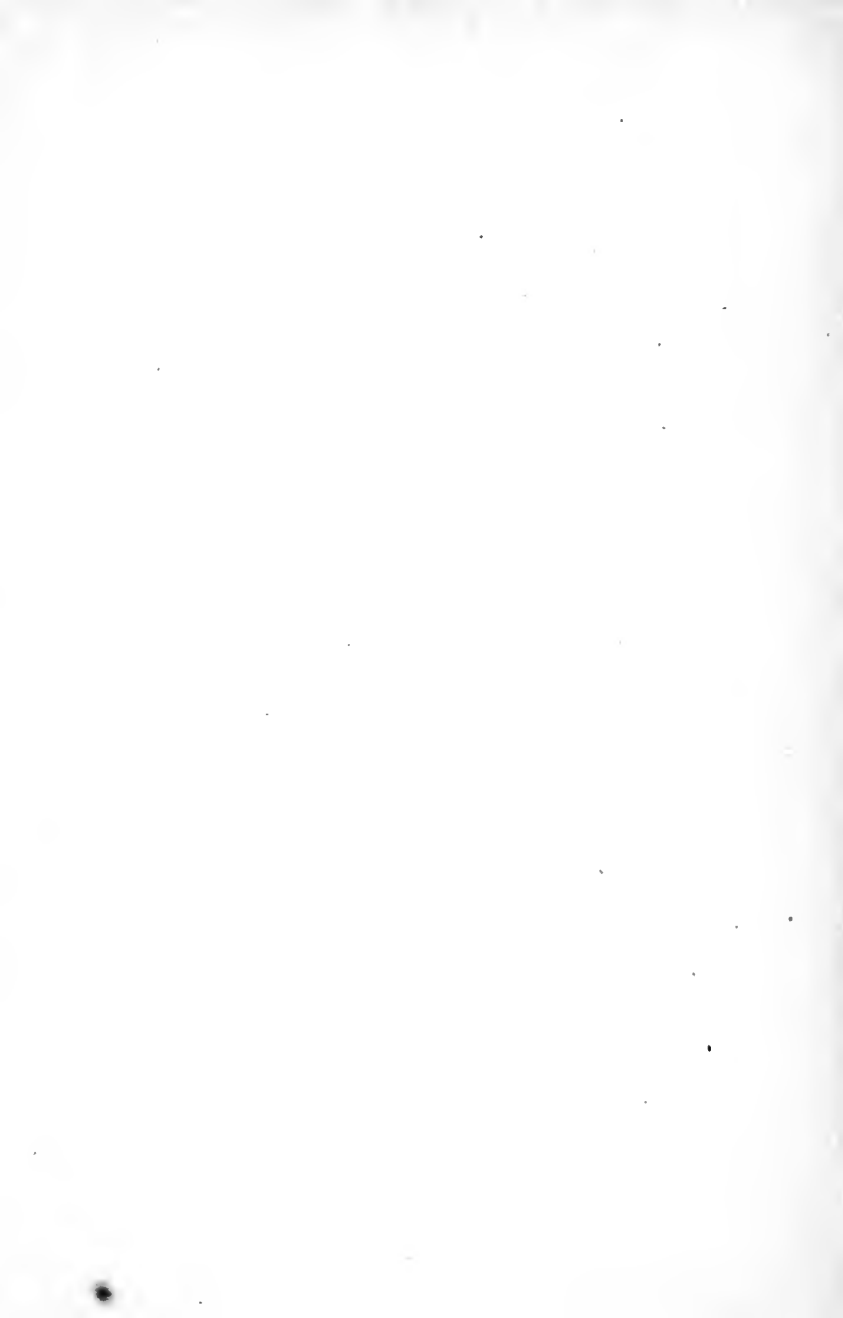
*runs to her. ELECTRA lies motionless.
CHRYSOTHEMIS runs to the door of the
house and knocks.*

CHRYSOTHEMIS

Orestes! Orestes!
[*Silence.*]

CURTAIN





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