

saluting you, because you are not an American, which is regrettable. In America there are not many great men. Americans are neither great nor small, but middling and of sound constitution. Stop. This tribute has its reservation. You discovered America four centuries too soon. You ought to be coming there now, yes sir! Still, it's all right as it is. It only remains for me to wish you good luck in this age in which it is possible that it will be shown that you did not exist, and in which statues go out of fashion remarkably quickly. Full stop.

[*At a signal from the speaker, the musicians attack Luther's chorale, Ein feste Burg. The AMERICAN, the BALLERINA, and BUFFALO BILL—the last of these punctuating the song with revolver shots—howl the following quatrain to the rudimentary music:—*]

Columbus, we extol thy name,  
Nor ask we therefore pardon.  
We sing to thy immortal fame  
With voice and with bombardon.

[*The procession goes off cacophonically. Silence. The lights go out and the stage is drowned in shadow. On the base, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS moves. He takes out handkerchief and begins to weep.*]

COLUMBUS. It's no good seeing things from up above. It does something to you . . . when you are sensitive like me. There's nothing you can do about anything. You have to be a statue to understand. . . .

## JEAN GIRAUDOUX

1882-1944

better place in which to live. He insisted "that the real life of a people can only be great if their unreal life, the life of the imagination and the spirit, is great. A people's force lies in its dreams." Whether the theatre has made the world a better place in which to live is questionable, but there is no doubt that Giraudoux was in large measure responsible for unleashing those forces that have brought the French theatre to its position of dominance in our time.

JEAN GIRAUDOUX described the theatre in his *Paris Impromptu* as "a world of light, poetry, and imagination," a magical place where reality resides in the unreal. And no dramatist in the modern theatre was more of a magician than this diplomat turned playwright who revitalized the French theatre. Today we think of the French as having one of the most exciting and alive theatres in the world, but we tend to forget that from the time of Victor Hugo and Dumas  *fils* until the opening of Giraudoux's *Siegfried* in 1928, France produced only one playwright of international repute—Henri Becque. It can be said without fear of exaggeration that no one man was more responsible for the renaissance of the contemporary French theatre than Jean Giraudoux.

Giraudoux's theatre is a strange mixture combining the spirit of German romanticism with the traditions of French classicism. He used legends, history, and classical myths as the basic framework for most of his plays and then infused them with a delicate fantasy which is gay and pixie-ish at the same time that it is bitter, sad, and even ironic. The result is a gossamer theatrical world which is hospitable to every form of free-wheeling irrationality and at the same time is extremely close to the most somber aspects of everyday reality. However, Giraudoux was first of all a poet, and the most noticeable aspect of his drama is the verve and polish of the language. It is a language which has been transformed in such a way that it is capable of expressing in dramatic terms Giraudoux's belief in the essential goodness of life. "The theatre," he wrote, "is not an algebraic formula but a show; not arithmetic but magic. It should appeal to the imagination and the senses, not the intellect. For this reason the playwright must have literary ability, for it is his style that shines into the minds and hearts of the audience. Its poetry need not be understood any more than sunlight need be understood to be enjoyed." If the playwright-magician succeeds in communicating to his audiences through feelings, Giraudoux believed the theatre can do a great deal to make the world a

## TWO LAWS<sup>1</sup>

By Jean Giraudoux

Two laws govern—if I may thus express myself—the eternal status of the playwright.

The first law defines the sad and slightly ridiculous position of the playwright toward those of his characters he has created and given to the theatre. Just as a character, before being played by an actor, is docile toward the author, familiar, and a part of him—as you may judge from my own creations—so once he appears before the audience he becomes a stranger and indifferent. The first actor who plays him represents the first in a series of reincarnations by which the character draws further and further away from his creator and escapes him forever.

In fact, this is true of the play in its entirety. From the first performance on, it belongs to the actors. The author wandering in the wings is a kind of ghost whom the stagehands detest if he listens in or is indiscreet. After the hundredth performance, particularly if it is a good play, it belongs to the public. In reality the only thing the playwright can call his own is his bad plays. The independence of those of his characters who have succeeded is complete: the life they lead on road tours or in America is a constant denial of their filial obligations. So while the hero of your novels follows you everywhere, calling you “father” or “papa,” those of your stage characters you chance to meet—as I have—in Carcassonne or Los Angeles, have become total strangers to you.

It was largely to punish them for this independence that Goethe, Claudel, and so many other writers wrote a new ver-

<sup>1</sup> *Two Laws* is from *Visitations* by Jean Giraudoux (Neuchâtel and Paris: *Ides et Calendes*). This translation, by Joseph Bernstein, appeared in *Playwrights on Playwriting* published by Hill & Wang, © 1961 by Toby Cole, and is reprinted here by permission of Toby Cole.

sion for their favorite heroines—but in vain. The new Marguerite, the new Héléne, or the new Violaine left their creators just as quickly. Once I was at a performance of Claudel's *Tidings Brought to Mary*. That day, at least, this law operated in my favor: I noted that the play belonged more to me than to Claudel.

How many playwrights are forced to seek in an actor or actress the memory or reflection of their sons and daughters who have escaped; just as, in daily life, other parents look for the same thing in a son-in-law or daughter-in-law. . . . On the terrace of the Café Weber, in the lobby during a dress rehearsal, on the lawn of the country house of a noted actress, how often we have met such couples: Feydeau and Mme. Cassive, Jules Renard and Suzanne Desprez, Maurice Donnay and Réjane. The woman slightly inattentive, the man alert, reminiscing, chatty, full of questions, was talking of his absent "child."

The second law, a corollary and inverse of the first, defines the wonderful position of the playwright toward his era and its events, and indicates his role therein. Here, if I wish to be sincere, I must strip myself and my colleagues of all false modesty. The figure who in the play is merely a voice, without personality, without responsibility, implacable, but a historian and an avenger, exists in a given era in flesh and blood: the playwright himself. Of all writers in the theatre worthy of the name, one should be able to say, when they appear: Add the archangel! It is futile to believe that a year or a century can find the resonance and elevation ultimately befitting the emotional debate and effort represented by each period of our passage on earth, if it does not have a spokesman of its tragedy or drama in order to reach its heights or plumb its depths. Tragedy and drama are the confession which humanity—this army of salvation and ruin—must also make in public, without reticence and in loudest tones, for the echo of its voice is clearer and more real than its voice itself. Make no mistake about it. The relationship between the theatre and religious ceremonial is obvious; it is no accident that in former times plays were given on all occasions in front of our cathedrals. The theatre is most at home on the open space in front of a church. That is what the audience goes to, on gala evenings in the theatre: toward the illuminated confession of its petty and giant destinies.

Calderón is humanity confessing its thirst for eternity,

Corneille its dignity, Racine its weakness, Shakespeare its appetite for life, Claudel its state of sin and salvation, Goethe its humanity, Kleist its vividness. Epochs have not come to terms with themselves unless crowds, dressed in their most striking costumes of confession, so as to increase the solemnity of the occasion, come to these radiant confessionals called theatres and arenas, to listen to their own avowals of cowardice and sacrifice, hatred and passion. And unless they also cry: Add the prophet!

For there is no theatre save that of divination. Not that false divination which gives names and dates, but the real thing: the one which reveals to men these amazing truths—that the living must live, that the living must die, that autumn follows summer, spring follows winter, that there are four elements, happiness, millions of catastrophes, that life is a reality, that it is a dream, that man lives by peace, that man lives by blood; in short, what they will never know.

That is theatre: the public recall of those incredible splendors whose visions disturb and overwhelm audiences by night. But—and this it is which heartens me—already by dawn the lesson and the memory are diluted, no doubt in order to make the writer's mission a daily one. Of such is the performance of a play: the sudden awareness in the spectator of the permanent state of this living and indifferent humanity—passion and death.

*Translated by Joseph M. Bernstein*



# ELECTRA<sup>1</sup>

*Translated by Winifred Smith*

## CHARACTERS

ORESTES  
THE EUMENIDES, *first as three little girls, later as fifteen-year-olds*  
GARDENER  
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL  
AGATHA, *his young wife*  
AEGISTHUS  
BEGGAR  
CLYTEMNESTRA  
ELECTRA  
YOUNG MAN  
CAPTAIN  
NARSES' WIFE  
GUESTS, SERVANTS, MAIDS, SOLDIERS

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, 1955, by Winifred Smith. Printed by permission of Ninon Tallon Karlweis. Published in French as *Electre*, Copyright, 1937, by B. Grasset, Paris. Caution: No part of this play may be written or performed without application in writing to Ninon Tallon Karlweis, 57 West 58th Street, New York, N.Y. 10019, exclusive agent for the works of Jean Giraudoux.

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

[A stranger, ORESTES, enters, escorted by three little girls, just as, from the opposite side, the gardener comes in dressed for a festival, and accompanied by guests from the village.]

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. How fine the gardener looks!  
SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Of course! It's his wedding day.  
THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Here it is, sir, your Agamemnon's palace!  
STRANGER. What a strange façade! Is it straight?  
FIRST LITTLE GIRL. No. There's no right side to it. You think you see it, but that's a mirage. Like the gardener you see coming, who wants to speak to you. He's not coming. He won't be able to say a word.  
SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Or he'll bray—or meow——  
GARDENER. The façade is perfectly straight, stranger. Don't listen to these liars. You are confused because the right side is built of stones from Gaul and sweat at certain seasons; that the people say the palace is weeping. The left side is built of marble from Argos, which—no one knows why—will suddenly be flooded with sunshine, even at night. Then they say the palace laughs. Right now the palace is laughing and crying at the same time.  
FIRST LITTLE GIRL. So it's sure not to be mistaken.  
SECOND LITTLE GIRL. It's really a widow's palace.  
FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Or of childhood memories.  
STRANGER. I can't remember seeing such a sensitive building anywhere.  
GARDENER. Have you already visited the palace?  
FIRST LITTLE GIRL. As a baby.  
SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Twenty years ago.  
THIRD LITTLE GIRL. He couldn't walk yet.  
GARDENER. But he must remember if he saw it.

STRANGER. All I can remember of Agamemnon's palace is a mosaic. They set me down on a square of tigers when I was naughty and on a hexagon of flowers when I was good—and I remember creeping from one to the other across some birds.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. And over a beetle.

STRANGER. How do you know that, child?

GARDENER. And did your family live in Argos?

STRANGER. And I remember many, many bare feet. Not a face, faces were way up in the sky, but lots of bare feet. I tried to touch the gold rings under the edges of the skirts; some ankles were joined by chains, slaves' ankles. I remember two little feet, very white ones, the barest, the whitest. Their steps were always even, timid, measured by an invisible chain. I imagine they were Electra's. I must have kissed them, mustn't I? A baby kisses everything it touches.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Anyway that would have been the only kiss Electra ever had.

GARDENER. It surely would!

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Jealous, gardener?

STRANGER. Electra still lives in the palace?

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Still. But not much longer.

STRANGER. Is that her window, the one with jasmine?

GARDENER. No. That's the room where Atreus, the first king of Argos, killed his brother's sons.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. The dinner when he served up their hearts took place in the room next to it. I'd love to know how they tasted.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Did he cut them up or cook them whole?

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. And Cassandra was strangled in the sentry box.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. They caught her in a net and stabbed her. She yelled like a crazy woman, through her veil. I'd love to have seen it.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. That all happened in the laughing wing, as you see.

STRANGER. The one with roses?

GARDENER. Stranger, don't try to connect the windows with flowers. I'm the palace gardener. I plant them at random. They're just flowers.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Not at all. There are flowers and flowers. Phlox doesn't suit Thyestes.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Nor mignonette Cassandra.

GARDENER. Oh, be quiet! The window with the roses, stranger, is the one of the rooms where our king, Agamemnon, coming back from the war, slipped into the pool, fell on his sword and killed himself.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. He took his bath after his death. About two minutes after. That's the difference.

GARDENER. That's Electra's window.

STRANGER. Why is it so high up, almost on the roof?

GARDENER. So she can see her father's tomb.

STRANGER. Why is she there?

GARDENER. Because it's Orestes' old room, her brother's. Her mother sent him out of the country when he was two and he's not been heard of since.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Listen, sisters, listen! They're talking about Orestes!

GARDENER. Will you clear out! Leave us! You're just like flies.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. We certainly won't leave. We're with this stranger.

GARDENER. Do you know these girls?

STRANGER. I met them at the door. They followed me in.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. We followed him because we like him.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Because he's a lot better looking than you are, gardener.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. No caterpillars in his beard.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Nor June bugs in his nose.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. If flowers are to smell sweet, the gardener has to smell bad.

STRANGER. Be polite, children, and tell us what you do all the time.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. What we do is, we're not polite.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. We lie, we slander, we insult.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. But specially, we recite.

STRANGER. And what do you recite?

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. We never know ahead of time—we invent as we go along. But we're very, very good.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. The king of Mycenae, whose sister-in-law we insulted, said we were very, very good.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. We say all the bad things we can think up.

GARDENER. Don't listen to them, stranger. No one knows who they are. They've been wandering about the town for two days without friends or family. If we ask who they are,

they pretend they're the little Eumenides. And the horrible thing is that they grow and get fat as you look at them. Yesterday they were years younger than today. Come here, you!

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Is he rude, for a bridegroom!

GARDENER. Look at her! See how her eyelashes grow. Look at her bosom. I understand such things, I've seen mushrooms grow. They grow fast, like an orange.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Poisonous things always win out.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. [to the FIRST LITTLE GIRL]. Really? You're growing a bosom?

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Are we going to recite or not?

STRANGER. Let them recite, gardener.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Let's recite Clytemnestra, Electra's mother—You agree? Clytemnestra?

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. We agree.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Queen Clytemnestra has a bad color. She uses rouge.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Her color is bad because she sleeps badly.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. She sleeps badly because she's afraid.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. What is Queen Clytemnestra afraid of?

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Of everything.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. What's everything?

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Silence. Silences.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Noise. Noises.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. The idea that midnight is near. That the spider on its thread is about to pass from the time of day when it brings good luck to the time when it brings bad luck.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Of everything red, because blood is red.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Queen Clytemnestra has a bad color. She puts on blood.

GARDENER. What a silly story!

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Good, isn't it?

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. See how the end goes back to the beginning—couldn't be more poetic!

STRANGER. Very interesting.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. As you're interested in Electra we can recite about her. You agree, sisters? We can recite what she was like at our age.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. We certainly do agree!

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Even before we were born, before yesterday, we agreed.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Electra amuses herself by making Orestes fall out of his mother's arms.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Electra waxes the steps of the throne so her uncle, Aegisthus, will measure his length on the marble.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. Electra is preparing to spit in the face of her little brother, Orestes, if he ever returns.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Of course, *that* isn't true, but it'd be a good story.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. For nineteen years she's prepared poisonous spittle in her mouth.

THIRD LITTLE GIRL. She's thinking of your slugs, gardener, to make her mouth water more.

GARDENER. Now stop, you dirty little vipers!

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Oh, ha, ha, the bridegroom gets mad!

STRANGER. He's right. Get out!

GARDENER. And don't come back!

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. We'll come back tomorrow.

GARDENER. Just try to! The palace is forbidden to girls of your age.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Tomorrow we'll be grown up.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Tomorrow will be the day after Electra's marriage to the gardener. We'll be grown up.

STRANGER. What are they saying?

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. You've not defended us, stranger. You'll be sorry for that.

GARDENER. Horrible little beasts! You'd think they were three little Fates. Dreadful to be a child Fate!

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Fate shows you her tail, gardener. Watch out if it grows.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL. Come, sisters. Let's leave them both in front of their tainted wall.

[*The little EUMENIDES go out, the GUESTS shrinking away from them in terror.*]

### Scene 2

[*The STRANGER. The GARDENER. The PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL and his young wife, AGATHA THEOCATHOCLES. VILLAGERS.*]



STRANGER. What did these girls say? That you are marrying Electra, gardener?

GARDENER. She'll be my wife an hour from now.

AGATHA. He'll *not* marry her. We've come to prevent that.

PRESIDENT. I'm your distant cousin, gardener, and the Vice President of the Council; so I've a double right to advise you. Run away to your radishes and squashes. Don't marry Electra.

GARDENER. Aegisthus orders me to.

STRANGER. Am I crazy? If Agamemnon were alive, Electra's wedding would be a festival for all Greece—and Aegisthus gives her to a gardener, whose family, even, objects! Don't tell me Electra is ugly or hunchbacked!

GARDENER. Electra is the most beautiful girl in Argos.

AGATHA. Oh, she's not too bad looking.

PRESIDENT. And she's perfectly straight. Like all flowers that grow in the shade.

STRANGER. Is she backward? Feeble-minded?

PRESIDENT. She's intelligence personified.

AGATHA. An especially good memory. Not always for the same thing, though. I don't have a good memory. Except for your birthday, darling, *that* I never forget.

STRANGER. What can she have done, or said, to be treated this way?

PRESIDENT. She does nothing, says nothing. But she's always *here*.

AGATHA. She's here now.

STRANGER. She has a right to be. It's her father's palace. It's not her fault he's dead.

GARDENER. I'd never have dreamed of marrying Electra, but as Aegisthus orders me to, I don't see why I'd be afraid.

PRESIDENT. You have every reason to be afraid. She's the kind of woman that makes trouble.

AGATHA. And you're not the only one! Our family has everything to fear.

GARDENER. I don't understand you.

PRESIDENT. You will understand. Life can be pleasant, can't it!

AGATHA. Very pleasant! Immensely so!

PRESIDENT. Don't interrupt me, darling, especially just to repeat what I say. It *can* be very pleasant. Everything has a way of settling itself in life—spiritual suffering can be cured more quickly than cancer, and mourning than a sty.

Take any group of human beings at random, each will have the same percentage of crime, lies, vice, and adultery.

AGATHA. That's a horrid word, adultery, darling.

PRESIDENT. Don't interrupt me, especially to contradict! How does it happen that in one group life slips by softly, conventionally, the dead are forgotten, the living get on well together, while in another there's hell to pay? It's simply that in the latter there's a woman who makes trouble.

STRANGER. That means there's a conscience in the second group.

AGATHA. I can't help thinking of your word, adultery—such a horrid word!

PRESIDENT. Be quiet, Agatha. A conscience, you say! If criminals don't forget their sins, if the conquered don't forget their defeats, if there are curses, quarrels, hatreds, the fault is not with humanity's conscience, which always tends toward compromise and forgetfulness, it lies with ten or fifteen women who make trouble.

STRANGER. I agree with you. Those ten or fifteen women save the world from egoism.

PRESIDENT. They save it from happiness! I know Electra. Let's agree that she is what you say—justice, generosity, duty. But it's by justice, generosity, duty, and not by egoism and easy going ways, that the state, individuals, and the best families are ruined.

AGATHA. Absolutely! But why, darling? You've told me, but I forget.

PRESIDENT. Because those three virtues have in common the one element fatal to humanity—implacability. Happiness is never the lot of implacable people. A happy family makes a surrender. A happy epoch demands unanimous capitulation.

STRANGER. You surrendered at the first call?

PRESIDENT. Alas, no! Some one else got in first. So I'm only the vice president.

GARDENER. Against what is Electra implacable? She goes every night to her father's tomb, is that all?

PRESIDENT. I know. I've followed her. Along the same road which my duty made me take one night, pursuing our most dangerous murderer, along the same river I followed and saw the greatest innocent in Greece. A horrible walk,

behind the two of them. They stopped at the same places, at the yew, at the corner of the bridge, at the thousand-year-old milestone, all made the same signs to innocence and to crime. But because the murderer was there, the night was bright, peaceful, clear. He was the kernel taken out of the fruit, which, in a tart, might have broken your tooth. Electra's presence, on the contrary, confused light and darkness, even spoiled the full moon. Have you seen a fisherman who, before going out to fish, arranges his bait? All the way along the river, that was she. Every evening she spreads her net for everything that without her would have abandoned this pleasant, agreeable earth—remorse, confessions, old blood stains, rust, bones of murdered men, a mass of accusations. In a short time everything will be ready for the fisherman to pass by.

STRANGER. He always comes, sooner or later.

PRESIDENT. That's not so.

AGATHA [*much taken by the STRANGER.*] A mistake!

PRESIDENT. This child herself sees the leak in your argument. A triple layer of earth daily piles up over our sins, our failures, our crimes, and stifles their worst effects! Forgetfulness, death, human justice. It is madness to remember those things. A horrible country, one where because of an avenger of wrongs, ghosts walk, dead men, half asleep—where no allowance is ever made for human weakness, or perjury, where a ghost and an avenger constantly threaten. When guilty men's sleep continues to be more troubled after legal prosecution than the sleep of an innocent, society is terribly disturbed. When I look at Electra, I'm troubled by the sins I committed in my cradle.

AGATHA. And I by my future sins. I'll never commit them, darling. You know that. Especially that adultery, which you will talk about. But those other sins already bother me.

GARDENER. I'm rather of Electra's opinion. I don't much care for wicked people. I love truth.

PRESIDENT. Do you know what truth is for our family that you proclaim it so openly? A quiet, well-thought-of family, rising fast. You'll not deny my assertion that you are the least important member of it. But I know by experience that it's not safe to venture on thin ice. It won't be ten days, if you marry Electra, before the discovery—I'm just inventing this—that our old aunt, when a young girl, strangled her baby so her husband wouldn't find out about

it, and in order to quiet suspicion, stopped hushing up the various aspersions on her grandfather's virtue. My little Agatha, in spite of being gaiety itself, can't sleep because of all this. You are the only one who doesn't see Aegisthus' trick. He wants to pass on to the Theocathocles family everything that might some day throw a sinister light on the Atrides.

STRANGER. And what have the Atrides to fear?

PRESIDENT. Nothing. Nothing that I know of; it's like every happy family or couple, every satisfied person. Yet it does have to fear the most dangerous enemy in the world, who would eat it through to the bone, Electra's ally, unpromising justice.

GARDENER. Electra loves my garden. If she's a little nervous, the flowers will do her good.

AGATHA. But she'll not do the flowers good.

PRESIDENT. Certainly. You'll get to know your fuchsias and geraniums. You'll see that they're not just pretty symbols. They'll show their knavery and their ingratitude. Electra in the garden is justice and memory among the flowers—that means hatred.

GARDENER. Electra is devout. All the dead are for her.

PRESIDENT. The dead! The murdered, half melted into the murderers, the shades of the robbed mingled with those of the thieves, rival families scattered among each other, and saying, "Oh, Heavens! here's Electra! And we were so peaceful."

AGATHA. Here comes Electra!

GARDENER. No, not yet. It's Aegisthus. Leave us, stranger; Aegisthus doesn't like strange faces.

PRESIDENT. You, too, Agatha. He's rather too fond of well-known women's faces.

AGATHA [*with marked interest in the STRANGER's good looks.*] Shall I show you the way, handsome stranger?

[AEGISTHUS enters, to the hurrahs of the GUESTS, as SERVANTS set up his throne, and place a stool beside a pillar.]

### Scene 3

[AEGISTHUS. The PRESIDENT. The GARDENER. SERVANT.]

AEGISTHUS. Why the stool? What's the stool for?

SERVANT. For the beggar, my lord.

AEGISTHUS. What beggar?

SERVANT. The god, if you prefer. This beggar has been wandering through the city for several days. We've never seen a beggar who's so much a beggar, so it's thought he must be a god. We let him go wherever he likes. He's prowling around the palace now.

AEGISTHUS. Changing wheat to gold? Seducing the maids?

SERVANT. He does no harm.

AEGISTHUS. A queer god! The priests haven't found out yet whether he's a rascal or Jupiter?

SERVANT. The priests don't want to be asked.

AEGISTHUS. Friends, shall we leave the stool here?

PRESIDENT. I think it will be better to honor a beggar than to insult a god.

AEGISTHUS. Leave the stool there. But if he comes, warn us. We'd like to be just a group of human beings for a few minutes. And don't be rude to him. Perhaps he is delegated by the gods to attend Electra's marriage. The gods invite themselves to this marriage, which the President considers an insult to his family.

PRESIDENT. My lord . . .

AEGISTHUS. Don't protest. I heard everything. The acoustics in this palace are extraordinary. The architect apparently wanted to listen to the council's discussions of his salary and bonus; he built it full of echoing passages.

PRESIDENT. My lord . . .

AEGISTHUS. Be quiet. I know everything you're about to say on the subject of your fine honest family, your worthy sister-in-law, the baby-killer, your uncle, the satirist, and our nephew, the slanderer.

PRESIDENT. My lord . . .

AEGISTHUS. An officer, in a battle, to whom the King's standard is given to turn the enemy's fire on him, carries it with more enthusiasm. You're losing your time. The gardener will marry Electra.

SERVANT. Here is the beggar, my lord.

AEGISTHUS. Detain him a moment. Offer him a drink. Wine is appropriate for a beggar or a god.

SERVANT. God or beggar, he's drunk already.

AEGISTHUS. Then let him come in. He'll not understand us, though we must speak of the gods. It might even be amusing to talk about them before him. Your notion of Electra, President, is true enough, but it's peculiar, definitely middle-

class. As I'm the Regent, allow me to give you more elevated philosophical ideas. You believe in the gods, President?

PRESIDENT. Do you, my lord?

AEGISTHUS. My dear President, I've often asked myself if I believe in the gods. Asked myself because it's the only problem a statesman must decide for himself. I do believe in the gods. Or rather, I believe I believe in the gods. But I believe in them, not as great caretakers and great watchmen, but as great abstractions. Between space and time, always oscillating between gravitation and emptiness, there are the great indifferences. Those are the gods. I imagine them, not constantly concerned with that moving mould on the earth which is humanity, but as having reached the stage of serenity and universality. That is blessedness, the same thing as unconsciousness. They are unconscious at the top of the ladder of being, as the atom is at the bottom. The difference is that theirs is the unconsciousness of lightning, omniscient, thousand-faceted, so that in their normal state, like diamonds, powerless and deaf, they only react to light, to omens, without understanding them.

BEGGAR [*at last seated, feels he must applaud*]. Well said! Bravo!

AEGISTHUS. Thanks. On the other hand, President, it's undeniable that sometimes there seem to be interruptions in human life so opportune and extensive that it's possible to believe in an extraordinary superhuman interest or justice. Such events have something superhuman or divine about them, in that they are like coarse work, not at all well designed. The plague breaks out in a town which has sinned by impiety or folly, but it also ravages the neighboring city, a particularly holy one. War breaks out when a nation becomes degenerate and vile, but it destroys all the just, the brave, and preserves the cowards. Or, whose ever the fault, or by whom committed, it's the same family that pays, innocent or guilty. I know a mother of seven children, who always spanked the same child—she was a divine mother. This fits our idea of the gods, that they are blind boxers, always satisfied by finding the same cheeks to slap, the same bottoms to spank. We might even be surprised if we understood the confusion that comes from a sudden waking to beatitude, that their blows weren't given more at random; that the wife of a good man, and not a per-

jurer's, is brained by a shutter in a wind storm; that accidents strike down pilgrims and not troops. Always humanity suffers. . . . I'm speaking generally. We see crows or deer struck down by an inexplicable epidemic—perhaps the blow intended for mankind went astray, either up or down. However it be, it's certain that the chief duty of a statesman is to watch fiercely that the gods are not shaken out of their lethargy, and to limit the harm they do to such reactions as sleepers snoring, or to thunder.

BEGGAR. Bravo! That's very clear! I understand it very well!

AEGISTHUS. Charmed, I'm sure.

BEGGAR. It's truth itself. For example, look at the people walking along the roads. Sometimes every hundred feet you'll see a dead hedgehog. They go over the roads at night by tens, male and female, and get crushed. You'll say they're fools, that they could find their mates on their side of the road. I can't explain it, but love, for hedgehogs, begins by crossing a road. What the devil was I trying to say? I've lost the thread. . . . Go on, it'll come back to me.

AEGISTHUS. Indeed! What is he trying to say!

PRESIDENT. Shall we talk about Electra, my lord?

AEGISTHUS. What do you think we've been talking about? Our charming little Agatha? We were talking only about Electra, President, and about the need I feel to get her out of the royal family. Why, since I've been Regent, while other cities are devoured by dissension, other citizens by moral crises, are we alone satisfied with other people and with ourselves? Why are we so rich? Why in Argos alone are raw materials so dear and retail prices so low? Why, when we're exporting more cows, does butter go down in price? Why do storms pass by our vineyards, heresies our temples, animal diseases our barns? Because, in this city, I wage merciless war against all who signal to the gods.

PRESIDENT. What do you mean, signal to the gods?

BEGGAR. There! I've found it!

AEGISTHUS. Found what?

BEGGAR. My story, the thread of my story. I was speaking of the death of hedgehogs.

AEGISTHUS. One moment, please. We're speaking of the gods.

BEGGAR. To be sure! Gods come first, hedgehogs second. But I wonder if I'll remember.

AEGISTHUS. There are no two ways of signaling, President: it's done by separating one's self from the crowd, climbing

a hill and waving a lantern or a flag. The earth is betrayed, as is a besieged city, by signals. The philosopher signals from his roof, the poet or desperate man signals from his balcony or his swimming pool. If for ten years the gods have not meddled with our lives, it's because I've kept the heights empty and the fairgrounds full. I've ordered dreamers, painters, and chemists to marry; and because, in order to avoid racial trouble between our citizens—something that can't help marking human beings as different in the eyes of the gods—I've always given great importance to misdemeanors and paid slight attention to crimes. Nothing keeps the gods so quiet as an equal value set on murder and on stealing bread. I must say the courts have supported me splendidly. Whenever I've been forced to be severe, they've overlooked it. None of my decisions has been so obvious as to allow the gods to avenge it. No exile. I kill. An exile tends to climb up a steep road, just like a ladybird. I never execute in public. Our poor neighboring cities betray themselves by erecting their gallows on the top of a hill; crucify at the bottom of a valley. Now I've said everything about Electra.

GARDENER. What have you said?

AEGISTHUS. That there's just one person in Argos now to give a signal to the gods, and that's Electra. What's the matter?

[BEGGAR moves about among the GUESTS.]

BEGGAR. Nothing's the matter. But I'd better tell you my story now. In five minutes, at the rate you're talking, it won't make sense. It's just to support what you say. Among those crushed hedgehogs you'll see dozens who seem to have died a hedgehog's death. Their muzzles flattened by horse's hoofs, their spines broken under wheels, they're just smashed hedgehogs, nothing more. Smashed because of the original sin of hedgehogs—which is crossing the main or side road on the pretext that the snail or partridge egg on the far side tastes better but actually to make hedgehog love. That's their affair. No one stops them. Suddenly you see a little young one, not flattened like the others, not so dirty, his little paw stretched out, his lips closed, very dignified, and you feel that he's not died a hedgehog's death, but was struck down for someone else, for you. His cold little eye is your eye. His spikes, your beard. His blood, your blood. I always pick up those little

ones, they're the youngest, the tenderest to eat. A year goes by, a hedgehog no longer sacrifices himself for mankind. You see I understand. The gods were mistaken, they wanted to strike a perjurer, a thief, and they kill a hedgehog. A young one.

AEGISTHUS. Very well understood.

BEGGAR. And what's true of hedgehogs holds for other species.

PRESIDENT. Of course! Of course!

BEGGAR. Why, of course? That's all wrong. Take the martin. Even though you're a President of the Council, you'll never pretend to have seen birds dying for you?

AEGISTHUS. Will you let us go on talking about Electra?

BEGGAR. Talk! Talk! But I must add, when you see dead men, many seem to have died for bulls or pigs or turtles, not many for mankind. A man who seems to have died for man, he's hard to find, or even for himself. Are we going to see her?

AEGISTHUS. See whom?

BEGGAR. Electra. I'd like to see her before she's killed.

AEGISTHUS. Electra killed? Who says Electra's to be killed?

BEGGAR. You.

PRESIDENT. There's been no thought of killing Electra.

BEGGAR. I have one gift. I don't understand words—I've had no education—but I do understand people. You want to kill Electra.

PRESIDENT. You don't understand at all, beggar. This man is Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin, and Electra's his darling niece.

BEGGAR. Are there two Electras? The one he was talking about who ruins everything, and the other one, his darling niece?

PRESIDENT. No! There's only one.

BEGGAR. Then he wants to kill her. No doubt of it. He wants to kill his darling niece.

PRESIDENT. I repeat, you don't understand in the least.

BEGGAR. Oh, I move about a lot. I knew a couple, he was called Narses. She was better than he. She was sick, her breathing bad. But a great deal better than he. No comparison.

GARDENER. He's drunk, a beggar, you know.

PRESIDENT. He's raving. He's a god.

BEGGAR. No. I started to tell you they had a wolf cub. It was

their darling little pet. But one day around noon, wolf cubs, you know, grow up. They couldn't foretell the day. Two minutes before noon they were petting her, one minute after twelve she jumped at their throats. I didn't mind about him!

AEGISTHUS. Well?

BEGGAR. Well, I was just passing by. And I killed the wolf. She was beginning to eat Narses' cheeks, she liked them. Narses' wife got away, not too badly hurt. Thanks! You'll see her. She's coming for me pretty soon.

AEGISTHUS. What's the connection . . . ?

BEGGAR. Oh, don't expect to see an Amazon queen. Varicose veins age a person.

PRESIDENT. He asked, what's the connection?

BEGGAR. The connection? It's because I think this man, as he's head of the state, must be more intelligent than Narses. No one could imagine such stupidity as Narses'. I never could teach him to smoke a cigar except by the lighted end. And what about knots? It's terribly important to know how to make knots. If you make a curlycue where you ought to have a knot, and vice versa, you're lost. You lose your money, you catch cold, you choke, your boat veers away or collides, you can't pull off your shoes. I mean if you want to pull them off. And the laces? You know Narses was a poacher.

PRESIDENT. We've asked you, what is the connection?

BEGGAR. Here's the connection. If this man distrusts his niece, if he knows that one of these days she'll give a signal, as he said, she'll begin to bite, to turn the city upside down, push up the price of butter, start a war, et cetera, he can't hesitate. He ought to kill her dead before she reveals herself. When will she reveal herself?

PRESIDENT. What do you mean?

BEGGAR. What day, at what time will she reveal herself? When will she turn into a wolf? When will she become Electra?

PRESIDENT. But nothing tells us she'll turn into a wolf.

BEGGAR [*pointing to AEGISTHUS.*] Yes. He thinks so. He says so.

GARDENER. Electra is the gentlest of women.

BEGGAR. Narses' wolf cub was the gentlest of wolves.

PRESIDENT. Your expression "reveals herself" doesn't make sense.

BEGGAR. My expression doesn't make sense? You know nothing about life. The 29th of May, when you see the hills astir with thousands of little red, yellow, and green balls flying, squawling, quarreling over every little bit of thistle fluff, never making a mistake nor going after dandelion down, aren't the butterflies revealing themselves? And June 14th when you see on the river bank two reeds move without wind or wave till June 15th, and, too, without bubbles made by carp, isn't the pike revealing himself? And judges like you, the first time they condemn to death, when the condemned man appears, distraught, don't they reveal themselves by the taste of blood on their lips? Everything in nature reveals itself. Even the king. And the question today, if you'll believe me, is whether the king will reveal himself as Aegisthus before Electra reveals herself as Electra. So he has to know the day when it will happen to the girl, so he can kill her on the eve, down in a valley, as he said, down in a little valley, the handiest and least visible, in her bath.

PRESIDENT. Isn't he awful?

AEGISTHUS. You're forgetting the wedding, beggar.

BEGGAR. True. I am forgetting the wedding. But a wedding, if you want to kill someone, isn't as sure as death. Especially as a girl like her, sensitive, rather retarded, et cetera, will reveal herself the moment a man takes her in his arms for the first time. You're marrying her?

AEGISTHUS. At once. Right here.

BEGGAR. Not to the king of a neighboring city, I hope?

AEGISTHUS. Not on your life! To this gardener.

PRESIDENT. To this gardener.

BEGGAR. She'll take him? I'd not reveal myself in the arms of a gardener. But everyone to his taste. I revealed myself in Corfu, at the fountain near the bakery, under the plane trees. You should have seen me that day! In each tray of the scales I weighed a hand of the baker's wife. They never weighed the same. I evened them up in the right tray with flour, in the left with oatmeal. . . . Where does the gardener live?

GARDENER. Outside the walls.

BEGGAR. In a village?

GARDENER. No. My house stands alone.

BEGGAR [to AEGISTHUS]. Bravo! I catch your idea. Not bad!

It's quite easy to kill a gardener's wife. Much easier than a princess in a palace.

GARDENER. Whoever you are, I beg you . . .

BEGGAR. You'll not deny that it's easier to bury someone in compost than in marble?

GARDENER. What are you imagining? For one thing she'll not be a minute out of my sight.

BEGGAR. You'll bend down to plant a pear tree. Transplant it again because you hit a hard clod. Death has passed by.

PRESIDENT. Stranger, I fear you don't know where you are. You're in Agamemnon's palace, in his family.

BEGGAR. I see what I see; I see this man is afraid; he lives with fear, fear of Electra.

AEGISTHUS. My dear guest, let's not misunderstand each other. I'll not deny I'm anxious about Electra. I know misfortunes and troubles will come to the family of the Atrides the day she reveals herself, as you say. And to us all, for every citizen is affected by what happens to the royal family. That's why I'm handing her over to a lowly family, unseen by the gods, where her eyes and gestures will not inflame, where the harm will be only local and in the middle class, the Theocathocles family.

BEGGAR. A good idea, a good idea! But the family ought to be especially lowly.

AEGISTHUS. It is, and I'll see that it stays so. I'll see that no Theocathocles distinguishes himself by talent or courage. As for boldness and genius, I'm not afraid they'll make their mark.

BEGGAR. Take care! This little Agatha is not exactly ugly. Beauty too can give a signal.

PRESIDENT. I beg you to leave Agatha out of our argument.

BEGGAR. Of course it's possible to rub her face with vitriol.

PRESIDENT. My lord!

AEGISTHUS. The case has been argued.

PRESIDENT. But I'm thinking of fate, Aegisthus! It's not a disease. You think it's infectious?

BEGGAR. Yes. Like hunger among the poor.

PRESIDENT. I can hardly believe that fate will be content with one obscure little clan instead of the royal family, or that it will become the fate of the Theocathocles instead of the Atrides.

BEGGAR. Don't worry. A royal cancer spreads to the middle classes.

AEGISTHUS. President, if you don't want Electra's entrance into your family to mark the disgrace of its members, don't add a word. In a third-class zone the most implacable fate will do only third-class harm. I personally am distressed, because of my great esteem for the Theocathocles family, but the dynasty, the state, and the city can no longer take risks.

BEGGAR. And perhaps she can be killed a little anyway, if an occasion arises.

AEGISTHUS. I have spoken. You may fetch Clytemnestra and Electra. They're waiting.

BEGGAR. It's not too soon. Without blaming you, I must say our talk lacks women.

AEGISTHUS. You'll have two, and talkers!

BEGGAR. And they'll argue with you a little, I hope?

AEGISTHUS. You like arguing women?

BEGGAR. Adore them. This afternoon I was in a house where a dispute was going on. Not a very high-toned discussion. No, compared to here. Not a plot of royal assassins as here. They were arguing whether they ought to serve guests chickens with or without livers. And the neck, of course. The women were furious. Had to be separated. Now I think of it, it was a fierce dispute. Blood flowed.

#### Scene 4

[*The Same.* CLYTEMNESTRA, ELECTRA, MAIDS.]

PRESIDENT. Here they both are.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Both! That's a manner of speaking. Electra is never more absent than when she's present.

ELECTRA. No. Today I'm here.

AEGISTHUS. Then let's make the most of it. You know why your mother has brought you here?

ELECTRA. It's her habit. She's already led a daughter to sacrifice.

CLYTEMNESTRA. There's Electra to the life! Never a word that's not treason or insinuation.

ELECTRA. Excuse me, mother. The allusion is quite apropos in the family of the Atrides.

BEGGAR. What does she mean? Is she angry with her mother?

GARDENER. It would be the first time anyone has seen Electra angry.

BEGGAR. All the more interesting!

AEGISTHUS. Electra, your mother has told you of our decision. We've been anxious about you for a long time. I hardly think you realize that you're like a sleepwalker in broad daylight. In the palace and the city people speak of you only in whispers, they're so afraid you'd wake and fall if they raised their voices.

BEGGAR [*shouting*]. Electra!

AEGISTHUS. What's the matter with him?

BEGGAR. Oh, I'm sorry, it's just a joke. Excuse it. But you were scared, not she. Electra's no sleepwalker.

AEGISTHUS. Please—

BEGGAR. At least the experiment has been made. You were the one who flinched. What would you have done if I'd shouted, "Aegisthus"?

PRESIDENT. Let our Regent speak.

BEGGAR. I'll shout "Aegisthus" pretty soon, when nobody expects it.

AEGISTHUS. You must get well, Electra, no matter what it costs.

ELECTRA. To cure me, that's easy. Give life to a dead man.

AEGISTHUS. You're not the only one who grieves for your father. But he'd not ask you to make your mourning an offense to the living. We wrong the dead to attach them to our lives, for that deprives them of the freedom of death, if they know it.

ELECTRA. He's free. That's why he comes.

AEGISTHUS. Do you really think he's pleased to see you weep for him, not like a daughter but like a wife?

ELECTRA. I am my father's widow, for lack of another.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra!

AEGISTHUS. Widow or not, today we'll celebrate your marriage.

ELECTRA. Yes, I know your plot.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What plot? Is it a plot to marry a twenty-one-year-old daughter? At your age I had the two of you in my arms, you and Orestes.

ELECTRA. You carried us badly. You let Orestes fall on the marble floor.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What could I do? You pushed him.

ELECTRA. That's a lie. I never pushed him.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What do you know about it? You were only fifteen months old.

ELECTRA. I did not push Orestes! I remember it, far back in my memory. Oh, Orestes, wherever you are, hear me! I did not push you.

AEGISTHUS. That's enough, Electra.

BEGGAR. This time they're really at it! It'd be funny if the little girl revealed herself right in front of us.

ELECTRA. She lies. Orestes, she lies!

AEGISTHUS. Please, Electra!

CLYTEMNESTRA. She did push him. Obviously at her age she didn't know what she was doing. But she did push him.

ELECTRA. With all my strength I tried to hold him; by his little blue tunic, by his arm, by the end of his fingers, by his shadow. I sobbed when I saw him on the floor, with the red mark on his forehead.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You shouted with laughter. The tunic, by the way, was mauve.

ELECTRA. It was blue. I know Orestes' tunic. When it was drying you couldn't see it against the sky.

AEGISTHUS. Can I get a word in? Haven't you had time these twenty years to settle this debate?

ELECTRA. For twenty years I've waited for this chance. Now I have it.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Why can't she understand that she might be wrong, even honestly?

BEGGAR. They're both honest. That's the truth.

PRESIDENT. Princess, I beg of you! Of what interest is this question today?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Of none, I grant you.

ELECTRA. What interest? If I had pushed Orestes I'd rather die, I'd kill myself. My life would have no meaning.

AEGISTHUS. Must I force you to keep quiet? Are you as mad as she, queen?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra, listen. Let's not quarrel. This is exactly what happened: he was on my right arm.

ELECTRA. On your left!

AEGISTHUS. Have you finished, Clytemnestra, or haven't you?

CLYTEMNESTRA. We've finished. But a right arm is a right arm, a mauve tunic is mauve, not blue.

ELECTRA. It was blue. As blue as Orestes' forehead was red.

CLYTEMNESTRA. That is true. Very red. You touched the wound with your finger and danced around the little prone body. You laughed as you tasted the blood.

ELECTRA. I? I wanted to bruise my head on the step that hurt him. I trembled for a week.

AEGISTHUS. Silence!

ELECTRA. I'm still trembling.

BEGGAR. Narses' wife tied hers with an elastic rope that had some play. Often it was askew, but he didn't fall.

AEGISTHUS. Enough. We'll soon see how Electra will carry hers. For you agree, don't you? You accept this marriage?

ELECTRA. I agree.

AEGISTHUS. I must admit not many suitors throng around you.

BEGGAR. They say . . .

AEGISTHUS. What do they say?

BEGGAR. They say you've threatened to kill the princes who might marry Electra. That's what they say in the city.

ELECTRA. Good! I don't want any prince.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You'd rather have a gardener?

ELECTRA. I know you two have decided to marry me to my father's gardener. I accept.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You shall not marry a gardener.

AEGISTHUS. Queen, we settled that. Our word is given.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I take mine back. It was a wicked word. If Electra is ill we'll care for her. I'll not give my daughter to a gardener.

ELECTRA. Too late, mother. You have given me.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Gardener, you dare to aspire to Electra?

GARDENER. I'm unworthy, queen, but Aegisthus commands me.

AEGISTHUS. I do command you. Here are the rings. Take your wife.

CLYTEMNESTRA. If you persist, gardener, it's at the risk of your life.

BEGGAR. Then don't persist. I'd rather see soldiers die than gardeners.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What's that man saying? Marry Electra, gardener, and you die.

BEGGAR. It's your business. But go into the garden a year after the death of the gardener. You'll see something. You'll



see what's happened to the endive, widowed by its gardener. It's not like kings' widows.

CLYTEMNESTRA. The garden won't suffer. Come, Electra.

GARDENER. Queen, you can deny me Electra, but it's not nice to say bad things about a garden you don't know.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I know it—empty land, with scattered plantings.

GARDENER. Empty? The best tended garden in Argos.

PRESIDENT. If he begins to talk about his garden we'll never finish.

AEGISTHUS. Spare us your descriptions!

GARDENER. The queen provoked me, and I answer. My garden is my dowry and my honor.

AEGISTHUS. Never mind! Enough of quarrels.

GARDENER. Empty, indeed! It covers ten acres of hilly land, and six of valley. No, no, you'll not silence me! Not a sterile inch, is there, Electra? On the terraces I have garlic and tomatoes, on the slopes grape vines and peach trees. On the level land vegetables, strawberries, and raspberries. A fig tree at the bottom of each slope against the wall, which warms the figs.

AEGISTHUS. Fine! Let your figs get warm and take your wife.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You dare talk of your garden! I've seen it from the road. It's all dry, a bald skull. You shall not have Electra.

GARDENER. All dry! A brook flows between the box and the plane trees, never dry in hottest weather; I've dug two little trenches from it—one turned on the meadow, the other cut in the rock. Try to find skulls like that! And scattered plantings! In spring it's full of narcissus and jonquils. I've never seen Electra really smile, but in my garden, I saw something on her face almost like a smile.

CLYTEMNESTRA. See if she's smiling now!

GARDENER. I call that Electra's smile.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Smiling at your dirty hands, your black nails. . . .

ELECTRA. Dear gardener. . . .

GARDENER. My black nails? Look, see if my nails are black! Don't believe it, Electra. You're unlucky today, queen, I spent this morning whitewashing my house, so there's not a sign of mice there, and my nails came out, not black, as you say, but mooned with white.

AEGISTHUS. That's enough, gardener.

GARDENER. I know, I know it's enough. And my dirty hands! Look! Look at these dirty hands! Hands that I washed after taking down the dried mushrooms and onions, so nothing would trouble Electra's nights. I'll sleep in the outhouse, Electra; there I'll keep guard so that nothing disturbs your sleep, whether an owl, or the open floodgate, or a fox, hunting in the hedge, with a chicken in his mouth. I've said my say.

ELECTRA. Thanks, gardener.

CLYTEMNESTRA. And that's how Electra will live; Clytemnestra's daughter, watching her husband going around his border, two pails in his hands. . . .

AEGISTHUS. There she can weep for her dead to her heart's content. Get ready your wreaths of everlasting tomorrow.

GARDENER. And there she'll escape from anxiety, torture, and perhaps tragedy. I don't understand people, queen, but I do know the seasons. It's time, full time, to transplant misfortune from our city. The Atrides won't be grafted on our poor family, but on the seasons, the fields, the winds. I think they'll lose nothing by that.

BEGGAR. Be persuaded, queen. Don't you see that Aegisthus hates Electra so much he'll be driven to kill her, giving her to the earth by a kind of play on words: he gives her to a garden. She gains by that, she gains life.

[AEGISTHUS rises.]

What? Was I wrong to say that?

AEGISTHUS [*to ELECTRA and the GARDENER*]. Come here, both of you.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra, I beg you!

ELECTRA. You're the one who wanted it, mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I no longer want it. You see I don't want it now.

ELECTRA. Why don't you want it? Are you afraid? Too late!

CLYTEMNESTRA. How can I make you remember who I am and who you are?

ELECTRA. You'll have to tell me I didn't push Orestes.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Stupid girl!

AEGISTHUS. Are they beginning again?

BEGGAR. Yes, yes, let them begin again.

CLYTEMNESTRA. And unjust! And stubborn! I let Orestes

fall! I who never break anything! Never let fall a glass or a ring! I'm so steady that birds light on my arms. It's possible to fly away from me but not to fall. That's just what I said when he lost his balance, "Why, why did an ill fate bring his sister so near him?"

AEGISTHUS. They're crazy!

ELECTRA. And I said to myself, as soon as I saw him slipping, "If she's a true mother she'll stoop to soften his fall, or she'll bend to make a slope and catch him on her thigh or her knees. We'll see if they'll catch him, the noble knees and thighs of my mother. I'm not sure. I'll see."

CLYTEMNESTRA. Be quiet!

ELECTRA. "Or she'll bend backward, so little Orestes will slip off her like a child from a tree where he's picked off a nest, or she'll fall so *he* won't, or so he'll fall on her. She knows all the ways a mother uses to catch her son, she still knows them. She can still be a curve, a shell, a motherly slope, a cradle." But she stood fixed, straight, and he fell right down from the full height of his mother.

AEGISTHUS. The case is heard. Clytemnestra, we'll leave.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Just let her remember what she saw when she was fifteen months old and what she didn't see. That's the point.

AEGISTHUS. Who but you believes her or listens to her?

ELECTRA. There are a thousand ways of preventing a fall, and she did nothing.

CLYTEMNESTRA. The slightest movement, and *you* would have fallen.

ELECTRA. Just as I said. You calculated. You figured it all out. You were a nurse, not a mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA. My little Electra . . .

ELECTRA. I'm not your little Electra. Your motherly feeling is tickled awake by your rubbing your two children against you. But it's too late.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Please——!

ELECTRA. There you are! Open your arms, see what you've done. Look, everybody. That's just what you did.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Let's go, Aegisthus. [*She leaves.*]

BEGGAR. I believe the mother is frightened.

AEGISTHUS [*to the BEGGAR*]. What's that you say?

BEGGAR. I? I say nothing. I never say anything. When I'm hungry I talk, everyone hears me. Today I've drunk a little something.

### Scene 5

[ELECTRA, BEGGAR, GARDENER, STRANGER, AGATHA.]

AGATHA. This is the right time, Aegisthus isn't here. Get out, gardener.

GARDENER. What do you mean?

AGATHA. Get out, fast. This man will take your place.

GARDENER. My place with Electra?

STRANGER. Yes, I'll marry her.

ELECTRA. Let go my hand.

STRANGER. Never.

AGATHA. Just look at him, Electra. Before you turn your back on a man, at least look at him. I'm sure you'll lose nothing by that.

ELECTRA. Gardener, help!

STRANGER. I owe you nothing, gardener. But look me in the eye. You understand species and kinds. Look at me and see the kind I am. So! Look, with your poor peasant eyes, with the gaze of humble folk, a blear-eyed mixture of devotion and fear, the sterile look of the poor, unchanged by sunshine or misfortune, see if I can give way to you. Fine! Now give me your ring. Thanks!

ELECTRA. Agatha, cousin! Help me! I swear I'll not tell about your rendezvous, your quarrels, I'll tell nothing.

AGATHA [*leading off the GARDENER*]. Come, the Theocatholics are saved. Let the Atrides work it out.

BEGGAR. She runs away—like a wood louse, hiding under a stone to escape from the sun.

### Scene 6

[ELECTRA, STRANGER, BEGGAR.]

STRANGER. Struggle no more.

ELECTRA. I'll struggle till I die.

STRANGER. You think so? In a minute you'll take me in your arms.

ELECTRA. No insults!

STRANGER. In a minute you'll embrace me.

ELECTRA. Shame on you for profiting from two infamies!

STRANGER. See how I trust you. I let you go.

ELECTRA. Farewell forever!

STRANGER. No! I'll say one word to you and you'll come back to me, tenderly.

ELECTRA. What lie is this?

STRANGER. One word, and you'll be sobbing in my arms. One word, my name.

ELECTRA. There's only one name in the world that could draw me to anyone.

STRANGER. That's the one.

ELECTRA. Are you Orestes?

ORESTES. Ungrateful sister, only recognizing me by my name!

[CLYTEMNESTRA *appears.*]

### Scene 7

[CLYTEMNESTRA, ELECTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR.]

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra!

ELECTRA. Mother?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Come back to your place in the palace. Leave the gardener. Come!

ELECTRA. The gardener has left, mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Where is he?

ELECTRA. He's given me to this man.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What man?

ELECTRA. This man. He's my husband now.

CLYTEMNESTRA. This is no time for jokes. Come!

ELECTRA. How can I come? He's holding my hand.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Hurry!

ELECTRA. You know, mother, those clogs they put on the legs of foals to prevent their running away? This man has put them on my ankles.

CLYTEMNESTRA. This time I command you. You must be in your room by tonight. Come!

ELECTRA. What? Leave my husband the night of my wedding?

CLYTEMNESTRA. What are you doing? Who are you?

ELECTRA. He'll not answer you. This evening my husband's mouth belongs to me, and all the words he speaks.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Where do you come from? Who is your father?

ELECTRA. A misalliance maybe. But not such a bad one.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Why do you look at me like that? Why the challenge in your eyes? Who was your mother?

ELECTRA. He never saw her.

CLYTEMNESTRA. She's dead?

ELECTRA. Perhaps what you see in his eyes is that he never saw his mother. Handsome, isn't he?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Yes. He looks like you.

ELECTRA. If our first married hours make us look alike, that's a good omen, isn't it, mother?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Who are you?

ELECTRA. What does it matter to you? Never was a man less yours.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Whatever or whoever you are, stranger, don't give in to her caprice. We'll see tomorrow if you're worthy of Electra. I'll win over Aegisthus. But I've never known a less propitious night. Leave this man, Electra.

ELECTRA. Too late! His arms hold me.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You can break iron if you want to.

ELECTRA. Iron, yes, *this* iron, no!

CLYTEMNESTRA. What has he said against your mother that you accept him this way?

ELECTRA. We've had no time yet to speak of my mother or his. Go, we'll begin!

ORESTES. Electra!

ELECTRA. That's all he can say. If I take my hand from his mouth, he just says my name without stopping. You can't get anything else out of him. Oh, husband, now that your mouth is free, kiss me!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Shame! So this madness is Electra's secret!

ELECTRA. Kiss me, before my mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Farewell! But I didn't think you were a girl to give yourself to the first passer-by.

ELECTRA. Nor I. But I didn't know what the first kiss was like.

### Scene 8

[ELECTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR.]

ORESTES. Why do you hate our mother so, Electra?

ELECTRA. Don't speak of her, above all not of her! Let's imagine for a minute that we were born without a mother. Don't talk.

ORESTES. I have everything to tell you.

ELECTRA. You tell me everything just by being here. Be quiet. Close your eyes. Your words and your look touch me too poignantly, they wound me. I often wished that I'd find you in your sleep, if I ever found you. Now I can't bear to have all at once the look, the voice, the life of Orestes. I ought to have stumbled on your image, dead at first, then coming alive little by little. But my brother was born like the sun, a golden animal at his rising. Either I'm blind or I find my brother by groping—oh, the joy of being blind for a sister who finds her brother! For twenty years my hands have fumbled over mean or indifferent things, and now they touch—a brother—a brother in whom everything is true. Some dubious or some false bits might have been in this head, this body, but by a wonderful chance, everything in Orestes is brotherly, everything is Orestes.

ORESTES. You smother me.

ELECTRA. I don't smother you. I don't kill you. I caress you. I'm calling you to life. From this brotherly shape which my dazzled eyes have scarcely seen I'm making my brother in all his features. See, how I've made my brother's hand, with its straight thumb. See how I've made my brother's chest, which I'm animating so it swells and breathes, giving life to my brother. See how I make this ear, little, curled, transparent like a bat's wing. One last touch and the ear is finished. I make the two alike. Quite a success, these ears! And now I'll make my brother's mouth, gentle and dry, and fasten it on his face. Take your life from me, Orestes, not from our mother.

ORESTES. Why do you hate her? Listen . . .

ELECTRA. What's the matter with you? Are you pushing me away? That's the ingratitude of sons. They're hardly finished before they get away and escape.

ORESTES. Someone is watching us from the staircase.

ELECTRA. It's she, certainly she. From jealousy or fear. It's our mother.

BEGGAR. Yes, yes, it's she.

ELECTRA. She suspects we're here, creating ourselves, freeing ourselves from her. She thinks that my caresses will cover you, wash you clear of her, make you an orphan. Oh, brother, who else could do me such a service!

ORESTES. How can you speak so of her who bore you?

Though she was harsh to me, I'm less hard on her.

ELECTRA. That's just what I can't stand about her, that she bore me. That's my shame. I feel that I came into life in a dubious way, that her motherhood is only a plot to bind us together. I love everything that comes from my father. I love the way he put off his fine wedding garment and lay down to beget me, from his thought and from his body. I love his eyes, and his surprise the day I was born; I came from him far more than from my mother's pains. I was born from his nights of deep sleep, his nine months' emancipation, the comfort he found with other women while my mother was carrying me, his fatherly smile when I was born. I hate everything about my birth that comes from my mother.

ORESTES. Why do you detest women so?

ELECTRA. I don't detest women, I detest my mother. And I don't detest men, I detest Aegisthus.

ORESTES. Why do you hate him?

ELECTRA. I don't know yet. I only know it's the same hatred.

That's why it's so hard to bear, that's why I'm suffocating. Many times I've tried to find out why I hate both of them with a special hatred. Two little hatreds could be borne—like sorrows—one balances the other. I tried to think I hated my mother because she let you fall when you were a baby, and Aegisthus because he stole your throne. But it's not true. I really pitied this great queen, who ruled the world, yet suddenly, frightened and humble, let her child fall, like a feeble grandmother. I pitied Aegisthus, that cruel tyrant, whose fate is to die miserably from your blows. All the reasons I had for hating them made me think them human, pitiable, but no sooner had my hatred washed them clean and re-clothed them and I found myself gentle, obedient before them, than a yet heavier wave, charged with a yet more virulent hatred, flowed over them. I hate them with a hatred that is not really me.

ORESTES. I'm here. It will vanish.

ELECTRA. You believe that? I used to think your return would free me of this hatred. I thought my illness was because you were far away. I prepared for your return by becoming all tenderness, tenderness for everyone, for them too. I was wrong. My pain tonight is caused by your

being here and all the hatred in me laughs and welcomes you, it is my love for you. It caresses you as a dog does the hand that frees him. I know that you have given me the sight, the smell of hatred. The first scent, and now I follow the trail. Who's there? Is it she?

BEGGAR. No, me. You're forgetting the time. She's gone up. She's undressing.

ELECTRA. She's undressing. Before her mirror, looking long at herself, our mother, Clytemnestra, undresses. Our mother, whom I love for her beauty and pity because she's aging, whose voice and looks I admire, our mother, whom I hate.

ORESTES. Electra, sister darling, please calm yourself.

ELECTRA. Then I'm to follow the trail?

ORESTES. Calm yourself.

ELECTRA. I? I'm perfectly calm. I'm all sweetness. Sweet to my mother, very sweet. It's this hatred for her that swells up and kills me.

ORESTES. Now it's your turn not to talk. We'll think about that hatred tomorrow. This evening let me taste, for an hour at least, the sweetness of the life I've never known and now return to.

ELECTRA. An hour. All right, one hour.

ORESTES. The palace is so beautiful beneath the moon. My palace. All the power of our family is emanating from it. My power. In your arms let me imagine all the happiness these walls might have held for calmer, more reasonable people. Oh, Electra, how many of our family's names were originally sweet and tender, and should have been happy names!

ELECTRA. Yes, I know. Medea, Phaedra.

ORESTES. Even those, why not?

ELECTRA. Electra. Orestes.

ORESTES. Isn't there still time? I've come to save them.

ELECTRA. Silence! She's there.

ORESTES. Who?

ELECTRA. She with the happy name: Clytemnestra.

### Scene 9

[ELECTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR, CLYTEMNESTRA, then AEGISTHUS.]

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra?

ELECTRA. Mother?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Who is this man?

ELECTRA. Guess.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Let me see his face.

ELECTRA. If you can't see it at a distance you'd see him less well near to.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra, let's stop fighting. If you really want to marry this man, I'll agree. Why do you smile? Wasn't it I who wanted you to marry?

ELECTRA. Not at all. You wanted me to be a woman.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What's the difference?

ELECTRA. You wanted me in your camp. You didn't want the face of your worst enemy constantly before you.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You mean my daughter's?

ELECTRA. Chastity, rather!

ORESTES. Electra . . . !

ELECTRA. Let me alone, let me alone. I've found the trail.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Chastity! This girl who's devoured by desire talks about chastity! This girl at two years old couldn't see a boy without blushing. It was because you wanted to embrace Orestes, if you want to know, that you pulled him out of my arms.

ELECTRA. Then I was right. I'm proud of it. It was worth while.

[*Trumpets. Shouts. Faces in the windows. AEGISTHUS leans down from a balcony.*]

AEGISTHUS. Are you there, queen?

BEGGAR. Yes, she's here.

AEGISTHUS. Great news, queen. Orestes is not dead. He's escaped. He's coming toward Argos.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Orestes!

AEGISTHUS. I'm sending my bodyguard to meet him. I've posted my most faithful men around the walls. You say nothing?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Orestes is coming back?

AEGISTHUS. Coming back to seize his father's throne, to prevent my being regent, and you being queen. His emissaries are preparing a revolt. But don't worry. I'll keep order. Who's down there with you?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra.

AEGISTHUS. And her gardener?

BEGGAR. And her gardener.

AEGISTHUS. I hope you're not still trying to separate them?

You see how well founded my fears were! You agree now?

CLYTEMNESTRA. No. I'm not trying any more.

AEGISTHUS. Don't let them leave the palace. Them especially.

I've ordered the gates closed till the soldiers return. You hear me, gardener?

ELECTRA. We'll not leave.

AEGISTHUS. Queen, come upstairs. Go back to your room. It's late and the Council is to meet at dawn. I wish you a good night.

ELECTRA. Thanks, Aegisthus.

AEGISTHUS. I was speaking to the queen, Electra. This is no time for irony. Come, queen.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Good-by, Electra.

ELECTRA. Good-by, mother.

[CLYTEMNESTRA goes, then turns back.]

CLYTEMNESTRA. Good-by, my daughter's husband.

BEGGAR. What you see in families! You see everything!

ELECTRA. Who spoke?

BEGGAR. No one! No one spoke. You think someone would speak at a time like this?

### Scene 10

[ELECTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR.]

ORESTES. Tell me, Electra! Tell me!

ELECTRA. Tell you what?

ORESTES. Your hatred. The reason for your hatred. You know it now, when you were talking to Clytemnestra a moment ago you almost fainted in my arms. It might have been from joy—or horror.

ELECTRA. It was both joy *and* horror. Are you strong or weak, Orestes?

ORESTES. Tell me your secret and I'll find out.

ELECTRA. I don't know my secret yet. I hold only one end of the thread. Don't worry. Everything will follow. Take care! Here she is.

[CLYTEMNESTRA appears at the back of the stage.]

### Scene 11

[ELECTRA, CLYTEMNESTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR.]

CLYTEMNESTRA. So it's you, Orestes?

ORESTES. Yes, mother, it's I.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Is it sweet to see a mother when you're twenty?

ORESTES. A mother who sent you away? Sad and sweet.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You look at her from far away.

ORESTES. She's just as I imagined her.

CLYTEMNESTRA. My son. Handsome. Regal. And yet I draw near.

ORESTES. Not I. At a distance she's a magnificent mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Who tells you that near to her magnificence remains?

ORESTES. Or her motherliness? That's why I don't move.

CLYTEMNESTRA. The mirage of a mother is enough for you?

ORESTES. I've had so much less until today. At least I can tell the mirage what I'd never tell my real mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA. If the mirage deserves it, that's all right. What will you tell her?

ORESTES. Everything I never tell you. Everything that would be a lie if said to you.

CLYTEMNESTRA. That you love her?

ORESTES. Yes.

CLYTEMNESTRA. That you respect her?

ORESTES. Yes.

CLYTEMNESTRA. That you admire her?

ORESTES. That the mother and the mirage can share.

CLYTEMNESTRA. It's the opposite for me. I don't love the mirage of my son. But when my son is actually before me, speaking, breathing, I lose my strength.

ORESTES. Think of hurting him, you'll recover it.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Why are you so hard? You don't look cruel. Your voice is gentle.

ORESTES. Yes, I'm exactly like the son I might have been.

You too, of course. You look so like a wonderful mother. If I weren't your son, I'd be deceived.

ELECTRA. Why are you both talking? Where does this horrible maternal coquetry get you, mother? At midnight the

little window which allows a mother and son to see each other as they are not opens for a minute. Shut it, the minute has passed.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Why so quickly? How do you know one minute of maternal love is enough for Orestes?

ELECTRA. Everything tells me you have no right to more than a minute of your son's love in your whole life. You've had it. And that's the end. What a comedy you're playing! Go!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Very well. Good-by.

FIRST LITTLE GIRL [*appearing from behind the columns*]. Good-by, truth of my son!

ORESTES. Good-by.

SECOND LITTLE GIRL. Good-by, mirage of my mother!

ELECTRA. You might say *au revoir*. You'll meet again.

### Scene 12

[ELECTRA and ORESTES asleep. The little EUMENIDES. BEGGAR. The EUMENIDES now seem to be about twelve or thirteen years old.]

FIRST GIRL. They're asleep. It's our turn to play Clytemnestra and Orestes. But not the way they played. Let's play it truly.

BEGGAR [*to himself, though out loud*]. The story of push or not push—I'd like to know. . . .

SECOND GIRL. You there, let us play. We're playing.

[*The three little EUMENIDES take the positions of the actors in the preceding scene and play it as a parody. Masks could be used.*]

FIRST GIRL. So it's you, Orestes?

SECOND GIRL. Yes, it's me, mother.

FIRST GIRL. You've come to kill me and Aegisthus?

SECOND GIRL. News to me!

FIRST GIRL. Not to your sister. You've done some killing, little Orestes?

SECOND GIRL. The things one kills when one is good! A doe. And to be a little kind, I killed her fawn too, so it wouldn't

be an orphan. But to kill my mother, never! That would be—parricide.

FIRST GIRL. Was that the sword you did your killing with?

SECOND GIRL. Yes. It will cut iron. See, it went through the fawn so fast he felt nothing.

FIRST GIRL. I'm not suggesting anything. I don't want to influence you. But if a sword like that were to kill your sister, we'd all be at peace!

SECOND GIRL. You want me to kill my sister?

FIRST GIRL. Never! That would be—fratricide. If the sword were to kill her by itself, that would be ideal. Let it come out of its scabbard, like this, and kill her by itself. I'd just quietly marry Aegisthus. We'd call you home; Aegisthus is getting old. You'd succeed him very soon. You'd be King Orestes.

SECOND GIRL. A sword doesn't kill by itself. It needs an assassin.

FIRST GIRL. Certainly! I should know! But I'm talking about the times when swords will kill by themselves. People who avenge wrongs are the curse of the world. And they get no better as they get older, I beg you to believe that. As criminals improve with age, good people always become criminals. Surely this is a fine moment for a sword to think for itself, move of itself, and kill by itself. They'd marry you to Alcmena's second daughter, the laughing one, with the fine teeth—you'd be Orestes, the married man.

SECOND GIRL. I don't want to kill my sister, I love her, nor my mother, I detest her.

FIRST GIRL. I know, I know. In a word you're weak and you have principles.

THIRD GIRL. Why are you two talking? Because the moon is rising, the nightingale singing here in the middle of this night of hatred and threats; take your hand off the hilt of your sword, Orestes, and see if it will have the intelligence to act by itself.

FIRST GIRL. That's right. Take it off . . . it's moving, friend, it's moving!

SECOND GIRL. It really is! It's a thinking sword. It thinks so hard it's half out!

ORESTES [*asleep*]. Electra!

BEGGAR. Off with you, screech owls! You're waking them.

ELECTRA [*asleep*]. Orestes!

## Scene 13

[ELECTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR.]

BEGGAR. I'd love to get straight that story of pushed or not pushed. For whether it's true or false, it would show whether Electra is truthful or lying and whether she lies knowingly or whether her memory plays her false. I don't believe she pushed him. Look at her: two inches above ground she's holding her sleeping brother as tight as if they were over an abyss. He's dreaming that he's falling, evidently, but that's not her fault. Now the queen looks like those bakers' wives who never stoop, even to pick up their money, or like those bitches who smother their prettiest pup while they sleep. Afterward they lick it as the queen licked Orestes, but no one ever made a child with saliva. I can see the story as if I'd been there. It's understandable, if you imagine the queen had put on a diamond pin and a white cat had passed by. She's holding Electra on her right arm, for the girl was getting heavy, and the baby on the left, a bit away from her so he'll not scratch himself on the brooch or drive it into him. It's a queen's pin, not a nurse's. And the child sees the white cat, a magnificent creature—a white life, white hair—his eyes follow it, he rocks himself, and she's an egotistical woman. Anyway, seeing the child capsizing, in order to hold him she need only free her arm of little Electra, throw little Electra off on the marble floor, get rid of little Electra. Let little Electra break her neck, so the son of the king of kings be unhurt! But she's an egotist. For her a woman is as good as a man, she's a woman; the womb as good as the phallus, and she's a womb; she wouldn't dream for a second of destroying her daughter to save her son, so she keeps Electra. Now look at Electra. She's revealed herself in her brother's arms, and she's right. She couldn't wish for a better moment. Fraternity is the mark of human beings. Beasts know only love . . . cats, parrots, et cetera, they only recognize fraternity by the hair. To find brothers they have to love men, to turn to men. . . . What does the duckling do when he gets away from the other ducks and, with his tender little eye shining on his slanting duck's cheek, he looks at us humans, eating and playing games, because

he knows men and women are his brothers? I've taken little ducks in my hands, and could have wrung their necks, because they came to me so fraternally, trying to understand what I was doing, I, their brother, cutting my bread and cheese and adding an onion. Brother of ducks, that's our real title, for when they raise the little heads they've plunged into the water and look at a man, they're all neatness, intelligence and tenderness—not eatable except for their brains. I could teach those little duck heads to weep! . . . So Electra didn't push Orestes! That makes everything she says legitimate, everything she undertakes irrefutable. She's unadulterated truth, a lamp without a wick. So if she kills, as looks likely, all happiness and peace around her, it's because she's right. It's as if the soul of a girl, in bright sunlight, felt a moment of anguish, as if she sniffed escaping gas in the midst of splendid festivals, and had to go after it, for the young girl is the guardian of truth; she has to go after it whether or not the world bursts and cracks down to its foundations, whether innocents die the death of innocents to let the guilty live their guilty lives. Look at those two innocents! What will be the fruit of their marriage? To bring to life, for the world and for ages to come, a crime already forgotten, the punishment of which will be a worse crime? How right they are to sleep away this hour that is still theirs! Leave them. I'm going for a walk. If I stayed, I'd wake them. I always sneeze three times when the moon is full, and, right now, to sneeze would be taking a frightful risk. But all you who remain here, be quiet, now. This is Electra's first rest, and the last rest of Orestes.

## INTERLUDE: THE GARDENER'S LAMENT

I'm not in the play any more. That's why I'm free to come and tell you what the play can't tell you. In stories like this the people won't stop killing and biting each other in order to tell you that the one aim of life is to love. It would be awkward to see the parricide stop, with upraised dagger, and make a speech praising love. That would seem artificial. A



lot of people wouldn't believe him. But I really don't see what else I can do here in this loneliness and desolation. And I speak impartially. I'll never marry anyone but Electra, and I'll never have her. I was made to live with a woman day and night, but I'll always live alone. I was meant to give myself fully, and yet I have to keep myself to myself. This is my wedding night that I'm living through, all alone—but thank you for being here—and the orangeade I'd prepared for Electra I had to drink up myself; there's not a drop left, and this was a long wedding night. Now who will doubt my word? The trouble is that I always say the opposite of what I mean, and that would be miserable today when my heart is so heavy and my mouth so bitter—oranges are really bitter—and if I forgot for an instant that I must speak to you of joy. Yes, love and joy. I come to tell you they're preferable to bitterness and hate. That's a motto to carve on a porch, or to put on a handkerchief, or better, in dwarf begonias in a clump. Of course, life is a failure, yet it's very, very good. Of course nothing ever goes right, never is well planned, yet you must confess, sometimes everything comes out splendidly, is splendidly planned. . . . Not for me . . . or perhaps just for me. . . . If I can judge from my wish to love everything and everyone, which is the result of the greatest misfortune in my life! What will happen to people who've had less bad luck? How much love must men feel who marry wives they don't love, what joy must those feel who leave a wife they adore, after having had her in their home one hour? And people whose children are ugly? Of course, tonight in my garden, I wasn't very happy. As a little festival it didn't come off. I pretended sometimes that Electra was near me, I talked to her and said: "Come in, Electra! Are you cold, Electra?" But no one was deceived, not even the dog, not to say myself. The dog thought: "He promised us a bride, and he only gives us a word. My master has married a word; he put on his white garment, the one my paws soil, which keeps me from caressing him, just to marry a word! He gives his orangeade to a word. He scolds me for barking at shadows, real shadows which aren't alive, yet he tries to embrace a word."

And I didn't lie down: to sleep with a word was impossible. I can speak with a word, that's all! But if you were sitting like me in this garden, where everything is confused at night, where the moon is shining on the sundial, and the blind owl

tries to drink the cement walk instead of the brook, you'd understand what I've understood: the truth! You'd understand that the day your parents died, that day your parents were born; the day you were ruined, that day you were rich; when your child was ungrateful, he was gratitude itself; when you were abandoned, the whole world was coming to you in rapture and tenderness. That was what happened to me in this empty, silent suburb. All these stony trees, these immovable hills, rushed toward me. This all applies to our play. To be sure, we can't say Electra is all love for Clytemnestra. But note the difference: she tries to find a mother and would see one in the first comer. She was marrying me because I was the only man who could be a kind of mother to her, though I'm not *really* the only one. There are men who'd be glad to carry a child nine months, if they had to, just to have daughters. All men, actually. Nine months are rather long, but . . . a week, or a day . . . any man would be proud. Perhaps to find a mother in *her* mother she'd have to cut her breast open, though with royalty that's rather theoretical. Among kings there are experiences never found among humble folk, pure hatred, for instance, and pure wrath. Always purity. That's tragedy, with its incests and parricides: purity, meaning—innocence. I don't know if you're like me, but to me, in tragedy, Pharaoh's daughter killing herself means hope, the treasonous Marshall means faith, the Duke-Assassin speaks of tenderness. Cruelty is a deed of love—excuse me, I mean: tragedy is a deed of love. That's why I'm sure this morning, that if I asked, Heaven would approve me, would give a sign that a miracle is near, which would show you that joy and love are written in heaven, and that they echo my motto, though I'm abandoned and alone. If you wish, I'll ask. I'm as sure as I'm here that a voice from on high would answer me, that loud-speakers and amplifiers and God's thunder are all prepared by God himself to shout, if I ask: "Love and joy." But I'd rather you didn't ask. First it would be indecent. It's not the gardener's role to demand of God a storm, even a storm of tenderness. Moreover it would be useless. We know so well that at this moment, and yesterday and tomorrow and always, they're all up there, as many as there are, or perhaps only one, or even if that one is absent, they're all ready to shout: "Love and joy." It's much better for a man to take the gods at their word—this is euphemism—without forcing them to underline it, or to be

held by it, or to create among themselves obligations of creditor and debtor. I'm always convinced by silences. Yes, I've begged them, haven't I? not to shout love and joy. But let them shout it if they really want to. Yet I'd rather conjure them, I conjure you, God, as a proof of your affections, of your voice and all your shouting, to keep silent, silent for one second. . . . That's much more convincing. . . . Listen! . . . Thanks!

## ACT TWO

### Scene 1

[The same setting, shortly before dawn. ELECTRA, seated, holding ORESTES, asleep. BEGGAR. A cock. Sound of a trumpet in the distance.]

BEGGAR. It won't be long now, eh, Electra?

ELECTRA. No. It's not far away.

BEGGAR. I said "it," I meant the day.

ELECTRA. I meant the light.

BEGGAR. It's not enough for you that liars' faces are shining in the sun? That adulterers and murderers move about freely? That's what the day brings—not too bad.

ELECTRA. No. But I want their faces to look blank at noon, and their hands red. That's what light brings out. I want their eyes to be rotten, their mouths diseased.

BEGGAR. As you say, one can't ask too much!

ELECTRA. There's the cock . . . shall I wake him?

BEGGAR. Wake him if you wish, but if I were you, I'd give him another five minutes.

ELECTRA. Five minutes of nothingness! A poor gift!

BEGGAR. You never know. I believe there's an insect that lives only five minutes. In five minutes he's young, adult, senile; he runs through childhood and adolescence, to the time of lame knees and cataract, and legitimate and morganatic unions. While I'm speaking he must be having measles and growing to puberty.

ELECTRA. Let's wait till he dies. That's all I'll agree to.

BEGGAR. Our brother sleeps well.

ELECTRA. He went to sleep right away. He escaped from me.

He slipped into sleep as though that were his real life.

BEGGAR. He's smiling. It *is* his real life.

ELECTRA. Tell me anything you like, beggar, except that Orestes' real life is a smile.

BEGGAR. Loud laughter, love, fine clothes, happiness. I guessed that as soon as I saw him. Orestes would be gay as a lark, if life were good to him.

ELECTRA. He has bad luck.

BEGGAR. Yes, he's not very lucky. All the more reason for not hurrying him.

ELECTRA. Good! As he was made to laugh, to dress well, as he's a lark, I'll give Orestes five minutes, for he'll wake to a lifetime of horror.

BEGGAR. In your place, since you can choose, I'd see to it that this morning light and truth depart at the same time. That doesn't mean much, but it would be a young girl's role and would please me. Man's truth is part of his habits, it leaves him somehow, whether at nine o'clock in the morning when workers strike, or at six in the evening, when women confess, et cetera; these are always bad things, always unclear. Now I'm used to animals. They know when to leave. A rabbit's first jump in the heather, the very second the sun rises, the plover's first flight, the young bear's first run from his rock, these, I can tell you, go toward the truth. If they don't get there, that's because they don't have to. A mere nothing distracts them, a gudgeon, a bee. Do as they do, Electra, go toward the dawn.

ELECTRA. A fine kingdom where gudgeons and bees are liars! But your animals are moving already!

BEGGAR. No. Those are the night creatures turning in. Owls. Rats. The night's truth turning in. Hush! Listen to the last two, the nightingales, of course the nightingales' truth.

### Scene 2

[The same. AGATHA. A YOUNG MAN.]

AGATHA. Darling, you do understand, don't you?

YOUNG MAN. Yes, I have an answer for everything.

AGATHA. If he sees you on the stairs?

YOUNG MAN. I have come to see the doctor on the top floor.

AGATHA. You forget already! He's a veterinary. Buy a dog. . . . If he finds me in your arms?

YOUNG MAN. I've picked you up in the street, you've sprained your ankle.

AGATHA. If it's in our kitchen?

YOUNG MAN. I'll pretend to be drunk—I don't know where I am. I'll break the glasses.

AGATHA. One will be enough, darling, a small one, the large ones are crystal. If it's in our room and we're dressed?

YOUNG MAN. I'm looking for him, to talk politics. I had to go there to find him.

AGATHA. If it's in our room and we're undressed?

YOUNG MAN. I entered unexpectedly, you're resisting me, you are perfidy itself, you treat as a thief a man who's pursued you six months. . . . You're a tart!

AGATHA. Darling!

YOUNG MAN. A real tart!

AGATHA. I understand. It's almost day, my love, and I've hardly had you for an hour, and how many more times do you think he'll believe I walk in my sleep, and that it's less dangerous to let me stroll in the grove than on the roof? Oh, my love, can you think of any pretext for letting me have you in *our bed* at night, me between you two, so it would seem quite natural to him?

YOUNG MAN. Think! You'll invent something.

AGATHA. A pretext for letting you two talk about your elections and the races over the body of your Agatha, so he'd not suspect anything. That's what we need—that's all.

YOUNG MAN. All!

AGATHA. Oh dear! Why is he so vain? Why is his sleep so light? Why does he adore me?

YOUNG MAN. The eternal litany! Why did you marry him? Why did you love him?

AGATHA. I? Liar! I never loved anyone but you!

YOUNG MAN. I? Remember in whose arms I found you day before yesterday!

AGATHA. That was only because I'd sprained my ankle. The man you mention was picking me up.

YOUNG MAN. First I've heard of any sprain.

AGATHA. You! You understand nothing. You don't realize that accident gave me an idea for us to use.

YOUNG MAN. When I meet him on the stairs he has no dogs, I can tell you, and no cats.

AGATHA. He rides horseback. You can't take a horse to the doctor upstairs.

YOUNG MAN. And he's always leaving your room.

AGATHA. Why do you force me to betray a state secret? He comes to consult my husband. They're afraid of a plot in the city. Please don't tell anyone, that would mean his dismissal. You'd bring me to the stake.

YOUNG MAN. One evening he was hurrying, his scarf not fastened, his tunic half unbuttoned. . . .

AGATHA. Of course, that was the day he tried to kiss me. I fixed him!

YOUNG MAN. You didn't let him kiss you, and he so powerful? I was waiting downstairs. He stayed two hours. . . .

AGATHA. He did stay two hours, but I didn't let him kiss me. YOUNG MAN. Then he kissed you without your leave. Confess, Agatha, or I'll go away.

AGATHA. Force me to confess! That's a fine reward for my frankness. Yes, he did kiss me . . . once . . . on my forehead.

YOUNG MAN. And that seems dreadful to you?

AGATHA. Dreadful? Frightful!

YOUNG MAN. And you don't suffer for it?

AGATHA. Not at all! . . . Ah, do I suffer? It's killing me, killing me! Kiss me, darling. Now you know everything, and I'm glad of it. Aren't you happy everything is cleared up between us?

YOUNG MAN. Yes. Anything is better than a lie.

AGATHA. What a nice way you have of saying you prefer me to everything else, darling!

### Scene 3

[ELECTRA, ORESTES, BEGGAR. *Then the EUMENIDES. They are taller than before, and seem fifteen years old.*]

BEGGAR. A dawn song, at the dawn of such a day! It's always like this.

ELECTRA. The insect is dead, beggar?

BEGGAR. Dispersed in the universe. His great-grandchildren are now fighting gout.

ELECTRA. Orestes!

BEGGAR. You see he's no longer asleep. His eyes are open.

ELECTRA. Where are you, Orestes? What are you thinking about?

FIRST FURY. Orestes, there's just time. Don't listen to your sister.

SECOND FURY. Don't listen to her. We have learned what life holds for you, it's wonderful!

THIRD FURY. Just by chance. As we grew up during the night.

SECOND FURY. We're not saying anything about love to you, does that seem strange?

FIRST FURY. She's going to spoil everything with her poison.

THIRD FURY. Her poison of *truth*, the only one that has no antidote.

FIRST FURY. You're right. We know what you're thinking.

Royalty is magnificent, Orestes: young girls in the royal parks, feeding bread to the swans, King Orestes' miniature hanging on their blouses—they kiss it secretly; soldiers going to war, the women on the roofs, the sky like a veil over them, a white horse prancing to music; the return from war, the king's face looking like the face of a god, just because he's chilly or hungry or a little frightened, or pitying his people. If the truth is going to spoil all that, let it perish!

SECOND FURY. You're right. And love is magnificent. Orestes! Lovers, it seems, will never part. They're never separated but they rush back to each other, to clasp hands. Or if they go away, they find each other face to face again immediately. The earth is round for the sake of lovers. Everywhere I run into him I love, though he's not yet alive. All this Electra wants to take from you, and from us too, with her Truth. We want to love. Flee Electra!

ELECTRA. Orestes!

ORESTES. I'm awake, sister.

ELECTRA. Wake from your awakening. Don't listen to these girls.

ORESTES. Are you sure they aren't right? Are you sure that it's not the worst kind of arrogance for a human being to try to retrace his steps? Why not take the first road and go forward, at random? Trust yourself to me. At this moment I can see so clearly the track of the game called happiness.

ELECTRA. Alas! That's not what we're hunting today.

ORESTES. The only thing that's important is not to leave

each other. Let's go to Thessaly. You'll see my house, covered with roses and jasmine.

ELECTRA. Darling Orestes, you've saved me from the gardener not just to give me to flowers!

ORESTES. Be persuaded! Let's slip out of the trap which will soon catch us! Let's rejoice that we woke up before it did! Come!

FIRST FURY. It's awake! Look at its eyes!

THIRD FURY. You're right. The spring is wonderful, Orestes. When you can see over the hedges only the moving backs of the beasts grazing in the new grass, and the donkey's head looking at you over them. That donkey's head would look funny if you murdered your uncle. Pretty funny, a donkey looking at you when your hands are red with your uncle's blood—

ORESTES. What's she saying?

THIRD FURY. Talk on about the spring! The buttery mould that floats on the watercress in the brooks—you'll see what a comfort that will be for a man who kills his mother. Spread your butter that day with a knife, even if it's not the knife that killed your mother, and you'll see!

ORESTES. Help! Electra!

ELECTRA. So! You're like all men, Orestes! The least little flattery relaxes them, the slightest breath captivates them. Help you? I know what you'd like me to say.

ORESTES. Then tell me.

ELECTRA. That on the whole human beings are good, that life, too, after all, is good.

ORESTES. Isn't that true?

ELECTRA. That it's not a bad fate to be young, handsome, and a prince, to have a young sister who's a princess. That it's enough to leave men alone in their mean, vain business—not lancing human ulcers, but living for the beauty of the earth.

ORESTES. Isn't that what you're telling me?

ELECTRA. No! I'm telling you our mother has a lover.

ORESTES. You lie! That's impossible.

FIRST FURY. She's a widow. She has the right.

ELECTRA. I'm telling you our father was murdered.

ORESTES. Agamemnon! Murdered!

ELECTRA. Stabbed, by assassins.

SECOND FURY. Seven years ago. It's ancient history.

ORESTES. You knew that and let me sleep all night!

ELECTRA. I didn't know it. It's the night's gift to me. These truths were tossed to me by the night. Now I know how prophetesses work. They hold their brother close to their heart through one night.

ORESTES. Our father killed! Who told you?

ELECTRA. He himself.

ORESTES. He spoke to you before he died?

ELECTRA. Dead, he spoke to me. The very day of his death, but it's taken seven years for his word to reach me.

ORESTES. He appeared to you?

ELECTRA. No. His corpse appeared to me last night, looking like him the day he was murdered, but illuminated; I just had to read. There was a fold of his garment which said, I'm not a fold of death but of murder. And on his shoe there was a buckle which repeated, I'm not an accidental buckle but a criminal buckle. And on his eyelid there was a wrinkle which said, I didn't see death, I saw regicides.

ORESTES. And about our mother, who told you that?

ELECTRA. She herself, herself again.

ORESTES. She confessed?

ELECTRA. No I saw her dead. Her body betrayed her. There's no possible doubt. Her eyebrow was the eyebrow of a dead woman who'd had a lover.

ORESTES. Who is this lover? Who is this murderer?

ELECTRA. I've waked you so you can find out. Let's hope they're both the same, then you'll have to strike just one blow.

ORESTES. Girls, I think you'll have to clear out. My sister presents me as I wake with a harlot queen and a murdered king . . . my parents.

FIRST FURY. That's not too bad. Add nothing more.

ELECTRA. Forgive me, Orestes.

SECOND FURY. Now she's excusing herself.

THIRD FURY. I'm killing you, but excuse it, please.

BEGGAR. She's wrong to excuse herself. This is the kind of awakening we generally reserve for our wives and sisters. They seem to be made for that.

ELECTRA. They are made just for that. Wives, sister-in-law, mothers-in-law, they're the ones to shake up the men who, barely awake, see nothing but purple and gold, till the women give them, with their coffee and hot water, a hatred of injustice and a scorn for small joys.

ORESTES. Forgive me, Electra!

SECOND FURY. It's his turn to beg pardon. Aren't they polite in this family!

FIRST FURY. They take off their heads and bow to each other.

ELECTRA. And they watch for their waking. For men put on the armor of happiness if they sleep no more than five minutes: and with it satisfaction, indifference, generosity, appetite. And a spot of sunlight reconciles them to all blood spots. And a bird song to all lies. But the women are there, all of them, worn by insomnia, with jealousy, envy, love, memory and truth. Are you awake, Orestes?

FIRST FURY. And we'll be as old as he in an hour! Let's hope heaven makes us different!

ORESTES. I believe I'm waking up.

BEGGAR. Here comes our mother, children.

ORESTES. Where's my sword?

ELECTRA. Bravo! That's what I call a good awakening. Take up your sword. Take up your hatred. Take up your strength.

#### Scene 4

[The same. Enter CLYTEMNESTRA.]

CLYTEMNESTRA. Their mother appears. And they turn into statues.

ELECTRA. Orphans, rather.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I'm not going to listen to an insolent daughter any longer.

ELECTRA. Listen to your son.

ORESTES. Who is it, mother? Confess.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What kind of children are you, turning our meeting into a melodrama? Leave me, or I'll call.

ELECTRA. Whom will you call? Him?

ORESTES. You struggle too much, mother.

BEGGAR. Be careful, Orestes. An innocent creature struggles as much as a guilty.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Creature? What kind of creature am I for my children? Speak, Orestes, speak!

ORESTES. I don't dare.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra, then. She'll dare.

ELECTRA. Who is it, mother?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Of whom, of what are you speaking?

ORESTES. Mother, it is true you have . . . ?

ELECTRA. Don't specify, Orestes. Just ask who it is. There's a name somewhere in her. However you ask your question, the name will come out.

ORESTES. Mother, it is true you have a lover?

CLYTEMNESTRA. That's your question too, Electra?

ELECTRA. It might be put that way.

CLYTEMNESTRA. My son and daughter ask if I have a lover?

ELECTRA. Your husband can't ask it now.

CLYTEMNESTRA. The gods would blush to hear you.

ELECTRA. That would surprise me. They've not been doing much blushing lately.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I have no lover. But watch your step. All the evil in the world is caused by the so-called pure people, trying to dig up secrets and bring them to light.

ELECTRA. Rottenness is born of sunshine. I grant that.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I have no lover, I couldn't have a lover if I wanted one. But take care. Curious people have had no luck in our family: they tracked down a theft and found a sacrilege; they carried on a love affair and ran into an incest. You'll not find out I have a lover, because I haven't, but you'll stumble on a stone which will be fatal to your sisters and yourselves.

ELECTRA. Who is your lover?

ORESTES. Electra, at least listen to her.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I have no lover. But who would call it a crime if I had?

ORESTES. Oh, mother, you're a queen.

CLYTEMNESTRA. The world is not old and day is just dawning. But it would take us at least till twilight to recite the list of queens who've had lovers.

ORESTES. Mother, please! Fight on this way. Convince us. If this struggle restores a queen to us, it's blessed, everything is restored.

ELECTRA. Don't you see you're giving her weapons, Orestes?

CLYTEMNESTRA. That's enough. Orestes, leave me alone with Electra, will you?

ORESTES. Must I, sister?

ELECTRA. Yes, yes. Wait there, under the arch. And run back to me as soon as I call, Orestes. Run as fast as you can. It will mean I know all.

## Scene 5

[CLYTEMNESTRA, ELECTRA. *The BEGGAR.*]

CLYTEMNESTRA. Help me, Electra!

ELECTRA. Help you to what? To tell the truth or to lie?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Protect me.

ELECTRA. It's the first time you stoop to your daughter, mother. You must be afraid.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I'm afraid of Orestes.

ELECTRA. You lie. You're not the least afraid of Orestes. You see what he is: passionate, changeable, weak—still dreaming of an idyl in the Atrides family. It's I you're afraid of, it's for me you're playing this game, the meaning of which still escapes me. You have a lover, haven't you? Who is he?

CLYTEMNESTRA. He knows nothing. And he's not in question.

ELECTRA. He doesn't know he's your lover?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Stop acting like a judge, Electra. Stop this pursuit. After all, you're my daughter.

ELECTRA. After all! Exactly after all! That's why I'm questioning you.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Then stop being my daughter. Stop hating me. Just be what I look for in you—a woman. Take up my cause, it's yours. Defend yourself by defending me.

ELECTRA. I'm not a member of the Women's Association, and someone other than you would have to recruit me.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You're wrong. If you betray your equal in body, in misfortune, you're the first one Orestes will loathe. Scandal always strikes back at the people who start it. What good does it do you to bespatter all women by bespattering me? In Orestes' eyes you'll sully all the qualities you get from me.

ELECTRA. I'm not like you in anything. I never look in my mirror except to be certain of that piece of luck. All the shiny marble, all the fountains of the palace have cried out to me, your own face cries it: Electra's nose is not the least like Clytemnestra's nose. My forehead is my own. My mouth's my own. And I have no lover.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Listen! I have no lover. I'm in love.

ELECTRA. Don't try that trick. You throw love at me the way drivers pursued by wolves throw them a dog. Dog meat is not my food.

CLYTEMNESTRA. We're women, Electra. We have a right to love.

ELECTRA. There are many rights in the sisterhood of women. I know. If you pay the entrance fee, which is steep, which means admission only for weak, lying, base women, you have a right to be weak, lying, and base. Unfortunately women are strong, loyal, and noble, so you're wrong. You had the right to love my father only. Did you? On your wedding night, did you love him?

CLYTEMNESTRA. What are you driving at? Do you want me to say that your birth owes nothing to love, that you were conceived in indifference? Be satisfied. Not everyone can be like your Aunt Leda, and lay eggs. You never spoke in me. We were indifferent to each other from the first. You didn't even cause me pain at your birth. You were small and withdrawn, your lips tight. When you were a year old, your lips were sealed, so "mother" wouldn't be your first word. Neither of us cried that day. We've never wept together.

ELECTRA. Weeping parties don't interest me.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You'll weep soon, perhaps over me.

ELECTRA. Eyes can weep by themselves. That's what they're there for.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Yes, even yours, which look like two stones. Some day tears will drown them.

ELECTRA. I hope that day comes! But why are you trying to hold me by cold words instead of by love?

CLYTEMNESTRA. So you'll understand I have a right to love. So you'll know that my whole life has been as hard as my daughter from her very first day. Since my marriage I've never been alone, never at peace. I never went to the forest except for festivals. No rest, even for my body which was covered every day by golden robes and at night by a king. Always mistrust, even of things, animals, plants. I often said to myself, as I looked at cross, silent lindens, smelling like a wet nurse: "They're like Electra's head, the day she was born." No queen has ever suffered so deeply the fate of queens, a husband's absence, a son's suspicions, a daughter's hatred. What had I left?

ELECTRA. What the others had left: waiting.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Waiting, for what? Waiting is horrible.

ELECTRA. For her who has caught you today, perhaps.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Can you tell me what you're waiting for?

ELECTRA. I no longer wait. For ten years I've waited—for my father. Waiting is the only happiness in the world.

CLYTEMNESTRA. A virgin's happiness, a solitary happiness.

ELECTRA. You think so? Except for you and the men, everything in the palace awaited my father with me, everything was party to my waiting. It began in the morning with my early walk under the lindens which hate you, which waited for my father with an eagerness they tried in vain to repress; they were sorry to live by the year and not by the decade, ashamed every spring that they couldn't hold back their flowers and perfume, that they grew weak with me over his absence. It went on till noon when I went to the brook that was the luckiest of us all, for it awaited my father as it ran to the river that ran to the sea. And in the evening, when I wasn't strong enough to wait near his dogs and his horses, poor short-lived beasts, that couldn't wait for centuries, I took refuge with the columns and the statues. I modeled myself on them. I waited in the moonlight for hours, motionless like them, without thought, lifeless. I awaited him with a stony heart—marble, alabaster, onyx—though it was beating, shattering my breast. Where would I be if there weren't still hours to wait, to wait for the past, wait for him still?

CLYTEMNESTRA. I'm not waiting. I love.

ELECTRA. Everything goes well with you now?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Very well.

ELECTRA. Flowers obey you? Birds talk to you?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Yes, your lindens signal to me.

ELECTRA. Quite likely. You've robbed me of everything in life.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Fall in love. We'll share.

ELECTRA. Share love with you? Are you offering to share your lover with me? Who is he?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Electra, have pity! I'll tell you his name, though it will make you blush. But wait a few days. What good will a scandal do you? Think of your brother. Can you imagine the Argives letting Orestes succeed an unworthy mother?

ELECTRA. An unworthy mother? What are you getting at with this confession? What time do you want to gain? What trap are you setting for me? What brood are you hoping to save, limping off like a partridge, toward love and unworthiness?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Spare me public disgrace! Why do you force me to confess I love someone below me in rank?

ELECTRA. Some little nameless lieutenant?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Yes.

ELECTRA. You're lying. If your lover were some little nameless, inglorious officer, or a bathhouse attendant, or a groom, you'd love him. But you're not in love, you've never loved. Who is it? Why do you refuse to name him, as you'd refuse a key? What piece of furniture are you afraid of opening with that name?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Something of my own, my love.

ELECTRA. Tell me the name of your lover, and I'll tell you if you love. And we'll keep it to ourselves forever.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Never!

ELECTRA. You see! It's not your lover but your secret that you're hiding from me. You're afraid his name would give me the one proof I'm lacking in my pursuit.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What proof? You're mad.

ELECTRA. The proof of the crime. Everything tells me, mother, that you committed it. But what I don't yet see, what you must tell me, is why you committed it. I've tried all the keys, as you say. Not one opens it—yet. Not love. You love nothing. Not ambition. You scoff at queenship. Not anger. You're deliberate, calculating. But your lover's name would clear up everything, tell us everything, wouldn't it? Who do you love? Who is he?

### Scene 6

[The same. AGATHA, pursued by the PRESIDENT.]

PRESIDENT. Who is he? Who do you love?

AGATHA. I hate you.

PRESIDENT. Who is it?

AGATHA. I tell you that's enough. Enough lies. Electra's right. I'm on her side. Thanks, Electra, you give me life.

PRESIDENT. What is this song?

AGATHA. Wives' song. You'll soon know it.

PRESIDENT. So, she's going to sing!

AGATHA. Yes, we're all here, with our unsatisfactory husbands or our widowhood. And we all kill ourselves, trying to make life and death pleasant. And if they eat cooked let-



tuce they have to have salt and a smile with it. And if they smoke we have to light their horrid cigars with the flame of our hearts.

PRESIDENT. Who are you talking about? I never ate cooked lettuce.

AGATHA. Sorrel, if you prefer.

PRESIDENT. Your lover doesn't eat sorrel or smoke cigars?

AGATHA. The sorrel my lover eats turns into ambrosia, and I lick up what's left. And everything soiled by my husband's touch is purified by his hands or lips. I myself! God knows!

ELECTRA. I've found out, mother, I've found out!

PRESIDENT. Collect yourself, Agatha.

AGATHA. Precisely. I've done just that. Twenty-four hours a day we kill ourselves to please someone whose displeasure is our only joy, for a husband whose absence is our only delight, for the vanity of the only man who humiliates us daily by showing us his toes and his shirt tails. And he has the gall to reproach us for stealing from him one hour a week of this hell! But, sure enough, he's right. When this wonderful hour comes, we don't greet it with a dead hand!

PRESIDENT. Electra, this is your work. This very morning she kissed me!

AGATHA. I'm pretty and he's ugly. I'm young and he's old. I'm bright and he's stupid. I have a soul and he hasn't. Yet he has everything. At least he has me. And I have nothing, though I have him! Until this morning, I gave everything and had to seem grateful. Why? I black his shoes. Why? I brush off his dandruff. Why? I make his coffee. Why? The truth might be that I'm poisoning him, rubbing his collar with pitch and ashes. Of course you can understand about the shoes. I spit on them. I spit on you. But it's all over, finished. Welcome, truth! Electra has given me her courage. I'm through. I'd as soon die.

BEGGAR. Don't these wives sing well!

PRESIDENT. Who is it?

ELECTRA. Listen, mother! Listen to yourself. It's you talking.

AGATHA. Who is it? All husbands think it's just one person.

PRESIDENT. Lovers? You have lovers?

AGATHA. They think we deceive them only with lovers. Of course we have lovers, too. But we deceive you with everything. When I wake and my hand slips along the wooden bedstead, that's my first adultery. Let's use your word for

once, adultery. How often, when I'm wakeful, I've caressed that wood—olive wood, so soft! What a pretty name! I start when I hear an olive tree mentioned in the street—I hear my lover's name! And my second adultery is when I open my eyes and see daylight through the blinds. And my third, when my foot touches the bathwater and when I jump in. I betray you with my fingers, with my eyes, with the soles of my feet. When I look at you, I deceive you. When I listen to you and pretend to admire you in court, I'm deceiving you. Kill the olive trees, the pigeons, the five-year-old children, boys and girls, and water and earth and fire! Kill this beggar. You're betrayed by all of them.

BEGGAR. Thanks!

PRESIDENT. And yesterday this woman was still pouring my tea! And finding it too cool, having the water boiled again! You're all pleased, aren't you? This little scandal within a great one can't displease you!

BEGGAR. No. It's like the squirrel in a big wheel. It gives the right rhythm.

PRESIDENT. And this scene before the queen herself. You'll pardon it?

ELECTRA. The queen envies Agatha. The queen would give her life to have the chance Agatha has today. Who is it, mother?

BEGGAR. Sure! Don't let anything distract you, President. It's almost a minute since you asked her who it is.

PRESIDENT. Who is it?

AGATHA. I've told you. Everybody. Everything.

PRESIDENT. It's enough to drive me to suicide, to make me bash my head against the wall.

AGATHA. Don't stop on my account. The Mycenaean wall is solid.

PRESIDENT. Is he young? Or old?

AGATHA. A lover's age—between 16 and 80.

PRESIDENT. And she thinks she's disgracing me by insulting me! Your insults only hurt yourself, abandoned woman!

AGATHA. I know, I know. Outrage is called majesty. In the streets the most respectable people slip on dung.

PRESIDENT. At last you'll find out who I am! Whoever your lovers are, I'll kill the first one I find here.

AGATHA. The first one you find here? You choose the place badly.

PRESIDENT. I'll make him kneel down and kiss the marble.  
 AGATHA. You'll see how he'll kiss the marble when he comes into this court in a minute and sits on the throne.  
 PRESIDENT. Wretch, what are you saying?  
 AGATHA. I'm saying that at present I have two lovers, and one is Aegisthus.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA. Liar!  
 AGATHA. What! She too!  
 ELECTRA. You too, mother?  
 BEGGAR. That's funny. I'd have thought, if Aegisthus had a liking, it was for Electra.  
 PAGE [announcing]. Aegisthus!  
 ELECTRA. At last!  
 THE FURIES. Aegisthus!

[AEGISTHUS comes in. Much more majestic and calm than in the first act. Far above him, a bird hovers in the air.]

### Scene 7

[The same. Enter AEGISTHUS. A CAPTAIN. SOLDIERS.]

AEGISTHUS. Electra is here. . . . Thanks, Electra! I'll stop here, Captain. Headquarters are here.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA. I, too, am here.  
 AEGISTHUS. I'm glad. Welcome, queen!  
 PRESIDENT. I too, Aegisthus!  
 AEGISTHUS. Good, President. I need your help.  
 PRESIDENT. And now he insults us!  
 AEGISTHUS. What's the matter with you all, that you stare at me so?  
 BEGGAR. What's the matter is that the queen is waiting for a perjurer, Electra for an infidel, Agatha for a faithless lover. He's more humble, he's waiting for the man who seduced his wife. They're all waiting for you, but it's not you that's come!  
 AEGISTHUS. They have no luck, have they, beggar?  
 BEGGAR. No, they have no luck. Waiting for a rascal, they see a king enter! I don't care about the others, but for our little Electra, the situation is complicated.  
 AEGISTHUS. You think so? I think not.  
 BEGGAR. I knew it would happen. I told you so yesterday. I

knew the king would reveal himself in you. He has your strength and your years. He finds the right moment. Electra is near. That might have involved a bloody act. But you've revealed yourself. Fine for Greece! But not so gay for the family.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA. What do these riddles mean? What are you talking about?  
 BEGGAR. Lucky for us, too! Since there has to be *some* kind of meeting, better let Electra meet nobility than wickedness. How did you get this way, Aegisthus?  
 AEGISTHUS [looking at ELECTRA]. Electra is here! I knew I'd find her looking toward me, her statuesque head, her eyes which see only when the lids are closed, deaf to human speech.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA. Listen to me, Aegisthus!  
 PRESIDENT. How well you choose your lovers, Agatha! What impudence!  
 CAPTAIN. Aegisthus, there's no time!  
 AEGISTHUS. Your ears are ornaments, aren't they, Electra? Mere ornaments. . . . The gods said, we gave her hands so she'd not touch, eyes so she'd be seen, we can't let her head be without ears! People would soon discover that she hears only us. . . . Tell me, what would we hear if we placed our ears near hers? What roaring! And where from?  
 CLYTEMNESTRA. Are you mad? Take care! Electra's ears do hear you.  
 PRESIDENT. They blush for it.  
 AEGISTHUS. They hear me. I'm sure of that. Since what happened to me just now in the outskirts of Argos, my words come from beyond myself. And I know she sees me too, she's the only one who does see me. The only one to guess what I've become since that moment.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA. You're talking to your worst enemy, Aegisthus!  
 AEGISTHUS. She knows why I galloped toward the city from the mountains. Electra, you'd have thought my horse understood. He was beautiful, that light chestnut, charging toward Electra, followed by the thunder of the squadron, in which the knowledge of rushing toward Electra grew less, from the white stallions of the trumpeters to the piebald mares of the rear guard. Don't be surprised if my horse sticks his head between the pillars, neighing to you.

He knew that I was strangling, with your name in my mouth like a golden stopper. I had to shout your name, and to you—shall I shout it, Electra?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Stop this outrageous behavior, Aegisthus.

CAPTAIN. Aegisthus! The city is in danger!

AEGISTHUS. True! Pardon me! Where are they now, Captain?

CAPTAIN. You can see their lances coming over the hills. I've never seen a harvest grow so fast. Nor so thick. There are thousands of them.

AEGISTHUS. The cavalry's no use against them?

CAPTAIN. Repulsed, prisoners taken.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What's happening, Aegisthus?

CAPTAIN. The Corinthians are surrounding us, no declaration of war, no reason for it. Their regiments entered our territory last night. The suburbs are on fire already.

AEGISTHUS. What do the prisoners say?

CAPTAIN. Their orders are to leave no stone standing in Argos.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Show yourself, Aegisthus, and they'll flee!

AEGISTHUS. I fear, queen, that wouldn't be enough.

CAPTAIN. They have friends in the city. The reserves of pitch have been stolen, so the middle-class quarters can be burned. Gangs of beggars are gathering around the markets ready to start pillaging.

CLYTEMNESTRA. If the guard is loyal, what is there to fear?

CAPTAIN. The guard is ready to fight. But they're muttering. You know, they've never willingly obeyed a woman. The city's the same way. They both demand a king, a man.

AEGISTHUS. They're right. They shall have one.

PRESIDENT. Who ever wants to be king of Argos, Aegisthus, must first kill Clytemnestra.

BEGGAR. Or simply marry her.

PRESIDENT. Never!

AEGISTHUS. Why, never? The queen can't deny that's the only way to save Argos. I don't doubt she'll consent. Captain, tell the guard the wedding has this moment taken place. Keep me informed of events. I'll wait here for your bulletins. And do you, President, go meet the rioters and tell them this news most enthusiastically.

PRESIDENT. Never! I must first speak to you, man to man, no matter what happens.

AEGISTHUS. No matter if Argos falls, if war comes? You're outrageous.

PRESIDENT. My honor, the honor of all Greek judges, is at stake.

BEGGAR. If Greek justice lies in Agatha's lap, that's just what it deserves. Don't hinder us at such a time. Look at Agatha, see if she cares for the honor of Greek judges, with her nose in the air.

PRESIDENT. Her nose in the air! Agatha is your nose in the air?

AGATHA. My nose *is* in the air. I'm looking at that bird hovering over Aegisthus.

PRESIDENT. Lower it!

AEGISTHUS. Queen, I'm waiting for your reply.

CLYTEMNESTRA. A bird? What is that bird? Get from under that bird, Aegisthus.

AEGISTHUS. Why? He's not left me since sunrise. He must have his reasons. My horse noticed him first. He kicked without any provocation. I looked all around and then up there. He was kicking at that bird, and plunging and rearing. It's exactly above me, isn't it, beggar?

BEGGAR. Exactly above. If you were a thousand feet tall, your head would be there.

AEGISTHUS. Like a mark on a page, isn't it? A black mark.

BEGGAR. Yes, at the moment you're the most marked man in Greece. We'll have to find out whether the mark is over the word "human" or the word "mortal."

CLYTEMNESTRA. I don't like this hovering bird. What is it? A kite or an eagle?

BEGGAR. He's too high up. I might recognize him by his shadow, but so high up we can't see it, it's lost.

CAPTAIN [*returning*]. The guards are delighted, Aegisthus. They're joyfully getting ready to fight. They're waiting for you to appear on the balcony with the queen, so they can cheer you.

AEGISTHUS. My oath, and I'll go.

PRESIDENT. Electra, help me! Why should this rake teach us courage?

BEGGAR. Why? Listen! . . .

AEGISTHUS. Oh, Heavenly Powers, since I must pray to you on the eve of battle, I thank you for the gift of this hill which overlooks Argos the moment the fog evaporates. I dismounted, weary from the night patrol, I leaned against the battlement, and suddenly I saw Argos as I had never before seen it—new, rebuilt by me; you have given it to

me. You've given it all to me, its towers, its bridges, the smoke from its farm machines, the flying pigeons, its first movements, the grinding of its locks, its first cry. Everything in your gift has equal value, Electra, the sunrise over Argos, the last lantern in the city, the temple, the ruins, the lake, the tanneries. And the gift is forever! This morning I was given my city for eternity, as a mother her child, and in agony I asked myself if the gift were not even greater, if you hadn't given me far more than Argos. In the morning God never counts his gifts: he might even have given me the whole world. That would have been dreadful. I should have felt a despair like that of a man who expects a diamond on his birthday and is given the sun. Electra, you see my anxiety! I anxiously stretched my foot and my thoughts beyond Argos. What joy! I had not been given the Orient, its plagues, earthquakes, famines: I realized that with a smile. My thirst was not like that of men who quench it in the great, warm rivers flowing through the desert, but, I discovered, I could quench it at an icy spring. And nothing in Africa is mine! Negresses can pound millet at the doors of their huts, the jaguar drive his claws into the crocodile's flank, not a drop of their soup or their blood is mine. I'm as happy over the gifts not given me as over the gift of Argos. In a fit of generosity the Gods have not given me Athens or Olympia or Mycenae. What joy! They have given me the Argive cattle markets, not the treasures of Corinth; the short noses of the Argive girls, not the nose of Athena; the wrinkled prune of Argos, not the golden fig of Thebes! That's what they gave me this morning; me, the wastrel, the parasite, the knave, a country where I feel myself pure, strong, perfect; a fatherland; a country where, instead of being a slave, I am king, where I swear to live and die—you hear me, judge—a country I swear to save.

PRESIDENT. I rely on you only, Electra!

ELECTRA. Rely on me. No one should save his fatherland with impure hands.

BEGGAR. A coronation purifies everything.

ELECTRA. Who crowned you? Who witnessed your coronation?

BEGGAR. Can't you guess? Just what he begged of you. For the first time he sees you in your truth and power. The

thought has suddenly dawned on him that Electra is included in this gift of Argos.

AEGISTHUS. Everything on my way consecrated me, Electra. As I galloped I heard the trees, the children, the streams shout to me: I was king. But the holy oil was lacking. I was a coward yesterday. A rabbit, whose trembling ears showed over a furrow, gave me courage. I was a hypocrite. A fox crossed the road, his eyes crafty, and I became frank. And a couple of magpies gave me independence, an ant hill, generosity. And if I hurried back to you, Electra, it was because you are the only creature who can give me her very being.

ELECTRA. And that is——?

AEGISTHUS. I think it is rather like duty.

ELECTRA. My duty is certainly the mortal enemy of yours.

You shall not marry Clytemnestra.

PRESIDENT. You shall not marry her.

CLYTEMNESTRA. And why shan't we marry? Why should we sacrifice our lives to ungrateful children? Yes, I love Aegisthus. For ten years I've loved Aegisthus. For ten years I've postponed this marriage for your sake, Electra, and in memory of your father. Now you force us to it. Thanks! But not under that bird. That bird annoys me. As soon as the bird flies away, I consent.

AEGISTHUS. Don't worry, queen. I'm not marrying you in order to create new lies. I don't know if I still love you, and the whole city doubts that you ever loved me. For ten years our liaison has dragged along between indifference and neglect. But marriage is the only way to cast a little truth over our past lies, and it will safeguard Argos. It must take place, this very hour.

ELECTRA. I don't believe it will take place.

PRESIDENT. Bravo!

AEGISTHUS. Will you be quiet? Who are you in Argos? A deceived husband or the chief justice?

PRESIDENT. Both, of course.

AEGISTHUS. Then choose. I have no choice. Choose between duty and prison. Time is short.

PRESIDENT. You took Agatha from me.

AEGISTHUS. I'm not the one who took Agatha.

PRESIDENT. Weren't you given all the deceived husbands in Argos this morning?

BEGGAR. Yes. But he's not the man who deceived them.

PRESIDENT. I understand. The new king forgets the outrages he committed as regent.

BEGGAR. Agatha looks like a rose. Outrages make her rosy?

AEGISTHUS. A king begs you to pardon today the insult a rake inflicted on you yesterday. That must satisfy you.

Listen to my orders. Go quickly to your courtroom, try the rebels, and be severe with them.

AGATHA. Be severe. I have a little lover among them.

PRESIDENT. Will you stoop looking at that bird? You irritate me.

AGATHA. I'm sorry. It's the only thing in the world that interests me.

PRESIDENT. Idiot! What will you do when it goes away?

AGATHA. That's what I'm wondering.

AEGISTHUS. Are you disobeying me, President? Don't you hear those shouts?

PRESIDENT. I'll not go. I'll help Electra prevent your marriage.

ELECTRA. I don't need your help, President. Your role ended when Agatha gave me the key to everything. Thanks, Agatha!

CLYTEMNESTRA. What key?

AEGISTHUS. Come, queen.

CLYTEMNESTRA. What key did she give you? What new quarrel are you trying to start?

ELECTRA. You hated my father! Oh, everything is clear in the light of Agatha's lamp.

CLYTEMNESTRA. There she goes again! Protect me, Aegisthus!

ELECTRA. How you envied Agatha just now! What joy to shout out your hatred to the husband you hate! That joy was not allowed you, mother. Never in your life will you have it. Till the day of his death he believed you admired and adored him. At banquets and festivals I've often seen your face harden, your lips move soundlessly, because you wanted to cry out you hated him. You wanted passers-by, guests, the servant pouring wine, the detective guarding the silver, to hear you, didn't you? Poor mother, you could never go to the country alone to cry out to the bushes! All the bushes say you adored him!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Listen, Electra!

ELECTRA. That's right, mother, cry it out to me! Though he's

not here, I'm his substitute. Cry to me! That will do you as much good as to say it to him. You're not going to die without letting him know you hated him.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Come, Aegisthus! Never mind the bird!

ELECTRA. If you take one step, mother, I'll call.

AEGISTHUS. Whom will you call, Electra? Is there anyone in the world who can take from us the right to save our city?

ELECTRA. Save our city from hypocrisy, from corruption? There are thousands. The purest, the handsomest, the youngest is here, in this courtyard. If Clytemnestra takes a step, I'll call.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Come, Aegisthus!

ELECTRA. Orestes! Orestes!

[*The EUMENIDES appear and bar the way.*]

FIRST FURY. Poor girl! You're too naive! Do you think we'll let Orestes run around sword in hand? Accidents happen too quickly in this palace. We've gagged him and chained him up.

ELECTRA. That's not true! Orestes! Orestes!

SECOND FURY. You, too, it will happen to you.

AEGISTHUS. Electra, dear Electra, listen to me. I want to persuade you.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You're losing precious time, Aegisthus.

AEGISTHUS. I'm coming! Electra, I know you're the only one who understands what I am today. Help me! Let me tell you why you must help me!

CLYTEMNESTRA. What is this craze to explain, to argue? Are we roosters in this courtyard or human beings? Do we have to go on explaining till our eyes are gouged out? Must the three of us be carried off by force, to separate us?

PRESIDENT. I think that's the only way, queen.

CAPTAIN. I beseech you, Aegisthus! Hurry!

BEGGAR. Don't you understand? Aegisthus must settle once and for all the business about Agamemnon—Clytemnestra—Electra. Then he'll come.

CAPTAIN. In five minutes it will be too late.

BEGGAR. We'll all do our bit. It will be settled in five minutes.

AEGISTHUS. Take this man away.

[*Guards take out the PRESIDENT. All the spectators leave. Silence.*]

AEGISTHUS. Now, Electra, what do you want?

## Scene 8

[ELECTRA, CLYTEMNESTRA, AEGISTHUS, BEGGAR.]

ELECTRA. She's not late, Aegisthus. She just won't come.

AEGISTHUS. Of whom are you speaking?

ELECTRA. Of her you're waiting for. The messenger of the gods. If divine justice absolves Aegisthus because he loves his city, and is marrying Clytemnestra because he despises lies and wants to save the middle class and the rich, this is the moment for her to appear before the two of you, bearing her diplomas and her laurels. But she'll not come.

AEGISTHUS. You know she has come. This morning's sunbeam on my head was she.

ELECTRA. That was a morning beam. Every scurvy child thinks he's a king when a morning sunbeam touches him.

AEGISTHUS. Do you doubt my sincerity?

ELECTRA. I don't doubt it. I recognize in it the hypocrisy and malice of the gods. They change a parasite into a just man, an adulterer into a husband, a usurper into a king. They thought my task not painful enough, so they made a figure of honor out of you, whom I despise! But there's one change they can't carry through! They can't transform a criminal into an innocent man. They bow to me there.

AEGISTHUS. I don't know what you mean.

ELECTRA. You have an inkling. Listen to the small voice beneath your heroic soul. You'll understand.

AEGISTHUS. Who can explain what you're talking about?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Of whom *can* she talk? What has she always talked about her whole life long? Of a father she never knew.

ELECTRA. I? I never knew my father?

CLYTEMNESTRA. You touched a corpse, ice that had been your father. But not your father.

AEGISTHUS. Please, Clytemnestra! How can you quarrel at such a moment!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Everyone must have a turn in this debate. It's my turn now.

ELECTRA. For once you're right. We've come to the heart of the matter. If I'd not touched my living father, from whom would I have drawn my strength, my truth?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Precisely. But now you're talking wildly. I wonder if you ever kissed him. I took care he didn't lick my children.

ELECTRA. I never kissed my father?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Your father's dead body, perhaps, not your father.

AEGISTHUS. I beg you . . . !

ELECTRA. Ah, now I see why you're so firm as you face me.

You thought me unarmed, you thought I'd never touched my father. What a mistake!

CLYTEMNESTRA. You're lying.

ELECTRA. The day my father came home you two waited for him a minute too long on the palace stairs, didn't you?

CLYTEMNESTRA. How do you know? You weren't there!

ELECTRA. I was holding him back. I was in his arms.

AEGISTHUS. Now listen, Electra . . .

ELECTRA. I'd waited in the crowd, mother. I rushed toward him. His escorts were frightened, they feared an attempt on his life. But he recognized me, smiled at me. He understood Electra's attempt, and, brave father, went to meet it. And I touched him.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You may have touched his leg armor, his horse, leather and hair!

ELECTRA. He got down, mother. I touched his hands with these fingers, his lips with these lips. I touched a skin you'd never touched, purified from you by ten years of absence.

AEGISTHUS. That's enough. She believes you!

ELECTRA. My cheek on his, I felt my father's warmth. Sometimes in summer the whole world is just as warm as my father. I fainted from it. And I did hug him in these arms. I thought I was taking the measure of my love—it was also that of my vengeance. He freed himself, mounted his horse, more agile, more resplendent than before. Electra's attempt on his life was over. He was more alive, more golden, because of it. And I ran to the palace to see him again, but I was really running not toward him, but toward you, his murderers.

AEGISTHUS. Pull yourself together, Electra!

ELECTRA. Perhaps I am out of breath. I've reached my goal.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Rid us of this girl, Aegisthus. Give her back to the gardener. Or turn her over to her brother.

AEGISTHUS. Stop, Electra! Why, at the very moment that I

✓ see you, that I love you, when I'm at the point of understanding you—your scorn for abuses, your courage, your disinterestedness—why do you persist in fighting?

ELECTRA. I have only this moment.

AEGISTHUS. Don't you know Argos is in danger?

ELECTRA. We don't see the same dangers.

AEGISTHUS. Don't you know that if I marry Clytemnestra, the city will quiet down, the Atrides will be saved? If not, riots, conflagrations?

ELECTRA. Perhaps.

AEGISTHUS. Don't you know that I alone can defend the city against the Corinthians who are already at the gates? If not, pillage, massacre?

ELECTRA. Yes. You'd be victor.

AEGISTHUS. Yet you are obstinate! You ruin my work. And you sacrifice your family and your country to a dream!

ELECTRA. You're mocking me, Aegisthus! You pretend to know me yet you think I'm the kind to whom you can say, "If you lie and let other people lie, you'll have a prosperous country. If you hide your crimes, your country will be victorious." What is this poor country that you're all of a sudden placing between us and truth?

AEGISTHUS. Your country—Argos.

ELECTRA. You're wrong, Aegisthus. This morning, at the very hour you were given Argos, I also received a gift. I expected it, it had been promised me, but I still didn't know just what it would be. I had already been given a thousand gifts, which seemed incomplete, I couldn't see their appropriateness, but last night, near Orestes as he slept, I saw they were all one and the same gift. I'd been given the back of a truck driver, the smile of a laundress suddenly stopped in her work, watching the river. I'd been given a fat, naked little child, running across the street as his mother and the neighbors shouted to him. I'd been given the cry of a caged bird set free, and that of a mason I one day saw fall from a scaffold, his legs sprawling. I was given the water plant, resisting the current, fighting and dying; the sick young man, coughing, smiling and coughing; and my maid's red cheeks, puffed up each winter morning as she blows on the ashes of the fire. I too thought I was given Argos, everything in Argos that is modest, tender, beautiful and wretched, but just now I found out that it's not so. I knew I'd been given all the servants' cheeks as they blow

on wood or coal, all the laundresses' eyes, whether round or almond-shaped, all the falling masons, all the water plants which seem lost and grow again in streams or the sea. But Argos is only a speck in this universe, my country only a village in that country. All the light and the cries in sad faces, all the wrinkles and shadows on joyful faces, all the desires and despair on indifferent faces—these are my new country. And this morning, at dawn, when you were given Argos and its narrow borders, I also saw it as tremendous, and I heard its name, which is not to be spoken, but which is both tenderness and justice.

CLYTEMNESTRA. So that's Electra's motto! Tenderness! That's enough. Let's go.

AEGISTHUS. And you dare call this justice, that makes you burn your city, damn your family, you dare call this the justice of the gods?

ELECTRA. Far from it! In this country of mine, concern for justice is not the gods' business. The gods are only artists. A beautiful light from a conflagration, beautiful grass on a battle field, such is their justice. A magnificent repentance for a crime is the gods' verdict on your case. I don't accept it.

AEGISTHUS. Electra's justice consists in re-examining every sin, making every act irreparable?

ELECTRA. Oh, no! Some years, frost is justice for the trees, other times it's injustice. There are criminals we love, murderers we embrace. but when the crime is an assault on human dignity, infects a nation, corrupts its loyalty, then—no pardon is possible.

AEGISTHUS. Have you any idea what a nation is, Electra?

ELECTRA. When you see a huge face fill the horizon and you look straight at it with pure, brave eyes, that's a nation.

AEGISTHUS. You talk like a young girl, not like a king. There's also a huge body to rule and to nourish.

ELECTRA. I speak like a woman. There's a bright look to sift, to gild. And the only gold is truth. Those great eyes of truth, they're so beautiful, when you think of the real nations of the world.

AEGISTHUS. There are truths that can kill nations, Electra.

ELECTRA. Sometimes, the eyes of a dead nation shine forever. Pray Heaven that will be the fate of Argos! But since my father's death, since our people's happiness came to be founded on injustice and crime, since everyone has

become a cowardly accomplice in murder and lies, the city can prosper, sing, dance, conquer, heaven may shine on it, but it will be only a cellar where eyes are useless. Infants suck the breast without seeing it.

AEGISTHUS. A scandal can only destroy it.

ELECTRA. Possibly. But I can no longer endure the dim, lusterless look in its eyes.

AEGISTHUS. That will cost thousands of glazed, dead eyes.

ELECTRA. That's the price. It's not too high.

AEGISTHUS. I must have this day. Give it to me. Your truth, if there is such a thing, will find a way to be revealed at a time more suitable for it.

ELECTRA. The revolt shows this day is made for it.

AEGISTHUS. I beseech you! Wait till tomorrow.

ELECTRA. No. This is the day for it. I've seen too many truths fade away because they were a day too late. I know young girls who waited one second before saying no to an ugly, vile thing, and could then say nothing but yes, yes. The beautiful and cruel thing about truth is that she is eternal, but is also like a flash of lightning.

AEGISTHUS. I must save the city and Greece.

ELECTRA. That's a small duty. I'm saving their soul.—You did kill him, didn't you?

CLYTEMNESTRA. How dare you say that, daughter? Everyone knows your father slipped on the tiles.

ELECTRA. Everyone knows it because you said so.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Crazy girl, he slipped and fell.

ELECTRA. He did not slip. For one obvious reason. Because my father never slipped.

CLYTEMNESTRA. How do you know?

ELECTRA. For eight years I've been asking the grooms, the maids, his escort in rain and hail. He *never* slipped.

CLYTEMNESTRA. The war came after.

ELECTRA. I've asked his fellow soldiers. He crossed Scamander without slipping. He took the battlements by assault without slipping. He never slipped, in water or in blood.

CLYTEMNESTRA. He was in haste that day. You had made him late.

ELECTRA. I'm the guilty one, am I? That's Clytemnestra's kind of truth. Your opinion, too, Aegisthus? Electra murdered Agamemnon?

CLYTEMNESTRA. The maids had soaped the tiles too well. I know. I almost slipped myself.

ELECTRA. Ah, you were in the bathroom, too, mother? Who held you up?

CLYTEMNESTRA. What's wrong in my being there?

ELECTRA. With Aegisthus, of course?

CLYTEMNESTRA. With Aegisthus. And we weren't alone. Leo, my counsellor, was there, wasn't he, Aegisthus?

ELECTRA. Leo, who died the next day?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Did he die the next day?

ELECTRA. Yes. Leo slipped, too. He lay down on his bed and in the morning was found dead. He found a way to slip into death—sleeping, not slipping! You had him killed, didn't you?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Aegisthus, defend me. I call on you for help.

ELECTRA. He can do nothing for you. You've come to the place where you must defend yourself.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Oh, God! Have I come to this? A mother! A queen!

ELECTRA. Where is "this"? Tell us where you've come.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Brought there by this heartless, joyless daughter! Happily, my little Chrysothemis loves flowers.

ELECTRA. Don't I love flowers?

CLYTEMNESTRA. To come to this! Through this idiotic journey called life, to come to this! I, who as a girl loved quiet, tending my pets, laughing at mealtime, sewing! . . . I was so gentle, Aegisthus, I swear I was the gentlest. . . . There are still old men in my birthplace who call gentleness Clytemnestra.

ELECTRA. If they die today, they needn't change their symbol. If they die this morning!

CLYTEMNESTRA. To come to this! What injustice! Aegisthus, I spent my days in the meadows behind the palace. There were so many flowers I didn't have to stoop to pick them. I sat down. My dogs lay at my feet, the one who barked when Agamemnon came to take me away. I teased him with flowers and he ate them to please me. If I only had him! Anywhere else, if my husband had been a Persian, or an Egyptian, by now I'd be good, careless, gay! When I was young I had a voice, I trained birds! I might have been an Egyptian queen, singing gaily; I'd have had an Egyptian aviary! And we've come to this! What has this family, what have these walls done to us?

ELECTRA. Murderers! . . . These are wicked walls.



MESSENGER. My lord, they've forced an entrance. The postern gate gave way.

ELECTRA. All right. Let the walls crumble.

AEGISTHUS. Electra, heed my final word. I forgive everything—your foolish fancies, your insults. But can't you see your country is dying?

ELECTRA. And I don't love flowers! Do you imagine flowers for a father's grave are picked sitting down?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Well, let this father return! Let him stop being dead! What nonsense, this absence, this silence! Let him come back, in his pomp, his vanity, his beard! That beard must have grown in the grave—a good thing, too!

ELECTRA. What are you saying?

AEGISTHUS. Electra, I promise that tomorrow, as soon as Argos is saved, the guilty, if there are any, shall disappear, for good and all. But don't be stubborn. You're gentle, Electra, in your heart you're gentle. Listen! The city will perish.

ELECTRA. Let it! I can already feel my love for a burnt and conquered Argos! No! My mother has begun to insult my father, let her finish!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Why are you talking about the guilty? What do you mean, Aegisthus?

ELECTRA. He's just told me in a word all that you deny!

CLYTEMNESTRA. And what do I deny?

ELECTRA. He's told me that you let Orestes fall, that I love flowers, and that my father didn't slip.

CLYTEMNESTRA. He did slip. I swear he slipped. If there's a truth in the world, let lightning from heaven show it to us. You'll see it revealed in all its brilliance.

AEGISTHUS. Electra, you're in my power. Your brother too. I can kill you. Yesterday I should have killed you. Instead of that I promise, as soon as the enemy is repulsed, to step down from the throne and place Orestes on it.

ELECTRA. That's no longer the question, Aegisthus. If the gods for once change their methods, if they make you wise and just in order to ruin you, that's their affair. The question now is, will she dare tell us why she hated my father!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Oh, you want to know that?

ELECTRA. But you'll not dare tell.

AEGISTHUS. Electra, tomorrow, before the altar where we celebrate our victory the guilty man shall stand, for there is only one guilty man, in a parricide's coat. He'll confess

his crime publicly and determine his punishment himself. First let me save the city.

ELECTRA. You've "saved" yourselves today, Aegisthus, and in my presence. That's enough. Now I want her to finish!

CLYTEMNESTRA. So, you want me to finish!

ELECTRA. I dare you to!

MESSENGER. They're entering the court yards, Aegisthus!

AEGISTHUS. Come, queen!

CLYTEMNESTRA. Yes, I hated him. Yes, you shall know what this fine father was like. Yes, after twenty years I'll have the joy that Agatha had today. A woman might belong to anyone, but there was just one man in the world to whom I couldn't belong. That man was the king of kings, father of fathers! I hated him from the first day he came to wrench me from my home, with his curly beard and the hand with the little finger always sticking up. He raised it when he drank, when he drove, when he held his scepter . . . and when he held me close I felt on my back only four fingers. It drove me wild, and the morning he sacrificed your sister, Iphigenia—horrible—I saw the little fingers of both his hands sticking out, dark against the sun—king of kings! What nonsense! He was pompous, indecisive, stupid. He was the fop of fops, the most credulous creature. The king of kings was never anything more than that little finger and the beard that nothing could soften. The bathwater I soaked his head in didn't soften it, nor did the nights of false love when I pulled and tangled it, nor the storm at Delphi which turned the dancers' hair into manes; it came out in gold ringlets from water, bed, and rain. He would beckon me with his little finger and I would go smiling. . . . Why? He would tell me to kiss his mouth in that fleece and I would run to kiss it. . . . Why? And when I woke and was unfaithful to him, like Agatha, with the wooden bedstead—a royal bed—and he bade me talk to him, though I knew he was vain, empty, tiresome, I told him he was modest, strange, even splendid. . . . Why? And if he persisted, stammering, pathetic, I swore to him he was a god. King of kings! The only excuse for that title is that it justifies a hatred of hatreds. Do you know what I did, Electra, the day of his departure, when his ship was still in sight? I sacrificed the curliest ram I could find and toward midnight I stole into the throne room quite alone, and took the scepter in my hands! Now you know every-

thing. You wanted a hymn to truth, and here's a beautiful one.

ELECTRA. Oh, father, forgive!

AEGISTHUS. Come, queen.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Take this girl first and chain her up.

ELECTRA. Father, will you ever forgive me for listening to her? Aegisthus, should she not die?

AEGISTHUS. Farewell, Electra.

ELECTRA. Kill her, Aegisthus. And I'll forgive you.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Don't let her go free, Aegisthus. They'll stab you in the back.

AEGISTHUS. We'll see about that. Leave Electra alone. . . .  
Unbind Orestes.

[AEGISTHUS and CLYTEMNESTRA go out.]

ELECTRA. The bird is coming down, beggar, the bird is coming down.

BEGGAR. Look, it's a vulture!

### Scene 9

[ELECTRA, NARSES' WIFE, BEGGAR. Then ORESTES.]

BEGGAR. You here, Narses' wife?

NARSES' WIFE. All of us beggars, the lame, the halt, and the blind, have come to save Electra and her brother.

BEGGAR. Justice, eh?

NARSES' WIFE. There they are, untying Orestes.

[A crowd of BEGGARS enters, a few at a time.]

BEGGAR. This is how they did the killing, listen, woman. This is the way it all happened, I never invent anything. It was the queen who had the steps soaped that go down to the bath; the two of them did it. While all the housewives in Argos scrubbed their thresholds, the queen and her lover soaped the doorsill to his death. Think how clean their hands were when they greeted Agamemnon at his entrance! And your father slipped, Electra, as he reached out his arms to her. You were right except on this one point. He slipped on the steps, and the noise of his fall, because of his golden cuirass and helmet, was that of a king falling. And she threw herself on him, he thought, to raise

him up, but she held him down. He didn't understand why his darling wife was holding him down, he wondered if it was a love transport, but then why did Aegisthus stay? Young Aegisthus was awkward and indiscreet. (We'll consider his promotion.) The ruler of the world, the conqueror of Troy, who had just reviewed the army and navy parade, must have been humiliated, to fall like that, on his back and in his noisy armor, even if his beard was untouched, in the presence of his loving wife and the young ensign. All the more annoyed because this might be a bad omen. The fall might mean he'd die in a year, or in five years. And he was surprised that his beloved wife caught his wrists and threw herself on him to hold him down, as fisherwomen do with big stranded turtles on the shore. She was strong, and not so beautiful, her face flushed, her neck wrinkled. Not like young Aegisthus, who was trying to extricate his sword for fear he'd hurt himself, apparently, he looked handsomer every minute. What was strange, though, was that the two of them were silent. He said "Dear wife, how strong you are!" "Young man," he said, "pull out the sword—by its handle!" But they said nothing, the queen and the squire had become mutes in the last ten years, and no one had told him. They were as mute as travelers hurrying to pack a trunk when time is short. They had to do something quickly, before anyone else came in. What was it? Suddenly Aegisthus kicked his helmet as a dying man kicks his dog, and the truth was plain. And he cried, "Wife, let me go. Wife, what are you doing?" She took care not to answer, she couldn't say aloud, "I'm killing you, murdering you!" But she said to herself, "I'm killing you because there's not one gray hair on your beard, because it's the only way to murder that little finger."

She undid the laces of his cuirass with her teeth, and the gold turned scarlet, and Aegisthus—beautiful with the beauty of Achilles killing Hector, of Ulysses killing Dolon—approached, with drawn sword. Then the king of kings kicked Clytemnestra's back, and she shook all over, her silent hand shook, and he shouted so loud Aegisthus had to roar with laughter to cover the noise. Then he drove in the sword. And the king of kings was no longer the mass of bronze and iron he'd thought himself, he was just soft flesh, as easy to pierce as a lamb, and the sword cut so deep it split the marble. The murderers were wrong to

hurt the marble, for it revenged itself. I found out about the crime from that split tile.

So he stopped struggling, let himself go between the woman, who became uglier every moment, and the man, who was handsomer and handsomer. One good thing about death is that you can trust yourself to her, death is your only friend in an ambush, she has a familiar look, he saw that and called on his children, first the boy, Orestes, then the girl, Electra, to thank them for avenging him in future, lending their hands of death. Clytemnestra, foam on her lips, did not let go of him, and Agamemnon as willing to die but not to have this woman spit in his face, on his beard. She didn't spit because she was walking around the corpse, trying not to get blood on her sandals; her red dress looked to the dying man like the sun. Then the shadow fell, because each of them took an arm and turned him over on the floor. On his right hand four fingers were already stiff. Then, as Aegisthus had pulled out the sword without thinking, they turned him over again and put it gently, deliberately, back in the wound. Aegisthus was grateful to the dead man for having let himself be killed so very easily. Dozens of kings of kings could be killed like that, if murder was so easy.

But Clytemnestra's hatred of the man who'd struggled so fiercely, so stupidly, grew as she foresaw how every night she would dream of this murder. That's just what happened. It's seven years since she killed, she's killed him three thousand times.

[ORESTES has come in during this speech.]

NARSES' WIFE. Here's the young man! Isn't he handsome?

BEGGAR. As beautiful as Aegisthus when young.

ORESTES. Where are they, Electra?

ELECTRA. Dear Orestes!

NARSES' WIFE. In the southern courtyard.

ORESTES. I'll see you soon, Electra, and we'll never part.

ELECTRA. Go, my lover.

ORESTES. Don't stop, beggar. Go on, tell them about the death of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. [*He goes out, sword in hand.*]

NARSES' WIFE. Tell us, beggar.

BEGGAR. In two minutes. Give him time to get there.

ELECTRA. He has his sword?

NARSES' WIFE. Yes, daughter.

BEGGAR. Are you crazy? Calling the princess your daughter!

NARSES' WIFE. I call her daughter, I don't say she's my daughter. I've often seen her father, though. Heavens, what a fine man!

ELECTRA. He had a beard, hadn't he?

NARSES' WIFE. Not a beard, a sun. A wavy, curly sun, a sun just rising from the sea. He stroked it with his hand. The most beautiful hand in the world.

ELECTRA. Call me your daughter Narses' wife! I am your daughter. . . . I heard a cry!

NARSES' WIFE. No, my daughter.

ELECTRA. You're sure he had his sword? He didn't go to them without a sword?

NARSES' WIFE. You saw him going. He had a thousand swords. Be calm, be calm!

ELECTRA. What a long minute, mother, you waited at the edge of the bath!

NARSES' WIFE. Why don't you tell us? Everything will be over before we know it.

BEGGAR. One minute! He's looking for them. Now! He's found them.

NARSES' WIFE. Oh, I can wait. Little Electra is soft to touch. I had only boys, gangsters. Mothers who only have girls are happy.

ELECTRA. Yes . . . happy. . . . This time I do hear a cry!

NARSES' WIFE. Yes, my daughter.

BEGGAR. So, here's the end. Narses' wife and the beggars untied Orestes. He rushed across the courtyard. He didn't touch or embrace Electra. He was wrong, for he'll never touch her again. He found the murderers on the marble balcony, calming the rioters. As Aegisthus leaned down to tell the leaders that everything was going well, he heard behind him the cry of a wounded beast. But it wasn't a beast crying, it was Clytemnestra. She was bleeding. Her son had stabbed her. He struck at the couple blindly, his eyes closed. A mother, though, even when unworthy, is sensitive and human. She didn't call on Electra or Orestes but on her youngest daughter, Chrysothemis, so Orestes thought he had killed another, and an innocent, mother. She clung to Aegisthus' arm; she was right, that gave her a last chance to stand up. But she prevented Aegisthus from drawing his sword. He shook her, to free his arm. She was

too heavy to serve as a shield. And that bird was beating his head with its wings and attacking him with its beak, so he struggled. Just with his unarmed left arm, the dead queen, loaded with necklace and pendants, on his right arm. He was in despair over dying like a criminal, when he had become pure and holy; to be fighting because of a crime which was no longer his; to find himself, though loyal and innocent, infamous before this parricide. He struggled with one hand, which the sword was cutting little by little, but the lacing of his cuirass caught on a brooch of Clytemnestra's, and it opened. Then he resisted no longer; he only shook his right arm to rid himself of the queen, not only to fight but to die alone, to lie far from Clytemnestra in death. He didn't succeed. Forever Clytemnestra and Aegisthus will be coupled. He died, calling a name I'll not repeat.

[AEGISTHUS' voice off stage. Electra!]

BEGGAR. I talked too fast. He caught up with me.

### Scene 10

[ELECTRA, BEGGAR, NARSES' WIFE, the EUMENIDES, who are of exactly the same height and figure as ELECTRA.]

SERVANT. Flee, everybody, the palace is on fire!

FIRST FURY. That's what Electra wanted. Three things: daylight, truth—and this fire!

SECOND FURY. Satisfied, Electra? The city's dying.

ELECTRA. I'm satisfied. I know now that it will be born again.

THIRD FURY. And the people killing each other in the streets, will they be born again? The Corinthians have started the attack, and it's a massacre.

FIRST FURY. Your pride has brought you to this, Electra. You have nothing left, nothing.

ELECTRA. I have my conscience, I have Orestes, I have justice, I have everything.

SECOND FURY. Your conscience! Will you listen to your conscience in the early mornings to come? For seven years you've not slept because of a crime that others committed. Now you're the guilty one.

ELECTRA. I have Orestes, I have justice, I have everything.  
THIRD FURY. Orestes! You'll never see Orestes again. We're leaving *you*—to pursue *him*. We've taken on your age and your shape—to pursue him. Good-by! We'll not leave him until he's been driven to madness or suicide, cursing his sister.

ELECTRA. I have justice. I have everything.

NARSES' WIFE. What are they saying? They're back. What have we come to, my poor Electra, what have we come to?

ELECTRA. What have we come to?

NARSES' WIFE. Yes, tell me. I'm not very quick to understand. I know something's happened but I don't know just what. How can you explain it, when a day begins like today, and everything's ruined and pillaged—though we're still breathing, we've lost everything, the city's burning, innocent people are killing each other, the guilty are dying, too—and the sun still rises?

ELECTRA. Ask the beggar. He knows.

BEGGAR. It all has a beautiful name, Narses' wife, it is called the dawn.