Fires, Façades, and Empty Metaphors: Staging Euripides’ *Orestes*

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Introduction

This is something of an unusual thesis. It is the result of interweaving many different strands of inquiry and modes of investigation. The thesis is a performance, a practicum in translation, and a traditional analysis in the mode of classical scholarship. It centers on *Orestes*, a complex play by Euripides that invites exploration from multiple angles; I have chosen to do exactly taking up the challenge of creating a multifaceted study of this play. As a result, the thesis may seem a bit piecemeal; an absolutely cohesive final product would be an inaccurate reflection of the work I did this year. My intention was not to create a hundred-page monograph, but rather to explore the play’s richness and to bring the complexity inherent in the play to my own work as well. The performance itself is central; the three chapters in the written portion are topics that radiate from the performance. The chapters appear in the order of my thought process: first came the traditional classical scholarship, then the translation of a text for a performance context, then the staging.

In the introduction that follows, I first give a broad overview of Greek drama, including its civic and religious contexts, before pivoting to look specifically at Euripides and then finally at the aspects of *Orestes* I sought to bring out in my own production. With all that in mind, the first chapter makes a linguistic argument about the role of the house in the play; I draw a particular contrast between Euripides’ treatment of the house in *Orestes* and Aeschylus’ in his *Oresteia*. The second chapter is a discussion of my translation strategies; I begin with an overview of the choices I made and the effects I sought to create, and then I give an example of my translation strategies in practice by comparing my rendition of a passage to two other translators’ versions. In the third chapter, I discuss the staging of *Orestes*, both in the scant
evidence we have for an ancient staging and in how I sought to reimagine that aspect of the production for the modern stage.

The core of the project was to try and stage an academic argument, to find out whether anything more can be learned about that argument from putting it into practice. This thread connects all three of my chapters, although each chapter also raises other issues I confronted. Chapter One makes the argument that Euripides concretizes the concept of the house, draining an Aeschylean metaphor of its symbolism and leaving it as an empty shell. In Chapter Two, I discuss, among other parts of my translation strategies, how I translated the play in order to best serve and show that linguistic argument. Chapter Three explores how Euripides might have concretized the house in his stagecraft and how I designed my set to show the lack of a substantial interior house.

Finally, I include the script I used for my performance; my conclusion offers a brief discussion of the performance and an evaluation of its success and impact. A video of the performance is available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsfpFskYJTe; a hard copy is also available.

* *

Euripides did not exist in a vacuum. His plays interact with the literary, political, and religious contexts that pervade the dramatic tradition. His voice is challenging; it is difficult to penetrate the extent to which his dialogue reveals his true beliefs or is employed ironically. The subject matter engages simultaneously with contemporary political issues and the broad mythological canon. Euripides manipulates genre, stylistic conventions, and the traditions of staging—to the eternal delight and frustration of scholars. He uses “New Music” in ways that grate on elite critics like Plato and Aristotle, writing virtuoso arias and complex rhythms instead
of simple melodic structures that provide familiar emotional cues for his contemporary audiences. Euripides was a polarizing figure: although he received unrelenting criticism, he was also the darling of the masses, and his plays were among the most popular in antiquity. No play is a more striking example of Euripides’ many innovations than Orestes. But first, a broader context for drama must be established.

The origin of Greek drama at large is complex and little is known for sure. The word for it, τὸ δρᾶμα, comes from the verb δράω, “to do”;¹ in that sense, “drama” simply means a thing that is done. The action of stage business seems to be its defining characteristic, at least at first. The idea of “doing” is related to ritual, and the convention of staged performance likely has roots in religious ritual, the tradition of lyric performance, or both.² By the fifth century, drama had an established context in Athens: the City Dionysia, a festival in honor of the god Dionysus, was the main venue for tragic performance. The City Dionysia relates to an ancient festival, the Rural Dionysia, that might not be specifically related to drama, and whose rituals are unknown. The City Dionysia started perhaps in the late sixth century but became the premier venue for dramatic performance at Athens.³ Playwrights would compete for prizes, entering four plays as a unit: a trilogy of tragedies followed by a more lighthearted, ironic, or bizarre satyr play. Euripides and other fifth-century playwrights participated in this tradition, dominated by famous winners such as Aeschylus. Euripides, although he is now considered one of the three great tragedians, won first prize only five times, including once posthumously. But in spite of their mixed critical

¹ LSJ s.v. δρᾶμα; δράω
² For an overview of the ritual origins of drama, see Gregory Nagy, “Introduction and Discussion,” in Csapo and Miller, eds., The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond, 121-125.
³ David Wiles, Greek Theatre Performance, 29-30 provides an overview of the ritual history leading to the establishment of the dramatic tradition at Athens; Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, The Dramatic Festivals of Athens, offers a much more detailed and technical account.
reception, his plays became hugely popular among the people and were reperformed many times.4

Our understanding of Attic drama is, of course, obscured by the fact that we have so little of it, and no guarantee that our sample is representative. No complete fifth-century tragedies survive that were written by anyone other than Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides. Still, some of the defining features of Attic drama may be gleaned from the works we do have. It is evident, for instance, that part of the work of drama was to shape cultural identity: the festival was state-sponsored, and it encouraged the entire polis to come together and absorb plays that often address themes of power, war, and justice. Perhaps Athens sought to build a unified sense of community among the people at Attica at a time when there was no centralized government; the city may have also wanted to foster discussion and deliberation among citizens at the same time.5

In order to accomplish this, playwrights constructed mythological frames to discuss current events. The audience watched a play about Greece’s mythic past and took away a message applicable to democracy and its strengths and weaknesses. The use of myth to transfer ideology in this way is especially clear in the case of Aeschylus, the earliest of the three great tragedians. His Oresteia trilogy is the context against which Euripides constructs his Orestes, as I will discuss further in the following chapter. Mark Griffith and others have argued for the contributions of Aeschylus toward the democratic ideology; years later, Euripides comes on the scene to complicate matters further.

5 The role of the polis in Athenian drama is highly debated; while the more common view is that drama specifically promoted Athenian democratic ideals (David Wiles, Greek Theatre Performance, 50-54; Rush Rehm, Radical Theatre, 106-108), Rhodes (“Nothing To Do With Democracy”) disagrees, pointing to the wider theatrical tradition outside Athens as evidence that the Athenian tradition was just one subset of the role drama played in ancient Greek society more broadly.
Euripides’ plays were performed in the latter half of the fifth century, from about 438 to 405 BCE. Most of the biographical information that exists on Euripides is conjectural at best, and “based on poetry about and by Euripides,” including such unreliable sources as the jokes of Aristophanes as well as his own plays. Supposedly, he went into exile, hated by the Athenians; died a violent death and was subsequently heroized, and lived a life ultimately “more pathetic than heroic.” In short, he sounds like one of his own characters.

Of the perhaps ninety-two plays Euripides wrote, eighteen are extant. His plays are unusual in content, often featuring surprising twists on the expected story. They are hard to categorize as straightforwardly tragic: many include elements from comedy, romance, and other generic categories. Not all end in misery, but happy endings are scarce, too: several plays, like Orestes, end with an unsatisfying conclusion. As often as they were performed, his plays also garnered a good deal of negative attention from elite critics—fourth-century writers like Plato and Aristotle; Plato describes his preference for dramas that follow the established conventions, while Aristotle specifically critiques Euripides in his Poetics for being ῃ ἀλλα μὴ ἐν ὕμνονομεῖ (“generally not a good manager,” 1453a), and for his treatment of the Chorus (1456a). And yet, as I alluded to above, Euripides became the most popular playwright to perform by the fourth century: his plays held popular appeal, and his style became the height of fashion.

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9 Lefkowitz, “Euripides,” 98.
10 The Suda gives his play count as 92. As for the number of extant plays, Rhesus is now most commonly considered to have been written in the fourth century.
In bringing *Orestes* to the modern stage, I adopted the strategy of thinking in terms of the entire production, as opposed to just translating the text and staging it as a work of literature. I wanted my *Orestes* to be challenging to my audience, but not alienating. In order to strike that balance, I kept some more familiar elements of antiquity in the staging while replacing others with modern devices that do the same work. For instance, I kept the ancient convention of three entrances,\(^{12}\) which is easily executable in modern theater, although they are not the exact same entrances that Euripides would have had at his disposal. In moving the performance indoors, I lost a lot of the natural effects of lighting, especially the sunrise and sunset to which playwrights do refer;\(^{13}\) but in this case I had no choice.\(^{14}\) I used a split-level space in order to achieve the same effect of differing height levels that Euripides achieved with the *skene* roof and the *mechane*. I dressed my actors in Greek-style chitons and used a single-sex cast. In my version, all the actors were female, reversing the ancient convention for cross-dressing characters: instead of the female, it was the male roles that were cross-cast. This choice was partly out of convenience, since the performance was staged at Wellesley, but also because I wanted to keep the element of gendered identity that features prominently in Euripides. I wanted to raise to my audience the recurring questions of whether Euripides was misogynistic or ironic.

I also hoped to raise questions about Euripides’ unique presentation of tragic material: I wanted, like Euripides, to stage a break from convention. I chose not to highlight questions of

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\(^{12}\) Graham Ley (“The Playing Space,” in *The Theatricality of Greek Tragedy*, 3) specifies further: he identifies characters entering or exiting from the side *eisodoi* as “arriving” or “leaving,” while characters entering or exiting through the *skene* are “appearing” or “entering” it.

\(^{13}\) Rush Rehm, *Radical Theatre*, 26-34.

\(^{14}\) Wellesley does have an outdoor theater, but it is not constructed like a Greek theater: there is no differentiation between stage and orchestra, no place for a backdrop or backstage, and the design results in poor acoustics. Especially given my use of music, I could not use such a space. In addition, the unpredictability of the weather might have left my actors freezing or standing in the rain: early April in Massachusetts is not warm enough to be considered chiton weather.
genre because I believed that comic elements would not read well to my audience. Instead of incorporating Euripides’ manipulation and blending of generic categories, I highlighted another aspect of Euripidean drama: the exploration of the human psyche and, in the case of *Orestes*, the role of subjectivity in the interpretation of divine will. I focused on the psychological aspects of the characters as a means of exploring Euripides’ engagement with interiority at large. My production makes it clear that Orestes’ construction of justice is malleable, that he molds the same ill-fitting rhetoric for use against a series of opponents, and that his perceptions do not align with those of anyone else.

Exceptions to this last observation are Electra and Pylades, who suffer from deindividuation: they lose their own identities and values and slowly become mere shadows of Orestes’ own mind. As paler versions of Orestes, especially toward the end of the play, they naturally accord with Orestes’ worldview and act as accomplices to all of his fruitless plots. They lose any sense of an interior identity as they are subsumed under Orestes’ persona. At the same time, I aimed to show the lack of interiority present in the house itself; I see this in the progressively more external focus, the way the play’s language and staging reduce the house to a mere façade and then proceed to dismantle that. Accordingly, one of my goals for the staging was to bring out the irrationality of Orestes’ mind and the physicality of the house, the ways in which every metaphor is empty and every narrator unreliable. These are motifs present in the original, although their precise prominence is difficult to determine.

The Chorus, too, gestures back toward Euripides. They are liminal figures; never truly part of the action, but also too invested to watch passively; they are somewhere between characters and audience. In my staging, the Chorus members functioned as a unit most of the

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15 For a fuller description of psychological aspects of Euripides, see William Arrowsmith, “A Greek Theater of Ideas.”
time, performing coordinated movements and speaking the majority of their lines in unison. Aside from Orestes, the Chorus alone could see the Furies. In order to portray them as liminal and their very reality as questionable, the Chorus wore identical costumes and heavy, mask-like makeup. Their movements gestured toward the original dance-focused meaning of the choral “strophe”: they walked in fluid patterns and often formed circles. They almost could have been stock literary figures rather than real people, or further figments of the characters’ imaginations. This presentation works well for the Euripidean choruses, who were generally much less involved with the central action than earlier choruses had been.\(^\text{16}\)

I took more license with the music. Music was integral to the ancient theater experience; crucially, it performed the work that we moderns expect from lighting and special effects in films; that is, setting the scene and providing emotional cues.\(^\text{17}\) Plato, in his *Republic*, lays out the expectations for the proper uses of the musical modes:\(^\text{18}\) the Ionian mode is calm and genial, while the Dorian is more strident and the Mixolydian can be mournful (398e-399a). In addition, Plato expected that the music should serve to accent the lyrics, rising and falling with the words’ natural accents and conforming to their rhythms (398d). Euripides regularly ignores these rules, opting instead for the showy “New Music” characterized by virtuoso monodies and unusual rhythms that clash with the words. Plato finds that “New Music” grates against his perception of order, but it is equally plausible that this new style simply constructs the formulae for emotional

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\(^\text{18}\) Plato, *Republic*, 398-403. Ancient musical modes differed somewhat from our modern definitions, but the general concept is the same: modes are essentially scales wherein the starting note, and therefore the relationship between the scale degrees, is different in each mode, lending different harmonic possibilities. See Andrew Barker, “Music and Perception,” for a thorough explanation of ancient music theory as applied to Aristoxenus.
cues in a different way, and that Plato, as an elite critic, had political motives to criticize the popular new style.\textsuperscript{19}

In my production, the music was not especially close to how it would have sounded in antiquity, but it did manage to perform the same function. In many ancient theater productions that incorporate musical elements, the music is shrill and alienating: that may sound like what we think ancient music sounded like, but it does not have the same effect on the audience at all. On the other end of the spectrum, some modern adaptations of drama choose the “Broadway musical” format to bring the story into a completely modern context. I chose to aim for a middle ground. I used early instruments: a wooden flute, a lap harp, and a soft drum. I worked closely with a composer\textsuperscript{20} to create the effects I was hoping to achieve. We pushed these simple instruments to their expressive limits, using the major or minor tonality instead of different modes to create emotional cues. The harp underpinned almost the entirety of the performance, while the flute played only at key points such as choral interludes.

These are some of the different strands of thought I sought to weave together in my production. What did that look like in performance? There was a lot going on: historically accurate costumes; a minimalist set that attempts to stage the absence of a house, as I will discuss in Chapter Three; and music acting as a soundtrack, providing an emotional atmosphere and indicating transitions. In these and other ways, I made small but frequent gestures back to Euripides and what an original staging might have been like. But the play as a whole is a profoundly modern interpretation. Staged in a split-level gallery space instead of a conventional theater, with English words substituting for the Greek, my performance was, if not quite an “adaptation,” certainly a reimagining of Euripides for a new context.

\textsuperscript{19} Eric Csapo, “The Politics of New Music.”
\textsuperscript{20} My composer was Laura Staffaroni, Wellesley College class of 2010.
The final aspect of ancient drama I wanted to highlight in my production was the audience. An ancient audience would have been steeped in the mythological background as well as the current events of the time, and there was no easy way to compensate for that. But by focusing on overarching themes, such as the construction of justice and empty metaphors, rather than particulars, I hoped to bring the play to my audience in a personal way that would allow each audience member to draw her own connections without forcing any modern context into the ancient text. Instead of inserting current references, I chose to highlight the dual nature of theater in a more thematic way. For the ancient theater did have a dual function: “It [could] transport the audience into the imaginary world of the past … or it [could] use the interaction between audience and stage to explore the possibilities of fiction.” But I would need to make accommodations for my modern audience, for whom this ancient culture was not their own.

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21 Helene Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, 158-159, identifies three basic approaches, of which I chose the first: stick to the original and allow spectators to draw their own conclusions, rewrite the play to fit modern circumstances, or interweave the ancient and modern material.  
22 Francois Lissarrague, “Visuality and Performance,” 53.
Chapter One: Reifying the δόμος

In the *Frogs*, Aristophanes has Aeschylus and Euripides vying for the title of supreme tragedian at the table of Hades. Produced in 405, shortly after Euripides’ death, the comedy places the two playwrights in direct competition, though they never were in life. However, the juxtaposition indicates that Aeschylus’ works were still very relevant by 405 and that in antiquity, it was certainly reasonable to consider Aeschylus and Euripides in relation to each other. Further, it seemed obvious to Aristophanes that Aeschylus was known for his poetic lines while Euripides depicted more quotidian speech: Aristophanes lampoons Euripides’ strikingly unceremonious approach to dialogue (*Frogs* 950-951), which J. Gregory calls “democratizing” in a fundamental way.¹ In this essay, I examine Euripides’ *Orestes* in terms of its engagement with and manipulation of Aeschylean motifs, specifically that of the house. I argue that Euripides reifies the house, a famously symbolic image in the *Oresteia*, directing emphasis away from the metaphorical significance of the elite family who lives in the house and toward the façade of the literal structure. In doing so, Euripides challenges the relevance of the elite family in the democratic political system, precisely the structure of government Aeschylus presents.

Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* uses the image of the house to refer to elite families, whom he stations as leaders in a democratic society. The *Oresteia*’s major themes have to do with blood guilt and justice, as Agamemnon’s family members murder each other in revenge for previous acts of violence, starting with Clytemnestra’s rage over Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia. The continual violence stops when Orestes is finally acquitted by the court in Athens. In “Brilliant Dynasts,” M. Griffith argues that the *Oresteia* advocates for both the Athenian democratic ideal and the place of a dynastic elite within that democratic system acting as civic

and military leaders for ordinary citizens to emulate: both the democratic system and the elite families who lead it are necessary for a virtuous government. In fact, “the old elite emerge as being essential to the prosperity and very survival of even the more ‘democratic’ communities.”

In order to illustrate the symbiosis between the elite and the masses, Aeschylus places his aristocratic protagonists in democratizing situations such as the trial of Orestes in the *Eumenides*. The trilogy as a whole depicts the desecration of reciprocity in a twisted ritual justification for murder; the elimination of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, who ignored elite behavioral codes of *xenia* and *hetaireia* (“hospitality” and “comradeship” respectively); and the eventual restoration of Orestes to the throne through the Athenian Areopagus, based in part on the relationship of *doryxenia* (“spear-friendship”) between the fathers of Orestes and Athena. By showing the triumph of a democratic institution in conjunction with aristocratic codes, the resolution simultaneously celebrates the Athenian institution of the democracy and long-standing elite traditions of reciprocity that keep the aristocracy in power. I will use Griffith’s model of Aeschylean politics as the ideological basis for my discussion of Euripides’ interaction with Aeschylus in his *Orestes*.

Central to the idea of the dynastic elite is the house, used in Aeschylus as a metonym referring specifically to those great mythological families who ruled over their respective city-states and about whom so much of Attic tragedy is written, such as the “House of Atreus.” The house is the seat of the powerful family and emblematic of the family itself as its ancestral home, passed down through generations as part of the family’s wealth and status. Aeschylus uses the image of the house to great symbolic effect, depicting the corruption of the home with blood in the *Agamemnon*, and then its eventual restoration through the return of Orestes as true monarch.

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2 Mark Griffith, “Brilliant Dynasts,” 64.
by the end of the *Eumenides*. The house represents the family who live within it, and it provides protection for the family as the elite ought to do for the masses. The house also represents interiority: in Aeschylus there is always tension between the visible action outside the home and the hidden events inside, and crossing the border between inside and outside is a potentially transgressive act every time.

In *Orestes*, Euripides employs the myth of the House of Atreus to somewhat different ends than Aeschylus does in his *Oresteia*. Instead of using the myth and the house image to promote a political model that places a dynastic elite at the fore of a democratic system, Euripides breaks down the image and the ideology to reveal its problems. *Orestes* is set after Orestes has killed his mother but before his eventual acquittal at Athens. The plot centers around Orestes’ frantic ploys to evade execution, culminating in a botched attempt on Helen’s life. The play spans only a day and takes place entirely in front of the palace. Euripides engages with many of the same themes of blood guilt, family relationships, and justice that appear in the *Oresteia*, but his approach is radically different: most notably, while the *Oresteia* drives toward its denouement of Orestes’ acquittal and the resolution of cyclical violence, Euripides’ play has no satisfying resolution or political manifesto.

In contrast to Aeschylus’ use of the house, Euripides deconstructs it and empties it of its symbolic meaning, leaving the house as just a structure onstage: a place for his characters to live, and less conventionally, a place to climb on top of and threaten to incinerate. In concretizing the house, focusing on the exterior and its minutia, Euripides detaches it from its metaphorical, Aeschylean meaning and emphasizes the artificiality of the dynastic metaphor. The breakdown of the symbol into a literal object also serves to break down concept the symbol stands for. In concrete terms, I propose that by de-emphasizing the interior and taking the symbolic content,
i.e. the family, out of the house, Euripides is working against the idea of the dynastic elite system, not so much out of any anti-democratic ideology but as a suggestion that the system is no longer functioning correctly in practice.

I begin with Aeschylus. According to Griffith’s analysis, the elite families such as the House of Atreus act as role models for the rest of the community to emulate, leading the democratic government to make good decisions. I argue that the image of the house is tied to the idea of the dynastic elite, sheltering the aristocratic family who take part in that tradition. In the 1673 lines of the Agamemnon, Aeschylus uses the five most common house-words 206 times in total: δῶμος is the most common by far and is the least marked word, appearing whenever there is a general reference to the house. It is more or less interchangeable with δῶμα, although the latter is used less frequently. By contrast, οἶκος is the most marked word and the one most connected to the idea of family, specifically the families of aristocratic leaders. The other marked word is στέγη, which specifically implies the physical house.

All the house-words are distributed fairly evenly through most of the play. As a result, the complete lack of the word οἶκος between Line 961, right before Clytemnestra and Agamemnon exit into the house, and its next use in 1531, after Clytemnestra has revealed the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra but before Aegisthus’ entrance, is highly conspicuous and marked as a strong contrast. It is no coincidence that those intervening lines contain the most serious disrespect of and damage to the dynastic household: Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon inside and subsequent display of his body onstage. The staging of this scene contributes especially to the typically Aeschylean treatment of the house, as I will explore further.

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3 δῶμος is used 112 times, δῶμα 34 times, οἶκος 30 times, μέλαθρον 18 times, and στέγη 12 times.
4 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, s.v. οἶκος, III.
5 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, s.v. στέγη.
later. Because of the close ties between the symbolic house and the family it represents, the absence of the word oĩkoς here highlights in language the desecration of the household onstage.

As the Watchman delivers the Agamemnon’s prologue, opening the entire trilogy, the language of the house is quickly employed to focus attention on the house as an institution and as a metaphor for the elite family, rather than as a physical presence. The scene begins with the Watchman on the roof of the house:⁶ he is κοιμώμενος στέγαις Ἀτρειδῶν ἄγκαθεν (‘lying on my arms at the roof of the Atreids,’⁷ 2-3), waiting to see a beacon indicating Agamemnon’s return. The word στέγη here appears to be a literal description of the roof covering the house rather than a synecdochic reference to the house as a whole, precisely because the Watchman’s task is to catch sight of the beacon. Even here, though, the house has a metaphorical bent: the house is specifically referred to as the στέγαις Ἀτρειδῶν (‘roof of the Atreids’), joining Menelaus and Agamemnon under one shelter. Baldry argues that Aeschylus locates them in the same house in order to emphasize the familial connection between the brothers—the loyalties expected from such a relationship as well as their intertwined fates.⁸

The use of στέγη is then both metaphorical, emphasizing the dynastic obligations between Agamemnon and Menelaus, and literal, describing the physical roof on which the Watchman sits. Yet it is the literal meaning that takes precedence: the word is usually used to refer to a concrete

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⁶ Ernest Metzger, “Clytaemnестra’s Watchman on the Roof,” argues that the Watchman is not literally on the roof but rather guarding around the perimeter of the house: however, if he is looking for a distant sign, as he claims, the high vantage point of the roof makes more sense; see also H. Neitzel, “ἄγκαθεν, der Wächter und der Hund” on the point of the language. C.f. Oliver Taplin, The Stagecraft of Aeschylus 276-277: according to him, the text neither confirms nor denies the Watchman’s positioning, and it makes more sense that he would be on the roof. Eduard Fraenkel II.3 claims that the Watchman wouldn’t have to state explicitly if he were there, as it would be obvious.

⁷ Greek texts are from the Oxford Classical Texts editions; all translations are my own.

structure, whether just the roof or an entire house. The implication here is that Menelaus literally lives in the same house as Agamemnon, not merely that they belong to the same dynasty in the abstract: Aeschylus has relocated Menelaus from Sparta to Argos, openly contradicting Homeric narrative. This more literal employment here provides a contrast to later metaphorical use of the concept of the house. It also serves to connect the house to its symbolic meaning: because both brothers live under one roof, the “House of Atreus” and the house of the Atreids are one and the same. The Watchman, given his position on the roof, draws attention to the physical structure of the house and creates a focalizing moment for it, which serves as a point of reference later; the house-as-family metaphor during the rest of the trilogy derives from this original connection between the house and family in Line 3.

During the rest of the Watchman’s speech, he refers to the house as oἶκος three times (18, 35, 37) and δόμος once (27). All of these references serve to establish the house firmly within the dynastic context. The speech appears to be about the Watchman’s occupation but is really about Clytemnestra; indeed, the frequency of house-words toward the end of the speech link the fortunes of the house to the woman causing the problems for the dynasty. The Watchman’s use of house-words is as follows:

\[\text{κλαίω τότ’ οίκου τοῦδε συμφοράν στένων}
\text{oύχ ώς τὰ πρόσθ’ ἀριστα διαπονομένου. …}
\]

\[\text{Ἀγαμέμνονος γυναίκι σημαίνω τορώς}
\text{εὐνής ἐπαντείλασαν ώς τάχος δόμος}
\text{ἀλλολογήσαν εὐφημίωντα τῇδε λαμπάδι}
\text{ἐπορθίαζειν …}
\]

9 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, s.v. στέγη.
10 J. T. Sheppard’s analysis of the rhetorical construction of his speech makes it clear that the “woman with a man’s will” is the driving force behind the precarious fortunes of the household, about which the Watchman is so anxious (J. T. Sheppard, “The Prelude of the Agamemnon,” 6).
γένοιτο δ’ οὖν μολόντος εὐφιλῆ χέρα
ἂνακτος οἶκων τηδε βαστάσαι χερί.
τὰ δ’ ἄλλα σιγῶ· βοῦς ἐπὶ γλώσσῃ μέγας
βέβηκεν· οἶκος δ’ αὐτός, εἰ φθογγὴν λάβοι,
σαφέστατ’ ἂν λέξειν.

I bewail the misfortune of this house, groaning, since it is not managed in the best way, as it was before…

I indicate clearly to the wife of Agamemnon that she, rising quickly from bed, should lift up a joyful shout for the house, well-omened to the torch…

If only, then, I could clasp the kindly hand of the master of the household, when comes, with this hand of mine. As for the other things, I’ll stay silent: a great ox has trodden on my tongue: and the house itself, if it had a tongue, would speak most clearly.

(Ag. 18-19, 26-29, 34-38)

The Watchman’s statements about the house offer ample ambiguity although his sentiment is clear. The house-words in his speech show the full range of possible meanings: Line 3 shows the most physical aspect, while the meaning of οἶκος is closer to “household” than “house” in the strict sense. The word δόμος, while it can refer to the house itself, is frequently used in tragedy to stand for the family,\(^{11}\) it is also the most common generic house-word used by both Aeschylus and Euripides. As I have demonstrated in my English rendering, the most literal usage is, perhaps oddly, in lines 37-38:\(^{12}\) οἶκος δ’ αὐτός, εἰ φθογγὴν λάβοι, σαφέστατ’ ἂν λέξειν (“and the house itself, if it had a tongue, would speak most clearly”). The use of οἶκος would suggest that it is the figurative entity of “household” that is personified here,\(^{13}\) but yet the most sensible interpretation, perhaps unduly influenced by the modern expression “If walls could talk,” reads

\(^{11}\) Liddell, Scott, and Jones, s.v. δόμος.
\(^{12}\) Eduard Fraenkel II.18 refutes the locative use of δόμοις that appears in many translations; I have accordingly translated it as a dative of interest.
\(^{13}\) οἶκος is also strongly suggestive of the feminine aspect of the household. See Michael Shaw, “The Female Intruder,” for a discussion of the relationship between oikos and the household, and especially its dichotomy with polis; Helene Foley reframes the concept in “The ‘Female Intruder’ Reconsidered,” using several comic examples to demonstrate that both men and women have a stake in both oikos and polis, and that the spheres are interdependent, especially since the institutions have much in common structurally.
οἶκος as an anthropomorphism implicative of the physical house. Still, all of these instances could conceivably take on either a literal or a figurative meaning, and there is no reason to rule out multiple layers of resonance. These words are more flexible than the usually-literal (and relatively uncommon) στέγη, and their deployment illustrates the strong ties between the concept of the home and the dynastic family. In this light, the prominence of the generally less symbolic “roof” at Line 3 seems all the more fitting as a reference point against which the later symbolism can reveal its importance.

To return to Griffith’s argument about politics in the Oresteia, Aeschylus highlights the importance of a dynastic elite within the democratic system; the symbolic importance of the house carries as much weight in the text as the elite does in the Aeschylean ideal democracy. Every mention of the house is deliberate, for the house is the physical manifestation of the dynastic family and every reference to the house includes that layer as part of its meaning. In light of the previous discussion, the lack of οἶκος between 961 and 1531 is significant because it elucidates in language Clytemnestra’s lack of the aristocratic values keeping the elite family politically relevant. For the purposes of this paper, the Aeschylean model as it is laid out in the Agamemnon forms the convention against which Euripides defines his own version of the house.

In Euripides’ Orestes, the house loses its symbolic value as the playwright becomes more and more concrete in his description of it. In the 1695 lines of the Orestes, Euripides uses the five most common house-words 222 times.δόμος is by far the most commonly-used word for the house, which makes sense given its flexible and generic meaning.

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14 δόμος is used 119 times, δῶμα 50 times, οἶκος 25 times, στέγη 15 times, and μέλαθρον 13 times. The distribution of the house-words here is very similar to that of the Agamemnon, with only the last two words switching in rank.
15 In fact, 20 extant tragedies use the word 50 or more times, with 8 of those plays using it more than 100 times. Euripides seems to have a particular affinity for the word: 15 of those 20 plays
In his use of words for the house, then, Euripides differs from Aeschylus not so much in the words he uses but in the context and connotation he applies to the same words. While Aeschylus’s usage of house-words is fairly consistent throughout the Agamemnon, except for the one section of obvious omission, Euripides’ patterns show a noticeable trend over the course of the play. It is significant in both cases: just as with the total lack of ὀἶκος between Agamemnon’s entry into the house and the end of Clytemnestra’s revelation of the corpses, Euripides’ trends reveal changing attitudes toward the house. The difference in Orestes is that usage shows a steady progression of meaning rather than a climactic omission.

Only one character in Orestes, aside from the Chorus who appear especially disjointed from the main action in this play, appeals to the symbolic meaning of the house image repeatedly: Electra. As the “family archivist,” she is the only character seriously interested in her family lineage and dynastic role: she is the one to describe her family history, twice in the play, and she laments her “unmarried and childless” fate multiple times. It is fitting that her discussion of the house would include the same layers of significance that appear in Aeschylus. She is also Orestes’ primary influence in the beginning of the play, acting as his caretaker and even an intermediary with Helen while Orestes sleeps (71-125). She delivers the prologue herself (1-70), mentioning the house five times. The first time, like Aeschylus’ Watchman, she uses στέγη (ἐδοξε δ’ Ἀργεῖ τῶδε μὴθ’ ἡμᾶς στέγαις, μὴ πυρὶ δέχεσθαι, “[the city] in Argos here expects..."

are his. Of course, our sample is skewed since more of his plays are extant, but it is notable that 15 of his extant 18 plays use δόμος 50 or more times, while only 3 of Aeschylus’ extant 7 plays and 2 of Sophocles’ extant 7 do; it may come as no surprise that those Aeschylus plays are the Oresteia trilogy.

16 It is notable too that the Chorus gives two stasimons (316-355 and 807-843) specifically about the fortunes of the household, and in those 75 lines only three house-words appear. 17 I borrow my phrasing here from Froma Zeitlin, “The Closet of Masks,” 60. Zeitlin describes Electra’s function as record-keeper and how she weaves connections between this story and the larger Atreid mythos.
that no one receive us in their home, or at their hearth,” 46-47), and she means it synecdochically as the house-as-edifice, but she is referring to other people’s houses rather than her own. Of the remaining four instances, which refer either to her own house or that of her aunt Helen, one (κλαίουσ’ ἀδελφὴν συμφοράν τε δωμάτων, “mourning her sister and the misfortunes of her house,” 61) most clearly refers to the house-as-dynasty, since it is generally people and not structures who suffer misfortunes. The other three instances are ambiguous, with significances at both the literal and metaphorical levels:

προύπεμψεν ἐς δόμι’ ἡμέτερον...
ἡν γάρ κατ’ οἶκους ἠλιφ’ …
ἀπορον χρῆμα δοστυχόν δόμος.

[Helen] sent forth to our house
[Hermione], whom she left at home
A helpless thing is a troubled house! (Or. 60, 63, 70)

Electra relates that her aunt Helen has come to visit and is reunited with her daughter Hermione, whom she abandoned when she went off to Troy and whom Menelaus gave to Clytemnestra to raise at Argos. It is quite apparent that Euripides has separated the two brothers again, placing Menelaus’ house firmly at Sparta (66). Electra mentions first her own house (ἡμέτερον), then Helen’s at Sparta, then her own again. The close back-and-forth between the two literal houses draws them together conceptually; it reminds us that they are both part of the larger dynastic “house” since each leader is a son of Atreus.

At this point the patterns in Euripides’ word choice become apparent, as well as the differences from Aeschylus’ use of house-words. In this play, the majority of references to the house use the words δόμος or δῶμα. Both suggest the “household” less strongly than οἶκος does, but could in context signify either the literal or the metaphorical house. Over the course

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18 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, s.vv. δόμος, δῶμα.
of the play, they come to stand increasingly for the literal house rather than the metaphorical. The house loses its symbolic value when Pylades replaces Electra as Orestes’ main supporter and instigator (upon his entrance, 729): he, a relative outsider with no stake in the lineage of the house of Atreus, speaks of the house in concrete terms. In contrast to Electra, who speaks ambiguously and uses both the literal and metaphorical senses of “house,” Pylades has no interest in the dynastic family and accordingly does not talk about it. He uses several different words for Orestes’ house (μέλαθρον at 759, δόμος at 1107, οἶκος at 1119, and στέγη at 1127), but in each case the context indicates that he means the physical space of the house: he describes fleeing (759), entering or being in the rooms (1107, 1119), and different parts within the house (1127). The word μέλαθρον most directly means “hall,” and στέγη, as we have seen, means “roof”; Pylades uses these words metonymically to stand for the house as a whole building. In contrast, δόμος and οἶκος both refer to the house as a whole, but their literality is flexible: in the beginning of the play, they were more likely to be used metaphorically, but here Pylades uses them strictly in reference to the edifice. As the literal, physical sense of the house is used with increasing frequency, the metaphorical significance begins to fade into the background.

As the play progresses, house-words increase not only in incidence but also in variety. When the Phrygian slave enters (1368), he brings with him an impressive collection of words relating to the house: in his first five lines he describes how he climbed κεδρωτὰ παστάδων ὑπὲρ τέραμα Δωρικάς τε τριγλύφους (“over the cedar roof of the porch and the Doric triglyphs,” 1371-1372), a highly specific illustration of the roof’s appearance. He uses five descriptive words

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19 Werner Biehl translates τέραμα as “’Haus, bzw. ‘Halle’, ‘Zimmer’” (151), and calls the use of τριγλύφους “unpräzis,” implying his opinion that the Phrygian should emerge through the skene doors, representing the “Luken zwischen den dorischen Triglyphen” rather than on the roof itself, where triglyphs would be quite a precise locator. The mechanics of the Phrygian’s
when another character might have used one (perhaps στέγη might have gotten his central point across), displaying both his Eastern floridness and an unmatched attention to detail. In doing so, he breaks down the house, or the roof in this case, into its constituent parts to emphasize their physicality: surely cedar and triglyphs have little to say about dynasty. For that matter, neither does the Phrygian himself; he is a slave of Helen’s, presumably brought from Troy with her, an outsider to the world of Attic democracy in both his ethnicity and his social standing. Yet he is a pivotal character who uses more house-words than any other character in the play: it is his voice that wins out over Electra’s, echoing Pylades in his literal treatment of the house and ultimately breaking down the house into its parts. It is not coincidental, then, that he is the one to describe the scene of chaos and breakage within the house:

\[
\text{ιαχᾷ δόμων θύρετρα καὶ σταθμοὺς}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{μοχλοῖσιν έκβαλόντες, ἐνθ’ ἐμίμνομεν,} & \\
\text{βοηδρομοῦμεν ἄλλος ἄλλοθεν στέγας,} & \\
\text{ὅ μὲν πέτρους, ὃ δ’ ἀγκύλας,} & \\
\text{ὅ δὲ ξίφος πρόκωπον ἐν χεροῖν ἐχὼν.} & 
\end{align*}
\]

With a shout, we threw open the doors and posts of the house, where we had been standing, with battering rams. We ran shouting from all over the house: some holding rocks, others javelins, and others drawn swords in our hands. (Or. 1472-1477)

As the Phrygian narrates his and his fellow slaves’ attempts to fight off the invaders, one of whom actually owns the house, he mentions the “doors and posts” as well as “battering rams” which he used to destroy parts of the house. He describes their weapons with as much specificity, allowing the audience to imagine the further property damage caused by stones and javelins. Beyond “breaking down” the house by naming its individual parts, he also narrates the activity of breaking apart the house: he and his comrades rupture it from the inside and render it a battlefield more than a house. Certainly it does not, and cannot, perform the sheltering function entrance are a subject of dispute, which I will not detail here. Regardless of his point of entry, the Phrygian shows remarkable precision in his description of the building.
of a house at the present moment. Thus the house as described here by the Phrygian has become the polar opposite of the one described by the Watchman at the beginning of the Agamemnon, whose only job is protection of the people and the concepts inside. This house cannot protect anything, not even itself. What’s more, the house has been completely detached from its symbolic meaning by the time the Phrygian arrives: no suggestion of the aristocratic family appears in his lines.

With their increases in both frequency and variety, the house-words become more concrete as the various characters break down the house into its basic elements and reduce it to the mere sum of its parts. The last usage of οἶκος occurs at line 1220. No word is more imbued with the familial sense of the house, especially in context of the aristocratic family unit; and as long as it is used, some trace of the “household” remains. But in the latter 500 lines of the play, Euripides switches entirely to the more ambiguous δόμος and δῶμα, and the Phrygian uses even more material words for the house and its parts. This is not to say that the sense of “household” or the family is never invoked: indeed, right at the end, Apollo announces that he will take Helen up to the Δίοις μελάθροις (“halls of Zeus,” 1684), indicating that she will leave the Atreid dynasty and rejoin the Olympian one, which is after all her father’s house. However, references to Orestes’ house, the one represented by the skene onstage, become increasingly literal as the dynastic metaphor’s importance wanes. Thus, over the course of the play, Euripides drains the house of its symbolism. Words for the house increase significantly in frequency and in variety as Euripides downplays the figurative use, leaving the multitude of words to stand for nothing more than the edifice itself. Not only does Euripides break down the house itself into its parts, but he

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20 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, s.v. οἶκος, III.
also reveals the dynastic metaphor to be empty. With no substance behind it, the metaphor becomes obsolete.

Language is not the only vehicle for the deconstruction of the house’s symbolism. The symbol also rings hollow in the plot because the dynastic metaphor reveals itself to be defunct: Menelaus does not end up helping Orestes. Thus he breaks the tradition of exchange that forms such a key part of the aristocratic code of behavior. According to that code, Menelaus owes Orestes his support not out of avuncular affection, but because Orestes’ father, Agamemnon, supported Menelaus on the battlefield, and because they are kin. When neither argument is enough to persuade Menelaus (682-707), Orestes feels betrayed (722-724) and ends up plotting to kill Menelaus’ wife in revenge, an even more serious transgression of xenia. Just as the behavior code of the aristocratic family is proven to be meaningless, so too does the house as symbol for the aristocratic family prove to be an empty one. In this way, the events of the plot and the words of the text drive toward the same goal: siphoning the symbolism out of the house and leaving the edifice as a mere shell, an object to be manipulated onstage.

The lack of an interior life in the house indicates a lack of depth to the family metaphor. It is this shift away from the importance of the interior that characterizes the house as devoid of any particular symbolic significance. Just as Euripides de-emphasizes the rooms of the house itself and the activities within in favor of detailing the bits and pieces of the façade, so too does he throw out the symbolic meaning of the “house,” the layers of significance which make up the semantic interior of the concept. The interior is hollow and illusory: the audience is led to believe that something climactic will occur inside, but nothing does and instead the action is transferred to the exterior. In the same way, the symbolic force of the “house” rings hollow and it is the

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physical edifice that assumes greater importance. He reinforces the meaninglessness of the symbol in his characters’ blasé treatment of the house structure itself.

Euripides still has his plot negotiating between two registers, but both of his registers are external, which is to say, visible to the audience. Instead of inside and outside, Euripides places his tension between the main floor, i.e. the stage, and the roof, or the top of the skene. Orestes clambers up to the roof with his hostage and threatens to burn down the palace if he is not heeded. By the time Menelaus arrives on the scene, he sees “a shrine of torches, men on top of the house, and a knife guarding the neck of my daughter” (λαμπάδων ὀρόσελας, δόμων δ’ ἐπ’ ἄκρων τοῦσδε πυρηνομένους, ζίφος δ’ ἐμῆς θυγατρὸς ἐπίφρουρον δέρη, 1573-1575). The roof of the skene is traditionally the domain of the gods, and Orestes’ occupation of the space is an indication that the house has been reduced to pure exterior functionality rather than a symbol for the divine or a protection for the family. After all, the roof provides the best vantage point, as Aeschylus’ Watchman knew well, and it allows Orestes to command attention from Menelaus as he threatens conspicuously to dispatch both Hermione and the house on which he stands. But whereas the Watchman starts on top of the roof before the symbolism of the house is established, Orestes ends on the roof, signaling the symbolism’s final breakdown. The fact that Orestes climbs onto the roof near the end of the play betrays his desperation as well as the general entropy to which the plot has succumbed. The chaos of the plot toward the end is yet another indicator of the lack of symbolism or a driving political agenda; Euripides’ method is more accurately labeled deconstruction of one ideology than advancement of a new one.

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23 I will discuss the staging of the final scene further in Chapter Three.
24 Donald Mastronarde, “Actors on High,” outlines all the instances in drama where a crane might have been used to place a character on the roof, and in tragedy gods outnumber humans roughly four to one in numbers of appearances on the roof.
Accordingly, it follows that the *Orestes* is not concerned with the theoretical dynastic questions that preoccupy Aeschylus in his *Oresteia*. Rather, he portrays an external and spectacle-based façade that symbolizes nothing in particular: its most useful function is as a space for the characters to climb on, which they do with increasing liberty as the play hurtles toward its conclusion. In this way, Euripides is able to steer his audience toward a more literal understanding of the house as a mere edifice with no symbolic undertones and at the same time emphasize the artificiality of the construct by his characters’ rough handling of the edifice. Thus he empties the house of its deeper significance and reduces it to the material form visible onstage. He brings the family outside the house in two ways: literally, by placing all the action onstage, outside the home instead of inside; and figuratively, by dissociating the family from the metaphorical significance of the house. In doing so, and in choosing to highlight the unsymbolic house instead of the symbolic one, he de-emphasizes the role of the elite family in Athenian society. Thus, the empty shell of the house manifests Euripides’ breakdown of the very political construct which Aeschylus championed, the democratic system with elite families at the helm.

Euripides is not so much attacking the institution of democracy as pointing out that the current system is riddled with corruption. As shown in the Messenger’s speech (866-956), Euripides gives a convincing account of both the defensibility of Orestes’ actions, and thus the validity of the dynastic model, and also the systemic corruption preventing the democratic assembly from serving justice effectively. Although this is hardly testimony to any political ideology Euripides may have held personally, there is plenty of evidence in this scene to assert that Euripides simultaneously keeps the Aeschylean democratic ideal and criticizes the corruption stymying its effective practice. It is precisely the elite system of reciprocity that causes the problem: a henchman of Aegisthus sways the crowd with flattery into making an
unjust verdict, while the politically-unconnected farmer who speaks justly is ignored. In showing codes like xenia ineffective at serving justice, Euripides challenges their benefit to society. Then, in pulling the family out of the house, Euripides suggests that the building no longer supports its dynastic inhabitants, and by extension, that the aristocratic family is no longer a relevant political concept. In a war-torn polis, fifty years after the Oresteia, Euripides’ Athens was highly receptive to this play despite derision from elite critics; perhaps in this context, the crumbling house and Orestes’ threat to conflagrate it did not seem so far-fetched after all.
Chapter Two: Translating for the Stage

This chapter is an exploration of the strategies I used when approaching the task of translating a Greek tragedy for the modern American stage. I brought together many intentions: I aimed at a neutral register, with words and syntax that would be manageable for my performers and my audiences to digest. But over time I began to narrow my criteria. I realized that I was privileging the sense of the Greek over fluidity in English. I chose to avoid making the translation especially colloquial, or excessively poetic. In order to illustrate the choices I made, I will use William Arrowsmith’s 1958 and Anne Carson’s 2009 translations as points of comparison with my own work.

One of the most important lessons I have learned about translation from practice is that it is malleable: there are multiple “correct” ways to translate a passage that create vastly different effects. There are several admirable translations of Orestes in existence, but their disparate goals meant that no existing translation was perfectly suited to my specific purposes. Besides, it was important for me to translate the play for myself and to use my own words onstage in order to convey my interpretive perspective. I had to change some details of the language to more accurately reflect what was happening onstage: for just a small example, I chose to have all my actors perform barefoot, so I had the Phrygian refer to his “foreign feet” instead of his shoes. In addition, since my translation was written expressly for performance, I had to make sure the actors did not trip over their lines. This was something we struggled with in the first few weeks of rehearsal, and as a result some lines became significantly simpler in order to help my actors remember them. I preferred a prose translation that kept many of the grammatical particularities of the Greek over a verse translation that lost them in favor of keeping the rhythm or sense of the original. In an ideal situation, I might have been able to write a verse translation that kept the
grammatical particularities, but given that I had only a few months to produce this translation and that the translation was not the sole product of my project, I did not pursue a verse translation.

In the lingo of translation theory, I was choosing what Venuti calls a “foreignizing” translation method.¹ According to Venuti, who takes his basic principles from Schleiermacher, a translation can either be domesticating, “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home,” or foreignizing, “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.”² In other words, domesticating translations adapt the original text to fit the target culture, while foreignizing translations do not and thereby run the risk of alienating readers. His rhetoric is problematic insofar as it places little value on the artistic endeavor of translation and conceptualizes it only as a vehicle for an original. Using the language of “violence,” he identifies domesticating translations as less desirable, possibly even imperialistic,³ because of their tendency to elide the distinction between original and translation, which in turn renders the translator furtively “invisible.” While I disagree with this conclusion, at least insofar as it is a sweeping generalization, the domesticating/foreignizing binary is still a useful conceptualization of translation strategies.

On the spectrum from domesticating to foreignizing, I intended my script to lean toward the foreignizing end. I kept as much of the content and syntax of the Greek as possible in order to give a sense of what the Greek text was trying to accomplish, and in order to be able to apply my linguistic argument to the staged version. At the same time, though, I was translating expressly

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¹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, 15.  
for a performance context. My actors were not trained in ancient Greek, and they had to be able
to say their lines with confidence. In order for the performance to be believable, the lines needed
to spill fluidly from my actors’ lips. Not only did my actors have to understand their lines, but
the lines also needed to flow well in English. To make that happen, I inflicted some “violence”
upon the Greek. I changed the sentence structure of some of the dialogue to make it more
idiomatic. I entered into what Walton might call “collaborating with Euripides.” Walton breaks
down the methods of translating Greek drama into English into seven categories, from literal to
free: mine falls between the third category, “faithful to the original but actable,” and the fourth,
“Intended for… production, with occasional license.” When examined independently of
Venuti’s anti-domesticating rhetoric, my method achieves a balance between retaining the sense
of the original and accommodating the performance at hand.

As a first step, I read the play in Greek several times. Then I produced a strictly literal
translation, which was rather wooden and verbose. From there I shaped those strands of words,
referring back to the Greek as necessary, into lines an actor might deliver, while retaining as
much of the first version as I reasonably could. I handed the actors the second version; we then
discussed the lines that proved impenetrable and adapted the script to the performance. The final
product was more or less consistent in tone, although the more rapid exchanges in the dialogue
tended to sound slightly more colloquial than longer lines and speeches.

In order to demonstrate my thought process, I will contrast my own translation with two
other versions. I will take the Phrygian’s monody as my example: although it is not by any
stretch representative of the whole play in terms of its language, it offers the most room for
interpretation and boasts the widest range of critical reception: for instance, his lines bear the

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4 J. Michael Walton, *Found in Translation*, 44.
brunt of Platonic (and others’) criticism of Euripides’ use of music. Because this scene is a
defining moment in the play, the Phrygian’s monody can be taken as paradigmatic of the play’s
most innovative features, and it is thus an ideal testing ground for my translation strategies. His
last section of text before Orestes bursts on the scene, ostensibly to kill the Phrygian, is
especially rich. In it, he explains the climax of the action that has occurred inside. I examine this
final passage of his description, breaking it into three sections.

With a shout, we threw open the doors and posts of the house, where we had been standing, with battering rams. We ran shouting from all over the house: some holding rocks, others javelins, and others drawn swords in our hands. The vicious Pylades came opposite, like... like Hector, who was Phrygian, or the triple-plumed Ajax, whom I saw once at the gate of Priam. (Wilson)

Oh, we shout, yes!
We batter doors
with iron bars, break down panels
where we are!
Then run, run,
rescue, rescue! Some with stones,
with swords, with spears.
But then!
Pylades came on—ooh, brave!
Hectorlike or Ajax with his helms of triple
(I saw him once in Priampalace). (Arrowsmith)

The doorposts we crack with crowbars and a yell,
and run out into the room pell-mell,
stones and slings and swords in hand
but Pylades comes at us like a monster man. (Carson)
In this segment, the Phrygian describes his own role in the fighting, which began when Orestes and Pylades enter the house: first, they disingenuously supplicate Helen; then Orestes leads her off while Pylades begins to sequester and massacre the slaves. By this point, the slaves have rallied and begun to fight back.

Each translator takes measures to distinguish the Phrygian’s speech from everyone else’s. The Phrygian is foreign, barbarian, effeminate. His monody is a flight of lyric fantasy. His content is somewhat convoluted: for a small example, he mentions the posts “where we had been standing,” as if they were all together, when he previously stated that Pylades had scattered them. The coordinated effort to break back into the house is unexpected from the cowardly Phrygians. On the other hand, his manner of speech reveals the utmost elegance. He is elegant because he is Eastern, because he is a slave of the decadent Helen, and because he represents the “Other” against which “Greeks” can construct and identify their own cultural values. McDonald argues that he is meant to be humorous; perhaps this is the case, with his over-the-top emotions acting as a foil to the Greek ideal of moderation (displayed by no one in this play). Perhaps he was meant to evoke pathos. In any case, he is certainly a Greek caricature of the East, a generic amalgam of stereotypes. Yet he is anything but ordinary.

It is difficult to decide how to render the Phrygian’s speech in English; there are so many angles one could take, among them his slave status, confusion, grammatical parataxis, stylistic lyricism, over-the-top stereotypical attributes, grace and delicacy, and musical virtuosity. Each translator here has taken a different approach, with vastly different results. In each case, however, the Phrygian stands out. None of the translations perfectly captures all the aspects of the original: Arrowsmith privileges his slave status and his confusion, Carson privileges style,

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6 Marianne McDonald, *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy*, 132.
and I privilege grammar. I chose grammar because for the play as a whole, it was most important to convey as much of the text as possible; for instance, I did not cut a single reference to a house-word, in order to best stage my linguistic argument. I wanted to maintain the same priority that I gave to content throughout the translation for the sake of continuity. My choice gave the actor portraying the Phrygian a relative freedom, a blank canvas with a lot of time to develop the character emotionally.

I translated the Phrygian’s speech, along with the rest of the play, into prose. However, I did want to distinguish it somehow. I thought that any overt rhyme or rhythmical pattern would be over-the-top, so I chose instead to keep more of the Greek syntax here than I did in other parts of the play. Whereas I translated the dialogue somewhat idiomatically into English, while keeping as many of the words as I could, here I also kept the confusingly paratactic structures, the references to ancient Greek places, and a slightly more archaic turn of phrase. The resultant speech was a touch loftier than the rest of the play, giving the Phrygian an air of grace and perhaps erudition, but it was also more nervously repetitive and overall harder to follow, which made sense for the character and in the context of the Chorus’ interjected questions.

As I alluded to above, the Phrygian embodies a particular Greek stereotype, applied broadly, about Eastern people. As a character, he drips with luxury, dressed in purple and spending his time fanning Helen with feathers. Although he is a slave, still he represents the perceived softness and indulgence of the East. As much as possible, I wanted to keep the Greek particulars Greek. I did not feel the need to “translate” the Greeks’ attitudes about women, since then the power dynamic between Orestes and Electra would have no context, nor did I desire to “translate” ancient slavery to a more modern equivalent. In his 1958 translation of *Orestes*, William Arrowsmith does exactly that, with results that are questionable at best, offensive at
worst: he makes the Phrygian into an African-American slave stock character. His Phrygian is cowering and unable to conjugate his verbs. This representation is nothing like the elegant lyricism of the Greek: it is, in a word, simple, while Euripides’ is anything but. Moreover, the overt racism makes this rendition completely unusable for a modern performance. So I chose not to “translate” the stereotype. I did not want my translation to make the Greeks come across as less racist than they were, with respect to the Eastern civilizations they interacted with; but I had no need to find a more recent equivalent to the ancient relationship between the Attic audience and the Phrygian slave in order to convey his slave status.

φασ- 
γάνων δ᾽ ἄκμας συνήψαμεν.
tότε δὴ τότε διαπρεπεῖς 
ἐγένοντο Φρύγες δὸν Ἀρεος ἀλκάν 
 homosexz  Ἑλλάδος ἐγενόμεθ’ αἰχμάς, 
ὁ μὲν οἰχόμενος φυγάς, ὁ δὲ νέκυς ὄν, 
ὁ δὲ τραύμα φέρων, ὁ δὲ λισσόμενος, 
θανάτου προβολάν: 
νεκροὶ δ᾽ ἔπιπτον, οἳ δ᾽ ἐμελλόν, οἳ δ᾽ ἐκεῖνθ’: 
ὑπὸ σκότον δ᾽ ἐφεύγομεν. 
ἐμολε δ᾽ ἀ τάλαιν Ἐρμίόνα δόμους 
ἐπὶ φόνῳ χαμαιπετεὶ ματρός ὅ 
νιν ἔτεκεν τλάμον. (1482-1492)

We joined our swords in contest. But it was clear how we Phrygians were inferior in strength to Hellas yet again, for we are lesser in Ares. One fled, one dead, one wounded, that one begging for death: corpses were falling, some about to die, some already gone. We fled through the darkness. Then poor Hermione came into the house, just as her mother was falling to the ground. (Wilson)

Steel on steel together meet, 
but soon we see 
Trojan men no match for Greek. 
Ai aî, 
one run, one dead, 
wounded this and begging that. 
So quick, quick, run, hide! 
Falling some, dying others, 
staggering is one with wounds.
And then, oh!
Hermione came in
as mother Helen sank to die (Arrowsmith)

Then we join swords and things get embarrassing
(we’re no match for Greeks at military harassing)—
some fled, some dead, some begging for their lives
and amidst all this Hermione arrives! (Carson)

In this section, the Phrygian continues his narrative, explaining to the Chorus what happened
after the Phrygians battered down the walls and Pylades rushed at them. The exact mechanics of
the scene are unclear, but he does manage to convey that Pylades killed or injured most of the
Phrygians, leaving the rest to flee for their lives.

Precisely because of the unclear configuration of bodies in the scene he describes, this
segment affords the actor an excellent opportunity to enhance the text with her performance.
Tone can be difficult to read on paper, but it will make all the difference when the lines are
spoken aloud. I directed the performance to enhance the characteristics I meant to convey with a
translation whose language and style limited its emotional expressiveness. I had my actor convey
the simultaneous elegance and terror of her character with constant but graceful motion; she
alternated between nervous fidgeting and showy explication, all the while keeping her body
language full of torsion and elasticity. In addition, she actively used Chorus members as
“puppet” Helen and Hermione figures to act out the scene her character had already lived
through once. The pantomime added a bit of physical humor but also made the explanation of
those unseen interior events easier to follow. The result was that the Phrygian was able to convey
the details of his harrowing experience, through gesture at least as much as speech.

The Phrygian also interacted directly with the audience: the actor was well aware that her
scene had both an internal and an external audience, and she made sure to play to both of them.
As she pantomimed “the vicious Pylades” approaching with a sword, she moved furtively to
convey to the audience that the Phrygian was now playing that “tricky boy.” She also turned the audience into Phrygians, brandishing an imaginary sword at them as her “Pylades” approached them straight on. She made eye contact with one or two audience members to intensify the experience and make the audience feel like they might have seen the events unfolding in the house with their own eyes.

I wanted my Phrygian to be less of a showpiece than he had the potential to be. As I mentioned in my introduction, the effect on my audience was important to me, so I wanted to encourage the audience to engage with the onstage action. This is not how it would have happened in antiquity: the vast majority of ancient spectators would have been at least twenty yards from the stage, some much further. But every spectator would have been steeped in the mythic and literary traditions that define this play, so the performance would have been in that way an intimate exchange, playing on the audience’s cultural knowledge. I did not have that resource of collective cultural knowledge, but I still wanted the audience to connect personally to the action. I chose a different route, and one that is familiar to many modern theatergoers: the destruction of the fourth wall. By having the Phrygian communicate directly with the audience and invite them into his scene, I gave my audience access to a closer connection with the play.

Carson’s catchy rhymes are so succinct that her Phrygian does not have much time to draw the audience into the scene. Her translation also loses the repetitiveness of the Phrygian’s prattling: in the above passage alone, he describes the flagging Phrygians in two separate lists using the same parallel constructions of ὦ μὲν and ὦ δὲ to designate his groups. I wanted to keep those constructions in my rendition; in the process my version lost some of the frenzied desperation that Carson captures so precisely. I let the majority of that task fall to my actor. My translation also elicits less sympathy for the Phrygian than Arrowsmith’s sorry fool. The way my
Phrygian narrates the battle, he is aware of his cowardice, whereas Arrowsmith’s barely seems to comprehend his own incompetence. All he knows is that he is “no match” for Pylades: there is no echo of Troy in Arrowsmith’s Phrygian, and even his narration is undercut by his lack of specificity and his inability to form full sentences.

I did not want my Phrygian to be incompetent. Because the concreteness of his descriptions of the house and his surroundings feature so prominently in my linguistic argument about *Orestes*, I wanted to keep the specificity of his language. My Phrygian is no fool. He uses house-words with more frequency and variety than any other character, something Arrowsmith’s simpleton and Carson’s concise style would not express. If I wanted to stage my argument effectively, my Phrygian would have to be as verbose as he is in the Greek.

ἀθυρσοι δ’ οἴα νίν
δραμόντε Βάκχαι σκύμνον ἐν χεροῖν
ὄρειαν ξυνήρπασαν:
πάλιν δὲ τὰς Διός κόρας
ἐπὶ σφαγάν ἔτεινον: ὃ δ’ ἐκ θαλάμων
ἐγένετο διαπρὸ δομάτων ἄφαντος,
ὁ Δίε καὶ γὰ καὶ φῶς καὶ νύξ,
ἡτοι φαρμάκοις
ἡ μάγων τέχναις ἢ θεῶν κλοπαῖς.
τὰ δ’ ὕστερ᾽ οὐκέτ᾽ οἶδα: δραπέται γὰρ εξ-έκλεπτον ἐκ δόμων πόδα.
πολύπονα δὲ πολύπονα πάθεα Μενέλας
ἀνσχόμενος ἀνόνατον ἀνόνατον ἀπο-
πρὸ Τροίας ἔλαβε τὸν Ἑλένας γάμον. (1493-1502)

Orestes ran like a bacchant who drops her thyrsus, ran to kidnap the girl: and again he turned to the daughter of Zeus to slaughter her. She disappeared from the chamber! Simply gone. O Zeus and Gaia and Light and Night, truly it must have been witchcraft or theft by the gods. I don’t know what happened after that, for I stole away as a fugitive. So all Menelaus’ suffering was in vain, suffering in vain for Helen, whom he took back from Troy. (Wilson)

Men stop, yes, Bacchantes,
dropping wands for seizing prey,
snatch at girl, then turn back
to kill, kill madam dead.
But then, oh then—
suddenly, ah, ah!
madam vanish,
fly through roof
as though some magic mebbe mebbe
or robbery of thiever gods.
O Earth! O Zeus! O Night!
What then happen I not know.
No, no, run, I ran!
But Menelaus, ai—
all his suffer, all his hurt
to bring the lady Helen home,
ah ah,
nothing is. (Arrowsmith)

They lunge at her, yelling,
then remember Helen—
who at that very moment simply vanishes from sight!
O Zeus! O Light! O Dark of Night!
I know not how!
Truth is, at that point I made my bow.
Panicked a bit, took to my heels.
You know how it feels. (Carson)

This passage, with its incidence of “mebbe mebbe,” a speech pattern that crops up elsewhere in
the Phrygian’s monody as well, shows most clearly the alienating effects, to modern ears, of
Arrowsmith’s rendering the Phrygian as an African-American slave. But he does more with the
passage. Using turns of phrase like “kill madam dead,” “thiever” and “all his suffer,”
Arrowsmith constructs a dialect significantly less grammatical than the one Uncle Tom spoke.
This is not merely a person whose native language is not English. This is an uneducated speaker
of very low status whose speech patterns mark him as clumsy and risible. His caricature
suddenly seems comical, bordering on absurd: beyond conveying his status to a 1950s audience,
Arrowsmith’s fool-slave Phrygian is played for laughs. Perhaps Arrowsmith was trying to make
an ironic commentary on what McDonald identifies as the ridiculous amalgam of Phrygian
stereotypes in the original, to draw attention to enduring modes of racist representations, but
more than likely it was played straight, to “help audiences understand” the relationship between the original audience and the Phrygian slave character.

Anne Carson makes no attempt to translate that relationship. Instead, she continues the rhyming pattern she has established for the Phrygian—with a noticeable breakdown in the meter at “They lunge at her, yelling./then remember Helen—/who at that very moment simply vanishes from sight!/O Zeus! O Light! O Dark of Night!” The Phrygian manages to keep his rhyme scheme, but at the climactic moment of his narrative he loses his rhythm. This gesture allows Carson to convey the Phrygian’s relative grace in the midst of terror and confusion. Carson eschews the patterns of the Greek prosody in favor of precise transference of the sentiment. As I worked within my constraints, I could only strive to emulate the emotive resonance she brings unrelentingly to her translation. She “collaborates with Euripides” to the core.

As mentioned above, I wanted my text to be clearly understandable without sacrificing the content. I prioritized the meaning of the Greek over the strict form. I preserved the Greek similes (for instance, “like a bacchant”) and features of everyday Greek language (swearing “by the gods,” or referring to their garments as “peploi”), in order to remind the audience that this is in fact an ancient play. In Venuti’s terms, I did not want to domesticate the translation. In the above passage, the Phrygian calls upon several divine spirits: Zeus is clearly a god, while the other three manifest as both divinities and aspects of nature. It is the editor’s decision whether to capitalize nouns like γᾶ (“Gaia,” also “earth”), and here both readings could be appropriate. Both Arrowsmith and Carson change the invocations slightly. They make each invocation a separate exclamation instead of the run-on sentence that appears in the Greek, and they shorten the list from four to three. Carson’s was clearly chosen for poetic effect, to keep the rhyme and meter.
Arrowsmith’s has less of an obvious justification, but then, so does his use of linguistic blackface.

As exemplified in the invocations, I wanted to keep my rendering as syntactically and semantically close to the Greek as possible. At the same time, I did not use excessively archaic language: an ancient Greek audience would not have perceived *Orestes* as arcane, so why should we? I ended up smoothing over the register in order to encourage my audience to take the play seriously, something many modern audiences have a difficult time with when the script includes as many comic elements as *Orestes* does. In the context of the rest of the play’s neutral register, the Phrygian’s lyric flights might have seemed disproportionately comical, and I did not want his fear to get lost in the humor. In another vein, this neutral register gave my actors significant control over the transmission of the text to the audience, since their delivery of the lines directly affected how the audience perceived sentiment and tone. Most importantly, I created the translation specifically to show the play for what it was, and what it ought still to be: a performance, and not just words on a page.
Chapter Three: Staging the Physical House

In many ways my staging of *Orestes* grows out of the linguistic reading I argued in Chapter One. First, I will discuss the possibilities regarding the ancient staging, and then I will discuss how I chose to use the stagecraft in my production. As I have shown above, the play’s language becomes increasingly physical and focused on the exterior, in contrast to Aeschylus’ more symbolic, internally-oriented use of the house. While we have little evidence for how the play was actually staged originally, it would certainly have underscored Euripides’ point if the stagecraft grew more concerned with the façade and its particulars over the course of the play. The basic information we can infer does seem to follow that pattern, especially when compared with the stagecraft of the significantly more internal *Agamemnon*. Where Aeschylus’ play is concerned with what happens inside the house, Euripides’ makes it clear that everything truly important happens outside it.

As with his language, the stagecraft of Euripides is a response to the established tradition: in the case of *Orestes*, the main tradition is Aeschylus. I argue that Euripides shapes his *Orestes* to look like a twisted version of the *Agamemnon*, using a few scenes that evoke Aeschylus but come to completely different conclusions. For instance, the Phrygian scene is a reworking of Cassandra, another foreign slave “messenger” who speaks frantically about a murder inside the house. But the two scenes surrounding Cassandra’s speech—the infamous “carpet scene” where Agamemnon enters the house before Cassandra speaks, and Clytemnestra’s revelation of the two corpses after Cassandra has followed Agamemnon to her death—are curiously absent. These absences are purposeful and serve to actively evoke Aeschylus and the ways in which *Orestes* deviates from the larger tradition.
The Aeschylean house presents a strong interiority that raises questions about its inner life, connecting the building represented onstage with the family who live inside it. Much of the tension in the play arises from the audience’s inability to see the activities taking place inside the skene, and the most climactic moments in the Agamemnon are descriptions of activities that occur inside: for example, Cassandra’s speech before going to meet her death or the revelation of Agamemnon’s body after Clytemnestra has killed him. Cassandra frantically sees both her own fate and that of Agamemnon, describing it to the Chorus in vain. Clytemnestra reveals that fate in gory detail. These two scenes reveal the interior activity: the first describes it in words before the murder, and the second shows the physical evidence afterward.

The audience is left to match up the two bodies of evidence, since they are not permitted to see the act as it happens. As a result, the primary dichotomy in the staging is between inside and outside; concerning the Oresteia, a major focus of the scholarship on staging has been the entrances and exits.\(^1\) The border between inside and outside is just as important as the dichotomy itself: for instance, the scene where Clytemnestra cajoles Agamemnon into walking on the carpet to enter the house, and then attempts to persuade Cassandra to follow (855-1071), highlights the interior because it is his manner of entry that causes Agamemnon’s downfall.\(^2\)

Oft-mentioned when discussing the boundary between inside and outside is the ekkulema, a wheeled device that allows something inside, or offstage, to be brought outside, or onstage, through the central skene doors.\(^3\) It could display the products of the action that happened inside, allowing the audience to view the aftermath unfolding outside. The device,

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\(^1\) For instance, Oliver Taplin’s *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* is arranged entirely according to the sequence of entrances and exits, although it discusses other aspects of staging as well.

\(^2\) Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre*, 84-86 discusses the logistics of the action onstage through the play’s language but emphasizes the importance of the manner in which Agamemnon and Cassandra enter the house.

\(^3\) Graham Ley, “A Material World,” 274.
presumed to have been deployed for the revelation of Agamemnon’s body (Ag. 1372-1398), was able to blur the boundary between inside and outside by ferrying things across that border. In this way it reifies the tensions Aeschylean characters allude to in their dialogue: the audience can see the product of climactic interior activity, but only after it has already been completed. In the Agamemnon, this bloody revelation would have been shocking, judging from the reaction of the Chorus at 1399-1400. In Agamemnon, the boundary between inside and outside, and the entrances and exits that cross that boundary, is significant because it is a place of ambiguity; this ambiguity in turn is a manifestation of the inextricable relationship between the house and its symbolic meaning. The physical house in the Agamemnon communicates a strong sense of interiority, corresponding to a pervasive metaphorical significance in the play’s language.

In contrast, Euripides’ version provides no ambiguous grey area between inside and outside, no anxiety about crossing the border, and no substantial interior house at all. The façade of the house is visible onstage; it manifests as the skene. I argue that the same principles that govern Euripides’ use of the language of the house in Orestes also underpin the staging of the drama. While Euripides concretizes the house in language by having his characters discuss the literal structure and its parts rather than the symbolic meaning of the house-as-dynasty, he also concentrates tension increasingly on the exterior façade, and by extension the action happening onstage, rather than on the interior and the offstage, as would be typical in Aeschylus. As I

4 Ruth Padel describes it as a “wheeled low platform” (“Making Space Speak,” 360) that could hold at least two bodies; Mary Lefkowitz, “Aristophanes and Other Historians of Fifth-Century Theater,” 143 argues that we have no concrete evidence for the use of the ekkuklema before the fourth century, and that scholiasts supplied information about staging based on what was used in their day. I will avoid arguing over the specific machinery because this paper has more to do with the effects of the staging than with its mechanics. Clytemnestra’s speech at this point indicates that the body was somehow brought out. It seems likely that the device would be the ekkuklema, at least as soon as it became the standard tool, and prior to that whatever machine was used surely performed the same function of bringing actors and props out through the skene door.
detailed earlier, no major moment actually occurs inside: Euripides feints toward an Aeschylean revelation, but his weapon is instead surprise, since no one dies in the house during the “murder” scene. Toward the end of the play, the action onstage divides into two registers: the main stage and the roof. Like the inside/outside dichotomy, the relationship between the two registers is important, but, unlike inside and outside, both Euripidean registers are visible to the audience. The tension then comes not from anticipation of the invisible, but from Euripides’ continual subversion of the audience’s expectations. As a result, the play’s staging contributes to the more concrete understanding of the house, which expands over the course of the play and peaks at the end, as the house approaches destruction.

Where the staging of the *Agamemnon* reinforces the integration between the house and the family inside, the *Orestes* separates the two and highlights the divide between them. Most notable is the lack of the *ekkuklema* blurring the boundary between inside and outside. In the *Orestes*, Euripides prepares his audience for an unveiling like that of the bodies in the *Agamemnon*—but it never occurs. The prelude to the revelation is structured in much the same way: a foreign slave bursts out of the palace and describes a scene of murder. In the *Agamemnon*, it is Cassandra and she uses her prophetic power to describe the murder before it happens (1072-1330). But in the *Orestes*, it is the escaped Phrygian who relates the scene he just witnessed. The expected end, modeled on the *Agamemnon*, would be a ghastly description of the bloody murder followed by a rolling out of the corpse. Instead, the Phrygian says that Helen disappeared and admits he does not know how the scene ended (1494-1498), and Orestes comes out of the house empty-handed, having been unsuccessful in his attempt to kill Helen. In this version of the “revelation,” there is nothing to bring out. Thus, Euripides’ revelation here is not the expected

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5 In fact, this type of scene, complete with shouts from inside the house, is a formulaic feature of tragedy: c.f. Richard Hamilton, “Cries Within and the Tragic Skene.”
sight of the corpse but the surprise that the murder did not actually occur. In the *Agamemnon*, the *ekkuklema* provides the transition between inside and outside, blurring the boundary and heightening suspense about the activities occurring unseen, but in Euripides, that kind of suspense is unnecessary because not much happens offstage. The lack of tension between inside and outside makes for a more stable boundary, reflecting the increased concreteness in the language describing the house. Because no product of indoor activity is ever brought onstage, the interior is less significant; it is the well-defined exterior appearance that matters.

And, indeed, there is a stage device to suit Euripides’ needs, the counterpart to Aeschylus’ *ekkuklema*. The *ekkuklema* brings the interior to the exterior; Euripides makes striking use of the *mechane*, a cranelike device that lifts actors into the air, in his final scene. While the exact mechanics of the device are debated, it is clear that its purpose was to raise actors up for dramatic effect. Euripides has more actors onstage at the end of this play than Aeschylus does in any play, some of whom are lifted by the *mechane*. The *mechane* serves to bring outside things, such as gods but also signals from far away such as the beacon spotted by Aeschylus’ Watchman, into the space of the drama. In this way it acts as an inverse of the *ekkuklema*. It is no surprise, then, that Euripides creates his spectacular final tableau with the *mechane* instead.

*Orestes* de-emphasizes the metaphor of the house to focus instead on the immediate, surface representations: a lack of interiority in staging corresponds to the lack of symbolism in language that I discussed in Chapter One. As a result, stagecraft, including the arrangement of characters onstage and the set, is a larger part of the experience of the performance of the *Orestes*

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7 Donald Mastronarde, “Actors on High,” discusses the use of the *mechane*, specifically for the “deus ex machina” effect.
than it was in the *Oresteia*: in Aeschylus’ trilogy, the climactic moments for staging are the revelation of the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, the revelation of the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in the *Choephoroi*, and the end of the *Eumenides* when Athena may alight upon the *skene*. Each installment has one central moment of spectacle. Not so in *Orestes*: the closest thing to one central spectacle is the end, when Orestes holds Hermione hostage as Apollo arrives on the scene. But the end of *Orestes* is utterly chaotic: although only three characters speak at this point in the play, in accordance with dramatic tradition, there are in fact seven characters present onstage: Orestes, Pylades, Hermione, Electra, Menelaus, Apollo, and Helen. Of these, at least four and possibly as many as six are situated above the stage level, with help from the above-mentioned *mechane*. A spectacle on this order would be out of place in Aeschylus, whose named characters never number more than six in a play.\(^9\) This conspicuous, over-the-top spectacle of the house, and its increasing use as a prop, ends with the near-incineration of the house and the descent into complete chaos. Its effect is not a meaningful staging moment but a sensational articulation of the artificiality of the set, and it precludes the existence of any functional interior.

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With an interpretation of the ancient staging context in mind, the question becomes how to stage such a scenario in modern practice. My performance space was very different from the ancient stage space. How can an academic argument such as this translate into performance? The goal of my production was to posit one answer to that question. The ability to use stagecraft as a device for conveying the play’s meaning opened up new ways of understanding Euripides and

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9 I follow the character lists as set out in the Oxford Classical Texts edition of Aeschylus; excluding member of the chorus, no extant play of Aeschylus has more than six characters. Euripides’ *Orestes* has ten, with seven of them onstage at the end including four mute characters.
the myth itself, opportunities that simply reading the text cannot afford. I had to be judicious with my own staging: I could not reasonably expect an audience to make sense of hundreds of divergent cues, let alone pick up on the reasoning behind every subtle staging decision. However, I was able to choose a few elements to highlight. It will come as no surprise that I sought especially to highlight the physicality and the lack of interiority of the house.

Stagecraft, just like textual imagery, is a device that Euripides uses to convey meaning; it is more difficult to trace because our evidence for staging is scant and mostly later. However, some attempts have been made to reconstruct stage business as indicated by the text itself, and in any case it is worthwhile to discuss possibilities for staging without suggesting that there is one canonical reading of the physical action onstage that can be gleaned from the dialogue. As a general rule, Euripides seems to have filled the stage with spectacle, and Orestes, especially considering the sensationalism of its final scene, certainly fits into that pattern. But it is not useful to try and reconstruct the ancient performance to the letter. Here, as with the text, I approached translating the stage as an exercise in equivalencies.

Several of the scenes in Orestes can be read as twisted versions of famous scenes from Agamemnon, but their significance goes beyond intertextuality. Euripides’ incorporation of a botched murder attempt, for instance, allows him to illustrate a lack of interiority by negative example. The audience does hear shouts from within, and the cries themselves are formulaic, and spoken by three different characters. In that sense, aside from a few simple entrances and

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10 For an overview of stage directions, see Oliver Taplin, “Did Greek Dramatists Write Stage Instructions?” Taplin methodically shows that any “stage directions” written in the margins are not necessarily by the hand of the author, but he does emphasize the role of in-text references to staging.

11 Peter Arnott, Greek Scenic Conventions in the Fifth Century B.C., 114ff.

12 For an analysis of the formulae regularly used in this type of scene, see Richard Hamilton, “Cries Within and the Tragic Skene.”
exits, and one more complicated one, these shouts are the only things that permeate the border between inside and outside. And these shouts are evidence of the failed murder plot: Helen shrieks that she is being murdered, but we learn that she is never really murdered, for she will be snatched up by the gods at the last minute. She screams to Menelaus for help, but Menelaus is not even there: he has left to go to the city assembly and he does not return until the final scene of the play. Helen’s cry is then ineffective not only because it does not succeed, but because there is also no practical effect at all; Menelaus only hears about the murder plot second-hand. In this way the scene stands in opposition to the murder scene in *Agamemnon*, where the king’s shouts immediately bring the Chorus to a state of fear.

Another important refraction of Aeschylus in the staging is the Phrygian’s scene. His function is similar to that of Cassandra, but he is her inverse. He was in the house and comes out to tell the story afterward, and yet he does not know clearly what happened inside because he fled in fear before he was able to piece the scene together. Cassandra is in many ways his opposite; she relates scene with biting accuracy, even though it has not happened yet and she has never been inside the house. But both are eastern slaves with unusual speech patterns and held in suspicion by the Chorus. Cassandra’s staging is relatively straightforward; whether she moves frenzily or not, her action takes place on the main floor of the stage, and at the end she enters the house through the middle *skene* door.

Not so the Phrygian. He appears on the roof and at some point comes down to the main stage level; as a result of sheer placement, he is the tallest person onstage when he enters. He is the first character in the play to use the *skene* roof. His entrance opens the new possibility of another plane: up to this point, the roof has not been acting-space in this play. It was, however,

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13 Biehl, as I mentioned in Chapter One, has strong opinions on the staging of his entrance.
used for acting in *Agamemnon*; the Watchman appears there and delivers the prologue on high. This physically dominating space, coupled with the fact that the Phrygian is the only character who has made it outside, lend the character credence. The Phrygian’s occupation of the roof also allows Euripides to introduce that space, crucially, as an area he will return to in the final scene. This introduction to the roof is a less shocking usage than the final scene: slaves and servants, like the Watchman, have been on the roof before, but it is highly unexpected for the protagonist and his elite companions to end up on the roof, much less with torches about to kindle their ancestral home to flame. By having the Phrygian enter here, Euripides prepares his audience for the use of the roof space in a shocking new way.

As in *Agamemnon*, *Orestes* too implies that Menelaus and Agamemnon both live under this one roof. The chronology is very muddled; it seems that Menelaus is only able to make it home at least five years after Agamemnon’s return from Troy. But the implication is still clear: Menelaus refers to the palace at Argos as home, and he is not permitted to go and rule Sparta until the very end, when Apollo announces this fate to him. However, Orestes categorically denies his aunt and uncle’s right to live in the palace: he threatens to burn it down expressly so that Menelaus cannot inherit it, and he gets irritated that Helen has brought her slaves and foreign luxuries back from Troy into the house he understands to be his. He values his family connections so little that he goes so far as to make Menelaus out to be a stranger in his own home. He turns against his family members (except Electra), one after the other, and he even directly compares Pylades and Menelaus, announcing that Pylades is more useful to him than “infinite kinsmen.” His lack of appreciation for familial bonds serves to reinforce the illusory

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14 Tragic timelines are notoriously fuzzy; here Menelaus must be returning home at least five years after Agamemnon because Clytemnestra has had time to send Orestes away to grow up with Pylades, murder Agamemnon upon his return, and come to be murdered herself by the now-teenaged Orestes.
nature of the house; when the family becomes devalued, the house that represents it has nothing further to represent.

Depicting an illusory object onstage is a challenge, especially one that serves as large part of the set as well as the backdrop. The imaginary Furies and bow were easy to stage as figments of Orestes’ fevered imagination; the house itself was not so easy. In the end, I decided to project an image onto the back wall for the backdrop instead of making a physical one. The image I used is a photograph of a real ancient theater set: it is the skene—or more accurately, the scaenae, since it dates to the Roman renovation of the site—of the theater at Bosra, in modern-day Syria. I chose an ancient theater set for a backdrop not in an attempt to recreate the stage as it would have been in antiquity, but rather to assert that the skene itself, and therefore also the house it represents, is nothing more than a painted façade. It also drew attention to its own fragmentary state, a casualty of the house’s sufferings: the house manifests a breakdown of metaphor over the course of the play and also the larger political chaos that may have so disillusioned Euripides.

Beyond the backdrop, I composed a mostly open stage, keeping only the bare minimum necessary for the action: Orestes’ bed, a place to pour libations, and a cushion. The stage included three entrances: one each at center stage, stage left, and stage right. The stage left and right entrances each included a small set of steps; each actor had to descend these steps in order to reach the main stage level. The stage right entrance was designated the roof. Characters who appeared on the roof, i.e. the Phrygian for his entrance, and Orestes, Hermione, Electra, and Pylades in the final scene, could not simply walk down the stairs to the stage level. The Phrygian jumped to convey the distance. Orestes went around the back of the stage after exiting through the middle and reappeared at the top of the stage right stairs holding Hermione captive. I hung black curtains all along the stage right and left sides, as well as on the stage right stairs, to
indicate the absence of a substantial house. The stage right stairs were painted to look like a roof, with parts made to look like the “Doric triglyphs” the Phrygian mentions, and another imitating the “cedar porch.”

The epiphany of Apollo, I decided, should not come from the same place as the roof. I had him appear on the stage left side, above the height of the top of the stairs, giving him the highest placement. He appeared out of thin air: the black curtains on the stage left side had a slit in them, and at the moment of his entrance the curtain was pulled back to reveal the god from a place which had not previously been a possible entrance. Such an entrance would be a surprise for the audience, who did not expect an entrance there, and it would afford Apollo the height necessary to manifest visually his divine status. The surprise of his entrance reflects the surprise of the use of the mechane in antiquity to deliver actors in midair entrances; one must only hope that the contrived nature of the epiphany does not strike the audience as ridiculous and artificial, pulling them out of the world of the play.

Fortunately, the epiphany was well-received by my audience. On the whole, I designed the stagecraft to operate on the same principles as the translation: I aimed to keep some elements of the original staging, such as the roof and the epiphany, while adapting others to suit the needs of my performance space, or in order to convey my argument to the audience. The same principles that govern Euripides’ use of language about the house also govern the stagecraft; like the house-words I detailed in Chapter One, the scene focuses increasingly on the façade and reveals the interior to be functionally nonexistent. Perhaps the excess of spectacle suggested to audiences that the mythic world of tragedy was no longer applicable to contemporary life, or accorded with prevailing ideas that the end of the fifth century was a time of decadent decline.

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Whatever the precise effect on the ancient audience, the play was celebrated by the masses and reperformed frequently. My production was a perfect chance to bring together the language and the staging in practice and to test out how the spectacle might impact an audience today.
Orestes
Euripides, trans. Megan Wilson

(The scene: outside the palace at Argos, Greece. Approximately 1200 B.C.E., give or take. ORESTES is lying motionless, seemingly dead, on a couch on the left side of the stage. He is wrapped in a cloak. ELECTRA sits by him. No one else is onstage; the stage is sparse and quiet. There is an entrance at either end of the proscenium and one in the middle of the stage. The left entrance goes into town. The center goes into the house. The right is the roof, and there is no way up to it from the stage floor. The house is indicated by heavy dark curtains; it is the absence of an interior. An image of the house is projected onto the backdrop, while the stage right entrance appears to be a real roof. It is mid-afternoon but the air is dark and heavy.)

ELECTRA
There is nothing so unspeakably awful, no suffering or god-given misfortune, that we cannot bear. For Tantalus (what a fate he had!), they say he was born of Zeus, and that he hovers in the air, in fear of the rock looming over his head: and they say he pays this penalty, because he showed the shameful weakness of an unbridled tongue when he had the honor of a common table with the gods. This man was the father of Pelops, who in turn had Atreus for a son. Atreus, whom the goddess Eris made hostile to his brother Thyestes. Do I even need to go through my family history? Atreus killed his brother’s children and served them at a banquet. And that same Atreus fathered the famous Agamemnon, if he truly is famous, and Menelaus by their mother, Aerope of Crete. Menelaus married Helen, that hateful woman, and Lord Agamemnon married Clytemnestra, notorious throughout Greece. She bore him three daughters: Chrysothemis and Iphigenia and me, Electra, and the boy Orestes. We were all born from our unholy mother, who murdered her husband, our father. Why she did it, it is not decent for a maiden to say. Why should I accuse Phoebus of injustice? Although he persuaded Orestes to kill his mother, an awful deed… nevertheless, he killed her in obedience to a god. And I was part of the murder, too—as much as a woman can be. And our friend Pylades helped us do it. Now poor Orestes wastes away in madness; he lies there on his mattress, since the blood of his mother drove him insane; I am afraid to name the goddesses who torment him, so I’ll call them the Eumenides. This is the sixth day after he killed his mother. Since then he can neither eat nor bathe; buried inside his cloak, he weeps inconsolably whenever his body is clear of fever and he remembers. Then he leaps from his mattress like a skittish pony. The city of Argos has decreed that no man shelter us, nor receive us at his hearth, nor address us, matricides that we are: and this is the fateful day when the city of Argos will vote on whether we should die by stoning, or by the sword. We have one hope for survival: Menelaus is coming here from Troy. He has just anchored onshore, with his wife Helen, who waits for night lest anyone see her and come throwing stones at her, since she led their sons to die at Troy. She is inside grieving for her sister and the misfortunes of her house. At least she has some consolation: for when Helen left home, Menelaus brought their daughter Hermione here to Argos, for my mother to raise her. I am watching the road until I see Menelaus: unless we can find some protection in him, we are adrift. Such a helpless thing is a troubled house! [70]

(Enter HELEN from center.)

HELEN
Electra, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon—and still unmarried, I see. How are you, you poor thing, and how’s your brother, that wretch who killed his mother? I won’t pollute myself by greeting him. But still I lament the fate of my sister Clytemnestra, whom I never saw again after I sailed to Ilion, maddened by the gods and by destiny. I mourn her death.

ELECTRA
Helen, why should I tell you about things when you can see them? The children of Agamemnon are full of misfortune. I sit unable to sleep beside his limp body (for his breath is so light he seems dead): I will not reproach him when he is ill like this. Besides, you, blessed one, and your blessed husband, have come to us who fare so wretchedly.

HELEN
How long has he been lying on the couch?

ELECTRA
Since he spilled his mother’s blood.

HELEN
Poor thing, and his mother too; how miserably she died! [90]

ELECTRA
So much that she died from his troubles.

HELEN
By the gods, would you do something for me, maiden?

ELECTRA
Yes, even though I’m occupied with sitting by my brother.

HELEN
Would you go to the tomb of my sister?

ELECTRA
You would have me visit my mother? Why?

HELEN
To bring a lock of my hair as a sacrifice and a libation for me.

ELECTRA
Why can’t you go to the tomb of a loved one yourself?

HELEN
I am ashamed to show myself in Argos.

ELECTRA
That is true, since you shamefully left your home in Sparta.
HELEN
You are right, although you speak unkindly to me.

ELECTRA
What shame is it that holds you back from going into Mycenae?

HELEN
I fear the fathers of those who died at Ilion.

ELECTRA
A reasonable fear, since you are cursed by the mouths of Argos.

HELEN
Then grant me this favor and ease my fear.

ELECTRA
I could not look upon my mother’s grave.

HELEN
But it would be shameful for the servants to bear these things.

ELECTRA
Why don’t you send your daughter Hermione?

HELEN
It is not appropriate for a maiden to walk into a crowd.

ELECTRA
She would be performing a service for her dead aunt. [109]

HELEN
That is true. (pause) You have persuaded me, girl: yes, I will send my daughter. Child, come out, Hermione, come out before the house. (Enter HERMIONE from center.) And take these libations in your hands, and this lock of my hair, and pour honey and milk and foaming wine around Clytemnestra’s grave, and stand on a high mound and say: “Your sister Helen sends these libations as gifts, although she fears your memory and the Argive crowd too much to come herself.” And bid her to have good thoughts toward me and you and my husband, and to your two cousins who are condemned. It is fitting to give a sister all the meager gifts the underworld can receive. Go and hurry, child, and when you have made the offerings at her grave, come home again as soon as you can. [125]

(Exit HERMIONE to left; exit HELEN to center.)

ELECTRA
Did you see how beautifully her hair was trimmed, even though the cuttings are a sacrifice? She is the same woman as always. May the gods hate you, since you have ruined me and all Hellas. Poor me… but here come my friends, adding to my laments; and soon they will wake him, and his frenzy will bring me to tears. (CHORUS enters from left and crowds around the bed. CHORUS LEADER approaches ELECTRA and they greet each other.) Dear women, withdraw with soundless feet, do not make a sound or go crashing inside. For friendship is gracious but all the same it will be a misfortune to awaken him.

CHORUS A
Quiet! Place your footsteps lightly; don’t crash or make a sound. (CHORUS gradually withdraw from the bed.)

ELECTRA
Get away from there, further from the couch.

CHORUS
There, I obey.

ELECTRA
Ah, ah, speak like the breeze of a syrinx blown softly, my dears.

CHORUS B
See how calm and soft my voice is.

ELECTRA
Yes, like that. Go, go lightly, go softly. Tell me why you came here. For he is asleep.

CHORUS C
How is he? Give us the tale, friend: what fate? what misfortune?

ELECTRA
He is still breathing, though he seems to be in pain. [155]

CHORUS C
What are you saying? Oh, poor Orestes.

ELECTRA
You’ll destroy him, if you rouse his sweet eyes from sleep that now brings him grace.

CHORUS A
The poor wretch, whom the god drove to commit awful crimes.

ELECTRA
Alas, what misery. It was injustice, then, when Apollo turned around and condemned my mother’s murder.
CHORUS B
Do you see? His body stirs in his peplos.

ELECTRA
Your noise woke him up!

CHORUS A
No, I think he is sleeping.

ELECTRA
Won’t you turn your steps away from me, and from the house?

CHORUS C
He is asleep.

ELECTRA
You’re right. Lady Night, giver of sleep to suffering mortals, come from Erebus, come, come winged lady, to the house of Agamemnon. For we are floundering under stress and misfortune. *(CHORUS appears to be chatting amongst themselves.)* Ah, what new noise! Silence, silence, guard your gushing mouth, and leave him to the quiet grace of sleep, my friends.

CHORUS
What is his fate?

ELECTRA
To die, what else? He has no desire for food.

CHORUS
His fate is clear.

ELECTRA
Phoebus offered us as a sacrifice when he made us spill the blood of our mother who killed our father.

CHORUS
It was just.

ELECTRA
It was still wicked. Oh, mother. You spilled blood and your blood was spilled. You killed my father and are killing your own children from beyond the grave; for we are close to death. You lie in your grave, while the majority of my life has been spent wailing and weeping; unmarried and childless, I live an eternally wretched life.

CHORUS C
Since you are nearby, maiden, see to it that your brother doesn’t die without you noticing. It does not please me, how still he lies. [210]
(ORESTES slowly wakes up. He seems disoriented.)

ORESTES
O sweet sleep, you help so much although I am sick. O mistress Lethe, how wise you are. All suffering people pray to you. (Gaining awareness.) Where am I again? How did I get here? I lost track when I was out of my mind earlier.

ELECTRA
Dearest brother, I am happy that you could sleep! Do you want me to prop you up?

ORESTES
Yes, yes, take me up, and wipe the foam from my mouth and my eyes.

ELECTRA
There. I would not refuse to care for my brother.

ORESTES
Sit me up, my side against yours, and brush away my hair from my face. My vision is so dim.

ELECTRA
How wild your hair looks from lack of washing.

ORESTES
Lay me on the bed again; whenever the frenzy leaves me, all my limbs are weak.

ELECTRA
There. The couch is welcome to a sick man, although it’s also a confinement.

ORESTES
Prop me upright again, turn me around. I’m sorry to be so fickle in my helplessness.

ELECTRA
Do you want to put your feet down and try to walk?

ORESTES
Very much. I feel a bit better, although I’m probably not.

ELECTRA
Listen now, my brother, while the Erinyes are allowing you to think clearly.

ORESTES
Tell me the news: if it is good, you will do me kindness. If it is bad, one more won’t hurt.

ELECTRA
Menelaus, our father’s brother, is coming. His ships are anchored at the port of Nauplia.
ORESTES
What? A man of our family and one who thinks highly of our father? What a light in the darkness!

ELECTRA
He’s coming, anyway—take this as proof: he has brought Helen from Troy.

ORESTES
It would be better if he had come alone. If he brings his wife, great evil will come.

ELECTRA
Our grandfather, noble Tyndareus, had two daughters notorious throughout Hellas for their wickedness.

ORESTES
You should be different from them. I know you can be, in both your words and thoughts.

ELECTRA
Alas, brother, you are troubled. You are getting wild, although you were sane just now.

ORESTES
Mother! I supplicate you; don't brandish the maidens with bloody eyes and snaky hair: for they… they leap at me, ever nearer.

ELECTRA
Miserable Orestes, calm down. Lie on your bed. You think you see things clearly, but there’s nothing there.

ORESTES
O Phoebus, they'll kill me, those fierce-eyed dog-faced women, priestesses of the gods below, those terrifying spirits.

ELECTRA
I won't let go: I'll hold you to prevent you from jumping, even though you twist my arms.

ORESTES
Let me go! You are one of the Erinyes, gripping me around the middle to throw me into Tartarus. (Pushes her away.)

ELECTRA
Oh, woe! What help is there, when the gods are hostile to us? [267]

ORESTES
Give me my bow tipped with horn, the gift of Loxias, which Apollo told me to use to ward off the Furies if they try to frighten me into madness again. I’ll throttle her with my mortal hand if
she doesn’t withdraw from my sight. Did you not hear? Did you not see the winged arrows sent forth from my far-shooting bow? Ah, ah! Why are you still there? Take to the air on wings! Blame Apollo and not me. Ah! I am frenzied; the breath has gone out of my lungs.

Where have I leapt from my couch? My vision is clear again. Sister, why do you weep with your head wrapped in your peplos? I am ashamed to let you share in my suffering and to let my sickness lead you into trouble. Don’t waste away on account of my illness. Although you were privy to the murder, our mother’s blood spilled from my hand: I blame Loxias, who encouraged me to unholy words and deeds. I think that if I had asked my father whether I should kill my mother, he would have prayed that I never do it, since he would not come back to life even after such an evil deed. And now, sister, uncover your head and stop crying, even though we are suffering. And when you see me despairing, you must calm my fears and distorted thoughts, and talk about lovely things. But, poor sister, I say, lie down inside the house and let your eyes rest: eat something, have a bath. If you leave or succumb to my affliction, I am lost. For I have only you as an ally, as you can see, since I am deserted by others.

ELECTRA
I won’t leave you: I will take it upon myself to live or die alongside you. If you die, what shall I do, since I am a woman? How shall I survive alone? Without a brother, a father, a friend? Still, I will do what you think is right. But lie down and rest now. Don’t think about the things that scare you, but stay on your bed. For if you are not sick but you think you are sick, there will be trouble for us. (Exit ELECTRA center.)

[315]

CHORUS (taking center stage)
Ah, ah! You running, winged, Potnian goddesses, we owe you a revel, not with Bacchic rites but tears and wailing, you shadow-faced Eumenides, who fly through the air, exacting vengeance for blood, vengeance for murder. I entreat you. I entreat you; permit the child of Agamemnon to escape the raging madnesses of his suffering. Alas, child, you did such frenzied deeds at the behest of Phoebus Apollo, when you visited his temple.

O Zeus, what a deadly struggle is there. You whom some Fury curses with wailing, the blood of your mother maddens you.

CHORUS C
I lament!

CHORUS B
I lament!

CHORUS
Great fortune is not stable for mortals. But some god, having shaken it like the sail of a swift ship, plunges it into the waves of terrible affliction, treacherous as the waves of the sea. For what other house could I honor, if not the one from the divine marriage, from Tantalus?

CHORUS A
And indeed here comes the king, Lord Menelaus.
CHORUS
It is clear from his luxury that he is of the blood of the Tantalids. O you who launched a thousand-ship army to Asia, hail! Good fortune is in your company; the gods helped you accomplish the things you prayed for.

(Enter MENELAUS from left. CHORUS makes space for him.)

MENELAUS
Home, I think sweetly of you, since I am coming from Troy, but you also bring me grief; for I never saw another house more encircled by troubles. I learned the fate of Agamemnon and about his death at the hands of his wife back when I was docking my ships at Cape Maleas. While I was still at sea, the seer Glaucus, the prophet of the truthful Nereus, said to me: “Menelaus, your brother lies dying, falling down in the last bath given by his wife. I was filled with tears, and my sailors were too. When I touched the ground at the port of Nauplia, after I sent my wife inside, expecting to embrace Orestes the child of Agamemnon and his mother with loving arms, as if they were fortunate, I heard from some sailor about the unholy murder of the daughter of Tyndareus. And now, say where he is, young women; the child of Agamemnon, who ventured to commit such a crime. He was just a baby in Clytemnestra’s arms when I left for Troy, so I would not recognize him if I saw him.

ORESTES
I am that Orestes whom you seek, Menelaus. I will gladly reveal to you my sufferings. First I touch your knees in supplication, letting the prayers fall from my mouth. Save me from suffering—you’ve arrived at precisely the right time.

MENELAUS
O Gods, what am I seeing? Are you a corpse?

ORESTES
Fair enough. Under the weight of my suffering I’m not truly alive.

MENELAUS
Poor boy, how wild you dry hair makes you look.

ORESTES
It is not my appearance but my deeds that hurt me.

MENELAUS
Your gaze is terrible to behold.

ORESTES
My body is gone, though my name has not left me.

MENELAUS
I did not expect you to be so unsightly.
ORESTES
Here I am, the murderer of my wretched mother.

MENELAUS
I heard; spare me the details.

ORESTES
I'll spare you the suffering, although the god gave it to me generously.

MENELAUS
What suffering is this? What sickness destroys you?

ORESTES
My knowledge that I have done a terrible thing.

MENELAUS
What are you saying? Better to be clear.

ORESTES
Grief has ruined me the most…

MENELAUS
That goddess is fearsome, but all the same she is curable.

ORESTES
..And madness, retribution for my mother’s blood.

MENELAUS
When did the madness start? On what day?

ORESTES
On the day I placed my mother in her grave.

MENELAUS
In the house, or at the funeral pyre?

ORESTES
Outside the house, waiting for them to take up her bones.

MENELAUS
Was someone else nearby who could help you? [405]

ORESTES
Pylades, my accomplice.
MENELAUS
What sort of phantoms are plaguing you now?

ORESTES
There seem to be three maidens at night.

MENELAUS
I know those you speak of, but I don’t wish to name them.

ORESTES
For they are powerful; you are well-advised to avoid saying their names.

MENELAUS
They drive you to frenzy for spilling the blood of your kin.

ORESTES
Ah, I am wretched! I am hounded and chased by them.

MENELAUS
For those who did terrible things, it is not terrible to suffer.

ORESTES
But there is one possible escape from my misfortunes.

MENELAUS
Do not speak of death; that is not wise.

ORESTES
Phoebus, you called me to murder my mother.

MENELAUS
You were ignorant of the good and the just.

ORESTES
We are slaves to the gods, whatever the gods are.

MENELAUS
Loxias does not save you from the consequences.

ORESTES
He will; that is the nature of the gods.

MENELAUS
How long since your mother breathed her last?

ORESTES
Today is the sixth day; the fire at her grave is still warm.

MENELAUS
How swiftly the goddesses come upon you for the murder of family members.

ORESTES
I am not wise, but I am loyal to my loved ones.

MENELAUS
Does your father help you at all for avenging him?

ORESTES
Not yet; and I say delaying is the same as inaction.

MENELAUS
How are you in the city, after doing this?

ORESTES
I am hated so much that they don’t address me.

MENELAUS
Isn’t the blood washed off from your hands, in accordance with custom?

ORESTES
I am shut out of the home wherever I go. [430]

MENELAUS
Which of the citizens are pushing you from the land?

ORESTES
Oiax. He hates my father for what happened at Troy.

MENELAUS
I understand. He avenges the blood of Palamedes on you.

ORESTES
Which is nothing to do with me. I am ruined by three things.

MENELAUS
Who else? Where are the friends of Aegisthus?

ORESTES
They insult me incessantly; the city listens to them now.

MENELAUS
Will the city allow you to keep the scepter of Agamemnon?
ORESTES
How would they, when they won’t allow me to live?

MENELAUS
What are they doing to you? Can you tell me clearly?

ORESTES
A vote will be taken about us today.

MENELAUS
Whether to exile you? Or whether to kill you?

ORESTES
Whether we die by stoning at the hands of the townspeople.

MENELAUS
Then shouldn’t you flee, past the boundaries of the land?

ORESTES
I am surrounded by men in full bronze.

MENELAUS
Are they a private enemy or the Argive militia?

ORESTES
They are all the townspeople, so that I may die, in short.

MENELAUS
O poor boy, you come to the end of your misfortune.

ORESTES
My hope for escape from suffering lies in you. Since you came here with good fortune, help your family members, and do not keep your good fortune for yourself alone, but take hold of it and in your turn, pay back the favors my father granted you. For true friends are loyal even in misfortune.

CHORUS (looking left)
And indeed, Spartan Tyndareus hastens here on his aged feet, wearing black robes with his hair cut in mourning for his daughter.

ORESTES
I am ruined, Menelaus. Tyndareus here walks toward me, he doesn't respect me because of the things I did. When he came before when I was young, he was very fond of me, carrying me in his arms since I was the son of Agamemnon, and Leda did the same, honoring me no less than a
Dioscuros. Oh my wretched heart and soul, I gave them poor returns. Can I find some shade for my face? What sort of cloud could I hide behind, fleeing the eyes of this old man? [469]

(Enter TYNDAREUS from left.)

TYNDAREUS
Where may I see Menelaus, the husband of my daughter? When I pouring out libations at the grave of Clytemnestra, I heard that he was anchored at Nauplia, safe after many years. Take me to him: for I wish to greet him; it has been so long since I’ve seen my son-in-law.

MENELAUS
Old man, hello! (They clasp each other’s right hands/forearms in greeting.)

TYNDAREUS
And hello to you, Menelaus, my kinsman. Ah! How wretched it is not to know the future. The matricide, that serpent, is in front of the house shooting bright venom: what an abomination. Menelaus, do you address him, wicked as he is?

MENELAUS
And why not? He is born of his father who was dear to me.

TYNDAREUS
This creature is that same child of Agamemnon?

MENELAUS
He is: even if he is unfortunate, he must be honored.

TYNDAREUS
You've been made barbarous, since you were among barbarians for so long.

MENELAUS
It is customary in Hellas to always honor one’s family.

TYNDAREUS
And also to stay within the laws.

MENELAUS
According to the learned, everything that depends on necessity is slavery.

TYNDAREUS
You keep that to yourself, I won't have it.

MENELAUS
You are angry, and your old age is not wise.
TYNDAREUS
Oh, so it’s a contest of wisdom. If good and evil were clear to all, who would be less wise than that one? For he ignored justice and the common law of Hellas. When Agamemnon breathed out his life, killed at the hands of my daughter (a most shameful deed! I won't speak of it anymore), Orestes should have exacted the holy and just penalty for bloodshed, which was to cast his mother from the house: he might have chosen prudence, and piously followed the law. But now he has come to the same fate as his mother: while justly regarding her as evil, he became wicked than she was. I will ask you one thing, Menelaus: if a wife kills a husband, and in turn their child kills his mother, will his son after him also avenge murder with murder? Where is the limit? Our ancestors settled this nobly: they did not allow a person with blood on his hands in their sight or at meetings. They purified him with exile; they didn't kill him in revenge. For the last one to kill would take the pollution on his own hands. I hate those wicked women, above all my daughter, who killed her husband. And Helen, your wife, I'll never speak well of her nor address her: I don't envy you, going on a voyage to Troy on account of your wicked wife. I avoid whatever misfortune I can, as is my habit. (Turning to ORESTES.) Did you have any pity, you wretch, when she bared her breast as suppliant and mother? I cannot fathom the evil in you; my old eyes shed miserable tears. At least one thing makes sense: you are hated by the gods and you pay the penalty for what you did, wandering in madness and fear. Why is it necessary for me to hear other witnesses, when I can see these things for myself? Know this, Menelaus: don't stand in opposition to the gods, trying to help him, but let him be stoned to death by the townspeople, and do not come back to Spartan land. My daughter is rightly dead; but it is not right that she was killed by him. I am blessed in my children, except my daughters: I am not lucky there.

[541]

CHORUS
He is enviable, whoever is fortunate in his children and does not take significant misfortune upon himself.

ORESTES
Old man, I am afraid to speak to you, since what I'm about to say will irritate you. Let your old age, which bars me from speech, not obstruct the words at your feet and I'll proceed: but now I fear your grey hair.
What should I have done? For you have set one thing against the other: my father created me, and your daughter bore me. But without a father I would not have been born. I reckon I should stand with seed that planted me rather than the field that nurtured me. Your daughter (I am ashamed to call her my mother), in a private and senseless marriage, went to bed with another man; I know I will impugn myself if I speak badly of her, but nevertheless I'll say it: Aegisthus was her secret husband. I killed him, and I sacrificed my mother to avenge my father. You say I should be stoned to death, but I actually benefitted Greece. If the women know their children won’t take vengeance when they seek pity by baring their breasts, it would be easy for them to kill their husbands on any trumped-up charge. They would get away with it. I stopped that from happening. Killing her was just, since it was the price for her adultery while her husband was at war, being a general for all of Hellas. She did not take responsibility for her actions but instead punished my father by killing him. And since you are your daughter’s father, in a way you are to blame, since without you she would not have existed. If I had tacitly approved of my mother's actions by not acting, what would have happened to me? Would my father have tormented me
with the Erinyes? Are they allies to my mother but not my father? Don’t you see? Telemachus did not kill Penelope since she did not take a lover, but kept an undefiled bed. Do you see Apollo, who speaks clearly and dispenses prophecy to us mortals? Whose every word we obey. I was obeying him when I killed my mother. He was in the wrong, not me. What was I supposed to do? Is the god not sufficient to bear the blame? Where should someone go to save himself, if he was acting under orders from the god? A blessed age for those who make good marriages; but those for whom it does not fall well are unfortunate both inside and outside the home.  

CHORUS
Women are always meddling in the circumstances of men, and they cause misfortune.

TYNDAREUS
Since you are impudent and you do not watch your words, I’ll give you such a piece of my mind that you’ll think you’re about to meet your death. For I will go to the assembly in Argos, and I will incite the city against you and your sister to give you the death penalty. That girl deserves to die even more than you, since she turned you against your mother, whispering lies in your ears about Aegisthus and telling you false dreams, until she set the house on fire that is no fire. Menelaus, I have told you this and I will do it: if you respect my anger and my cane, do not protect the murderer, in opposition to the gods, but let him be stoned to death by the citizens, and do not enter the Spartan land. Do not ally yourself with ungodly friends and push aside the pious. Show me the way from the house, servants. (CHORUS points left; exit TYNDAREUS at left.)

ORESTES
(Calling after him) Go, so the rest of my words won’t provoke you! You and your old age. Menelaus, what are you thinking about? I can see that you’re deliberating something.

MENELAUS
Leave me: I am thinking to myself about how I should turn, given this fortune.

ORESTES
Now that you’ve heard both sides you can make your judgment; but I’ll give you time to think.

MENELAUS
Talk to me: for you can speak persuasively. There is a time for silence, and there is a time for speech.

ORESTES
Indeed I will. You, Menelaus, are giving me nothing to repay all that my father gave you. I am not speaking of possessions, save my soul, which is the most valuable thing I have. I have done wrong, but I do not deserve malice from you. For my father Agamemnon wrongly took Hellas to Troy, by no fault of his own but trying to repair the wrongdoing of your wife. So really he gave up his life for you, as we do for loved ones, so that you could get your wife back. Repay to me what you received from him, in one day instead of ten years, and advocate for me. This is the one thing I ask of you. Give me back my life, for the sake of my miserable father, and the life of my sister, who is still unmarried: for if I die now I will leave my ancestral house without an heir. I supplicate you on behalf of my whole house. You'll say: it's impossible. No. Families should
help each other in times of crisis: if the god gives only good things, what need is there of friends? It seems to me that you care more for your wife than for all of Greece. Then I beseech you for her sake—O, I have come to such evil. Why? O uncle, brother of my father, it seems the dead can hear under the ground: his soul is fluttering around you, and he echoes my words. I have spoken, in tears and weeping and misfortune, and I beg a reply. I want only what everyone wants: my safety. [679]

CHORUS
And although I am a woman, I implore you to help those in need, since you are able.

MENELAUS
Orestes, I respect you and I wish to help you: it is necessary to help kinsmen bear their sufferings, even to go war for them if the god grants the power to do so. And I wish I had power from the god: but I have come without allies, without a fleet, wandering through countless labors, with only the little strength of my friends left. We would never defeat Pelasgian Argos in battle: but if words can be powerful too, then there is hope. With only weak efforts, how can someone accomplish great things? It is foolish even to hope for that. For whenever the crowd turns against a young man, the fire becomes too furious to quench: but you must yield and watch cautiously for your opportunity. They may calm down enough to take pity on you. I will attempt to persuade Tyndareus and the city to judge with a moderate mind, like the balanced rigging of a ship. For god and city alike hate zealotry. I will not say otherwise: I will try to save you by wisdom, not force, since they are stronger. And it will not be an easy victory. I would never otherwise try to soften the Argives: but it is necessary. (Exit MENELAUS at left.)

ORESTES
(Calling after him) You are useless except to raise an army for the sake of a woman! But now you flee, you awful coward, unwilling to defend a loved one. You turn away from me. Have you forgotten your debt to Agamemnon? O father, you are abandoned! And ah, I am betrayed, there is no hope by which I might escape a death-sentence from the Argives. Menelaus was to be my salvation. But I see Pylades, my best friend, coming at a run from Phokis. What a pleasant sight! A man who can be trusted in times of trouble is more welcome than a calm sea is to sailors. [728]

(Enter PYLADES from left; ORESTES greets him enthusiastically.)

PYLADES
I came as quickly as I could once I saw the city assembling. They clearly want to kill you and your sister immediately. What is this? How did it come to this? What did you do, my comrade, my best friend, my brother? For you are all those things to me.

ORESTES
The short version is, I am ruined.

PYLADES
You must kill me too: for these things should be shared among friends.
ORESTES
That wicked Menelaus... me and my sister...

PYLADES
Of course he’d turn wicked—look at his wife.

ORESTES
He would have been kinder not to come.

PYLADES
So he’s really here?

ORESTES
He arrived a while ago, but soon revealed himself to be hostile.

PYLADES
And did he come with his wife, that most vile creature?

ORESTES
He did not bring her—she brought him here.

PYLADES
Where is that woman who ruined so many of the Argives?

ORESTES
In my house, if I can even call it mine.

PYLADES
And what did you say to your uncle?

ORESTES
That he should not let Argos kill me and my sister.

PYLADES
By the gods, and what did he say to you? I would like to know.

ORESTES
He was cautious, false friend that he is.

PYLADES
What was his excuse? Then I’ll know the whole story.

ORESTES
That man came, the one who fathered such notorious daughters.

PYLADES
You mean Tyndareus? He was angry about his daughter, of course.

ORESTES
You understand: he focused on that rather than my father.

PYLADES
And Menelaus didn't dare to support you?

ORESTES
No, for he wasn't born a warrior; he is only brave compared to women.

PYLADES
Your troubles are great. And must you die?

ORESTES
The citizens will take a vote about us today.

PYLADES
What does the vote decide? Tell me. I am getting anxious.

ORESTES
Whether we die or not. A short description for such a complex topic.

PYLADES
Then flee! Leave the house with your sister.

ORESTES
Don't you see? We are being constantly guarded.

PYLADES
I saw the streets were lined with armed townspeople.

ORESTES
We are besieged like a city under enemy attack.

PYLADES
I know how you feel, since I am ruined too.

ORESTES
Oh? What’s happened to you? I don’t think I can take another disaster.

PYLADES
My father Strophios kicked me out of his house in anger.

ORESTES
With a private charge against you, or a formal one?
PYLADES
He said I was an accomplice to your mother’s murder.

ORESTES
O poor Pylades! It seems that my suffering affects you too.

PYLADES
I am not like Menelaus: I will gladly endure it for you.

ORESTES
Aren’t you afraid that Argos will try to kill you along with me?

PYLADES
They can’t punish me; I am a citizen of Phokis.

ORESTES
But the mob is terrible when villains are leading it.

PYLADES
But whenever there are honest men, its plans are honest.

ORESTES
We must talk about this together.

PYLADES
About what?

ORESTES
If I went to town and said... [775]

PYLADES
That your deed was just?

ORESTES
Avenging my father?

PYLADES
They should be glad not to kill you.

ORESTES
Should I cower and die in silence?

PYLADES
That would be terrible.
ORESTES
What should I do, then?

PYLADES
Do you have any chance for salvation if you stay here?

ORESTES
No, I don’t.

PYLADES
And is there any hope of reprieve if you flee?

ORESTES
If I’m lucky, there might be.

PYLADES
Then that is better than staying?

ORESTES
Indeed, should I go?

PYLADES
Then again, dying is the nobler option.

ORESTES
Very true: fleeing is cowardly.

PYLADES
Yes, it’s better to stay.

ORESTES
And the deed was just.

PYLADES
If only they’ll see it that way.

ORESTES
And someone might pity me...

PYLADES
You are an aristocrat, after all.

ORESTES
Mourning my father's death.

PYLADES
That may be your saving grace.

ORESTES
I'll go, in hopes that the men won't kill me.

PYLADES
I'll say.

ORESTES
Shall we tell my sister?

PYLADES
No, by the gods.

ORESTES
For she might cry.

PYLADES
And that might bring bad luck.

ORESTES
Clearly it is better to be silent.

PYLADES
And you’ll have more time.

ORESTES
And then… only one problem...

PYLADES
What are you talking about now?

ORESTES
Those goddesses sting me constantly.

PYLADES
But I will care for you.

ORESTES
It is irritating to be slowed by illness.

PYLADES
Not for me.

ORESTES
Be careful not to join me in my frenzy.
PYLADES
Let it go.

ORESTES
Help me up…

PYLADES
I am glad to.

ORESTES
…and lead me to the tomb of my father.

PYLADES
Why?

ORESTES
So that I may supplicate him to save me.

PYLADES
That is fair.

ORESTES
May I not see the grave of my mother. [798]

PYLADES
For she is an enemy. But quickly, so that you don’t miss vote of the Argives. I will help you get there. If necessary I will carry you through the town, paying the crowd no mind, ashamed of nothing. For how should I prove my friendship if I don’t help you when you are in trouble?

ORESTES
That’s it: one must have companions, not just kin: for a man who becomes like family, although he is an outsider, is better to have as a friend than infinite kinsmen.

(Exeunt both, with PYLADES supporting ORESTES, at left.)

CHORUS (Taking center stage)
The house of Atreus was prosperous and virtuous once, and well-known throughout Hellas and near the Simountian streams. But misfortune befell the house when the sons of Tantalus quarrelled over a golden ram, leading to the deplorable feasting and the slaughter of well-born children: and still the sons of this house are locked in the cycle of blood guilt.

What seemed good is not good: to slice the skin of a parent with a fiery hand, to show to the light of day a sword black with blood. To commit a noble crime is an impiety, wickedness, the madness of men. For in her fear of death, the daughter of Tyndareus screamed: “Child, killing
your mother in vengeance is not honorable. Do not fall into eternal notoriety in the name of your father.”

What greater affliction exists on earth? What brings more tears or pity than a mother’s blood shed with his own hand? Having committed this crime, he has been made mad with Bacchic frenzy, tormented by the Eumenides, whirling fear with darting eyes, the child of Agamemnon. O the poor child, he made his mother a sacrifice, even though she supplicated him, in recompense for his father’s troubles. [843]

(Enter ELECTRA from center.)

ELECTRA
Women, has poor Orestes left the house? Has he gone mad again?

CHORUS
No, he is not mad. He went to the Argive people, to the convening assembly, where his soul is on trial: they are deciding whether he lives or dies.

ELECTRA
Ah me! Why did he do that? Who persuaded him?

CHORUS
Pylades. But here comes a messenger to tell about your brother.

(Enter MESSENGER from left.)

MESSENGER
Ah poor girl, unhappy daughter of lord Agamemnon, lady Electra, hear the woeful tale I bring to you.

ELECTRA
Ah, ah, we are ruined: it is clear already. Surely the messenger bears bad news. [855]

MESSENGER
The Pelasgians voted against you and your brother, poor girl; you will die today.

ELECTRA
Ah, me! I feared it long ago and now it has come. I have wasted my whole life in weeping. How did the debate go? What was our downfall? Tell me, sir. Will we be killed by stoning or by the sword? Shall my brother and I die together?

MESSENGER
I came into the city because I needed to hear about the fate of you and Orestes: I always had goodwill toward your father, and your house nourished me when I was poor, so I wanted to be the one to tell you. I saw the crowd sitting on high, where they say Danaus first delivered justice to Egypt. Indeed, when I saw the gathering I asked someone: "What news of Argos? Surely not a
message from an enemy of the city of Danaus?" And he said, "Don't you see Orestes coming to his death?" I saw that awful sight, Pylades and your brother walking together, one downcast and weakened by illness, the other helping him like a brother, attending to his illness and grieving alongside him. When the crowd of Argives was full, a messenger stood up and said, "Who wants to speak, as to whether Orestes should die or not, since he is a matricide?" And Talthubios stood up, the one who helped conquer the Phrygians with his father. And he spoke, always looking to those in power, using slippery words and double meanings: respecting your father’s memory, but not commending your brother, whirling kind and treacherous words together, in the end advocating against disloyal children. But all the while he kept his bright eyes on the friends of Aegisthus. Such is the kind of man here: always subservient to those in power. He's a sycophant, a friend to those in government. After him, the lord Diomedes spoke: he did not want to kill you or your brother, but preferred to live without the stain of bloodshed, punishing you with exile instead. Some shouted how well he spoke, but others didn't approve. And after him some man stood up, a strident babbler, bold and ignorant yet he was persuasive. For whenever someone crooked uses sweet words to charm the multitude, the city will suffer. In that way statesmen can be thought of like orators. And he was that sort of person. He said that you and Orestes should die by stoning, but Tyndareus was the one who fed him these arguments in favor of your death. Another man stood up and countered him. He was not much to look at, but hardworking, a man who seldom ventures into town and to market: a honest farmer who works the land and practices a life beyond reproach. He said that Orestes, the child of Agamemnon, should be crowned: he who was willing to avenge his father, he who killed a godless and wicked woman who would have prevented her husband from raising his army, even if staying at home would ruin him. And to the sensible people, he seemed to speak well. And then no one spoke. Then your brother came forth. And he said, "Citizens of Argos, you who dwell on the Danaian land, by killing my mother I served you no less than my father. For if the women are allowed to kill men without consequence, you will all die, or else become slaves to your wives. I saved you from that fate. If you kill me, the law will relax, and there will be no lack of feminine temerity." But he did not persuade the crowd, although he seemed to speak well: that evil fellow prevailed by bribing multiple people, and he argued that you and your brother should die. Poor Orestes only just persuaded them not to kill him by stoning: he promised death by his own hand on this very day, and he promised your suicide too. Pylades is weeping and bringing him home from the assembly: and a bitter sight is coming to you. But get your sword ready, and a noose for your neck, since you need to die soon: your noble birth has not helped you, nor Pythian Apollo, but instead he has ruined you.  

(Exit MESSENGER at left.)

CHORUS B
O you unhappy maiden, how speechless you are, falling toward the ground with your mouth covered, as if you were about to break into wailing and weeping.

CHORUS
I begin my lament, Pelasgia, by tearing at my cheeks, bloodstained in my bewilderment, and beating my head; these are the things which Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, holds sway over. Let the Kyklopian earth call forth, and let us cut our hair in mourning for the misery of this house. Pity, pity for those who are about to die, who were once the leaders of Hellas.
It has gone, for it has gone! The whole lineage of Pelops is gone, and all the glory that once lived in this home. But malice came from the gods and quickly turned the citizens savage.

CHORUS B
Oh, oh and you peoples full of tears, full of suffering, how ephemeral you are.

CHORUS C
See how fate veers away from our hopes!

CHORUS A
One misery is exchanged for another eventually—

CHORUS
A miserable life for a miserable death. For the length of every life is uncertain.

ELECTRA
If only I could go to that rock that stretches between heaven and earth, the part of Olympus suspended in golden chains, where I may wail my lament for my ancestor Tantalus, who killed his son, setting off the chain of blood guilt. Pelops drove the winged chase of horses in his chariot upon the sea, throwing the corpse of Myrtilos into the swelling waters, at Geraistia with its waves white from the tossing sea. Then the miserable course came to my house, full of sorrow, brought about among the flocks by Hermes, that child of Maia, when the golden lamb became a deadly portent for Atreus, the breeder of horses. Then Eris threw the winged chariot of Helios off course. She skewed the path of the chariot toward Eos instead of evening. And Zeus diverted the course of the seven-tracked Pleiades toward another road, and he exchanged death for death: both the banquet Thyestes gave his name to, and the troubled marriage of Cretan Aerope to his brother Atreus: but the greatest misfortune of all came to me and my father from the painful constraints of our house.

CHORUS
Look now, your brother is approaching! His death is confirmed by vote, and Pylades, who is as loyal as a brother, is coming too, supporting the weak limbs of Orestes. [1017]

(Enter PYLADES supporting ORESTES at left.)

ELECTRA
Ah, me! I can already see your tomb, brother, and the funeral fires in front of it. Ah, me! Seeing your face this way makes me lose my mind.

ORESTES
Will you not be quiet? Don’t give me your womanly wailing, but accept our fate. It is piteous, but nevertheless we must bear our misfortune.

ELECTRA
How can I be silent? Never again will we see the light… this is beyond miserable.
ORESTES
Don’t you kill me. We have enough to deal with already. Let the present misfortunes alone.

ELECTRA (laughing in her grief)
Oh, your youth is miserable, Orestes, and your impending death is too soon.

ORESTES
By the gods, don’t emasculate me; it will bring me to tears to remember my sufferings.

ELECTRA
We are about to die! It is not possible not to lament our misfortune. Moreover it is piteous for all mortals to let go of sweet life.

ORESTES
This day has conquered us: we must fasten nooses above our heads or sharpen swords.

ELECTRA
And you must kill me, brother, so that no Argive will do it and cast shame on the house of Agamemnon.

ORESTES
The blood of our mother is enough: I will not kill you, but you can die by your own hand if you wish.

ELECTRA
I do: and I will not be far behind you by the sword. (A pause.) I wish to throw my arms around your neck.

ORESTES
Yes, take comfort in that empty cheer, if there is any cheer to be had today.

ELECTRA
My dearest brother, for your name is sweet and beloved to me; you and I share one soul.

ORESTES
You will melt me, talking that way. And I wish to embrace you for a small comfort. (Embraces her lovingly.) This is all that remains for us wretches, instead of marriages and children.

ELECTRA
Alas! Could your sword kill us together bring us one burial, one cedar coffin? [1053]

ORESTES
That would be the sweetest thing. Indeed we have no other love. (Kisses her head; she pulls away.)
ELECTRA
So. Cowardly Menelaus did not even speak for you? Did he have no will to save you? That traitor of our father.

ORESTES
He did not show his face. He was too cautious to rescue his family. But let us see how we can die a death worthy of Agamemnon. I will show the city my nobility when I strike my sword into my liver. And you can do something similar. Pylades, be witness to our death, and when we are dead wrap our bodies carefully, and bury us together by the tomb of our father. And farewell: as you can see, I am ready to do it.

(Exit ELECTRA center to get Orestes’ sword.)

PYLADES
Stop! First, I have one complaint for you, if you think I could want to live on after your death.

ORESTES
Why are you called upon to die with me?

PYLADES
Why are you even asking? What is living without your companionship?

ORESTES
You didn’t kill your mother; as I did, unfortunately.

PYLADES
But I helped you. So I should suffer the same punishment.

ORESTES
Don’t die with me. For you have a city, and your father’s home and wealth, unlike me. You did not manage to marry my unlucky sister, whom I betrothed to you out of respect for our friendship. But you should father children from another bed; there are no hard feelings about it. But, Pylades my beloved companion, farewell. Be happy, since we dead cannot be.

[1084]

(Re-enter ELECTRA from center with sword. She sits and begins to polish it, glancing down the road every so often.)

PYLADES
You misunderstood my meaning. May the fruitful earth refuse to soak up my blood, and the air too, if I ever betray you to free myself. For I am a co-conspirator, and I will not escape the penalty. For one thing, I concocted the scheme for which you are dying. So I must die alongside you. As for Electra, I consider her my wife. So it is settled. Since we are about to die, let us agree on how Menelaus might suffer alongside us.

ORESTES
My best friend, if only I could die having seen this revenge.

PYLADES
Now obey me, stay your sword, if I may request it.

ORESTES
I will hold.

PYLADES
Now be quiet. For there are women around, and I don’t trust them.

ORESTES
Don’t worry about them. If they are here, they are friends to us.

PYLADES
Let’s kill Helen, that snake Menelaus loves.

ORESTES
How? I will do it if there is a good opportunity.

PYLADES
Cutting her throat. She is hidden in your house.

ORESTES
Indeed. And she already puts her stamp on everything.

PYLADES
But no longer, once she has Hades for a bridegroom.

ORESTES
But how? She has her foreign comrades about her.

PYLADES
Who? I fear none of the Phrygians.

ORESTES
Since they are lords of mirrors and perfume.

PYLADES
Has she come with her Trojan luxuries?

ORESTES
So much that the whole of Greece is too small for them. I would be willing to die twice if I could succeed here.

PYLADES
Me too, if I could avenge you.

ORESTES
Finish explaining the plan so we may begin.

PYLADES
We enter the house pretending we are about to die.

ORESTES
I have no need to pretend.

PYLADES
We’ll supplicate her with our tears.

ORESTES
So that she will weep for us but secretly be glad.

PYLADES
Then she will understand our point of view.

ORESTES
And then? How shall we contend?

PYLADES
We will have swords hidden in our peploi.

ORESTES
Won’t her attendants kill us first?

PYLADES
We’ll shut them up in different parts of the house.

ORESTES
And we’ll have to kill anyone who won’t be silent.

PYLADES
And anyone who presents a challenge, we’ll attend to him separately.

ORESTES
To kill Helen; I understand. [1130]

PYLADES
Yes. If we unleashed the sword on a more chaste woman, the murder would be infamous. But as it is, Helen will pay the price for all Hellas, whose fathers she killed, when she doomed their children, and she made brides into widows. The citizens will shout for joy and raise a fire to the gods and sing our praises because we’ll have spilled the blood of a wicked woman. You will not
be called a matricide once you’ve killed her, but you will be given a better title, the killer of the murderous Helen. Menelaus does not deserve to be happy while your father and you and your sister die, and your mother… well, I’ll allow that one. It is not polite to speak of it. For him to possess your house would be criminal. May I die if we don’t draw our sword against that woman. Indeed, if we do not kill Helen, we should die by setting fire to the house. At least then Menelaus can’t have it. We will have glory, whether we escape or die trying.

CHORUS
She incited all women to hate her, that child of Tyndareus who dishonored her family.

ORESTES
Alas! There is no one better, nor a more trustworthy companion; no riches, no amount of power is sweeter than you. You devised our plot against Aegisthus. Now again you give me vengeance on an enemy and you are quick on your feet: I will stop praising you now. I want to exact vengeance on my enemy before I die, so that I may destroy the one who betrayed me, so that the one who made me suffer may suffer himself. Indeed, I am the child of Agamemnon, who was considered worthy to lead Greece, not as a tyrant but bearing the favor of the gods: I won’t dishonor him by submitting to death like a slave, but I will release my soul in freedom and take vengeance on Menelaus. For if we accomplish one thing, we would be fortunate. We could be saved. We could become the victors instead of victims. I pray for that; in any case it’s a cheerful thought. [1176]

ELECTRA
I think I have just the thing, brother: salvation for you and him and thirdly for me.

ORESTES
You speak of divine intervention: how can that be? I know how wily you can be.

ELECTRA
Now listen, and you will find out.

ORESTES
Tell me: do not deny me the pleasure.

ELECTRA
You know the daughter of Helen? Of course you do.

ORESTES
I know her, the one my mother raised, Hermione.

ELECTRA
She went to the grave of Clytemnestra…

ORESTES
Doing what? What are you suggesting?
ELECTRA
She went to pour libations over the grave of our mother.

ORESTES
How does that help us?

ELECTRA
We’ll take her hostage when she comes back.

ORESTES
How does that help us?

ELECTRA
If Menelaus should try to get revenge on you for the death of Helen, or on Pylades and me, you can say that you’ll kill Hermione. (Passing him the sword.) You must draw your sword and hold it to her neck. And if he tries to bargain with you, offer Menelaus the chance to die in his daughter’s place. He is weak and gets frustrated quickly. If he wants to let you die, you slit his daughter’s throat. And even if he appears strong at first, soon he will soften: for he is neither brave nor bold. That can be our safety net.

ORESTES
You have the mind of a man, although your body is female, so you are more worthy to live than to die. Pylades, you will have her as your wife if you both live that far.

PYLADES
May it happen; may she come to Phokis, since she is worthy of a noble marriage.

ORESTES
When will Hermione come to the house? Everything else was so clear, and you’re right that the best plan is to take the girl hostage.

ELECTRA
I expect she is near the house now: for she’s been gone about the right amount of time.

ORESTES
Excellent; and now you, sister Electra, wait in front of the house, in case someone comes along to the household, shouts into the house, and strikes the boards to bring the news inside before we are done. We are going inside to the furthest recesses; let’s take up the sword, Pylades. O father, you who live in the house of dark Night, I, your child Orestes, call you to come as an ally to us who are bound. For on your account I have suffered unjustly, and I have been betrayed by your brother, even though I did right. I wish to kill his wife: be our accomplice to this deed. [1230]

ELECTRA
O father, come indeed, if under the earth you hear your children crying! Your children who are dying for your sake.
PYLADES
O kinsman of my father, Agamemnon, hear my prayers and save your children!

ORESTES
I killed my mother…

ELECTRA
I held the sword…

PYLADES
And I released them from fear, and encouraged them.

ORESTES
I call you, father, as an ally.

ELECTRA
And I did not betray you.

PYLADES
Hearing these words, will you rescue your children?

ORESTES
I pour libations with my tears.

ELECTRA
And I too, with wailing.

PYLADES
Stop, and let’s set about the deed. He hears our prayers within the earth. And you, O Zeus my ancestor, and holy Justice, grant success to all three of us. For it is one struggle among friends, one justice, whether we all live or are bound to die. [1245]

(Exeunt PYLADES and ORESTES center.)

ELECTRA
Oh my Mycenaean friends, first in rank of the Argives at Pelasgos.

CHORUS
What are you shouting about, mistress? That honored title is still yours in the Danaian city.

ELECTRA
Some of you, station yourselves along the carriage road; others, stay along the other road as guards of the house.

CHORUS C
Why do you call us to this obligation? Tell me, my friend.
ELECTRA
I fear that someone might discover my brother about to commit bloody murder.

CHORUS
Let us make way, let us make haste.

CHORUS B
I will guard the path toward the east.

CHORUS A
And I will guard the one that bears west.

ELECTRA
Now keep your eyes down, as maidens do.

CHORUS
We are looking here and there, as you told us.

ELECTRA
Cast your eyes around now, look everywhere through your hair, as maidens do.

CHORUS C
Who’s that approaching on the path?

CHORUS A
Who wanders around above the city?

CHORUS B
What farmer is it?

ELECTRA
We are ruined, friends! He’ll reveal our covert ambush to our enemies.

CHORUS
Hold fast and unafraid!

CHORUS A
(after a long pause) Friends, the path seems empty.

ELECTRA
(after a long pause) What? Well, is the coast clear? Give some good news, if the courtyard before you is empty.

CHORUS B
All is well here. But check that no one of the Danaians approaches us.
CHORUS C
No one. There is no company here.

ELECTRA
I am coming closer so I can hear you better.

CHORUS
Why are you quiet? Are you delaying the murder?

ELECTRA
They can’t hear us. Ah, I am wretched in my troubles! Are their swords stunned by her beauty?

CHORUS B
Soon one of the Argives will approach the hall as her ally.

ELECTRA
Now look harder: there is a struggle: but some are inside, and some look outside.

CHORUS C
I am crossing over so I can see everything.

HELEN (INSIDE THE HOUSE)
O Pelasgian Argos, I am being murdered!

ELECTRA
Did you hear? The boys have begun the murder. That shriek was from Helen.

CHORUS
O everflowing power of Zeus, of Zeus, come as the only ally to my friends.

HELEN (INSIDE THE HOUSE)
Menelaus, I am dying! You are close: why don’t you help me?

ELECTRA and CHORUS
Kill her, strike her down, destroy her, ruin her! Throw the sword into her duplicitous face! That woman who deserted her father, deserted her husband, who killed most of the Greeks, killed by the spear near the river, where tears fell with streams of iron weapons around the eddies of Skamandros.

CHORUS B
Silence, silence! I heard a crash from someone’s foot falling on the path near the house. [1312]

ELECTRA
My dearest ladies, our Hermione is near her death: let us stop our shouting. Here she comes, having fallen into our trap: the spoils will be great. Let us stand quietly again, and watch what I
do. I will act as if I do not know what is happening. (Enter HERMIONE from left.) (Assuming a sweet voice) Maiden, did you make it to the grave of Clytemnestra? Did you give it garlands and pour libations to the dead?

HERMIONE
I have come, having entreated her favor. But now I am afraid, since I heard a shout from the house while I was still far away.

ELECTRA
Why should that scare you? Our fortune is lamentable.

HERMIONE
Let it be a good omen: what news do you have?

ELECTRA
Orestes and I are sentenced to die here.

HERMIONE
Oh, no! Woe to my family.

ELECTRA
It is decreed: we must do it.

HERMIONE
So the shout inside the roof came because of this?

ELECTRA
I cried out as a suppliant, falling at the knees of Helen…

HERMIONE
What next? I can’t know more if you don’t tell me.

ELECTRA
…On behalf of Orestes and me, so that we don’t die.

HERMIONE
Then the house shouts justly.

ELECTRA
Why else would we cry out? But come and help us supplicate her. Fall at the feet of your prosperous mother, so that Menelaus might not let us die. You who were raised by my mother, have pity on us and lighten our sufferings. Come here to struggle with us; I will lead you. For you alone hold the end of our salvation.

HERMIONE
I’m going into the house. I’ll save you! (Exit HERMIONE center.)
ELECTRA (*dropping the act completely*)
O friends inside the house, won’t you seize your prey?  [1337]

HERMIONE (*inside*)
Ah! What am I seeing?

ORESTES (*inside*)
You must be silent. For you have come to our salvation, not yours.

ELECTRA (*shouting in, center*)
Hold her, hold her! Point the sword to her neck, keep her quiet, so that Menelaus may learn that we are men, not Phrygian cowards, and learn how we treat cowards here. (*Exit ELECTRA center.*)

CHORUS
Ah, ah, friends, raise a cry and a shout in front of the house, so that the murder may not cause terrible fear in the Argives and make them hasten to help the palace,

CHORUS A
At least not before I see the corpse of Helen

CHORUS B
Bloodstained

CHORUS C
Lying in the house

CHORUS B
Or before we learn the news from servants.

CHORUS A
I know part of the misfortunes, but I don’t know the whole thing clearly.

CHORUS C
Retribution has come for Helen through the justice of the gods.

CHORUS B
For she filled all Hellas with tears on account of that accursed, accursed Trojan Paris, who led Hellas to Ilion.

CHORUS A
The bars of the king’s house crash open—be silent! One of the Phrygians is coming out; we may learn from him how the house is holding up.  [1368]

(*Enter PHRYGIAN from right.*)
PHRYGIAN
I escaped the Argive sword, escaped from death, on my foreign feet, crossing over the cedar porch, over the chamber and the Doric triglyphs, away, away! O earth, O earth, ah! Where shall I flee, strangers, flying on the grey ether or on the sea, which is called Ocean, rolling bull-headed in the bending arms which encircle the earth?

CHORUS
What is it, creature of Helen’s, Trojan boy?

PHRYGIAN
Ilion, Ilion, ah me, ah me! That Phrygian city and holy Mount Ilion with its rich soil, how I bewail your destruction in my fluty melody, in my strange wailing. You were destroyed by her beauty, born from a bird, the swan-plumed child of Leda, that wicked, wicked Helen. (gives a drawn-out cry of anguish) Oh, wretched wailing: wretched Dardania, that birthplace of Ganymede, who is companion of Zeus.

CHORUS
Tell us clearly each thing that happened in the house. For now it's all a jumble.

PHRYGIAN
Ah, for Linus! Ah, Linus! For that is what we foreigners say before we die, whenever royal blood is shed by iron swords. They came to the house, those two lions of Hellas. For one young man, his father was the famous general. The other was the child of Strophius, that tricky boy, sneaky like Odysseus, but trustworthy to his friends, bold and clever, and a deadly snake: may he perish for his cunning. They came inside, and knelt humbly at the throne, one on each side of the wife of the archer Paris, and they were armed. And they threw, oh they threw their hands in supplication around the knees of Helen. (Using CHORUS as extra bodies, he acts out the following scene as he narrates it.) Then the Phrygian servants leapt up from their huddles; they whispered to each other in panic. Some thought there was nothing to fear, but others thought that matricide, that serpent, was weaving a trap for the daughter of Tyndareus. [1424]

CHORUS
And where were you? Or had you fled in fear long before?

PHRYGIAN
It happened that I was fanning a breeze toward the curls of Helen, in the Phrygian custom. I was fanning a breeze by her cheek with a ring of feathers, in the foreign custom. She twisted flax, flax, with her fingers, letting the yarn fall on the ground, she wanted to draw purple cloth as a gift in flax, for the tomb of the Phrygian spoils, a gift to Clytemnestra. Orestes said to that Lakanian woman, he said, “O child of Zeus, put your footsteps on the ground again, turn away from the couch.” And he led her, and she followed since she was not a prophet of the future. And his accomplice, that evil Phokian, had another task. “Out of my way!” he said, and the Phrygians always were cowards. He shut us up in different areas of the house, some by the posts of the horse stables, others in the exhedrae, one here, one there. He scattered us away from our mistress.

CHORUS
What misfortune happened next?

PHRYGIAN
Great mother, mother of Ida, mighty Antaia! I saw murderous happenings and lawless evil inside the palace. Drawing his sword from his purple-bordered peplos in the darkness, he darted his eyes around, looking for people nearby. To her he said: “You will die, you will die. Your wicked husband condemned you, when he betrayed his kin to die in Argos.” Then she wailed and screamed: Ah, ah me, ah me! She threw her white forearm on her chest she beat her miserable head. She took up her gold-sandalled foot to flee: but Orestes caught up with his Mycenaean shoes and threw his fingers in her hair, and he bent back her neck to her shoulder, and he was about to strike into her throat with his black sword.

CHORUS
Where in the house were the Phrygians? Did they help?

PHRYGIAN
With a shout, we threw open the doors and posts of the house, where we had been standing, with battering rams. We ran shouting from all over the house: some holding rocks, others javelins, and others drawn swords in our hands. The vicious Pylades came opposite, like... like Hector, who was Phrygian, or the triple-plumed Ajax, whom I saw once at the gate of Priam. We joined our swords in contest. But it was clear how we Phrygians were inferior in strength to Hellas yet again, for we are lesser in Ares. One fled, one dead, one wounded, that one begging for death: corpses were falling, some about to die, some already gone. We fled through the darkness. Then poor Hermione came into the house, just as her mother was falling to the ground. Orestes ran like a bacchant who drops her thyrsus, ran to kidnap the girl: and again he turned to the daughter of Zeus to slaughter her. She disappeared from the chamber! Simply gone. O Zeus and Gaia and Light and Night, truly it must have been witchcraft or theft by the gods. I don’t know what happened after that, for I stole away as a fugitive. So all Menelaus’ suffering was in vain, suffering in vain for Helen, whom he took back from Troy.

CHORUS C
And now here’s a new sight: for I see Orestes walking out before the house, sword in hand. He looks angry. [1505]

(Enter ORESTES from center.)

ORESTES
Where is he, the one who ran out of the house, fleeing my sword?

PHRYGIAN
I supplicate you, lord, falling before you as is my custom.

ORESTES
Get up! This is not Trojan but Argive land.

PHRYGIAN
According to the learned, it is sweeter in every land to live than die.

ORESTES
So you were the one squawking. Hoping Menelaus would come to your aid, were you?

PHRYGIAN
I… actually, I did it to help you: for you are more worthy.

ORESTES
Oh? Was the daughter of Tyndareus killed justly?

PHRYGIAN
Most justly! If she had had three throats, all three should have been slit.

ORESTES
You speak with a fearful tongue; you don’t really think that.

PHRYGIAN
No! For she destroyed Troy as well as Greece.

ORESTES
Swear it. (If you don’t, I’ll kill you.) Swear you aren’t saying it for my favor.

PHRYGIAN
I swear on my soul, and I would swear truly.

ORESTES
This same fear of iron was in all the Phrygians at Troy.

PHRYGIAN
Take away your sword: for it gleams terribly with blood.

ORESTES
Are you afraid of turning to stone, as if you’d seen a Gorgon?

PHRYGIAN
Not to stone, but rather to a corpse. I don’t know the head of this Gorgon.

ORESTES
You’re a slave and yet you still fear death? But death will release you from your servitude.

PHRYGIAN
Everyone, whether slave or free, rejoices to see the light.

ORESTES
Well said. Your intelligence saves you. But leave now.
PHRYGIAN
You won’t kill me?

ORESTES
You are discharged.

PHRYGIAN
This is a wonderful word you say.

ORESTES
But I may change my mind.

PHRYGIAN
That is not so wonderful.

ORESTES
You’re a fool if you think I would bother to bloody your neck. I left the house on account of your ceaseless shouting: the whole of Argos heard you and is now awakening. I am not afraid to take up my sword against Menelaus; let him come, with his curls bouncing on his proud shoulders. If he brings the Argives against our house, to prosecute the murder of Helen, he’ll receive two deaths: his daughter’s and his wife’s. [1536]

(Exit PHRYGIAN at left Exit ORESTES center.)

CHORUS
O, O fortune! Again the house has fallen to struggle around the heirs of Atreus.

CHORUS B
What shall we do? Shall we announce this to the city?

CHORUS A and C
Or keep silence?

CHORUS A
It is safer to be silent, friends.

CHORUS C
Look! The rising smoke proclaims our fortunes to the heavens.

CHORUS A
They kindle torches to set fire to the house of the Tantalids, and they do not shrink from murder either.

CHORUS
The god holds the end for mortals; the end is whenever he wishes.
CHORUS B
Some great god is against us.

CHORUS C
We have fallen!

CHORUS B
This house has fallen because of the blood, since Myrtilos fell from the chariot.

CHORUS
But now I see Menelaus near the house, that swift-footed Menelaus, who has surely heard the present fortunes. (calling into the house.) Heirs of Atreus, block the entrances, securing them with bars, under the roof. A fortunate man is a terrible misfortune for someone who fares as badly as you, Orestes.

(Enter MENELAUS from left. Exit ORESTES center.)

MENELAUS
I have come because I heard about the bold and terrible deeds done by two lions: for I won’t call them men. I heard that my wife is not dead, but that she vanished unseen; what a foolish rumor, a laughable fabrication of that matricide. Let the house be opened! I say, servants, push open the gates, so that I may rescue my child from the bloodstained hands of men and take the body of my poor, miserable wife too, while her killers must both die by my hand.

(ORESTES appears at right with a bound HERMIONE. PYLADES and ELECTRA follow with torches.)

ORESTES
Don’t beat the doors with your hand; I said Menelaus, you who are so full of boldness. Or I will shatter your head with this cornice block, breaking the ancient roof that was made by masons. The doors are bolted with bars, and those willing to help you are shut up within, motionless inside the house. [1572]

MENELAUS
Ah, what is this? I see a shrine of torches, men on top of the house, and a sword guarding the neck of my daughter.

ORESTES
Do you wish to question or to listen?

MENELAUS
Neither! But necessity compels me to listen.

ORESTES
I am about to kill your daughter, since you asked.
MENELAUS
Didn’t you already commit murder upon murder?

ORESTES
I would have done it, if she hadn’t been stolen by the gods!

MENELAUS
Do you deny it, and say this out of insolence?

ORESTES
No, my denial is a sad one. If only…

MENELAUS
If only what? You’re making me nervous.

ORESTES
If only I’d thrown that polluted woman from Hellas into Hades.

MENELAUS
Give back the corpse of my wife, so that I may put her in a grave.

ORESTES
Demand her from the gods! I will kill your daughter.

MENELAUS
The matricide commits murder after murder?

ORESTES
I am the avenger of my father, whom you betrayed by allowing him to die.

MENELAUS
Your mother’s blood doesn’t satisfy you?

ORESTES
I would never tire of killing wicked women.

MENELAUS
And you, Pylades, are you his accomplice?

ORESTES
He says yes by his silence. Let my talking suffice.

MENELAUS
But you won’t rejoice if you dodge your sentence.
ORESTES
We will not flee, but we will kindle the house in flame.

MENELAUS
You will destroy your ancestral home?

ORESTES
So that you can’t have it, yes, and we’ll sacrifice your daughter to the fire.

MENELAUS
Kill her, then. You’ll pay the price for murder.

ORESTES
So be it.

MENELAUS
Ah, no! Don’t do it!

ORESTES
Now silence. Your suffering is just.

MENELAUS
Remove your sword from my daughter.

ORESTES
Your words are in vain.

MENELAUS
But you are killing my daughter?

ORESTES
Now you speak the truth.

MENELAUS
Ah, me, what shall I do?

ORESTES
Persuade the oncoming Argives…

MENELAUS
Persuade them what?

ORESTES
That we should not die.

MENELAUS
Or you’ll kill my child?

ORESTES
That is correct.

MENELAUS
Is it just for you to live?

ORESTES
And to rule the land.

MENELAUS
Where?

ORESTES
Here, in Pelasgian Argos. [1601]

MENELAUS
Ah, yes, you are fit to touch the holy water…

ORESTES
For why not?

MENELAUS
…and to make a sacrifice before a battle.

ORESTES
And are you a good man?

MENELAUS
My hands are pure.

ORESTES
But your mind is not.

MENELAUS
Who could ever address you?

ORESTES
Whoever respects their father.

MENELAUS
And what about whoever honors his mother?

ORESTES
He was born fortunate.
MENELAUS
But not you.

ORESTES
Wicked women do not please me.

MENELAUS
O, poor Helen…

ORESTES
But not poor me?

MENELAUS
…I brought you back from Troy, only to be a victim…

ORESTES
If only she were that.

MENELAUS
…Enduring countless troubles.

ORESTES
Except where I am concerned.

MENELAUS
I have suffered terribly!

ORESTES
Because you were unhelpful earlier.

MENELAUS
You have me.

ORESTES
You have yourself, since you are a coward. Set fire to this house, Electra, And you, too, Pylades, my most trustworthy friend. Burn down the roof and the walls.

MENELAUS
Oh, land of the Danaids, will you not hasten to help me? For this man forces the city to live with him after he spilled the foul blood of his mother. [1624]

(APOLLO appears on high.)

APOLLO
Menelaus, calm down and cease your raving: Phoebus is calling you. And you, Orestes, who brandish your sword at this girl, may you hear my words. You failed to kill Helen in your eagerness, trying to provoke anger in Menelaus. She is here, you see, in the folds of the ether, saved and not killed. And I saved her from your sword. For she is the child of Zeus and therefore semidivine, sitting with Castor and Pollux in the folds of the ether. You can procure another bride, Menelaus. You, Orestes, must live on the Parrasian plain, outside the borders of this land, for one year. And then it will be called the land of Orestes by Azanians and Arcadians, named after your exile. You will then go to Athens and serve the penalty for a matricide, decreed by the three Eumenides. For the gods will not be judges, so you will complete the sentence. Orestes, it is fated that you will marry Hermione, at whose neck you hold your sword. Although Neoptolemus thinks he will marry her, he will not. For his fate is to die at Delphi while avenging his father Achilles. Give your sister in marriage to Pylades, to whom you promised her before: for a blessed life awaits them. Menelaus, let Orestes rule Argos; go and become lord of the Spartan land, as dowry for the wife who caused you so much trouble. I will put things right with the city, since I compelled Orestes to kill his mother. [1665]

ORESTES
O prophet Loxias, I know your oracles are true. And yet I was afraid that I was hearing some avenging spirit pretending to be you. But all is well, and I will obey your words: (releasing HERMIONE) see, I’ll spare Hermione from slaughter, and I will marry her whenever her father gives her to me.

MENELAUS
O hail, Helen, child of Zeus! I praise your blessed fate, to be settled among the gods. Orestes, I betroth my daughter to you, as Phoebus commanded it: since we are both well-born, the match benefits both of us.

APOLLO
And now each of you, go to your places; cease your quarrel!

MENELAUS
Yes, I will obey you.

ORESTES
I too. I pour libations for our truce, Menelaus, and your oracles, Loxias.

APOLLO
Now go on the road, paying honor to fairest Eirene, the goddess of peace. And I will bring Helen to the halls of Zeus, arriving at the sphere of shining stars, and sitting beside Hera and Hebe, the wife of Heracles, she will eternally be honored among men with libations as a goddess. And along with the sons of Tyndareus she will be a guardian of sailors and of the sea.

CHORUS
O greatly revered Nike, may you preserve my life, and may you never cease crowning the true victor. [1693]
Conclusion

The most important component of my thesis is missing from this document: the performance itself. I have provided a weblink and a hard copy, but at best the recording will be a mediocre substitute for the live performance. The viewer misses out on the experience of the set, the live music, and the interaction between cast and audience. But the recording will allow its viewer to see connections between language and staging, my interpretation of the house, and my approach to putting *Orestes* on the modern stage. The astute observer might also observe my integrated approach to the role of music and the set in creating the atmosphere; my reading of gender dynamics in the play; the liminal role of the Chorus; and my interpretation of the psychological in *Orestes*.

More than anything, this project was a chance for me to explore a play from multiple angles by pulling everything into performance: I was able to hone my translation skills, make a literary argument, and put that argument into practice. The project was sometimes frustrating: at times it felt like I was searching for a cohesive meaning that didn’t exist, and at other times the answer was readily apparent once I reframed the question. I struggled for months with the question of how to stage my argument. Once I broke up the argument into the linguistic and the staging, situating these components as mutually reinforcing, it became clear that the script does the former work for me, while the latter would be best exemplified in an open set.

Staging a performance allowed me to incorporate elements of the text I had been thinking about, but didn’t have the space to discuss in my main line of argumentation. For instance, I was very interested in the relationship of the Chorus to the other characters, and in how the dynamic of power and misogyny plays out in the relationship between Orestes and Electra. Orestes’ point of view becomes increasingly dominant over the course of the play, but his early interactions
with other characters reveal that he is a deeply unreliable narrator. In performance, I was able to take a stand on Orestes’ character: I portrayed him as highly disturbed, hallucinating Furies and magic bows, but also a sulky teenager who happens to have a lot of power. This interpretation added an extra hollowness to the sudden, too-perfect resolution when Apollo appears. Orestes consistently blames Apollo for compelling him to matricide, but Apollo’s ready acceptance of that blame is hard to stomach given that Orestes has wheedled his way out of taking responsibility for any of his actions.

Of course, while I sought to convey all of these elements in the production, much of the performance’s success derives from what the audiences takes away. The audience’s reaction was an important part of the project for two reasons: it was a shorthand for the effect I aimed to create with my reimagining of a Greek tragedy, and it afforded me a relatively objective measure of the play’s success and limitations. As it turns out, my initial worry that audience members without any classical background would miss out on much of the play’s sentiment was warranted: it is, after all, unlikely that someone who had not read my paper would give much thought to my choice of a projected backdrop. One person told me she enjoyed the broadly-applicable endorsement of peace at the show’s end, while someone else thought that the Phrygian was meant as a unilaterally comical caricature of foreigners to assert Athenian dominance. While these readings are understandable, they are also over-simplifications of the complex issues at play.

But even for those people without background, the play proved successful. It was consistently entertaining, and several audience members each night came up to me afterward to tell me that they had learned something useful: a new perspective on politics, context for Greek art and mythology, or the challenges of translation. Hearing these reactions reminded me that this
play was more than a personal academic journey. I offered a performance to the community, and like a work of literature, its interpretation belongs in some way to its interpreters: as carefully planned as every aspect of my production was, it took on a life of its own once it acquired an audience. Some of my audience’s interpretations differed from my intentions: one student reported that I composed the open stage set in order to convey the “room for interpretation” present in the text, and another made connections between the stylized makeup and gender roles, specifically as relevant to the Phrygian. I found that all of these observations broadened my own understanding of what the play offers, and they enriched my appreciation for the relationship between the performance and the audience.

In the process of staging *Orestes*, I learned that it is, in fact, possible to stage an academic argument. Although the particular details may have been lost on audience members who did not read this paper, I believe that the basics came through: the play’s plot and significance are driven by façades rather than tensions related to the interior, and by emptying the house of its symbolic meaning, Euripides calls into question everything the house stood for. On a related note, I received very positive feedback about the introductory speech I gave before the performance. That speech allowed me to introduce some themes for audience members to look for: sanity and subjectivity, the construction of justice, and façades and empty metaphors. Audience members I spoke with appreciated hearing an overview of my interpretations as well as key motifs I was aiming to bring out.

Aside from the purely academic side of this thesis, I learned exactly how much work goes into planning each aspect of production, and how much interpretation it is possible to squeeze into one’s creative decisions. I was in rehearsal for at least six hours per week for over two months, in addition to regular meetings with each of my crew members, and the time I devoted
to the development of my argument. I felt the limitations of the space: there was only room for sixty spectators, and as a result, one night sold out completely. Further, I was unable to control other events occurring in the building, so one performance had significant interference from ambient noise in the hallway. Still, having to figure out all the logistics of staging a performance and influencing every aspect of it increased my dedication to the production exponentially.

Along the way, I also felt an increased sense of responsibility toward Euripides: I felt obligated to carry out my version of his drama to the best of my ability, even if not necessarily to execute it in accordance with his original intentions. I did not want to present a false image of Euripides to my audience by underserving his work.

Moreover, I learned the pedagogical value of performing ancient drama. The dialogue is much easier to follow when the characters deliver the lines with body language and interaction, since it was designed to be heard and seen rather than read. In addition, the performance context forces viewers to be aware of continuity and character interaction—it helps us get away from the textual, literary mode that is the most common form in which modern students encounter ancient plays. No ancient viewer would have encountered a tragedy that way. The performance is a useful reminder, for instance, that all the play’s action occurred in front of the Chorus, and that, unlike modern films, characters could move in and out of view but the set remained constant. The emotional impacts of pathos and catharsis, those qualities of a tragedy that have defined the genre since Aristotle, come at least as much from seeing the characters in misery as from the text itself.

The intrinsic value of staging ancient drama, of allowing audiences to interact with plays as performances, is immeasurable and will follow me in my future research. Before this project, I was adamant that performance was a means to an end for me, in that it helped students
understand the drama and make connections. Now I have come to appreciate the high level of academic thought that is possible in the unconventional format of the theatrical production. Further, performance is a perfect site for interdisciplinary communication and thought. For this project I drew on scholarship in multiple disciplines: classical philology, ancient religion, the archaeology of performance, translation theory, modern performance theory. In the future, I wish to continue expanding the borders and drawing on multiple scholarly traditions. As a direct result of this project, I have become interested in the role of architecture in performance, and I would like to further explore the connections between ancient dramatic texts and their archaeological and architectural contexts. My senior thesis has been transformative and tremendously rewarding; the sheer joy of the production sustained me through countless wanderings, and the project has taught me more about ancient drama and multidisciplinary analysis than I ever imagined it could.
Bibliography


