

SOPHOCLES
FOUR TRAGEDIES

AJAX

WOMEN OF
TRACHIS

ELECTRA

PHILOCTETES

TRANSLATED, WITH
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES, BY
PETER MEINECK AND
PAUL WOODRUFF

Sophocles

Four Tragedies

Ajax

Women of Trachis

Electra

Philoctetes

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Introduction¹

These four plays of Sophocles were admired enough in antiquity to have survived, along with the three plays about Oedipus and his family that we have published as the *Theban Plays*. The four were probably written over a span of thirty years or so. They were not meant to be performed or published together. Only the accident of their joint survival brings them together in this volume, but they represent the same extraordinary mind and bring similar themes to the stage.

The Main Themes of Sophoclean Drama

Sophocles writes of human suffering and the passions that drive human choices. His plays show the most destructive effects that love, grief, shame, and anger can have, while leading us into sympathy with the deranged or almost deranged characters who display these emotions. Sophocles' characters are huge in their mythic grandeur and their outsized emotions, and through their choices they are working out the purposes of the Olympic gods. They illustrate why most people in an Athenian audience were thankful every day that they were no longer ruled by tyrants or even by rough-minded Homeric heroes like Ajax. Still, Sophocles' characters are close enough to the human norm that an audience would understand their choices and feel some part of their passions.

All of Sophocles' plays are remarkable for the time they give to sustained lamentation—nearly a third of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example. In the plays in this volume, Electra laments for her father and for the brother she thinks is dead. Deianeira grieves over her life as wife of an absent hero; later she grieves over what she has unwittingly done, and Heracles grieves over his own slow death. Philoctetes laments his wound, and Ajax bemoans his shaming by the Greeks.

1. The Introduction is mainly the work of Paul Woodruff, who thanks Peter Meineck for many suggestions about *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. The section on staging was written almost entirely by Peter Meineck.

Lamentation arises most naturally from war, and all four plays touch on the effects of war—not the actual conduct of battle, but the aftershocks of war that reverberate over time and across the sea. In these plays we see women who are left behind by men at war and who are fearful, jealous, or angry; we see a successful warrior dishonored and ashamed; and we see a reluctant hero, deeply wounded but possessed of the weapon that will decide a war. War strains friendships and makes enemies.

On the ancient stage war itself could not be represented, and therefore the many conflicts play themselves out in exchanges of argumentative speeches or bitter games of one-line sallies and responses. Cleverness with words and arguments shines in these contests, though it never decides a match by itself. Odysseus' speech wins the day at the end of *Ajax*, not by cleverness, but because the leaders respect him and because he is plainly in the right.

Friendship and enmity bring out the strongest feelings in these four plays. Friendship, as the ancient Greeks conceived it (*philia*), begins with family and is strongest between parents and their children. Alliances against enemies also provide a foundation for friendship. Your friends are the people you ought to help, and your enemies are the ones you ought to harm. You ought to harm anyone who has harmed you, and you ought to help anyone who has offered to help you. In this way friendship and enmity are defined by the ancient rule that you should help your friends and harm your enemies.²

If helping friends and harming enemies is the bedrock of ethics, then what are you supposed to do when friends do you harm and thereby become your enemies? Ethical choice in Sophocles is never simple, and the playwright holds back from delivering clear verdicts on his own part or even on the part of the gods. Electra's mother should be Electra's dearest friend, but circumstances have turned mother and daughter into the bitterest enemies, and they act toward each other as enemies in the play. Are they right or wrong to do so? The mother, Clytemnestra, is surely in the wrong (or so we feel), and yet we cannot

2. See Blundell 1989 for an excellent introduction to the rule, followed by a discussion of this ethical principle in five of Sophocles' plays. Blundell omits *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Women of Trachis* because they give less attention to issues of friendship.

be sure that Electra is entirely in the right. We may expect the audience, like the chorus, to be both sympathetic with Electra and horrified by the entire conflict in this accursed family.

A generation after Sophocles, Plato rejected the rule of helping friends and harming enemies, but Sophocles had already brought it into question. Gods may know who their friends are—among humans, the friends of the gods are the reverent and sound-minded. But we mortals, faced with shifting relationships, cannot be so sure.³ On the battlefield, Ajax saved and was saved by his allies in the Greek army, and he should be friends with them, but before the play begins they have destroyed his honor, and so he makes them his enemies. Is he right or wrong? Does the answer matter in view of his elevation, after death, to the status of cult-hero? Hyllus, in *Women of Trachis*, is caught several times with loyalties divided between his parents. “Whatever I do is going to be wrong” (1243), he complains before giving in to his father, as he cannot do with a whole heart.⁴ Philoctetes started as a friend of the Greek leaders, but they abandoned him some years ago, and now they and he must struggle to repair the relationship on which both sides depend. The result will be the gross irreverence of the sack of Troy, as we are reminded at the end of the play. Right or wrong? In Sophocles, such situations are both fraught and ethically complex. In his world, ethical complexity is not a problem to be solved but a cause of human suffering.

Chorus and characters alike in these plays attribute their suffering to the gods. Heracles’ son concludes *Women of Trachis*:

You have seen majesty in death, and novelty,
 Much suffering, and suffering in new forms—
 And nothing in this is not Zeus. (1276–8)

Is the boy laying all the responsibility for these deaths on Zeus? Perhaps, but matters cannot be so simple. The chorus earlier said that the cause was the Love-goddess, Aphrodite (497–502), but there is nothing spooky about how love operates in this play. The

3. So Knox, who shows how *Ajax* brings this rule into question, contrasts Athena’s clear view with the uncertainties of the humans (1979, pp. 132–3).

4. Hyllus’ father asked him to marry the young woman who came between his parents; Hyllus refuses at first, because she is “our worst enemy” (1237).

story is familiar: a wife loves her husband and will do anything to keep him; what she does in this case turns out to be devastating. Human beings cause their own suffering in Sophocles, even when they are carrying out a divine plan or bringing an oracle to fruition.⁵ Sophocles' plays are the best ancient illustrations for Aristotle's rule that the actions of a play should follow each other by *eikos* or *ananke*—probability or necessity.⁶

This means that Sophocles' characters cleave closely to what we would normally expect such characters to do. Nothing here is as unexpected as Iphigenia's sudden conversion in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which remains mysterious.⁷ We find no such mysteries in Sophocles' plays. A jealous wife takes steps to keep her husband; an insulted hero, sick with shame, takes his life; a young woman is tormented by grief and anger over her father's murder; a wounded soldier, neglected by his comrades, turns against them. Sophocles in his reverence no doubt believed that "nothing in this is not Zeus," but we may also observe that there is nothing here that is not human.

Sophocles' gods do not intervene in the action of his plays, not in the way Euripides uses a *deus ex machina*.⁸ If something weird is going to happen—outside the realm of probability—it happens offstage and off plot, before the play begins. The most famous example, noted by Aristotle, is Oedipus' failure to ask how the old king died when he took up residence in Thebes.⁹ This is astonishing, because Oedipus is a man who solves riddles. But it

5. "Just as in the *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, so too in the second *Oedipus* the causes of suffering are entirely human. And more and more, as the human takes the place of the divine in the causation of suffering, so the divine becomes something which stoops down to man from above, at the last moment, to guide and reconcile" (Reinhardt 1947/79, p. 207). "The supernatural influences in Sophocles are often made with infinite delicacy to shade into subjective motivations" (Wilson 1947, p. 241).

6. *Poetics* 1451a13, 1454a34.

7. One moment Iphigenia is fighting to save her life; the next she is offering herself as a sacrifice (Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1211 ff., 1368 ff.). This flaw in dramaturgy was noted by Aristotle in *Poetics* 1454a32.

8. A *deus ex machina* is an actor playing a deity who is delivered to the roof of the scene building by a machine, often at the end of a play, to resolve the complexities of the plot.

9. *Poetics* 1460a29–30; cf. 1454b8.

is not part of this play; it happened long in the past, before the play's action begins. So it is in these four plays: strange things have happened before the sun rises on a prologue, but what happens in the plays is probable, rather than miraculous.

Ajax loses his mind and slaughters cattle; Athena made him do it, but that was before the play's action begins. In the prologue she reveals Ajax to Odysseus, distracting Ajax so that he does not see his pursuer. After that, what Ajax does is what we would expect—no gods needed. A dying Centaur persuades Deianeira to treat venom as a love-charm; even the sophists are not so clever, so he may well be using magical powers over her mind, but that happened nearly twenty years ago, though the thought still holds her mind. The least probable event in these four plays would seem to be the final conversion of Philoctetes, but this (as we shall see later) has much to do with human factors—the reconciliation of the wounded hero with Neoptolemus, as well as Philoctetes' deep friendship with Heracles.

Reverence combines with humanism in Sophocles, however. The opposite of hubris, which is the arrogant abuse of power, reverence shows itself in a felt recognition of the limitations human beings share. "All of Sophocles' extant work is in a sense a study of piety, *eusebeia*," writes Segal, and he is surely right for the two best-known plays in this volume (1995a, p. 95). *Philoctetes* ends with a homily on reverence, and the whole play turns on the difficulty of bringing the hero's inclinations in line with the will of the gods. In *Ajax* we watch in horrified fascination while the hero pays a steep price for forgetting the difference between his human weakness and the power of a god.

If you expect a tragic play to end in disaster, you may be puzzled by the endings of two of these plays. *Electra* ends with a cry of joy from the chorus—or so it appears. Two murderers have been punished, and those who punished them seem not to foresee any problems in the future. *Philoctetes* ends in success; we know that a great weapon and the man who wields it will rejoin the Greek army, so that the Greeks will win their war and sack Troy.

What then makes these plays tragic? Certainly the characters are of heroic proportions, and their actions carry the full tragic burden of emotion. We know also that the ancient Greeks accepted tragic plays with happy endings; Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is a famous example, praised by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1454a5). But these two plays of Sophocles do not leave us

entirely satisfied. They are not happy plays. The punishment in *Electra* is mother-killing, after all, and it is a case of mother-killing that occurs entirely outside the context of judicial deliberation and decision. As for the success of *Philoctetes*, this is only the prelude to a victory that will become famous for its nastiness.

As we will see in the introductions to these plays, both plays show characters who suffer moral damage. Honest Neoptolemus learns from his mentor how to lie, and loyal, loving Electra learns from her circumstances—and from her mother—to devote her life to anger and revenge. Sophocles' themes are tragic even when his characters appear to reap success in the end.

Sophocles' Life

Sophocles was born about 495 B.C.E. at Colonus, just outside the city of Athens, and lived until about 405. His life began fifteen years after the last tyrant ruled in Athens. Athenian democracy came to full flower during his youth, and in his old age it almost collapsed under the pressure of war and right-wing revolution. As a young boy, he danced to celebrate the naval victory of the Greeks over the invading Persians at Salamis (in 480). In middle age he served as an official at the zenith of the Athenian empire. He survived the great plague, and he saw the shadows closing on Athens as the Spartans neared victory in the Peloponnesian War. In midlife he listened to the sophists, who brought to Athens their professional art of persuasion and their challenges to the old order. Meanwhile, the beginnings of medical science were starting to question religious teachings about sickness and healing.

Sophocles first competed in the festival of tragic plays in 468 and won against Aeschylus. Sophocles was the most successful Athenian playwright of the fifth century, composing 120 plays and winning twenty victories. This is an extraordinary record, since each victory represented the success of three tragic plays. Sad to say, only seven complete tragedies survive; we know little about the others aside from fragmentary evidence, and we know next to nothing about the circumstances under which the surviving plays were produced.

The plays we have, however, give us grounds for attributing to him certain interests and attitudes. He was fascinated by the enduring question of what it is to be human in a world that does not bend itself to support human ambitions, and he was drawn to

depict the most powerful human emotions. In politics he was evidently a patriotic Athenian (as we can see from *Oedipus at Colonus*), and he appears to have been resolutely opposed to tyranny.

Toward the intellectual revolution of his time, he seems to have had mixed feelings. Two things were especially widespread in what is called the “new learning”—the art of persuasion, which came to be known as rhetoric, and various programs to explain natural and human events without reference to the gods. Odysseus represents the cunning that rhetoric supports, both in *Philoctetes* and in the story behind *Ajax*; Sophocles does not make him entirely admirable. In other areas, however, Sophocles took the new teachings to heart; he seems, for example, to have adopted a godless explanation for human progress (as we see in the first stasimon of *Antigone*—332–75): Human beings invented their own culture, for better or worse. His treatment of the events he brings to the stage is humanistic, as we have seen, in that he generally points to human factors as the causes of human events.

In spite of the humanism implied in his dramaturgy, Sophocles was a deeply religious man, and religious in ways that do not have clear modern analogues. Sophocles was supposed to have welcomed the healer god to Athens, and for this he was honored after death with the title of “Receiver.”

The Athenians must have admired the man as much as they adored his writing; they made him a treasurer in 443 and a general, with Pericles, in 441. At the city’s moment of greatest need, after the disaster of 413 in Sicily, the Athenians turned to Sophocles as one of the ten advisers empowered to see them through the crisis. After his death they honored him with cult as a hero in his own right.¹⁰

Dating the Plays

The only play of the seven that survive for which we have a firm date, *Philoctetes*, was produced in 409, about four years before the author’s death. *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced after the poet’s

10. He had been the “Receiver” of the cult of Asclepius, having opened his home to the god of healing and provided the first altar in his own house in 420, when the Asclepius cult was inaugurated in Athens. On the significance of Sophocles’ role in cult, see Edmunds 1996, pp. 163–8.

death in 401 and was probably written after *Philoctetes*. Otherwise, dating is uncertain. *Women of Trachis*¹¹ and *Ajax* are generally considered fairly early.¹² *Electra* is relatively late. Euripides' play of the same name is dated between 422 and 413, but this does not help us, because scholars differ on whether Sophocles' *Electra* was written before or after Euripides', and we have no way to clinch the matter.¹³ Jebb and Reinhardt argue for a relatively late date for Sophocles' *Electra* on the basis of differences between that play and the ones they believe to be early. Such differences are striking to anyone immersed in Sophocles, and the consensus for a late date for *Electra* seems universal—no earlier than 420.

Staging the Plays

Each play was conceived and staged for only one performance, along with two other tragic plays by the same author that may or may not have been related in theme or subject, followed by a brief satyr-play. Performances were held in broad daylight in the Theatre of Dionysus on the southeast slope of the Acropolis in Athens. The Theatre of Dionysus of the mid-fifth century B.C.E. was a large open-air structure that took advantage of the natural slope of the Acropolis to accommodate a huge raked auditorium known as the *theatron* (seeing place). This seating area consisted mainly of wooden benches, with perhaps some marble seating for dignitaries in the front rows, and it could accommodate between fifteen thousand and twenty-five thousand spectators, making it the largest public structure in the city of Athens.

The Festival of Dionysus itself was a multiday event financed by the city in celebration of the god of wine, revelry, and the theatre, but it was also a prime opportunity for politics: civic functions and ceremonies took place at the festival alongside cult

11. For a thorough discussion of the dating of *Women of Trachis*, see East-erling: "Any date between 457 and, say, 430 would not be implausible; many scholars nowadays would prefer the earlier half of that period" (1982, pp. 19–23).

12. Jebb assigns *Ajax* a date later than *Antigone*, which is usually placed around 442 B.C.E.

13. Lloyd-Jones, Reinhardt, and Jebb think that Sophocles' version was written first; Wilamowitz (a 19th-century scholar) and Kells think that Euripides' was first.

practice and theatrical performances. The performances were competitive; victory was declared for the author of the three-play set that was judged to be the best. There is much debate among scholars about the composition of the audience and, in particular, about whether women attended the theatre during this period. It seems that the bulk of the audience was adult male Athenian citizens. The judges for the dramatic competition certainly would have been men.

The audience sat around three sides of a large, flat playing space called the “orchestra,” which was traditionally the performing area for the chorus, though there is reason to believe that the actors playing the named roles also may have used this space at certain points in the play. On the upstage edge of the orchestra was a low, raised wooden stage about three feet high and probably only a few feet deep with a small set of steps. This low playing area allowed the principal actors to dominate the performing space and be clearly seen and heard from all parts of the *theatron*.

The stage itself stood in front of a low, wooden scene building, the *skene*, probably no more than ten feet in height, with an upper level and a large central doorway dominating the strongest visual position of this performing space, upstage center. The actors either entered the stage through this doorway, from behind the *skene* directly onto the stage, or from one of the two side entrances (known as *eisodoi*) that ran into the orchestra from left and right. An actor entering from an *eisodos* would be seen by a large proportion of the audience as he traveled up the slight slope before emerging into full sight. Sophocles makes repeated dramatic use of these long entrances when the prolonged physical entrance of the actor is used to generate dramatic excitement.

Only three actors were employed in a performance for speaking parts; in addition to these, an unregulated number of mute actors wearing masks took the parts of attendants, guards, or (rarely) major characters in scenes in which they do not speak. All the performers were male. The three-actor rule led to some interesting effects of doubling. In *Women of Trachis*, for example, the actor playing Deianeira would also have played her husband Heracles, and in *Electra* the same actor would as appear as Orestes and be heard offstage as the woman he kills—Clytemnestra. In *Philoctetes* the actor playing Odysseus would also have played the hero who wins the case for Odysseus—Heracles. The cast of each play included a chorus of twelve or fifteen young

men recruited and trained specifically for the production. The whole chorus sang and danced the choral passages and remained onstage throughout the play, usually as a dramatic reactive force to the events unfolding—except famously in *Ajax*, in which they fan out offstage in two parties to look for their commander. When the chorus engaged in dialogue with the main characters, they were usually represented by the chorus leader. But the entry-song of *Electra* is a sung dialogue between Electra and the chorus as a whole.

What marks the plays as poetry is not rhyme (ancient poetry almost never used end rhyme) but figurative language, word-play, assonance, alliteration, and, above all, meter. The meter is based on syllable length, so that each line is like a string of quarter notes and eighth notes arranged in a special sequence. The dialogue and speeches are written to be spoken, in iambic meter (short-long). The choral odes (the parodos, or entry-song, and the stasima that divide the scenes) are written to be sung, in a variety of complex meters, to the musical accompaniment of a drum and a reed instrument called the *aulos* (usually translated “flute”). These odes are composed of pairs of metrically identical stanzas called “strophes” and “antistrophes.” In addition, several passages for the chorus or the chorus leader are neither strophic nor iambic but written to be chanted in a rhythm of anapests (short-short-long). There are also a few strophic passages for a single voice or chorus, such as the solo for Heracles that’s interrupted by other characters (*Women of Trachis* 1004–43). Commentaries on the Greek texts usually lay out the metrical forms of all the passages that are not iambic.

The characters wore a distinctive theatrical costume of a long-sleeved long robe and a tragic mask. No fifth-century masks survive today, since they were probably constructed of lightweight perishable materials, such as linen, cork, or wood. But representations of tragic masks do exist on vase paintings of the period, and with some caution we can assume that the masks were whole-faced with a soft skullcap (*sakkos*) and realistic hair. The masks were slightly larger than life, though not grotesque, and there is certainly no evidence for any kind of megaphone mouth or other speaking device. The superb acoustics of the fourth-century theatre of Epidaurus in the Peloponnese proves that classical theatre architects were able to use the natural acoustic qualities of the hollowed-out hillside.

The mask is a vital element of Greek drama, and it seems that the actors never performed bare-faced. Performing in a mask does dictate a certain style of acting: the performer must face the front, or make no more than a three-quarter turn, and stand back on the raised stage while speaking. Otherwise, the voice will be lost to a majority of the audience, and the mask will not be visually engaging and therefore will seem offstage. Gestures would have been more pronounced and precise than in modern acting without masks, and since the performers have no peripheral vision, their movements and relationships to each other onstage would have been highly stylized. This does not imply that the Greek tragic mask could not convey a whole range of emotions. On the contrary, a mask manipulated correctly becomes a blank canvas to be painted by each audience member's individual imagination, and here the shared experience of drama between performer and audience member is at its most powerful.

Set and props were minimal but nevertheless vitally important in Greek tragedy. The *skene* may have been painted for certain productions; in *Ajax* it represented the entrance to the tent of Ajax, whereas in *Women of Trachis* and *Electra* it held the doors of a great house. Also, Sophocles would have used the spatial relationship of orchestra and stage, skillfully blocking his actors to take maximum advantage of the opportunities that this physical relationship offered. In *Philoctetes*, Sophocles uses the spatial relationship of orchestra and *skene* to create a physical opposition between Odysseus, who lurks on the shoreline (orchestra), and Philoctetes, who lives high up on the cliff face (*skene*). Neoptolemus negotiates the physical space between them as he climbs up the cliff face to find the cave of Philoctetes. Here the actor may have simply exited the orchestra by mounting the steps and climbing up onto the stage.

Sophocles made especially dramatic use of the *ekkyklêma*, a wheeled platform that could emerge from the doors of the scene building into the central position onstage. This device brings Ajax into view in the prologue of his play, and it later allows us to see his suicide scene as a new location. In *Electra* it presents Aegisthus with the body he believes is his enemy's—only to find, in one of Sophocles' great stage moments, that it is the body of Aegisthus' beloved wife.

Stage properties also formed an important part of Sophocles' dramatic arsenal. In *Philoctetes* the bow of Heracles is important as the focus of the play, and in *Ajax* the sword of Hector plays a

prominent and deadly role. The casket in *Electra* is the focus of grief until it is revealed to be empty, and in *Women of Trachis* a box carries an ambiguous gift: we know it will prevent Heracles from loving another woman but in what way? We will learn all too soon.

Ajax

Ajax shows the aftermath of an altercation over the honors that warriors feel are due to them after battle. Achilles has been killed, and his fabulous armor is to go to the finest surviving fighter of the Greeks. To whom shall it go—to the brains of the army, Odysseus, or to its brawn, Ajax? The contest fascinated Greeks from Homer on. Ajax had been the bulwark of the Greek army—huge, strong, and utterly dependable, “always in the right place at the right time” (*Ajax* 120). He had once saved Odysseus’ life by sheltering the weaker man behind his enormous shield until Menelaus could lead Odysseus to safety (*Iliad* 11.473–88). The sailors who came with Ajax from Salamis feel utterly dependent on his strength: “And without you, lord, we lack / The strength to defend ourselves” (164–5). Odysseus by contrast had been a strong-enough fighter, but he was primarily known as a clear thinker, a plotter and planner whose intelligence and good sense would lead to victory after the events of this play.

Odysseus won the decision, and Ajax thought he had been robbed. Who made the call? Different versions of the story give different answers. In one family of tales the Greeks asked Trojans or Trojan prisoners to decide, but in Sophocles’ version the leaders of the Greek army apparently submitted the matter to a tribunal of soldiers from the army, rather like an Athenian law court.¹⁴ The decision this tribunal made reveals what the army thinks of Ajax. Late in the play we are not surprised to hear Agamemnon’s verdict:

Broad-shouldered, brawny men
Are not the most dependable; it is the clear thinker
Who succeeds. A big-boned ox needs only
A small whip to keep him on a straight path. (1250–3)

14. In Pindar’s version the decision was made by the Achaean chiefs, and Jebb takes this line for Sophocles. But Knox rightly points to clues that the decision implicates the entire army through a process, similar to that of Athens, that is alienating to Ajax, the hero who has no place in a democratic city (1979, p. 146).

But Ajax was the greatest fighter of the army, as even Odysseus admits (1339–41). And far from being a dumb ox, Sophocles' Ajax is not even the blunt-spoken hero of Homer's *Iliad* (Book 9). The finest lines in the play are his, and his great speech on time has some of the finest poetic language in all of Sophocles' work. Athena recognizes Ajax's intelligence, or at least his good sense, which she overthrows when she drives him mad (119).¹⁵

Ajax felt disgraced and dishonored by this decision. He blamed his former friends, who are now enemies in his mind, especially Odysseus (who probably gave a persuasive speech to the tribunal) and Agamemnon (who as leader of the army must take responsibility). The night before the action of the play begins, Ajax made a plan to kill the leaders of his army. He was still entirely sane, and his rage was the normal rage of a Greek hero who has lost his honor.

As the play opens, we learn that Ajax has lost his mind during the night and butchered cattle in place of the leaders he hates. Athena was behind this, driving him mad both to protect the leaders and to chasten Ajax for his hubris on earlier occasions. The goddess is here above the stage now, standing on the scenery building; she tells us what she has done, and she shows Ajax at his worst to Odysseus. She stage-manages the scene for an audience of one, Odysseus, giving us in the real audience a chance to see theatre at work. Odysseus, like us, will be horrified by the scene, but it will plant sympathy in him for Ajax—a sympathy that will lead the play to its necessary conclusion.¹⁶

As Odysseus sees him now, Ajax is still demented, blood-stained, surrounded by carcasses of those he has killed, ravening to humiliate Odysseus with his whip before delivering the coup de grâce. But the beast that Ajax has strung up for whipping is only a sheep or a cow. We in the audience see the scene as Odysseus does, ghastly and ridiculous as it is, and we are impressed by his sober reaction:

I pity the poor man
Yoked to this insatiable evil,
Even though he is my enemy.

15. "You couldn't find a sounder man" (119). The crucial word is *pronousteros*, which Jebb says connotes "robust good sense."

16. This point about metatheatre and sympathy is from Peter Meineck.

It could just as easily be me.
 We are all insubstantial shadows,
 And life is just a flickering dream. (121–6)

Odysseus is too reverent to exult over his enemy; he thinks instead of the vulnerability that he and Ajax share as human beings. Such thoughts were far from Ajax's mind when the war began, we are told. When his father advised him to "win with the help of the gods" (766), Ajax replied that anyone could do that; he would prefer to make a name for himself (769), and he asked Athena to help the other Greeks instead. He "dared to think he was / More than just a man" (778–9), and for that Athena is punishing him, shaming him in front of his enemy Odysseus.

Soon, however, Ajax recovers his senses, and now his true agony begins. Doubly disgraced, Ajax faces the consequences of his rage and his madness, and he lurches toward taking his own life. What else can he do? He cannot join the Trojans, who hate him, he cannot continue to fight in an army that despises him, and he cannot go home like a dog with his tail between his legs. "Then how could I face my father, Telamon?" he asks (462). Honor meant more than life to a soldier like Ajax, as it had to Hector in the *Iliad*.¹⁷ Ajax's wife Tecmessa stands for family, for life above honor. She begs Ajax to live for her sake and their child's:

The day you die, leaving me alone,
 Will be the day the Greeks seize me
 And sell me and your son into slavery. (496–8)

But Ajax seems not to hear her, nor does she hear Ajax. "Each remains the prisoner of his own fate," says Reinhardt of this dialogue between man and woman, in which communication fails (1947/79, p. 28). But these two are not prisoners. Each is right about the situation—Tecmessa's future without Ajax is perilous, and any future is unbearable for Ajax. We will hear later that Athena intends his suicidal feelings to last for only a day (757), but it would take a miracle for Ajax to see beyond his shame at this point.

17. Hector had remained outside the walls of Troy rather than face family and friends after a defeat, and so he was taken alone by Achilles and killed (*Iliad* 22).

Ajax must die to escape his shame, and he cannot allow anyone else to have the honor of killing him. He wants his death to come with a curse to his enemies. Ajax will take his death actively in his own hands and make it a supreme act of vengeance against the Greek leaders, directing the pollution of his self-murder against them. He probably expects that the Greek army will be divided by the issue of his burial, and he relishes the thought that they will be paralyzed by turmoil after his death.

For this reason, he must die by his own hand, and he must do it alone, so as not to risk the further shame of being prevented in the act. But how will he be able to go off by himself now that he is on suicide watch? His sailors depend on him, and so does his wife Tecmessa. She began as his captive, and so she cannot retain her status without him at her side. Ajax's half-brother Teucer is illegitimate, and his life too would be ruined by Ajax's suicide. Teucer is away on a mission; Tecmessa is a woman. Only the chorus are in a position to hold Ajax back. So it is to them that he must now speak.¹⁸

At the center of the play Ajax delivers a speech that is Sophocles' masterpiece (646–92). Its subject is time and change, its poetry is of spine-tingling beauty, and its meaning combines the plain with the mysterious. From the start it carries chilling tones of death, and yet it reassures both Tecmessa and the chorus—so much so that she does not tag after Ajax when he leaves and the chorus break out into a cry of joy.¹⁹ But we in the audience cannot miss the point that Ajax is going to his death. Scholars wrangle, however, over what Ajax is actually trying to do in the speech.²⁰ Some see it as a grand deception, designed to put an end to the suicide watch; others cannot believe that Ajax could ever bring himself to practice deception. He is the hero of straight speech and blunt words; Odysseus is the one who spins words to cloud minds, and Odysseus is the opposite of Ajax. So, on this second

18. Knox has argued that the speech begins as a soliloquy and only ends as an address to Tecmessa and the chorus. "There is only one possible answer. . . . He is talking to himself" (1979, p. 136). In the speech, "Ajax worked his way through to a knowledge of the world of time only to reject it" (1979, p. 150).

19. At line 807, Tecmessa says she was deceived; the choral cry of joy is at line 693.

20. On the various views, see Hesk 2003, pp. 74–103.

view, we must find a way to read the speech as aimed at the truth.²¹ A third view is that Ajax has been shaken by Tecmessa's tears, as he says, and is truly considering changing his mind; in this speech, on the third view, we follow his train of thought as it veers from understanding change and learning submission back again to suicide.²²

The great speech on time is complex, so we should not give the same verdict on every part of it.²³ Certainly, Ajax honestly rues the effects of time on friendship. And, just as certainly, he honestly begs the chorus to ask Teucer to "attend to me and care for all of you" (689). But he cannot honestly find it in his heart to "learn reverence for the sons of Atreus" (667), the leaders in his humiliation. At the moment of his death he will curse them and all of the army as well (840–5), and when he does so, there will be no sign that he has changed his mind since making the speech on time. His intention in the speech is to reassure those who depend on him, at whatever cost to his honesty, but he will do this with words that can be taken two ways—one way by us in the audience, another by those onstage.

The truth about Ajax must be this: that he is deeper than anyone suspected. Time has indeed brought about a change in him, and he has had to learn to deceive in order to save himself from further humiliation. Like the hero he is, he rises to the occasion and, for the first time, uses words rather than weapons for his own salvation.

We must remember that Ajax at his death became a cult-hero, that he was venerated in Athens, and that his name had been given to one of the tribes, or political divisions, of the Athenian people (the Ajantes). The story line of this play must, therefore, take Ajax from the depths of his humiliation to an honorable grave, from which he can become a cult-hero. The crucial step in this progress is for him to take his death into his own hands, as he

21. "Ajax's own mind is the victim of self-deception to such an extent that, far from voluntarily intending to mislead, Ajax involuntarily *veils* his meaning" (Reinhardt 1947/79, p. 26).

22. See note 18.

23. So Jebb, in his brilliant discussion of the speech (1893/2004, pp. xxxiii–xxxviii). Of the three threads he finds in the speech, one is an honest declaration of feeling, another is an irony not meant to deceive, but the third is deceptive.

does in this speech. The final step will be his honorable burial. But the violent heart of war does not stop at death. Ajax's burial will be contested by his enemies Menelaus and Agamemnon, and Ajax's brother Teucer will not have the strength or wit to overcome them.

Ajax's future will be saved by another unexpected twist: just as Ajax surprises us by turning out to be a master user of words, so Odysseus surprises us by his reverence. Odysseus—who was thought to be merely clever with words, who seemed to have no thought of anything but getting the better of his enemies (as he is represented elsewhere and in *Philoctetes*)—in this play seems to be a model of wisdom and restraint from his earliest lines. "It could just as easily be me" (124), Odysseus says when invited by Athena to mock Ajax in his madness. In that same spirit Odysseus defends the burial of his enemy, and the play ends with Ajax saved—as he promised he would be—from every kind of shame.²⁴

At the same time, Odysseus has saved the army from a meltdown over Ajax's burial. Reverent he may be, but he is also politically astute; he understands what must be said and done to keep a community running smoothly. He alone of this Greek army has the temperament to live in a city like Athens, though as a clever aristocrat he would be a living danger to the democracy. The Athenian audience would have recognized Odysseus as one of their own. But Ajax—sweet, strong, admirable Ajax, wholly devoted to his heroic warrior code—would have had no place in Athens, except as the cult-hero he would become. In the death of Ajax, Sophocles' audience mourned the passing of a world of heroes.

Women of Trachis

In *Women of Trachis* (*Trachiniai*), Deianeira worries about her husband Heracles, who has been gone longer than she expected. We soon learn that Heracles, having completed his famous labors, has been tied up with other affairs, most recently with war. A procession of prisoners arrives, and we discover that one of them is to be Heracles' new wife. Deianeira is stung with jealousy but

24. His greatest speech's last line, "that I have found peace" (692), is more literally, "that I have been saved," meaning, saved from conflict and shame.

still careful not to be angry with the young woman; after all, this new wife is part of the spoils of war, and Deíáneira knows what it is like to be a young girl won in battle—she had been such a girl. And Deíáneira understands the power of sexual love over Heracles and claims not to resent it. Still, she wants him back, to be her passionate and loving mate. But the love-charm she tries to use on him turns out to be poison. When she learns this, she takes her life. Soon after, the dying hero is carried onstage, raging against his death and trying to control the power of his emotions, the manner of his death, and the future of his family. In the end he triumphs in all three contests. He will die without a cry, in a funeral pyre lit by a friend, and his son will marry the young woman he captured with his spear.

The plot outline gives readers little reason to expect a play as rich as this one turns out to be—rich in poetry, in the clash of heroic emotions, and in its reflection of Heracles' many conquests. *Women of Trachis* deserves more performances or, at the very least, more readers. It sizzles with drama. Its backdrop is the mighty contest between Heracles and the fierce world of magical beasts—wanton Centaurs, the deadly Hydra, an indomitable lion. Zeus is his father, but Heracles depends on his own strength and wit to beat back the monsters of the earth and make it habitable for lesser humans. All his life, until just before the play opens, he has been in the service of a most demanding master, Eurystheus, who had commanded him to complete the proverbial labors.²⁵

In the foreground is a more familiar conflict between man and woman. This man has a very demanding and dangerous job; his wife Deíáneira has a lot of children. At first we are aware only of the humdrum tension we would expect between the man's great work and the woman's lonely, fear-stricken days, but then we find there is a deeper conflict, growing with the fury of love on both sides. The man is besotted with a young woman, and he goes to war to take her as a trophy. This leads his wife, in her frustrated love, to take up the power of a long-since-conquered beast. Death follows for both, but not before their young son quarrels with each of them in turn, and not before the dying hero seizes control of his death and reaches beyond it to place his mark on the future.

25. On the myths of Heracles, see Jebb's superb Introduction to the play (1892/2004). See also Padilla 1998 and our note to lines 1091–1111, p. 107.

The play was a favorite of poet Ezra Pound.²⁶ The greatest Sophocles scholar in recent years, Charles Segal, wrote brilliantly about what the play reveals about heroic values on the one hand and marriage on the other (1995b and c). Critics have faulted the play for breaking apart in the middle as if it were two plays—one a drama of marriage and love, the other a drama of heroism and death. One actor plays both the wife and her husband, and so we never see them together onstage. For that matter, the characters have hardly ever seen each other even in the back story, except at night, between labors, when Heracles returns to plant another child. And yet their actions onstage unfold in strict counterpoint, each formed by opposition to the other, not formally (like strophe and antistrophe) but thematically. Deianeira's domestic life is the complement of Heracles' career of wandering, and so is Heracles' own lingering death. Forced into passivity, his actions are reduced to words and wordless howls of pain, a far cry from his active victories in the past.

Deianeira's speeches are among the most beautiful Sophocles ever wrote, and they show a startling sympathy for the lot of a woman in a world that men seek to control by violence. She was the prize in a contest between Heracles and an untamed river god, she was almost ravished by a Centaur, and now she lives as a kind of refugee with her children in a place that is strange to her, waiting for news of her husband.

When she sees the procession, she takes a special interest in the beautiful young prisoner who seems to her to have a royal bearing. The herald pretends that he does not know who this prisoner is, but a busybody heard him tell the truth in the marketplace, and now Deianeira must induce the herald to tell her what he knows. She realizes that he is afraid she will do something horrible, so she disarms his suspicions with a fine speech about the power of love (441–67), concluding:

Hasn't Heracles taken a number of wives already?
 And, so far, none of them has had to bear an ugly word,
 Or any hint of blame, from me. And the same for her.
 Even if she was totally melted by their love,

26. "The *Trachiniae* represents the highest peak of Greek sensibility registered in any of the plays that have come down to us, and is, at the same time, nearest the original form of the God-Dance" (1957, p. 3).

I would not blame her, because I pity her the most.
 As soon as I saw her, I realized: Her beauty
 Has destroyed her life, ruined her fatherland,
 Enslaved her people. She never wanted that! (460–7)

Some scholars have seen this speech as deceptive.²⁷ Deianeira will take the truth hard when it hits her, but perhaps she is, at this point, self-deceived. In any case, she never shows ill will to the younger woman, Iolê, and she never intends harm to her husband. So if she is hiding anything, it could only be the pain she feels or expects to feel.

Once she does know the truth, she seeks to rekindle Heracles' love with a potion given her by the Centaur. And now, for the first time in the play (and a rarity in Sophocles' work), magic seems to be in play. But it is only the magic of persuasion; Greeks of the time thought of rhetoric as having the powers that were promised for magic.²⁸ The Centaur had persuaded Deianeira that this was a love potion, and she believed him after all these years, even though she knew she had taken it from his wound, which was oozing with the poison from Heracles' arrow—poison Heracles had taken from the venomous Hydra he had killed.

Perhaps Deianeira believed the Centaur because of magic at the time, but as the play unfolds we see her delusion arising from her desperate wishful thinking. She will do anything to win back her husband's love, and this is her only weapon. It should be no surprise that she turns to it. And little surprise that the poison works on Heracles; after all, it worked when Heracles used it, even on his most powerful targets. The supernatural dominates the background of this play, and it continues to lie close to the surface of the action onstage, giving to the characters a mysterious and awe-inspiring dignity. But it is all too human for one passionate, spurned lover to take actions that lead to the death of the other. So the family will come to an end in accidental murder and intentional suicide; the household gods will have no one left to tend them.

27. Reinhardt says that she disguises her intentions here much as Ajax disguises his when he seems to deny that he plans to take his life (1947/79, p. 34, referring to *Ajax* 646–92).

28. For the idea that persuasion works like a drug, see Gorgias, *Helen* 14; for the connection with magic, see de Romilly 1974.

Heracles' death takes a magnificent turn at the end when he realizes that this is the appointed end of his labors, accepts the fact, and takes control of his death. He will be carried up the mountain, still breathing, and placed on a pile of wood, which (the audience would have known) Philoctetes will set alight. Heracles' son will marry, albeit reluctantly, the young woman his father won in battle. And Heracles will shut his mouth, as if with a steel binding, so that no further howling will escape his lips. The hero who conquered every beast with every mysterious power has fallen victim to venom he collected himself, now recycled and used against him. And the woman who kept his home has now united the force of love with the power of the world that Heracles had subdued, and these together have brought him down.

Electra

The opening line of *Electra* reminds us that Agamemnon was victor at Troy, and we soon learn that, during his long absence at war, his wife Clytemnestra found comfort with another man. But she has reasons to be angry with her husband: he sacrificed their daughter for a fair wind, and then he returned from war with another woman as a trophy. And so Clytemnestra killed him, with the help of her lover Aegisthus. Electra saved her young brother Orestes (who would otherwise have been killed as a potential avenger of their father) and sends him to grow up far away in safety.

Now, as the play opens, Orestes has returned, but Electra does not know it. Angry and grief-stricken over the murder of her father, she has longed over many years for her absent brother to return so that he may kill the murderers—her mother and her mother's lover. In this play we see Electra first under pressure to abandon her grief and anger, and then, after surprises that would break the resolve of a weaker person, we see her in triumph as her longings are fulfilled—as her mother shrieks under the death blows inside the royal house and as her mother's body is revealed to the lover who is about to die.

Two other plays tell much the same story, one by Aeschylus (*The Libation Bearers*) and the other by Euripides (also entitled *Electra*). Both of those plays recognize the horror of mother-killing as a deed that will bring the avenging deities, the Furies, down on Orestes. And both of those plays put Apollo clearly on the side

of Electra and Orestes, as a divine counterweight to the impending Furies.

Sophocles' play does neither of those things. No one seems shocked over the mother-killing or moves in fear of the Furies; and although Orestes assumes that Apollo approves, the god is represented onstage only by a silent statue, to which both sides pray, and by Orestes' account of an oracle:

You know I went to the Pythian Oracle at Delphi
 To find out what strategy would make
 My father's murderers pay the price for what they did.
 Apollo answered my questions along these lines:
 By myself, without mustering an armed force,
 To trick them, sneak in, and, with my own hand, do
 The slaughter they deserve. (32–8)

Orestes never doubted that it would be right to kill his mother; he wanted the god's advice only on how to do the deed.

Again, no one doubts the efficacy of prayer. Electra speaks of "the divinity / That is at work here" (1306–7), but Apollo never appears from the machine or affects the action of the play in any other direct way. Immediately after the chorus pray for Electra's cause, Orestes makes his first appearance to Electra (1098), but right after Clytemnestra's prayer, she comes face-to-face with her doom, in the form of the Tutor. Apollo may be behind all this, but these people are carrying out their own plans, and the statue is silent.

Why did Sophocles treat the subject so differently from the other playwrights—why leave out Apollo's approval or the Furies' condemnation? Why does he make the play all about Electra? She is a woman who longs to assist in the killing of her own mother, and yet the playwright does not openly raise moral questions about Electra's character.

The name *Electra* means "unmarried." She has been denied the role in life for which she has been born (as Sophocles' audience would have seen it). But she has found another role: she is the bearer of memory, and she carries her memory with full emotional power. What sort of person would devote her life to the hope of having her mother killed? Scholars have disagreed about Sophocles' Electra. Some see her as a throwback to Homer's greathearted amoral heroes; others see her as morally damaged by her passion for revenge; still others seek a balanced verdict.

Few characters in the history of drama have struck such different chords with different scholars.

Denniston, representing the Homeric view, calls her “gentle, loving, and womanly” (1939, p. xxviii); he is following Jebb: “The stronger nature, when brought into conflict with the feebler, almost inevitably assumes, at certain moments, an aspect of harshness: yet the union in *Electra* of tenderness with strength can be felt throughout” (1893/2004, p. xlii).

The moral-damage view, brought forward by Sheppard,²⁹ has been most recently defended by Kells, who writes, “Relentless association with the revenge principle ruins her mentally and morally” (1973, p. 10), and pictures the death scene in these striking words: “Soon she will lend herself to the deed of matricide, hovering, herself like a Fury, at the palace-gates, straining to catch her mother’s dying cries, hissing in her venom (1410 f.), gloating in hideous triumph, and urging her brother to ‘strike, if you have the strength, a second blow’” (1973, p. 11).

If the moral-damage view were right, asks Gardiner, then why would Sophocles put the chorus on *Electra*’s side? “By the end of the play, these sensible, admirable women are with *Electra* in every aspect. . . . they serve to show *Electra* as a woman who is not harsh, cruel, or even unreasonably stubborn” (1987, pp. 161–2).

And yet there is something not quite normal about *Electra*, as the sympathetic chorus point out early on:

You were right to grieve at first,
But now it’s absurd, this endless wailing.
You’ll cry yourself to death. Tell me:
Why are you so devoted to your pain? (140–3)

Electra’s sister Chrysothemis has adjusted to the situation and lives at peace with their mother. Why not *Electra*? Because, *Electra* says, “I have to be dreadful in dreadful times” (221).

29. In his groundbreaking work on *Electra*, J. T. Sheppard argued that the tragedy of the play is that “a loving and lovable person” should wind up crying out line 1415, which we translate “Hit her again! Make it twice if you’re strong enough” (1918, p. 88). He defended the quality of the play against the charge that the playwright “blundered strangely if he meant to make the last scene happy” (1927b, p. 164). Orestes, like his forbears, is a bad interpreter of signs if he thinks he is in the clear; the sentence he pronounces against wrongdoers applies to himself (1927a, p. 9).

Reinhardt appreciates the point:

[Electra] appears in a world of the wicked and the false as the extreme of great-heartedness which enables mortal humanity to survive; she is the woman who loves and hates from the depths of her heart; because of her hate and love, she suffers, is persecuted, and is even alienated from herself, disfigured, and consumed by her own fires. . . . [She is] a symbol of resistance to evil and indifference, meanness and carelessness, man's forgetfulness in general. (Reinhardt 1947/79, p. 138–9)

In assessing these views, we should keep in mind that in other plays, also, Sophocles does not deliver verdicts on his characters. At the end of *Antigone* for example, we still do not know which side the gods are taking, Creon's or Antigone's, and we are left to debate whether the playwright himself took sides—whether he meant to make one right and the other wrong, or both right, or both wrong. An Athenian audience, we believe, would have been shocked by both sides—by Creon's tyrannical behavior and by Antigone's intemperate passion for her dead brother.

Electra's family, like Antigone's, carries a curse that affects all its members (513–5). Just as Antigone inherited her father's stubbornness, Electra has picked up some of her mother's harshness, both by birth and by the necessity of living in resistance to it, as she admits:

All right, if I was born like that, it came from you.
So I have my mother's nature: I'm not ashamed of that. (608–9)

Listen, of course I am ashamed of what I do,
Even if you can't tell. I learn from what I see,
And so I act in ways that are not right for me. (616–8)

The customary rule (as we said early in this Introduction) is to do good to your friends and harm to your enemies. But what do you do when your friends become your enemies? This is a common situation for Sophocles' characters. Electra is friends with Clytemnestra by birth, since family ties imply friendship in the Greek sense. But she is enemies with Clytemnestra by virtue of murder within the family, and Electra must take her father's killers as her enemies. Clytemnestra shares the dilemma: she is both friends and enemies with her son Orestes, and she recognizes this when she hears the manner of his death:

O Zeus! What can I say? Is it good luck?
 Or horrible? But is it to my advantage?
 What agony this is—I save my life by losing so much! (766–8)

She overcomes this momentary qualm and goes on to celebrate. But the contrast with Electra is striking. Electra does not feel qualms about her feelings toward her mother, and she is not aware of any moral conflict in taking her mother for her enemy. True, her sister and the chorus admit she is right, and they don't seem to feel any qualms either—except about the impracticality of Electra's passions.

Electra's outsized passions are her most salient characteristic. Anger, grief, love, joy—these are immense in her, awe-inspiring, and she expresses them magnificently, although often at the wrong times. She almost scuttles her own plan for revenge by launching into loud expressions of joy on discovering Orestes and meeting the Tutor. To Sophocles' audience, who expected women to curb their expressions of grief at funerals,³⁰ these outbursts would have been both exciting and appalling. We do not believe, however, that any audience could harden its hearts against sympathy with this woman. She has been suppressed, muzzled, and virtually enslaved by her mother and stepfather; now the lid is off; she remembers how she feels and lets it all out.³¹

We may pass rapidly over the other characters. Orestes and the Tutor are background figures on the whole; they think little and do what they are supposed to do, in cold blood, as agents of Electra's passion, carrying out her dream. The Tutor's messenger speech, however, is the longest we have in Greek tragedy and magnificently charged with detail. False from start to finish, it is a masterpiece of invention. Chrysothemis is an Ismene-like character, as is often remarked, and, like her counterpart in *Antigone*, serves as a foil to show that Electra does not have to be the way she is. One sister accepts the role given her by the family; the

30. Thucydides 2.45, "The Funeral Oration of Pericles."

31. Charles Segal gives an elegantly nuanced account of Electra. On the one hand, she is her mother's daughter, and the harshness of her lines often echoes that of her mother (1966, p. 501). On the other hand, she displays a heroic and passionate resistance "to the moral inversions" of the world, and this is what keeps the play from being entirely dark (p. 539).

other, our hero, has chosen hers. Clytemnestra's divided reaction to news of Orestes' death is fascinating but too short to make for drama. We see only enough of Aegisthus to recognize him as the stage tyrant familiar from Sophocles' other plays, who plans to hold the people in submission by means of fear (1458–63).

The chorus have the only role that approaches Electra's in importance. As citizens of Mycenae, they represent the good sense of the community without being involved in the political life of the state (Gardiner 1987, p. 163). They support Electra's cause from the start, but they feel that she goes too far in her emotions, and they see both sides of her debate with Chrysóthemis (370–1). They care about the ruling family, but they too long for justice and an end to the tyranny that Aegisthus has brought to them. But in their passivity they show more than anyone why the play belongs to the one person whose feelings are powerful enough to bring change to Mycenae—Electra.

Philoctetes

Philoctetes was Heracles' dear friend. Years ago, Philoctetes had lit the funeral pyre that released Heracles from his slow, painful death and raised him to semidivine status. In return for that favor Heracles had given Philoctetes his own famous bow, along with a stock of arrows dipped in the same poison that inadvertently caused Heracles' death. Later, Philoctetes started out for Troy with the Greek army, but he was bitten by a snake as he approached a shrine. The wound festered, stank, and made Philoctetes scream in pain; it did not kill him, but it never healed, and it made him miserable company for the army. The Greek leaders decided to leave him on the northeastern shore of the island of Lemnos, far from any village or usable harbor,³² and to sail on to Troy, about a day's sail north along the coast of Asia Minor (see Sophoclean Geography). There Philoctetes lived in a cave with two entrances, hunting for game with his bow. He

32. Sophocles, alone among early tellers of this tale, emphasizes the loneliness of Philoctetes before the Greeks arrive. Lemnos was large and inhabited in all periods, as his audience knew, so he places the hero in a remote part of the island (Jebb 1898/2004). The other playwrights, in writing on this theme, gave the play a chorus of Lemnians; Sophocles' chorus of Greeks both isolates Philoctetes and brings him back into the world of the army.

made no attempt to seek out human company but nevertheless yearned to return to his home in Malis (the area where *Women of Trachis* is set).

Odysseus and the sons of Atreus were the leaders in this betrayal. Now, after nine years, Odysseus is back on Lemnos because the army has learned that it cannot win the war without Philoctetes and his bow. Apparently, Philoctetes must come willingly; he must be persuaded, not kidnapped, and Odysseus is the champion persuader in the army. But Philoctetes hates Odysseus, and he has a weapon of such power that even a braver man than Odysseus would balk at confronting him directly. Zeus has decreed that Philoctetes will rejoin the army, but, like most of Zeus' decrees in Sophocles' plays, this one will have to be carried out by human agency. So how will Odysseus achieve his end?

Two other great playwrights had put this story onstage before Sophocles, and, luckily, we know roughly how they did it.³³ Both of them put Philoctetes on a populated part of the island and gave the play a chorus of Lemnians; only Sophocles thought to isolate Philoctetes on a deserted mountainside and bring onstage a chorus of Greek sailors, representing the army that had abandoned Philoctetes. Philoctetes had longed for the company of Greeks from the army, and yet he was furious with their leaders for leaving him alone. So how will he react to this delegation from the Greek army?

Here Sophocles' second great innovation lifts the story to a higher level of tension and human interest. Odysseus has not come alone; as the play opens, we see that he has brought with him the Greek army's latest recruit, Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. Achilles was not implicated in marooning Philoctetes on the island; he had, moreover, a record of solid honesty. Anyone would be inclined to believe the son of Achilles: "I know for certain that he's telling us the truth" (319), Philoctetes will say after hearing a web of lies and half-truths. Odysseus' rhetoric would be too artful to be convincing, as it was in the embassy scene of the *Iliad* (Book 9). But who would expect an unschooled youth to be capable of subtlety?

33. Dio Chrysostom summarizes and comments on the three plays in his *Discourse* 52; he apparently paraphrases the opening of Euripides' play on the subject in *Discourse* 59.

Neoptolemus is the pivot of the play.³⁴ Odysseus tries to teach him the art of deception, so that he can trick Philoctetes into giving up the bow and going aboard ship. But Philoctetes plays on the young man's sympathies, so that the great conflict of the play takes place not merely onstage but in the mind of the young man.

The trick is this: Neoptolemus will tell a half-truth—that his father's armor was given to Odysseus. It was, but when Neoptolemus reached the army, it was taken from Odysseus and given to him. Still, he is instructed to say that he has left Troy in a rage against the Greek leaders and is now stopping off at Lemnos on his way home. He is supposed to offer Philoctetes a lift to Malis along the way. The chorus of his sailors are supposed to support his story, and they do. But first the chorus and then Neoptolemus are swayed by pity for the suffering hero.

For the Athenian audience in 409, this play would have struck a special chord. Teachers of rhetoric had turned out a generation of wealthy young men who had learned the art of Odysseus, of speaking winning words without much regard for the truth. Ten years later, Socrates would be executed on a charge of corrupting the youth, partly because he was believed to teach the art of verbal deception.³⁵ But Neoptolemus was born to be honest; he had a painfully honest soldier for a father. Alongside the contest for Philoctetes and his bow, then, we will be watching the contest for the soul of a young man, between his inborn nature and the instruction he receives from Odysseus under the pressure of circumstance.

Another pressure will weigh on him: compassion for the wounded hero. The chorus express it first (169), and Neoptolemus will be ashamed not to follow them (524–5). Greek ethical texts of the time say little about the capacity for compassion as a virtue, but no one could read this play and not realize that Athenian

34. "How then is the gulf to be got over between the ineffective plight of the bowman and the proper use of his bow, between his ignominy and his destined glory? Only by the intervention of one who is guileless enough and human enough to treat him, not as a monster, nor yet as a magical property which is wanted for accomplishing some end, but simply as another man, whose sufferings elicit his sympathy and whose courage he admires" (Wilson 1947, p. 241).

35. See Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comic play presented in 421, in which Socrates is represented as such a teacher.

culture was fertile ground for an ethics of compassion. We are impressed by the young man's goodness when he finally does give in to fellow feeling, although only a heart of stone could be unmoved by Philoctetes' agony. Sophocles has made the wound fester for everyone in the audience through repeated episodes of pain broadcast by the unbearable screams of the hero.

Odysseus removes himself from these scenes of agony. He has no room in his plans for pity. "I am whatever kind of man I have to be" (1049), he says. He knows from the start that his young friend has a nobler nature than he does (79), but he promises that Neoptolemus will have to surrender to deceptive practices for only one day, after which the boy can resume a life of virtue (83–5). Neoptolemus resists at first: "My lord, I would rather / Do right and fail than do wrong to win" (94–5). But later he plunges fully into the planned deception. He easily wins the sympathy of Philoctetes, so easily that he hardly needs to ask for the bow to come into his hands. When it does, he makes a promise he may not intend to keep ("No one else but you and I / Will hold this bow"; 774–5), but then he hedges it with a carefully worded double meaning: "Gods, grant . . . smooth sailing to wherever heaven wills" (779–80). He knows that heaven wills them to return to Troy and not, as he has promised, to their homes on the mainland.

Neoptolemus' nature is still too fresh to yield completely to Odysseus' design. He admits that he finds himself disgusting for changing from his nature (900), but he sticks to his purpose and, now that he has the power of the bow in his hands, reveals the deception to its victim. Still, late in the play, offstage, he apparently has a crisis of conscience and, when he returns, gives the bow to Philoctetes. This is a moment of high theatre: Odysseus vehemently protests, and Philoctetes adamantly refuses to change his mind, but Neoptolemus gives Philoctetes back his bow nonetheless (1288).

Here we expect the play to end, with a moral success for the young man, a failure for the devious old warrior, and a homecoming for the wounded hero. That would be satisfying in many ways: the good would triumph over the bad, the values of peace would rise above those of war, and the Greek army would simply have to give up its bloodthirsty ambition. But that is not Zeus' plan, and somehow Zeus' plan must prevail. The audience at this point is on tenterhooks, suspended between its knowledge of Zeus' plan and its sense of the rightness of the conclusion that

now seems inevitable. “Then say good-bye to this place, and let’s go” (1409), says Neoptolemus, prepared to take his new friend home to Malis.

But Heracles appears and changes everything. He is much like a *deus ex machina* here—a device that Euripides often used to resolve plots but Sophocles almost never used. The term refers to a device for flying an actor who plays a god or goddess into the audience’s field of sight on top of the scene building. We do not know for sure that the machine was used for this scene, but we do know that Heracles must actually make an appearance. Philoctetes is delighted to see his dear old friend. He has heard before what Heracles has to say about Zeus’ plan, but he did not believe it then. Gods can deceive through prophecies, and human beings can certainly lie about what the prophecies are, so he has good reason to doubt Odysseus’ self-seeking story. But this time he believes it, coming from Heracles—perhaps because Heracles comes straight from Zeus, now that he is a demigod, or perhaps because he is a trusted friend.

The actor playing Odysseus is now playing Heracles. Earlier, he had played the Trader, and we suspected with good reason that he was Odysseus in disguise. Could this be Odysseus again, letting his Heracles mask slip a little so that we can see the other mask behind? Could this be one last trick from the master of deceit—coupled with a trick by the playwright, poking fun at Euripides?³⁶ That’s not impossible, but we cannot be sure.

More likely, we are meant to take this late arrival for the demigod himself, because Odysseus would have no reason to give a homily on reverence, a homily that looks to a dark future:

Be warned: When you lay waste to the land,
 Show true respect for the things of the gods.
 This is paramount to my father, Zeus.
 Reverence does not die when men do;
 In life as in death it is immortal. (1440–4)

The play ends in an ominous success: the powerful weapon and its user will return to the Greek army at Troy, and Troy will be sacked—but not without moral cost. The audience knew that

36. Credit for this point goes to Peter Meineck, who found, through producing the play, that audiences did indeed suppose that Heracles was yet another of Odysseus’ manipulative disguises.

Neoptolemus and the others would forget Heracles' advice in their rage over a defeated enemy. Images of the young warrior run amok—for example, slaying the elderly Priam as he clung to an altar—were well known at the time. In the great contest between a good inborn nature and the corruption of life at war, we know which side will win. Odysseus has been a devious teacher, but war will be a violent one.³⁷ Neoptolemus has succeeded in the Philoctetes mission without losing his natural goodness; but before the war is over, he will grow monstrous.³⁸

37. For the thought, which Sophocles may have shared, see Thucydides 3.82.

38. Roberts (1988) makes a good case for the view that Sophocles' endings point toward future events known to the audience but not explicitly mentioned in the play. This is especially striking in *Philoctetes*, though not all scholars recognize it. Segal, in his study of *Electra*, sees *Philoctetes* as ending on a clear positive note (1966, p. 542).

Note on the Translations

Sophocles wrote these plays for the stage, and we have translated them with the stage in mind, though we have also tried to maintain a high standard of accuracy. At the same time, we have aimed to preserve the poetic qualities of the choral passages and longer speeches, without observing a strict meter or rhyme scheme. Sophocles' poetry is concise, alliterative, and of staggering emotional power, and these qualities tend to be lost in metrical or rhyming versions. On the art of translation, see Woodruff 2005. We have followed the Oxford Classical Text (Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990) except where indicated in the notes. Our line numbers follow those of the Greek texts as closely as humanly possible.

Peter Meineck originally translated *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* for stage productions by the Aquila Theatre Company and then adapted them for publication in this volume, providing the notes and bibliographies. Paul Woodruff rendered *Women of Trachis* and *Electra* for this volume, providing notes and bibliographies for those plays.

Stage directions. Readers should understand that the manuscripts contained no stage directions. We have provided directions where appropriate, basing them on Peter Meineck's understanding of ancient staging techniques.

Notes. For the notes, we are often indebted to the commentaries cited for each play. In all things we are indebted to Jebb's brilliant edition and commentary of the entire body of Sophocles' work. Notes that would help readers understand the text are printed as footnotes keyed to line numbers; notes that are of interest to scholars appear as endnotes and are gathered at the end of this volume, page 253.

Introduction. Paul Woodruff wrote the Introduction, except for the section on staging. For the sections on *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, he is often indebted to Peter Meineck.

Paul Woodruff's acknowledgments. My passion for Sophocles was reignited some years ago when I witnessed Peter Meineck's brilliant 1994 production of *Philoctetes*, and I am honored to have had the opportunity to complete this volume with him. His thorough understanding of the staging of these plays has brought them alive in my mind, and I have depended on his insights again and again.

I wish to thank my undergraduate research assistants, Collin Bjork, Dhananjay Janannathan, Christopher Morley, and Christopher Reed.

Bringing *Electra* across into a modern idiom took me five years, because it was such an emotionally draining experience that I could not keep it up for long periods. So intense are the anger and grief that animate the play. Lucia Norton Woodruff kept me sane and laughing during this time, as she always has, and I am deeply grateful for that and for all the music of our lives. My part of this work is dedicated to her.

Peter Meineck's acknowledgments. I was introduced to the beauty and power of Sophocles' Greek by Pat Easterling, a wonderful and inspiring teacher of Greek drama. In 1992, I translated and directed *Ajax* as the second production of the Aquila Theatre Company, then based in London. The play exploded into life in rehearsal, its second half in particular developing into a taut and exciting conflict between two powerful points of view. *Ajax* has always seemed to me to be a soldier's play, one that would have resounded with the rowers, hoplites, and cavalrymen of the Athenian citizen armed forces who made up the audience. Aquila's production enlisted the help of a Royal Marine drill instructor to realize the chorus in our modern-dress production; the actors brought a potent combination of muscularity and sensitivity to their roles and great integrity to their speeches.

In many ways Sophocles could be said to be the most theatrical of all the extant Greek dramatists, and his plays reflect an intimate knowledge of the workings of the stage of the day. This inherent theatricality imbues his words with the power to fully stimulate the imagination. One of the joys of working on productions of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* was having the opportunity to marry Sophocles' text with live stage action. This process lies at the heart of my work on these two superb plays, and I have greatly benefited from the input and advice of the Aquila artists,

including Tony Longhurst, Nina Lucking, Steve Owen, Robert Richmond, Yasmin Sidwha, and Karyln Stephen, to name a few.

I was inspired to approach *Philoctetes* after seeing Seamus Heaney's excellent *Cure at Troy* at London's Tricycle Theatre. *Philoctetes* is surely one of Sophocles' greatest works and deserves to be read, performed, and seen far more often. Aquila's original production toured the United States in 1994–5 and had a distinct Celtic air, with beguiling live music composed by Robert Richmond and a compelling central performance by Steve Owen. For me, *Philoctetes* seems like a noble, ancient Ben Gunn—quirky, cantankerous, and at times repellent, yet somehow always worthy of our empathy and love. His resolute insistence not to bend to the will of the Greeks is as wonderful as it is dangerous, and the play has the perfect ending. It should take a demigod to change the mind of this stubbornly resolute curmudgeon. We would all love to dig our heels in and stand our ground like *Philoctetes*, but we know that to live with each other we must be more like *Odysseus*.

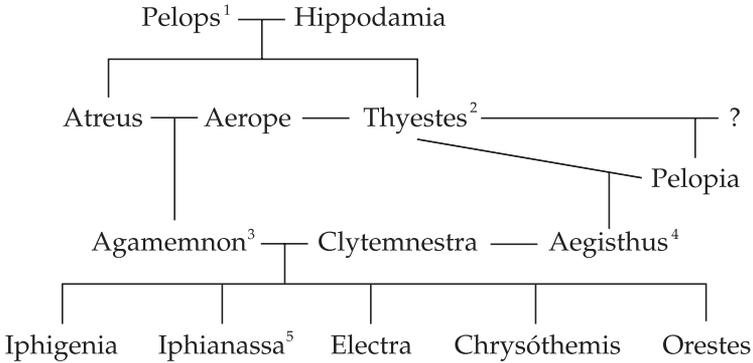
Working with Paul Woodruff on all the plays of Sophocles has been a rare pleasure. Woodruff has produced superb translations in an American idiom that have inspired and invigorated my work. His knowledge of ancient philosophy, religion, and culture and his unique experiences as a combat veteran and dramatist have contributed enormously to my understanding and appreciation of Sophocles, Greek drama, and the delicate art of translation.

I wish to thank the artists of the Aquila Theatre Company who have helped guide me over the past sixteen years. Matthew Santirocco, dean of the College of Arts and Science at New York University and director of the Center for Ancient Studies, has provided Aquila and me with a wonderfully supportive home and a vibrant Greenwich Village base for our myriad operations. My colleagues in classics and students at NYU have constantly lent their support and encouragement. Brian Rak and Meera Dash at Hackett have been incredibly patient, nurturing, and helpful. I would also like to thank all the theatres, college departments, and arts programs across America that hosted *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* in the early formative days of Aquila. Finally, I am indebted to the beautiful dancer Desiree Sanchez Meineck for constantly reminding me of the extraordinary qualities of art and for calling me her husband. I dedicate my work to Desiree and our wonderful family.



Sophoclean Geography

House of Pelops Family Tree



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1. The curse on the family stems from Pelops' cheating in a famous chariot race.
 2. Thyestes seduced his brother's wife, Aerope, and his brother, Atreus, got even by giving Thyestes a horrible feast in which the unsuspecting guest devoured his own children.
 3. Agamemnon's younger brother Menelaus was married to Clytemnestra's sister Helen.
 4. Aegisthus is the sole surviving son of Thyestes. In Sophocles' lost play about Thyestes, Aegisthus is the son of incest between Thyestes and his daughter Pelopia. The gods apparently commanded Thyestes to commit this incest as part of a plan to get even with Atreus, but that story is not brought to bear on *Electra*.
 5. Homer's *Iliad* mentions three daughters of Agamemnon—Chrysóthemis, Laodice, and Iphianassa—as possible brides for Achilles (9.145). Iphigenia may have replaced Iphianassa in some versions of the myth, but in Sophocles, as in the *Iliad*, Iphianassa survives the sailing of the fleet.

Ajax

Ajax: Cast of Characters

ATHENA	goddess of wisdom, craft, and strategy
ODYSSEUS	a Greek commander from Ithaca
AJAX	the son of Telamon and a Greek commander from Salamis
CHORUS	of Salaminian warriors
TECMESSA	a Phrygian captive, wife of Ajax
MESSENGER	from the Greek camp, loyal to Teucer
TEUCER	the half-brother of Ajax, son of Telamon and Hesione, a Trojan
MENELAUS	the youngest son of Atreus and a Greek commander from Sparta
AGAMEMNON	the eldest son of Atreus from Mycenae and the supreme commander of the Greeks at Troy

Nonspeaking Roles

EURYSACES	the young son of Ajax and Tecmessa
ATTENDANTS	

Casting

In the original production at the Theatre of Dionysus, the division of roles between the three speaking actors may have been as follows:

1. Ajax, Agamemnon
2. Athena, Messenger, Teucer
3. Tecmessa, Menelaus, Odysseus

After line 1168, a nonspeaking actor played the role of Tecmessa.

This translation is based on a version developed by Peter Meineck for the Aquila Theatre Company in 1993 for a U.S. tour. The original cast included Donald T. Allen, Tony Longhurst, James Moriarty, Yasmin Sidhwa, and Andrew Tansey.

Division of roles: The parts can also be divided as follows: (1) Ajax, Teucer; (2) Odysseus, Tecmessa; (3) Athena, Messenger, Menelaus, Agamemnon.

Ajax

SCENE: *Night. The Greek camp at Troy. It is the ninth year of the Trojan War, after the death of Achilles. Odysseus is following tracks that lead him outside the tent of Ajax.*

The skene (scene building), with its large central door and upper roof level, represents Ajax's tent. In front of the skene is a small wooden stage with steps leading down to the orchestra. On each side of the orchestra is a long wing entrance.

(Enter Odysseus through the stage left wing toward the orchestra. He is moving very cautiously, reading the ground as he goes. Enter Athena on the roof of the skene.)

ATHENA:

I'm always watching you, son of Laertes,
Devising ways to trap your enemies.
Now you're on the scene of Ajax's tent
By the ships on the edge of camp,
Doggedly trailing
His freshly laid tracks

5

Enter Odysseus: The texts of Greek plays have come down to us without any stage directions, so any note pertaining to onstage movement can only be conjectural based on the archaeology of the Theatre of Dionysus, our knowledge of the staging of Greek plays in the fifth century, and the clues inherent in the text. Here we assign the stage left wing as denoting the direction of the Greek camp and the stage right as the way to the plain of Troy.

Enter Athena: We do not think a *mechane* (stage crane) was used to fly Athena, who probably stood on the roof of the stage building.

3: "The scene of Ajax's tent"—Sophocles uses *skene*, the Greek word for "tent" but also the term used for the onstage scene building with a large central door that is used here to represent the hut or tent of Ajax.

4: "The edge of camp"—In Homer's *Iliad* (11.5–9), Ajax's camp is at the far eastern end of the Greek line, while Achilles' was located on the western flank. Odysseus' tents were in the center.

To see if he might be inside.
 Is my Spartan bloodhound
 Sniffing out what he seeks?
 The man you want has gone in there,
 10 His head and hands splattered by his sword,
 But there's no need to peer inside the door.
 Speak to me: Why do you search so intently?
 I know the answer; you might learn something.

ODYSSEUS:

The voice of Athena, dearest god of all!
 15 I can't see you, but I know it's you.
 My heart grasps every word, as clear
 And crisp as a bronze Etruscan trumpet.
 You see so well: I am circling my enemy,
 Tracking Ajax, the great shield man;
 20 He is the only one I am hunting.
 Last night he did the unthinkable,
 If it really was him—nothing's certain yet;
 We're confused and all adrift—
 So I volunteered to find out for sure.
 25 We discovered our captured herds
 And their stockmen slaughtered,
 Butchered at the hands of a man.

8: "Spartan bloodhound"—Spartan dogs were renowned for their hunting and tracking abilities.

15: See endnote.

18: "Circling"—another reference to the Greeks' stage as Odysseus remains in the circular orchestra following Ajax's trail.

19: "The great shield man"—Ajax was famous for his huge shield, which is described by Homer as being seven layers of ox-skin thick (*Iliad* 7.219). This was a tall full-body shield that was considered an antique weapon even on the Homeric battlefield. This type of shield acts as a symbol of Ajax's resolute, stubborn personality and his rigid adherence to a warrior value system that is already being eclipsed by the new morality of men like Odysseus.

25: "Our captured herds"—The Greeks had been raiding the Trojan allies and had built up a herd of valuable captured livestock, which was to be divided up among the chiefs.

Now everyone thinks he is to blame;
 A lookout saw him rushing across
 The plain clutching a bloody sword 30
 And came and told me, so I set out on his trail.
 I found his footprints, but what are these?
 I'm confused. You have come just in time;
 I need your guidance now as much as ever;
 Your hand has always steered me well. 35

ATHENA:

I know, Odysseus, I've been here awhile now,
 Watching you. I'll help you on your hunt.

ODYSSEUS:

My beloved lady, am I on the right track?

ATHENA:

Indeed. That man did those things.

ODYSSEUS:

Such a senseless attack. Why? 40

ATHENA:

His anger over the arms of Achilles.

ODYSSEUS:

Then why slaughter our herds?

ATHENA:

He thought he was bathing his hands in your blood.

ODYSSEUS:

He meant to do this to his fellow Greeks?

ATHENA:

And he would have succeeded if I had not been diligent. 45

ODYSSEUS:

The audacity. How did he think he would get away with it?

41: "The arms of Achilles"—After the death of Achilles, the Greek chiefs voted to award his arms to Odysseus. Ajax considered himself by far the better man and was severely insulted. The armor of Achilles was especially prized not only because it had belonged to the Greeks' best fighter but also because Hephaestus, the god of the forge, had made it.

ATHENA:

By stealth, in the night, acting alone.

ODYSSEUS:

And how far did he get? Was he close?

ATHENA:

Yes, he reached the doors of the two commanders.

ODYSSEUS:

50 Then what stopped him when he was so set on murder?

ATHENA:

I held him at the brink of his deadly moment of joy,
Deluding his eyes with visions of his own obsession.

Then I turned his rage against the livestock,
Your undivided spoils guarded by the herdsmen.

55 He attacked the horned beasts, smashing
Their spines, then hacking out a circle of carcasses.

He thought he had hold of the two sons of Atreus
And was slaughtering them with his own hands.

Then he hacked at this chief and that chief,

60 Hurling himself on and on, deeper into madness;
And I was there to urge him on into the trap.

Once he tired of the slaughter, he tied up the surviving
Sheep and cows and dragged them back to his camp
As if he had captured men, not horned beasts.

65 Now he is torturing them, tied up inside his tent.

I will show you the state of his sickness

So you will tell everything to your fellow Greeks.

Be strong; stay and see him for yourself.

You've nothing to fear; I'll avert his eyes—

70 He will never know that you are here.

(Shouting toward the skene door.)

You in there, roping the arms of your captives,

47: "By stealth, in the night, acting alone"—the antithesis of how an Athenian soldier of the fifth century would fight. The hoplite fought in a line shoulder to shoulder with his fellow troops and fought by day.

49: "The two commanders"—Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus and leaders of the war on Troy.

Pinning them back! I'm calling you; come out!
Ajax! Come out of your tent!

ODYSSEUS:

What are you doing, Athena? Don't call him out.

ATHENA:

Quiet! Don't be a coward.

75

ODYSSEUS:

By all the gods, let him stay inside!

ATHENA:

What could he do? He's just a man, the same as before.

ODYSSEUS:

He was my enemy; he still is.

ATHENA:

But isn't it satisfying to laugh at your enemy?

ODYSSEUS:

It's enough for me to have him stay inside.

80

ATHENA:

Are you afraid to see a madman face-to-face?

ODYSSEUS:

I would not avoid him if he were sane.

ATHENA:

He won't see you, however close he gets.

ODYSSEUS:

How can that be if he still has his eyes?

ATHENA:

I can darken the sharpest eyes.

85

ODYSSEUS:

Gods can do anything when they want to.

ATHENA:

Keep quiet, and stay just where you are.

ODYSSEUS:

I'd rather be anywhere than here, but I'll stay.

ATHENA:

Ajax! I'm calling you again!

90 Is this any way to treat your ally?

(Enter Ajax through the door of the skene that represents his tent. He is covered in blood and gore and holding a bloodstained whip.)

AJAX:

Welcome, Athena, daughter of Zeus!

You stood by me, and I will dedicate golden
Trophies to thank you for this hunt.

ATHENA:

95 Fine words, but tell me: Did you bathe
Your sword well in the blood of the Greeks?

AJAX:

I'll shout it out! There's no denying it.

ATHENA:

Did you get your hands on the sons of Atreus?

AJAX:

They will never disgrace the name of Ajax again!

ATHENA:

Are they dead? Is that what you mean?

AJAX:

100 Dead! Now let them try and steal my arms.

ATHENA:

Indeed. And Laertes' son, what of him?
Did he manage to escape you?

AJAX:

You want to hear about that conniving fox?

ATHENA:

Oh yes! Odysseus was your great rival.

94: "Bathe"—*baphas*, a word that means both to plunge a sword and to dye fabric. It has a ritual connotation akin to the word "baptize," which derives from it.

- AJAX:
 Lady, he's inside and most welcome.
 I'm not ready for him to die just yet. 105
- ATHENA:
 What's first? What are you going to do?
- AJAX:
 First, I will lash him to a pole in my tent.
- ATHENA:
 The poor man. Are you going to hurt him?
- AJAX:
 I'll bloody his back with my scourge before he dies. 110
- ATHENA:
 Oh, please don't torture the wretched man.
- AJAX:
 Athena, in everything else I will do what you want,
 But nothing will stop him from receiving this punishment.
- ATHENA:
 Since this brings you so much pleasure,
 You have a free hand; stop at nothing. 115
- AJAX:
 To work! But let me say this:
 Always stand by my side; be my ally forever.
(Exit Ajax through the skene door.)
- ATHENA:
 You see, Odysseus, the power of the gods.
 Once, you couldn't find a sounder man,
 Always in the right place at the right time. 120

117: "Be my ally"—Ajax places himself on the same level as the gods when he declares Athena his "ally."

120: Homer depicted Ajax as a great bulwark, holding the Greek line and flying into battle in the nick of time. In the *Iliad*, Ajax saves Odysseus by planting his great shield and defending Odysseus from a Trojan attack (11.473–88).

ODYSSEUS:

No, I could not; but I pity the poor man
 Yoked to this insatiable evil,
 Even though he is my enemy.
 It could just as easily be me.
 125 We are all insubstantial shadows,
 And life is just a flickering dream.

ATHENA:

Look on these things and remember:
 Never arrogantly boast before the gods,
 Nor raise yourself up because you measure
 130 More in strength or weight of wealth.
 Just one day can tip the balance of a life.
 The gods love the temperate
 And hate the transgressor.

(Exit Athena from the roof of the skene. Exit Odysseus through the stage left wing. Enter the chorus through the stage right wing into the orchestra.)

CHORUS:

Telamon's son, from the wave-washed
 135 Isle of Salamis, embedded by the sea,
 When all is well with you, I take heart;
 But when the wrath of Zeus comes

132: "The temperate"—*sophrosunê*, the concept of moderate behavior or having a sound mind. Ajax's excessive personality, great strength, and steadfastness all go far beyond the bounds of well-balanced conduct in Athena's view.

Enter the chorus . . . into the orchestra: In the Greek, Ajax's Salaminian warriors are called both *nautes* (usually translated as "sailors") and *aspisteres* ("shield-bearing fighters"). They crew Ajax's ships and make up his infantry force at Troy. In modern terms, they resemble marines. According to Homer, Ajax has twelve ships (*Iliad* 2.557)—a force of around seven hundred men, here represented by a chorus of twelve or fifteen.

134: Telamon—the father of Ajax and Teucer, the king of Salamis, and the brother of Peleus.

135: Salamis—an island off the Saronic coast of Attica. At the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.E., an Athenian-led force defeated the Persian invasion.

Or furious words from the Greeks,
 Then I shudder in fear, nervous
 As the darting eye of a dove. 140
 The night passed, and we woke
 To an almighty uproar and threats
 Of great disgrace. They say
 You came to the horse fields
 And slew the captured cattle 145
 Not yet portioned to the Greeks,
 Killing them with flashing iron.
 These words are being whispered
 By Odysseus and poured in every ear,
 Persuasive, credible words— 150
 Consuming each listener who revels
 In your misfortune, relishing the rumor
 Far more each time it's told.

If you aim at a great soul, you cannot miss.
 If such things were said of me, 155
 They would never be believed.
 Envy creeps against the mighty,
 But small men make flimsy walls
 Without a powerful buttress.
 The great support the small, 160
 And the weak prop up the strong,
 But the fool will never learn
 The wisdom of these truths.
 Men like this rail against you,
 And without you, lord, we lack
 The strength to defend ourselves. 165
 Out of your sight they cluck
 Like a flock of prattling birds;
 But if you appeared before them,
 A great vulture in their midst, 170
 They'd be struck with fear and silenced.

152: "The rumor"—The chorus introduce the idea of the power of words. Rumors tarnish their chief's reputation, diminishing his status and allowing his enemies to mock rather than fear him.

Parodos (Entry-song)

[Strophe]

Dread rumor, mother of my shame,
 Was it Artemis of the bulls,
 Daughter of Zeus, who set him
 175 Against the herds we shared?
 Did he fail to make a sacrifice
 And cheat her of the spoils of war?
 Did you kill a deer and offer nothing?
 Did the bronze-clad god of war
 180 Fight for you and receive no glory,
 Then punish your transgression in the night?

[Antistrophe]

Never in your right mind
 Would you, Telamon's son,
 Go so far as to slaughter livestock.
 185 The gods must have driven him mad!
 Zeus! Apollo! Stop these rumors of the Greeks.
 The high-kings charge him falsely,
 And that bastard son of Sisyphus
 Is spreading lies in secret.
 190 No Lord, no! Don't skulk in your tent on the shore.
 Go and show your face and fight this slander!

173: Artemis—the goddess of the hunt and protector of wild animals. Sophocles uses her title *Tauropolos* as a reference to her cult, said to have been brought to Attica by Orestes from the Tauric Chersonese. The origins of this cult may have included human sacrifice. The savagery of this particular cult is mirrored by the blood and gore surrounding Ajax.

179: “Bronze-clad god of war”—Ares, the god of war and violence.

188: Sisyphus—the legendary founder of Corinth and a famous trickster, who went so far as to try to cheat Death himself. Sisyphus was eternally punished in Hades by having to push uphill a huge boulder that always rolled back again. Odysseus' mother, Anticleia, was said to have conceived Odysseus with Sisyphus before she married Laertes.

[Epode]

Now rise up!
 You've sat in there far too long!
 No more brooding, missing battle,
 Fanning the flames of your ruin up to heaven! 195
 Your enemies' insolence knows no fear;
 It sweeps on, howling across the plain.
 They're all laughing at you,
 Mouthing your misery!
 I can hardly bear the pain. 200

(Enter Tecmessa, the war bride of Ajax, through the skene door.)

TECMESSA:

Soldiers of Ajax,
 Sons of Athenian soil,
 The house of Telamon is far away,
 But all of us must share its pain.
 The magnificent, powerful, and fierce 205
 Ajax lies suffering,
 Struck by a storm of madness.

CHORUS:

What happened last night
 That could make today worse?
 You're the daughter of a Phrygian, 210
 But ever since Ajax won you in battle,
 He has come to love you deeply.
 You must know what happened.

Enter Tecmessa . . . skene door: Tecmessa was the daughter of Teleutas the Phrygian, an ally of Troy. She was captured during one of the Greek raids. She is a "spear-bride," a captive woman forced into slavery and sexual servitude. Like those of the chorus, Tecmessa's status and survival are now bound up with the fortunes of Ajax.

202: "Sons of Athenian soil"—The Greek has this line: "The race of Erechtheus, sprung from the soil." Erechtheus was a mythological early king of Athens and tied to the notion that the Athenians were "autochthonic," or "of the soil." Here the men of Ajax from Salamis are linked to the Athenians.

210: Phrygia—the region around Troy, modern-day northwestern Turkey.

TECMESSA:

How can I speak what is unspeakable?
 215 You'll want to die when you hear it.
 Our glorious Ajax was driven insane
 And brought down disgrace in the night.
 Look inside his tent for the proof.
 You'll see the slaughter:
 220 His sacrifices soaked in blood.

[Strophe]

CHORUS:

What you've said about
 This fierce, fiery man
 Is too hard to hear but inescapable.
 225 The greatest Greeks shout it out
 And mouth to mouth the rumors swell.
 If he went beserk, unleashed his dark sword,
 And massacred the drovers and their herds,
 Then I fear what is to come.
 230 There will have to be a public execution.

TECMESSA:

Oh, from there? From there?
 Those animals he captured came from there?
 235 He slit the throats of some; others
 He hacked to death, shattering their bones.
 He caught two white-footed rams, tore
 The head off one, and ripped out its tongue;
 The other he tied to a pole, then took

220: "Sacrifices soaked in blood"—a startling image. The blood from sacrificial victims was either collected in a bowl and burned for the Olympian gods or spilled on the ground to be drunk by the earth. Here the audience is presented with the obscene image of Ajax's tent swimming in blood, the result of a perverted sacrifice.

221–56: This passage was written to be sung, owing to the heightened emotions it conveys. Such a passage is known as a *kommos*.

234: "Came from there?"—Tecmessa's grief is compounded when she realizes that the livestock came from the Greek camp and that Ajax's actions represent a gross act of treachery.

Two huge leather straps from a harness 240
 And flogged the ram with the double lash
 Stinging the air. A torrent of evil curses
 Flew from his mouth, so foul
 Only a demon could have taught them to him.

[Antistrophe]

CHORUS:

The time has come for us to hide our faces 245
 And creep away on foot or get to the ships,
 Pull away to wherever the wind takes us.
 The commanders, the two sons of Atreus, 250
 Are making angry threats against us.
 I fear the end if I stay with him,
 Death by stoning—alongside a man 255
 Struck by a fate too terrible to endure.

TECMESSA:

But it's over! As quick as lightning
 From a cruel southern storm,
 His madness blazed and died.
 Now sanity brings new pain:
 To see your own misfortune, 260
 To bear the blame alone—
 This strains his very soul.

CHORUS:

Then if his madness has gone, all will be well!
 The talk of it will fade; the trouble will pass.

TECMESSA:

If you hurt your friends, what would you choose? 265
 Would you want to be happy about it
 Or feel remorse and share their pain?

CHORUS:

The first—the second choice is a double blow.

TECMESSA:

And so we are worse off now that his madness has passed.

CHORUS:

What are you talking about? I don't understand. 270

TECMESSA:

When he was mad at least he took pleasure
 In the dark depths of his obsession,
 Though we, the sane, could not bear to see it.
 Now he has some relief from his sickness;
 275 He feels the full weight of his misery.
 Our initial pain remains as sharp as ever,
 But now we know twice the agony.

CHORUS:

You're right; I fear he was struck by a god.
 Why else would he be so unhappy
 280 Now that he is no longer sick?

TECMESSA:

Now you know. This is how things stand.

CHORUS:

How did this happen—this devastation?
 You can tell us; we're all caught up in this.

TECMESSA:

Because it involves you, I'll speak:
 285 In the dead of night when the lamps burn low,
 He rose up and took his double-edged sword,
 Intent upon some senseless mission.
 "Ajax," I said, "Where are you going?
 I've not heard the trumpet call,
 290 Nor has there been a messenger.
 The whole army is still sleeping."
 And all he said was that old line:
 "A woman's best attribute is silence."
 I knew to keep quiet, and he hurried off alone.
 295 I can't tell you what happened out there,
 But he returned dragging tethered bulls,
 Herdsmen's dogs, and captured sheep.
 He slit the throats of some; others he hung up
 And butchered, cleaving them in two.
 300 The rest were tied up and tortured
 As if they were men, not livestock.

271–5: "When he was mad . . . his misery"—Now that Ajax is no longer raving, he has realized what he has done and sunk into a deep depression.

Finally he burst out the door ranting
 At a shadow, scorning the sons of Atreus
 And Odysseus and brashly laughing
 At some outrage he had done them.
 Then suddenly he came storming back inside. 305
 Slowly and painfully he returned to his senses.
 And when he saw the carnage under his roof,
 He grasped his head and screamed,
 Crashing down onto the bloody wreckage,
 Then just sitting in the slaughter, fists clenched,
 His nails tearing into his hair. 310

For the longest time he just sat in silence,
 But then he threatened horrific things
 If I didn't tell him all that had happened
 And how he had come to be in such a condition.
 Friends, I was so scared, I told him what I knew, 315
 And he let out such pitiable, mournful cries—
 Sounds I had never thought possible from him.
 He had always thought weeping cowardly,
 A sign of weakness in lesser men.
 Before, he would never wail or cry
 But deeply groan and bellow like a bull. 320
 Now he has been laid low by this evil.
 He won't eat or drink or say anything;
 He just sits in the midst of his butchery.
 I know he is planning to do something terrible;
 I hear it in his bitter, tormented cries. 325
 Oh, my friends, this is why I came to you.
 Please go inside and help him.
 He needs you now. Men in such a state
 Can be talked into sense by friends. 330

CHORUS:

Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas, to hear
 Of his sufferings—his insanity—is too much to bear.

(They hear Ajax from inside the tent.)

AJAX:

Why me? Why me?

333: See endnote.

TECMESSA:

I fear it may only get worse.
 335 Do you hear? That is Ajax.

AJAX:

Why me? Why me?

CHORUS:

It sounds as if he is still mad or tormented
 By the thought of his own insanity!

AJAX:

Oh, my son, my son!

TECMESSA:

Ah me, he's calling for Eurysaces, our son.
 340 What does he want? Where is he? What now?

AJAX:

Teucer! Where is Teucer? Forever out plundering
 While I am destroyed!

CHORUS:

He sounds sane enough. Open up!
 345 Perhaps when he sees me he'll regain his self-respect.

TECMESSA:

Then look, I will open the doors. See for yourselves
 What he has done and the state of the man.

(Enter Ajax on the ekkyklêma—a wheeled platform—pushed through the skene door. He sits, soaked in blood and surrounded by animal carcasses.)

[Strophe a]

AJAX:

Oh,
 My crewmen, my only friends
 350 Still loyal to me. You see the wave

340: *Eurysaces* means "Broad Shield" or "Good Shield."

345: "Self-respect"—*aidos*, a sense of personal worth and self-esteem.

346–55: See endnote.

348–429: Second Kommos—See note on lines 221–56.

That swelled up in this blood-soaked storm,
Swirling around me, pulling me under,
Drowning me in misery?

CHORUS: (*To Tecmessa.*)

It was all true—everything you told us!
There's no doubt now: He's out of his mind!

355

[Antistrophe *a*]

AJAX:

Oh!
My veteran seafarers
Whose oar-blades swept the seas,
You are the only ones who can help.
Only you would do this.
Come then and kill me!

360

CHORUS:

Don't say such things! Evil cannot cure evil;
It will only bring on more misery.

[Strophe *b*]

AJAX:

Look at the valiant man! The brave heart!
The one who unflinchingly faced the enemy!
You see the great deeds I have done to harmless beasts?
Oh, the ridicule runs riot against me!

365

TECMESSA:

Ajax, please stop talking like this.

AJAX:

Get out of my sight! Get away!
Aiai! Aiai!

370

TECMESSA:

By all the gods, please come to your senses!

370: "Aiai!"—Sophocles plays on the meaning of the name *Ajax*, which in Greek reads as *Aias* and corresponds to the term *aiai*, meaning a great cry of pain.

371: Some editors (notably Jebb) attribute this line to the chorus.

AJAX:

What a pitiable man I am
 To have let those devils slip
 From my grasp and instead
 375 Attack horned cattle, sheep, and goats,
 Shedding their dark blood.

CHORUS:

It happened; nothing can change that now—
 But don't keep suffering the pain of the past.

[Antistrophe *b*]

AJAX:

You see it all, hear everything,
 380 Invent every evil—Odysseus,
 You mealy-mouthed bastard!
 Are you enjoying this? Are you laughing now?

CHORUS:

It's up to the gods if a man laughs or cries.

AJAX:

I'd face him, even in this state I'd . . .
 385 Why me? Why?

CHORUS:

This is not the time for big words. Can't you see
 The situation you are in?

AJAX:

Zeus, father of my ancestors,
 If only I could kill that conniving
 390 Mealy mouth and those brother-kings,
 Then I could finally die.

TECMESSA:

Then pray for my death as well.
 I will not live without you.

381: "Mealy-mouthed"—*alema*, "powder" or "cornmeal." Ajax's insult emphasizes the contrast between the two men. Odysseus is powdery, insubstantial, refined, and almost unseen.

[Strophe c]

AJAX:

Oh!

Darkness is now my only light;

The gloom of the Underworld

395

Shines for me. Take me!

Take me to the halls of death.

I have lost the right to look for

Any help from gods or men.

400

The daughter of Zeus,

The mighty goddess,

Torments me to my death.

Where could I run?

Where could I ever stay?

My reputation now lies here

405

Among these butchered carcasses—

My reward for the obsession of a fool.

Now the entire army is waiting

To take their swords and strike me dead.

TECMESSA:

It is intolerable to hear such a good man speak like this;

410

He would never have said such things before.

[Antistrophe c]

AJAX:

Oh!

Paths of the rushing sea,

Beach coves, and wooded coastline,

Too long, too long have you kept me

Lingering here at Troy.

415

But no more will you know me,

Not living and breathing anymore,

Of this the sane man is sure.

405–6: These lines may be dubious; they do not seem to correspond to the meter of the antistrophe, and the words themselves make little sense without emendation. We follow Jebb and Stanford in our translation. Garvie translates: “If these things perish, my friends, along with these creatures near me” (1998). The sense of the line seems to be that Ajax is comparing his own situation with the carnage around him.

River Scamander,
 420 Flowing beside us,
 Kind to the Greeks,
 You'll see this man no more.
 But I'll make a claim:
 Troy never saw a better man
 425 From the army of the Greeks.
 Now I stand here
 Disgraced.

CHORUS:

I should stop you from saying these things, but how?
 You're so deep in despair.

AJAX:

430 AIAI! Who would have thought the name
 I was given would sound out my misery?
 AIAS! AJAX! AGONY!
Ajax means agony, so much agony!
 My father came to this land of Ida
 435 And returned home covered in glory,
 Winning the army's greatest prize.
 And what of me, his son, who followed
 Him to Troy? Am I a lesser man?
 Did I not do enough? Yet I will die,
 440 Dishonored by all the Greeks.
 One thing I know for sure:
 If Achilles had lived to award
 His arms to the strongest and best of men,
 No other would have had them but me.
 445 But the sons of Atreus handed them over
 To that schemer, ignoring my strengths.
 If my eyes had not been deluded
 And my mind diverted from its intent,

430–1: "The name I was given"—Ajax was one of the ten eponymous heroes of the Athenian tribes.

432–3: a free translation of these lines. The Greek has: "Now I can say *ai ai* twice or three times, such is the depth of my pain." See note on line 370.

434–6: "My father . . . prize"—Telamon battled the Trojans alongside Heracles. For bravery he was given Hesione, King Laomedon of Troy's daughter. Hesione was the mother of Teucer.

They would not have lived to rig any more votes.
 But the unconquerable gorgon-eyed daughter of Zeus 450
 Deceived me as I was about to strike
 And sent me reeling into madness,
 To be drenched in the blood of these beasts.
 Now I am ridiculed by the men who escaped me.
 This was not my plan, but when a god strikes, 455
 Even the coward can outdo the better man.
 And what now? The gods revile me,
 That is certain. I am despised by the Greeks
 And hated by this plain of Troy.
 Should I go home? Abandon these moorings? 460
 Sail the Aegean and desert the sons of Atreus?
 Then how could I face my father, Telamon?
 He was crowned with the greatest glory;
 I will return from Troy having earned nothing.
 How could he stand to even look at me? 465
 It would be unthinkable.
 Should I attack Troy? Storm the walls
 Single-handedly, take the enemy on,
 And give my life for one last great deed?
 No, that would only please the sons of Atreus; 470
 I won't do that. I must find some way
 To prove to my father that his son is not a coward.
 It is dishonorable for a man to crave a long life
 When he endures nothing but endless miseries.
 What pleasure is there in living day after day, 475
 Edging slowly back and forth toward death?
 Anyone who warms their heart with the glow
 Of flickering hope is worth nothing at all.
 The noble man should either live with honor
 Or die with honor. That's all there is to be said. 480

CHORUS:

Ajax, no one can question what you've said;
 You've spoken your mind, but you must relent.
 Put these kinds of thoughts aside—
 Let your friends change your mind.

TECMESSA:

Ajax, my lord, the force of destiny 485
 Can be the harshest evil we ever endure.

I was the daughter of a free man,
 A powerful and wealthy Phrygian,
 And now I am a slave. So the gods
 490 Ordained, so your hands enslaved me.
 Now I share your life, bound to you in loyalty.
 I beg you, by Zeus, guardian of our hearth,
 By the bed that has made us one,
 Don't leave me to endure the abuse
 495 Of your enemies or abandon me to a stranger.
 The day you die, leaving me alone,
 Will be the day the Greeks seize me
 And sell me and your son into slavery.
 Think of the insults that our new masters
 500 Will hurl: "See that woman doing slave's work?
 She used to share the bed of Ajax,
 The mightiest man in the army.
 To think people used to envy her!"
 So they'll say, and while I endure my fate alone,
 505 Your family will suffer your disgrace:
 The shame of your father, left grieving in bitter
 Old age; the shame of your elderly mother,
 Who has offered so many prayers
 To the gods to bring you home safely.
 510 And have pity for your son, my lord,
 Left alone with nobody to raise him,
 His life spent in the care of unfeeling
 Guardians. He will never know your love;
 When you die we inherit only sorrow.
 515 You are all I have left, nothing else.
 You devastated my country with your spear,
 And fate dragged my parents to Hades.
 Where would I go if I lost you?
 How would I live? I depend on you.
 520 Am I forgotten? A true man cherishes
 The memory of happy times
 And repays kindness with kindness.
 But the man who neglects his blessings
 Can no longer call himself noble.

CHORUS:

525 Ajax, if you feel any pity for her,
 As I do, you would commend her words.

AJAX:

She will be commended
When she is obedient to me.

TECMESSA:

Oh, Ajax, I will do anything you ask.

AJAX:

Then bring me my son. I want to see him.

530

TECMESSA:

I sent him away. I was so afraid.

AJAX:

When I was afflicted—is that what you mean?

TECMESSA:

I thought you might kill the poor child.

AJAX:

A fitting addition to my fate.

TECMESSA:

At least I was able to prevent that.

535

AJAX:

You did well. I commend your foresight.

TECMESSA:

Then how can I help you now?

AJAX:

Let me speak to him, face-to-face.

TECMESSA:

He's with a servant nearby.

540

AJAX:

Then why delay? Bring him here.

TECMESSA:

(Calling to Eurysaces.)

My child, your father is calling you.
Have the servant bring him here.

AJAX:

Is he coming? Did he hear you call?

TECMESSA:

The servant is bringing him now.

(Enter the Servant with Eurysaces through the stage right wing.)

AJAX:

545 Lift him up, up to me here. The sight
Of fresh blood will not frighten him—
Not if he is truly his father's son.
Now he must begin to be broken in
And hardened to the ways of his father.
550 My son, I wish you a happier life than me,
Though I hope you become like your father;
Then you'll never know baseness.
I envy you, oblivious to all this misery;
Life is sweet when it is innocent,
555 Before you know pleasure or pain.
But when you reach that age, be sure you show
My enemies that you are your father's son.
Until then, be nourished by the soft breezes
That feed your soul, and be a joy to your mother.
560 The Greeks will never try to harm you,
Even though I will not be with you;
Teucer will stand as your guardian
When he returns from hunting the enemy.
He will devote himself to your care.
565 My shield-bearing warriors,
Seafaring men, you must also
Share in this obligation: Tell Teucer
To take this boy home to Telamon
And my mother, Eriboea;
570 He will be a comfort in their old age

545–64: See endnote.

565–76: See endnote.

567–8: “Tell Teucer . . . home”—Sophocles wrote a tragedy entitled *Eurysaces*. Only one small fragment has survived. It may have told the myth of how Eurysaces became the ruler of Salamis and forced Teucer into exile.

Until they reach the halls of Hades.
 My armor must not be bargained away
 As a prize awarded to some Greek,
 Especially not the man who ruined me.
 Eurysaces, named for this spear-stopping
 Broad shield, seven ox-hides strong,
 Now, my son, you must grasp its sturdy strap.

575

(He holds up his great shield as Eurysaces takes hold of the strap.)

Bury the rest of my armor with me.
 Tecmessa, quickly, take the child.
 Shut my house. Do not mourn outside the tent;
 This is no time for women's wailings.
 Hurry! Close the doors. A good surgeon does not
 Chant spells when the wound needs a knife.

580

(Ajax begins to withdraw through the skene door on the ekkyklêma.)

CHORUS:

His urgency frightens me. I don't like
 The sound of these sharp words.

TECMESSA:

Ajax, my lord, what are you going to do?

585

AJAX:

Don't question me! Show some discretion.

TECMESSA:

My heart is breaking. I beg you, for the sake
 Of our child, by all the gods, do not betray us!

AJAX:

No more! You press me too much.
 Don't you understand? I owe the gods nothing!

590

571: This line is disputed on metrical grounds and the "strangeness of the phrase" (Jebb 1893/2004, p. 92). It is deleted in some editions. Stanford points out the alliteration in the Greek and that the line could be read as "lively" or "rapid," rather than "harsh" (1981, p. 132).

579–82: See endnote.

TECMESSA:

Don't say such things!

AJAX:

I will not listen to you.

TECMESSA:

Please hear me!

AJAX:

You have already said too much.

TECMESSA:

Because I am afraid.

AJAX:

Will you not shut us in together? Quickly!

TECMESSA:

By the gods, soften your heart!

AJAX:

You are a fool to think

595 You could teach me to change the man I am.

(Exit Ajax, Tecmessa, and Eurysaces through the skene door.)

First Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

Famous Salamis,
 Blessed isle, lapped
 By friendly seas,
 What a sight to see!
 600 But I must suffer here,
 Enduring endless months,
 Camped on the plain of Ida,

593: "Will you . . . Quickly"—Stanford notes that this line could have been addressed to attendants. In any event, Ajax, Tecmessa, and Eurysaces all exit through the *skene* door, which closes behind them, leaving the chorus alone onstage.

602: The text is uncertain here, and only a general meaning can be grasped. We follow Jebb's restoration.

Ground down by time,
 Nothing to hope for,
 Waiting for oblivion, 605
 When I'll sink down
 To Hades' gloomy depths.

[Antistrophe *a*]

Now here is Ajax
 Counted out—
 Beyond all help, 610
 Sent mad by the gods.
 The mighty warrior
 Ares sent out to war
 Retreats into lonely despair,
 Greatly distressing his friends. 615
 Everything he reached for,
 All his great glories, lost—
 Lost on the worthless sons of Atreus,
 Leaving just hostility and hate. 620

[Strophe *b*]

And what of his mother,
 Silver haired and vulnerable
 In the autumn of her years? 625
 Hearing of his madness,
 She'll howl with grief
 Sorrow after sorrow.
 Not a melancholic lament,
 Nor the nightingale's soft song, 630
 No, she'll shriek and wail,
 Scream out and beat her breasts,
 Tearing at her old white hair.

[Antistrophe *b*]

Better to hide in Hades 635
 Than suffer such sickness.
 He was one of the noblest,
 The best of all the Greeks.
 Now he's beside himself with madness.

640 This is not the man we knew.
 His poor father, he doesn't know
 The malady that has struck his son.
 The line of Aeacus has never
 Suffered such a disaster;
 645 Nothing could compare with this.

(Enter Ajax and Tecmessa through the skene door.)

AJAX:

The long and countless course of Time,
 Revealing what is hidden, then shrouding what appears.
 Anything can happen; nothing is beyond belief—
 The most solemn oath and the strongest will
 650 Can be overcome. Even I, who stood so firm,
 As hard as iron, now feel my sharp edge dulled
 By the soft words of this woman. The thought
 Of leaving her a widow among my enemies
 With a fatherless child fills me with pity.
 655 So I will go to the springs in the grasslands
 At the shore and wash away these stains—
 Purify myself and escape Athena's anger.
 I will bury this hateful weapon in a secluded place
 Deep down in the earth, never to be seen again.
 660 Let Night and Hades keep it there forever.
 Hector, my bitterest enemy, gave me this sword,
 And ever since it first came into my hand,
 I have suffered only malice from the Greeks.
 Now I know that the proverb is true:
 665 "An enemy's gift is no gift and brings no good."
 From now on I shall know to submit to the gods

643: Aeacus—the grandfather of both Ajax and Achilles, making the two men cousins. According to Pausanias (2.29.2), Aeacus was the son of Zeus and the nymph Aegina. They had two sons: Telamon, the father of Ajax, and Peleus, who also married a nymph, named Thetis. It was Thetis who bore Achilles. The chorus remind us of Ajax's close blood ties to Achilles, another important motive for his rage over the award of the arms to Odysseus.

Enter Ajax . . . through the skene door: See endnote.

665: "An enemy's gift . . . no good"—In Book 7 of the *Iliad*, Hector and Ajax fight a famous duel until sunset, when they are forced to stop.

And learn reverence for the sons of Atreus;
 They rule and we obey—how else can it be?
 Even the fiercest and most powerful forces
 Accept authority: Snow-laden winter 670
 Gives ground to abundant summer;
 Night's eternal cycle gives way to the white
 Horses of Dawn's light. Once furious winds
 Breathe softly and calm the groaning sea,
 Even invincible sleep must release its grip; 675
 Its prisoners cannot be held forever.
 Then how can we not learn restraint?
 I must. I have recently come to learn
 To hate my enemy while knowing
 That one day he may be my friend— 680
 And that I should help my friend but know
 That he may one day be my enemy.
 For us, friendship is a treacherous harbor.

All will be well.
 Tecmessa, go inside and pray to the gods: 685
 Ask them to grant me what my heart desires.

(Exit Tecmessa through the skene door.)

My comrades, do as she does; honor my wishes.
 And when Teucer comes you must tell him this:
 He must attend to me and care for all of you.
 Now I will leave you and go where I must. 690
 Please do what I ask; although I suffer now,
 Soon enough you will hear that I have found peace.

(Exit Ajax through the stage right wing.)

Equally matched as fighters, they exchange gifts before they part. Reciprocal gift giving was fundamental to Homeric warrior values, but this adage suggests that a gift from an enemy will always bring ill. Ajax gave Hector his belt, which Achilles used to drag Hector around Troy (see line 1032). Hector gave his sword, which will have tragic consequences for Ajax.

679–82: “To hate my enemy . . . be my enemy”—This idea of fluctuating loyalty, which will be central to Odysseus’ debate with Agamemnon later in the play, is abhorrent to a steadfast, immovable man like Ajax.

Second Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

Joy shakes me! Soaring delight!
 O Pan! Pan! Pan!
 695 Sea-scudding Pan,
 Come from the rocky crags
 Of snow-capped Cyllene!
 Lord of divine dances,
 Dance wildly with me,
 700 Mysian steps, Knossian leaps!
 Lead us in your dance!
 Apollo, lord of Delos,
 Cross the Icarian Sea,
 Come with kindness;
 705 Appear to me!

[Antistrophe *a*]

Ares has cleared my eyes
 Of dark despair. Yes! Yes!
 O Zeus, now the bright light
 Of day can shine down again
 710 On our swift sea-going ships!

695: Pan—the Arcadian god of the wild who was half man and half goat. He is invoked here as a god of rustic pleasure, song, and dance and a deity associated with Salamis. Pan had cult associations with the tiny island of Psyttaleia off the coast of Salamis.

697: Cyllene—a peak of Arcadia in the Northern Peloponnesus, sacred to Pan and the mythological birthplace of his father, Hermes.

700: Mysia—a region in northern Asia Minor associated with Cybele, the mother goddess. Her followers, the Corybants, would perform ecstatic dances. “Knossian” refers to the dances of Crete, also famous for their exuberance and the celebration of Mother Earth figures such as Rhea. In mythology, Pan is linked to both Cybele and Rhea. Mysia was allied with Troy.

702: Apollo—a god of healing and music, born on the sacred Cycladic island of Delos. The island of Icaria lies between Delos and the coast of Turkey (ancient Asia Minor).

Ajax has put his troubles behind him
 And turned again to the gods!
 His sacrificial offering
 Will revere their sacred laws.
 Time can extinguish anything, 715
 And nothing is beyond belief—
 When against all hope Ajax has relented
 And with the sons of Atreus made his peace.

(Enter the Messenger through the stage left wing.)

MESSENGER:

Friends, I have to tell you what is happening—
 Teucer has returned from the Mysian hills; 720
 He tried to report to the generals at midcamp
 And was met by an uproar from the Greeks.
 When word spread that he was approaching,
 A huge crowd gathered and surrounded him,
 Hurling vicious abuse and saying, 725
 "The maniac's brother!
 The traitor's friend!"
 They cried that he would not escape,
 And some even called for death by stoning.
 Hands went to sword hilts, blades flashed, 730
 The crowd rose to fever pitch until, just in time,
 The elders intervened and talked them down.
 But where is Ajax? I have to speak to him;
 I must tell him what is happening.

CHORUS:

He's not here. He left us, 735
 A changed man with new purpose.

MESSENGER:

Oh no!
 Then I was sent too late;
 I didn't get here in time.

CHORUS:

What is it? What did you fail to do? 740

MESSENGER:

Teucer was adamant that Ajax should not
 Leave his tent until he could get here.

CHORUS:

He has gone, but all is well now;
His anger's passed, and he's setting things right with the gods.

MESSENGER:

745 You have no idea what you are saying,
Not if the prophecies of Calchas are true.

CHORUS:

What prophecies? What do you know about this?

MESSENGER:

I know what I saw and heard—I was there.
The commanders were sitting in council
750 When Calchas drew away from the circle,
Out of sight of the sons of Atreus.
He took Teucer kindly by the hand
And warned him that if he ever wanted to see
Ajax alive again, he must do everything
755 In his power to keep him inside today.
He said that Athena's anger
Will last only for this one day.
The prophet said that the body
Falls when it grows too great,
760 Collapsing under god-sent weight.
As with men who forget they're human
And have ideas above their station,
He was foolish when he left home.
His father offered him sound advice:
765 "Seek out victory on the field of battle,
And win with the help of the gods."
But Ajax scoffed and said, "Father, anyone
Can do well with the help of the gods;
I will make a name for myself!"
770 That was the measure of his boasting.
And when Athena was urging him on,
Forcing his hand against his enemy,
He answered her with the kind of words
That no man should ever speak to a god:
775 "Go help the other Greeks! The line

746: Calchas—the prophet of the Greek army at Troy.

Will never be breached where Ajax stands."
 It's those kinds of words that brought down
 Athena's anger, because he dared to think he was
 More than just a man. But there is still a chance
 That he can be saved—with the help of the gods! 780
 That's what the prophet said, and then Teucer called me
 Over to where he was sitting and gave me
 These instructions to give to you.
 If we fail, Ajax will die, or Calchas is no prophet.

CHORUS: (*Calling to Tecmessa.*)

Tecmessa, you must have been born to suffer. 785
 Come and hear the news this man brings.
 Disaster is balancing on a razor's edge.

(*Enter Tecmessa through the skene door.*)

TECMESSA:

What do you want? What now? I was finally
 Finding peace from these unending troubles. 790

CHORUS:

Listen to what this man has to say:
 It's about Ajax; it's not good news.

TECMESSA:

Speak, man! Are we still in danger?

MESSENGER:

I can't speak for you, but if Ajax is not here,
 Then I fear what might happen. 795

TECMESSA:

He left some time ago. What do you mean?

MESSENGER:

Teucer's orders are to keep Ajax in his hut
 And not leave him alone for a moment.

TECMESSA:

Where is Teucer? Can he not come and speak for himself?

MESSENGER:

He's just returned and fears for Ajax's life
 If he is allowed to go out alone.

TECMESSA:

800 Oh no! Who told him this?

MESSENGER:

The son of Thestor, Calchas, foretold
That this day will bring life or death for Ajax.

TECMESSA:

O friends, protect me from the threat of this fate.
Some of you go and find Teucer; bring him here quickly.
805 The rest of you, split up. You go west to the coves;
You, to the east: Follow his unhappy footsteps and find him!
He deceived me—I see it now. Once he cared for me;
Now he has cast me aside. O my son, what can we do?
810 I can't just stay here. I'll go myself and do all that I can.
There's no time to lose. We must hurry
If we stand any chance of saving him from death.

CHORUS:

I am ready and a man of my word.
I'll go as fast as my feet can carry me.

*(Exit Tecmessa, the Messenger, and the divided chorus offstage
via the two wings, leaving the stage empty.)*

SCENE: *An isolated place near the shore, away from the Greek camp.*

*(The skene door opens to reveal Ajax on the ekkyklêma,
holding his sword. He looks at it and then plants the hilt in the
earth.)*

AJAX:

815 The executioner is ready to do its work,
Standing where it will cut most efficiently.
To think—if a man can think at a time like this—

801: Thestor—a prophet and the son of Idmon who accompanied the Argonauts. Idmon was the son of Apollo, the god of prophecy.

The skene door opens . . . hilt in the earth: The stage and orchestra are cleared of all performers, creating a sense of solitude and silence. The door of the *skene* slowly opens, and Ajax emerges on the *ekkyklêma*, representing the secluded grove he described at lines 655–7. On the *ekkyklêma* is a preset mound where the actor can plant the sword.

That this was a gift from Hector, a token
 Of friendship from my most hated enemy.
 And now it is planted in enemy soil at Troy, 820
 Newly honed on the iron-biting whetstone;
 I've planted it firmly in the earth.
 Let it be kind. Let death come quickly.
 Everything is ready: Zeus, it's right that I call you first.
 I only ask one small thing: Send a messenger 825
 To Teucer with the news of my death.
 Let him be the one to lift me up
 After I have fallen on this freshly stained sword;
 Don't let one of my enemies find me first
 And throw me out as carrion for dogs and birds. 830
 Zeus, I ask you for this, but I also pray to Hermes,
 Guide to the Underworld, to help me fall on my sword
 Without a struggle—one quick, sharp thrust—
 Then lay me painlessly to sleep.
 I call on the immortal virgins 835
 Who feed on the sufferings of man.
 You far-treading Furies,
 Mark how I am being destroyed
 By the sons of Atreus.
 Overtake that foul pair with some horrific fate 840
 As they see me brought down by suicide;
 So might it be suicide for them when they
 Are destroyed by their nearest and dearest.
 Come, Furies, to a feast of vengeance—
 Feed on the whole army; devour them all! 845
 And you, Helios, sun god—climbing the heavens
 In your chariot—when you see my homeland,
 Pull up your golden reins and bring the news

818–9: “A token . . . enemy”—See note on line 665.

837: Furies—avengers of crimes against blood, invoked here as spirits of cruel vengeance. It is as if the blood of Ajax will be on the hands of the sons of Atreus and the Greeks. His suicide, then, may arise not so much out of hopelessness and despair as from a deep passion to inflict maximum harm on his enemies via a perverted chthonic sacrifice. This both purifies him of the blood he has shed and turns the *miasma* (pollution) on his foes.

841–3: See endnote.

Of my death to my old father and the poor woman
 850 Who raised me. Oh, my unfortunate mother!
 When she hears this news, the whole city
 Will echo with her grief-stricken cries—
 I will achieve nothing if I give way to grief.
 I must do this now, without delay.

(Ajax prepares to fall on his sword.)

855 Death! Death! Do you see me?
 I will soon be speaking to you face-to-face.
 This is that last time Helios the charioteer
 Will ever shine the light of day on me.
 O sunlight. Sacred Salamis, my home,
 860 My father's hearth and throne.
 Legendary Athens—land of my kinsmen.
 You springs and rivers that water
 This plain of Troy, you nurtured me,
 And now I take my leave of you.
 These are the last words of Ajax;
 865 Now he speaks in Hades to the dead.

(The ekkyklêma withdraws through the skene door, and the door closes. Enter Semi-Chorus 1 through the stage left wing.)

SEMI-CHORUS 1:

Trouble brings trouble and more trouble.
 Where, where?
 Where have I not looked?
 No information, nothing, anywhere.
 870 Look!
 I heard something. There!

The ekkyklêma withdraws . . . door closes: Many commentators and a scholiast's note on a later manuscript of the play suggest that the suicide was staged in full view of the audience. We think Ajax's language of withdrawal from the light and the discovery of his body at line 891 point to the exiting of the *ekkyklêma* here and not to a depiction of the act of suicide onstage. The myth of Ajax's resentful death was well known to the audience (*Odyssey* 11.540–65), and Sophocles would increase suspense by not depicting this most private of acts. Using the *ekkyklêma* here would also make it very easy to set a masked dummy on the platform for the remainder of the play.

(Enter Semi-Chorus 2 through the stage right wing.)

SEMI-CHORUS 2:

It's us, your shipmates.

SEMI-CHORUS 1:

Any news?

SEMI-CHORUS 2:

We've searched everywhere west of the ships.

SEMI-CHORUS 1:

Anything to report?

875

SEMI-CHORUS 2:

Just a lot of trouble and nothing to show for it.

SEMI-CHORUS 1:

We've been all along the eastern path, and he's not out there.

(Semi-Chorus 1 and Semi-Chorus 2 unite.)

[Strophe *a*]

CHORUS:

If only someone had seen him—
A fisherman working through the night,
A spirit from Olympus, the rivers
That flow to the Bosphorus.

880

If only they had seen that
Raging heart roaming somewhere.

885

We've been searching for so long,
And we are still so far off course.
It's too hard to imagine that we may
Never find this tormented man.

890

(Suddenly the chorus hear cries offstage.)

TECMESSA:

No! No!

878–960: Third Kommos—See note on lines 221–56.

Suddenly . . . offstage: probably from behind the door of the *skene*, a device also used by Aeschylus for the death of Agamemnon in *Agamemnon* (1343–5).

CHORUS:

What was that shout? It came from that grove, there!

TECMESSA:

Disaster!

(Enter Tecmessa through the skene door on the ekkyklêma, kneeling over the body of Ajax.)

CHORUS:

It's Tecmessa, Ajax's spear-bride,
895 Overwhelmed with grief.

TECMESSA:

All is lost—I am finished, alone. Oh, my friends!

CHORUS:

What is it?

TECMESSA:

Here is Ajax, lying here, just recently killed,
His body enveloping his planted sword.

[Strophe *b*]

CHORUS:

900 We'll never see our homes again!
Lord, you condemned us all to death:
Your own men,
Your own woman.

TECMESSA:

He did, and all that's left for us is to mourn for him.

CHORUS:

905 Who was it? Who helped him do this?

Enter Tecmessa . . . body of Ajax: Here again we think Sophocles uses the *ekkyklêma*. Aeschylus placed corpses on the *ekkyklêma* in the *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon* 1372 and *The Libation Bearers* 972). The innovation here is that the *ekkyklêma* will remain onstage until the end of the play—a physical impediment to an open-flowing stage just as Ajax's suicide creates an impediment to any resolution between Teucer and the Greeks. Note how the *skene* door is not used for entrances from this point on.

TECMESSA:

He did it himself. Look at the blade planted in the ground:
He committed suicide by falling on his own sword.

[Strophe c]

CHORUS:

How could I have been so blind
You died alone with no friend to save you. 910
I was deaf to it all, oblivious to everything—
Stupid!
Where is he? Where is adamant Ajax?
Such an ill-fated name.

TECMESSA:

No one will see him! I will envelop his body 915
In a burial shroud. No one who loved him
Could bear the sight of his blackened blood
Spewing from his nose and mouth,
Or to see his self-inflicted gaping wound.
What now? What friend will carry you? 920
Where is Teucer? He should be here
To help prepare his brother for burial.
Oh, Ajax, how far you fell, but even
Among enemies we will mourn for you.

[Antistrophe a]

CHORUS:

Finally, poor man, it finally happened— 925
Your unyielding heart
Caught up with you
And fulfilled this terrible fate.
All night and on into the day
I heard you bellow, 930
Raging passionate spite
Against the sons of Atreus.

915: “Envelop”—The same term is used to describe Ajax’s corpse wrapped around his sword at line 899. The shrouding of the corpse was performed by the closest of female relatives. Ajax’s body has not been ritually cleansed, and the chilling description of “blackened blood” here stands as a vivid metaphor for Ajax’s furious curse.

I know when all these great troubles began:
 935 The contest to be named the best of men
 And win those glorious arms.

TECMESSA:
 Why me? Why me?

CHORUS:
 I know, only genuine grief can really pierce the heart.

TECMESSA:
 Why me? Why me?

CHORUS:
 940 Cry, cry, I understand your loss;
 The man you loved is gone.

TECMESSA:
 You can only imagine my pain—I feel it.

CHORUS:
 Yes, I know.

TECMESSA:
 945 And my poor son—whose slaves will we become?
 Who will be our new master?

[Antistrophe *b*]

CHORUS:
 Oh, I know too well what unspeakable things
 The two sons of Atreus are capable of.
 We have cause for despair,
 But surely the gods will avert them.

TECMESSA:
 950 It was the gods who let this happen!

CHORUS:
 Yes, they are crushing us with a burden
 Too great to bear.

936: The meter of the Greek suggests that a word is missing here. Jebb proposes “golden” (1893/2004); Elmsley, “Greeks” (1826; in Stanford 1981, p. 181).

TECMESSA:

This agony was from the dread-goddess Athena,
Daughter of Zeus, to entertain her dear Odysseus.

[Antistrophe c]

CHORUS:

I'll bet that dark-hearted survivor 955
Is reveling in all of this,
Mocking our misery
Over the madness of Ajax.
And those two kings will join in
The laughter when they hear the news. 960

TECMESSA:

Let them laugh and revel in Ajax's misfortune.
They took him for granted when he was alive;
They'll mourn him when they need him in battle.
Stupid men, they don't know what they have until it's lost.
It doesn't matter if his death is as bitter for me 965
As it is sweet for them; it brought him contentment.
He chose to die this way; it is what he wanted.
He longed for death. Why then should they mock him?
His death concerns the gods, not them—certainly
Not them. Let Odysseus delight in his empty jeers. 970
For them, Ajax is no more; to me, he has left sorrow,
Grief, and emptiness.
He is gone.

(Enter Teucer through the stage left wing.)

TEUCER:

Oh no!

CHORUS:

Quiet! I think I hear Teucer's voice 975
Sounding like our sorrow.

955: "That dark-hearted survivor"—Odysseus.

Enter Teucer . . . left wing: Which of the three actors played Teucer? Most scholars assume it was the actor who played Ajax. However, it is also possible that this was the second actor, who played Athena and the Messenger. The actor who played Ajax could then return as Agamemnon.

TEUCER:

Ajax, my brother! Let me see you!
These rumors cannot be true!

CHORUS:

It's true, Teucer: Ajax is dead.

TEUCER:

980 No! I cannot bear this!

CHORUS:

It has happened.

TEUCER:

Oh, misery, misery.

CHORUS:

Mourn for him.

TEUCER:

So suddenly . . .

CHORUS:

Yes, Teucer.

TEUCER:

I despair. But what of his son?
Is he still here at Troy? I must find him.

CHORUS:

He's in camp, alone.

TEUCER:

985 Tecmessa, bring him here
As quickly as possible, before some enemy
Takes him from us, like a lion cub snatched
From his mother. Go now! Men are quick
To take advantage of the dead.

(Exit Tecmessa through the stage right wing.)

CHORUS:

990 This is fitting, Teucer. Before Ajax died,
He gave instructions that you should care for his child.

TEUCER:

I have never seen anything that hurt

Me more than this. I have never trodden
 A more painful path than the one
 That led me here. I was looking 995
 For you when I learned your fate.
 A rumor flashed through the Greek
 Camp as if sent by a god:
 "Ajax is dead!" When I heard it myself,
 I groaned in anguish, but to see you 1000
 Here, like this . . . breaks my heart.
 Uncover him; let me see the worst.

(The shroud is removed from Ajax's head.)

Your face is so hard to look at, marked
 With harsh defiance—what a bitter harvest
 Your death has reaped for me! 1005
 Where can I go now? Where would I
 Be welcome? I who failed you when
 You needed me the most. Our father,
 Telamon, will hardly greet me with open
 Arms when I return home without you. 1010
 Has that man ever smiled, even at good news?
 He'll not be able to restrain himself;
 No insult will be spared: "Bastard son of a slave!
 Coward! Weakling! You let your brother die!"
 The brother I love. He'll accuse me of treachery 1015
 And think I planned to take advantage of your death
 By inheriting your title. You know the temper
 Of that cantankerous old man.
 He will disown me and have me banished
 From my home. He'll strip my freedom 1020
 And call me nothing but a slave.

 This is what waits at home, and here at Troy
 I have many enemies and little support—
 Probably none, now you are dead. What can I do? 1025

The shroud . . . Ajax's head: Ajax's mask may have been used here. A similar device was used in Euripides' *Bacchae* when Agavê enters holding the head of her son (1165). An empty mask that had previously been seen animated on an actor would have been a very disturbing sight.

Should I lift you from this deadly gleaming blade?
 Your killer, who took your final breath,
 You see now, even after his death,
 It was Hector who finally killed you!
 1030 Consider the destiny of these two men:
 Hector mangled to death, dragged behind
 A chariot by the belt that Ajax gave him,
 And Ajax, fallen on the sword he had from Hector.
 A Fury must have forged this blade,
 1035 And that belt was surely crafted by Hades.
 These things are all in the schemes of the gods,
 Schemes that plague all mortal men.
 I don't care if you disagree—you're entitled
 To your thoughts—but I know what I think.

CHORUS:

1040 That's enough! No more. Think how to bury him
 And what you are going to say to our enemies.
 I can see one of them coming now, no doubt
 To mock us in our misery and gloat over the dead.

TEUCER:

Who is it? Someone from the army?

CHORUS:

1045 Menelaus, the reason we all sailed here in the first place.

TEUCER:

I see him; I'd recognize *him* anywhere.

1026: "Gleaming blade"—Homer describes Hector's sword as "silver-studded" (*Iliad* 7.303).

1032: "By the belt"—In Book 22 of the *Iliad*, Achilles drags the corpse of Hector behind his chariot with leather straps. Here Sophocles describes Hector as being dragged to his death.

1045: Menelaus—the king of Sparta, the younger brother of Agamemnon, and the abandoned husband of Helen. In Homer's *Iliad*, he is depicted as a willing but lesser warrior than many of the other Greeks, although he does the bulk of the fighting in Book 17 and defeats Paris in single combat in Book 3 (340–82). In Book 7, Menelaus is prevented from facing Hector, who would have overpowered him, and Ajax fights in his place.

1046: "I'd recognize *him*"—perhaps because Homer describes Menelaus as *Xanthos*—a redhead (*Iliad* 3.434, *Odyssey* 15.133). Homer also describes Achilles as having red or fair hair (*Iliad* 1.197, 23.141).

(Enter Menelaus through the stage left wing.)

MENELAUS:

You there! That corpse is not to be moved!
There is to be no burial. Leave it!

TEUCER:

You're wasting your breath with an order like that.

MENELAUS:

I have made my decision, as has the commander of the army. 1050

TEUCER:

What is the reason for this?

MENELAUS:

This reason: When we brought this man with us from home,
We assumed that he would be a friend and ally to the Greeks;
Instead he has proved a far deadlier enemy than any Trojan. 1055
He planned to murder the entire army in a night attack,
Turning his spear against us. If one of the gods had not
Stifled this attempt, then his fate would have been ours,
And we would now be lying dead in shame while he lived.
But luckily a god averted his outrageous assault
And turned him on sheep and cattle instead. 1060
So you see, there is no one powerful enough
To make him a tomb and perform the burial-rites.
No, he'll be thrown out on the yellow sands,
Where the seagulls can peck at his carcass. 1065
Don't you dare lose your temper and resort
To force. If we were not able to control him
While he lived, then we will be sure to rule
Him in death. He never listened to a word
I said, but he is in our hands now, 1070
Whether you like it or not.

It is a sure sign of baseness when a commoner
Decides to ignore those who rule over him;

1062: Menelaus wants to prevent any kind of hero cult from developing around the tomb of Ajax. Ajax's death was an act of willful defiance against the authority of the sons of Atreus. He was worshiped as a hero in Athens with a monument in the Agora and the Temple of Ajax on the island of Salamis (Pausanias 1.35.3).

1075 Law and order cannot flourish in a city
 Where there is no place for fear.
 A military camp cannot be run effectively
 Without the defenses of respect and fear,
 And any man, however great he grows,
 Can always be felled by the slightest blow.
 1080 A man will be secure only if he knows
 Both how to fear and how to feel shame.
 The state that tolerates insubordination and lets
 Men do as they please might sail on fair winds
 For a while, but soon enough she's sure to sink.
 1085 In the established order I feel that fear has its place.
 Don't think that we are free to please ourselves
 Without paying the price in pain; these things
 Have a way of creeping back in on us.
 This man was once full of hotheaded insolence,
 But now it is my turn to think great thoughts.
 1090 I am warning you: Do not try to bury him,
 Or you'll be needing someone to bury you.

CHORUS:

Menelaus, what you've said makes a lot of sense,
 But don't disgrace yourself by insulting the dead.

TEUCER:

1095 Men, no wonder the commoners turn out so badly
 When the nobility say so many stupid things.
 I don't think I heard you the first time.
 Did I hear you say that *you* brought Ajax here
 And that *you* made him an ally to the Greeks?
 I thought he sailed here of his own free will,
 1100 His own master. Who put you in charge?
 What authority placed you over the men
 He brought with him? You came
 As the commander of the Spartans,
 Not our commander. Where is it laid down
 1105 That you outrank him any more than he should
 Outrank you? You sailed here as a subordinate officer,
 Not the general—least of all over Ajax.
 Go away and lord it over your own men;
 Bully them with your arrogant lectures.
 1110 As for Ajax, whatever you or your brother says,

I will bury him as is right. I'm not scared.
 He didn't go to war for the sake of your wife
 Like those poor wretches who toil under you;
 He came to keep the oath he swore, not for you.
 He would never listen to a nobody like you. 1115
 Come back with some more men and the "big chief"
 Himself; make as much noise as you like—
 A man like you I'll hardly even notice.

CHORUS:

Again, such strong words. In the middle of all
 These troubles, right or wrong, hard words hurt.

MENELAUS:

The Bowman certainly has more than a little pride. 1120

TEUCER:

There's nothing common about the skill I possess.

MENELAUS:

I wonder if you'd boast like that with a shield on your arm.

TEUCER:

I don't need a shield to match you.

MENELAUS:

What terrifying boldness from such a sharp tongue.

TEUCER:

I've every reason to be bold; I'm in the right! 1125

MENELAUS:

How is it right that my murderer should be honored?

TEUCER:

Murderer? Then it's a miracle! You have risen from the dead.

MENELAUS:

I was saved by a god; he would have killed me.

1114: "The oath he swore"—All of Helen's suitors, including Ajax, swore an oath to her father, Tyndareos, to uphold her marriage to Menelaus.

1120-2: Being an archer and fighting from a distance was considered less meritorious than serving as a heavily armed spearman in close-quarters combat.

TEUCER:

If the gods saved you, then don't dishonor the gods.

MENELAUS:

1130 I would never belittle divine law.

TEUCER:

Yet you forbid the proper burial of the dead.

MENELAUS:

It is not appropriate to bury the enemy.

TEUCER:

Did Ajax ever declare himself your enemy?

MENELAUS:

He hated me as much as I hated him. You know that.

TEUCER:

1135 He knew that you cheated him by fixing the vote.

MENELAUS:

Not me; the judges were responsible for his downfall.

TEUCER:

You could secretly make any evil look good.

MENELAUS:

Somebody will suffer for these words.

TEUCER:

Not as much as the suffering we will inflict.

MENELAUS:

1140 Hear me: This man will not be buried.

TEUCER:

No, you hear me: He *will* be buried.

1132: "The enemy"—*Polemios* here means "enemy of war." Menelaus claims that the Greeks should not bury a dead enemy, but Teucer suggests that Ajax was the personal enemy of the men who wronged him, not an enemy of the state.

1135–6: "Fixing the vote . . . the judges were responsible"—Sophocles envisions the decision about the disposition of Achilles' arms as having transpired in a way analogous to that of a verdict reached in an Athenian court; the chiefs acted as both judges and jurors and cast their votes into an urn.

MENELAUS:

I knew a man like you once, a brave talker;
 He ordered his crew to sail through rough seas.
 But where was his big voice when the storm hit?
 He cowered under a blanket and let his crew 1145
 Walk all over him. The same goes for you
 With your angry mouth. A great storm
 Is gathering quickly from a solitary cloud
 And will drown out your noisy bluster.

TEUCER:

And you remind me of a man I knew, 1150
 A fool who laughed at his friends' troubles.
 Another man, someone very much like me,
 Looked him right in the eye and told him this:
 "You should never insult the dead, or you
 Will surely suffer for it." And he spoke 1155
 This warning right to this stupid man's face.
 But *surely* that same man is standing here now.
 Have I made my point, or are you confused?

MENELAUS:

I'm not going to stay here and lower myself into arguing
 With you when I have the power to compel you by force. 1160

TEUCER:

Then go! It's a far worse disgrace to be forced
 To listen to the empty ranting of a fool!

(Exit Menelaus through the stage left wing.)

CHORUS:

This quarrel is going to turn very bad.
 Teucer, quickly dig out a grave for him
 So he will have a final resting place 1165
 In a dark tomb, a monument,
 Where he will always be remembered.

(Enter Tecmessa and Eurysaces through the stage right wing.)

Enter Tecmessa . . . right wing: A nonspeaking performer now plays Tecmessa, freeing up the actor who formerly held the role to play Menelaus and Odysseus.

TEUCER:

Look, here comes Ajax's wife and son.
 They have come at the right time to help
 1170 With the arrangements for the burial.

(To Eurysaces.)

Come here, my boy, stand by your father,
 And lay your hand on him as a suppliant;
 Kneel down and pray for protection.
 Take these locks of hair—first mine, then hers,
 1175 And thirdly yours—the suppliant's fortune.
 If anyone from the army tries to drag you
 From his body, let him meet an evil end
 To match his evil deed. Let him die,
 Exiled and unburied, his future generations
 1180 Rooted up and cut down just as I cut this hair.
 Take it; keep it safe. Let no one move you.
 Kneel down here and hold him tight.

(To the chorus.)

You weep like women. Act like men and protect him
 Until I return from preparing his forbidden grave.

(Exit Teucer through the stage left wing.)

Third Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

1185 When will it all end?
 How many more restless years
 Of never-ending pain,
 Fighting for survival?
 1190 The plain of Troy is strewn with
 The sorrow and shame of Greece.

1180: Laying a lock of hair on a relative's grave was a mark of respect and remembrance of the dead. Orestes does the same thing in *Electra* (52–4).

[Antistrophe *a*]

He should have been hurled into infinity
 Or dragged down to Hades—
 That man, who showed us all
 The detestable weapons of war. 1195
 He invented pain after pain;
 He taught us self-destruction.

[Strophe *b*]

When did he ever give me a garland,
 A cup overflowing with wine? 1200
 Or let me hear the sound of sweet music
 And grace my unlucky life
 With at least a good night's sleep?
 Or let me feel love, know love? 1205
 All I have is my hard bedroll
 And the damp ground to rot my hair,
 Always reminding me that I am still
 Here—in this damned land of Troy! 1210

[Antistrophe *b*]

Ajax always shielded us
 From the terrors in the night
 And the enemy's spears.
 Now he is the sacrifice
 To a despicable fate. 1215
 What happiness, what happiness is left?
 I'd give anything
 To sail by Cape Sounion, past
 That lovely wooded headland, 1220
 To see sacred Athens once again!

(Enter Teucer through the stage left wing.)

1219: Cape Sounion—the promontory to the southeast of Athens that juts out into the Aegean Sea where the remains of the magnificent Temple of Poseidon can still be seen today. It's a beacon for all Athenians returning home from sea.

TEUCER:

Stand to! The commander Agamemnon
 Is on his way here now. I came as fast as I could;
 1225 Nothing will stop him unleashing his abuse.

(Enter Agamemnon through the stage left wing.)

AGAMEMNON:

You, I have been told that you have dared to open
 Your mouth and defy us and that you have not
 Been punished—you, whose mother was a slave.
 Imagine, if you were born of a noble family,
 The arrogant speeches you would have made
 1230 And the conceited strutting about that we would endure.
 And now you, a nobody, are defending a nobody.
 I have heard that you claim that my brother and I
 Are not the rightful commanders of the Greeks
 On land or sea, that you owe us no allegiance,
 1235 And that Ajax sailed here of his own accord!
 I have never heard such insults from a slave.
 And who is this man you are shouting about?
 Where has he been and what has he done that I have not?
 Have the Greeks no other man than him?
 1240 It seems that the contest for the arms of Achilles
 Will cost us dearly if a man like Teucer
 Can accuse us of fraud. You are obviously
 Not content to accept defeat or the clear verdict
 Of the majority. Instead you spread slander
 1245 And devise plots to stab us in the back—
 All because you have run out of luck!
 If we did things your way, there would be no law.
 Would you have us punish the rightful winners
 And bring the stragglers up to the front?

1223: Agamemnon—the king of Mycenae or, in some myths, Argos; supreme commander of all the Greek forces at Troy; and the older brother of Menelaus. The actor who played Ajax may have undertaken this role. Such casting would make sense considering the vocal qualities demanded by the two roles.

1227: “You, whose mother”—Teucer’s mother was Hesione, a Trojan princess who was awarded to Telamon by Heracles after the first Greek expedition against Troy.

No, I think not. Broad-shouldered, brawny men 1250
 Are not the most dependable; it is the clear thinker
 Who succeeds. A big-boned ox needs only
 A small whip to keep him on a straight path.
 I think you might benefit from the same treatment
 If you do not learn some common sense! 1255
 The man you defend is dead and gone,
 Nothing but a shadow, and yet you will not
 Hold your tongue or show any restraint.
 If you feel you have a case to plead before us,
 Then remember your origins and your status; 1260
 Find a free man who is willing to speak for you.
 I won't listen to you anymore. I can't even
 Understand your babbling foreign tongue.

CHORUS:

I wish that you would both restrain yourselves;
 That is the best advice anyone could offer. 1265

TEUCER:

Gratitude certainly doesn't last long, does it?
 It soon forgets the dead and turns traitor. This man
 Can't even find a single word to honor your memory.
 Ajax, here is the man you fought for, the man you
 Put your life under the spear for, time and time again. 1270
 It has all been thrown away. It was all for nothing.
 You, with your endless long-winded speeches,
 Have you forgotten the time when you were penned in
 Behind our ramparts and thought the war was lost?
 Who saved you single-handedly when the flames reached 1275
 The sterns of our ships and flashed up on the decks
 And Hector stormed our defenses and bore down
 On our ships? Who averted that disaster?
 He did, the man who, as you said, has never been
 Anywhere or done anything that you have not. 1280
 What do you think: Did he do his duty on that day?
 He volunteered to face Hector in single combat
 Of his own free will, not because he was ordered.

1275–8: “Who saved you . . . disaster?”—Homer depicts Ajax single-handedly defending the Greek ships from a Trojan attack in Book 15 of the *Iliad*.

1285 When it came time to draw lots, he didn't coat
 His ballot with mud to make it heavy but ensured
 It would be the first to leap from that crested helmet.
 That is what this man did, and I was by his side.
 Yes, me, whose mother was a barbarian slave!
 1290 How dare a man like you speak to me like that?
 Don't you know that your grandfather was Pelops,
 A Phrygian, a barbarian foreigner? And his son,
 Atreus, your very own father, he served up
 That foul banquet of his own brother's children!
 1295 Your own mother was from Crete, and when
 Her father caught her in bed with a slave,
 He condemned her to death and decided
 To turn her into food for the poor fishes!
 Well, that's your family—how dare *you* insult mine.
 1300 I am the son of Telamon, and my mother was his prize
 For his bravery in the field. She was a royal, the daughter
 Of King Laomedon, and this choicest flower was given

1284–6: “When it came . . . helmet”—In Book 7 of the *Iliad*, Hector challenges any Greek to face him. Nestor recommends that they draw lots to choose a champion, and the lot of Ajax jumps out of the helmet. It was at the culmination of this fight that Ajax and Hector exchanged gifts.

1291: Pelops—the son of Tantalus, the king of Sipylus, a territory in Asia Minor between Phrygia and Lydia. Pelops came to Greece and earned the hand of Hippodamia after winning a chariot race by bribing the rival charioteer to loosen his linchpins. For this, Pelops was cursed.

1294: “That foul banquet”—Atreus invited his exiled brother Thyestes and Thyestes' children to a feast of reconciliation at his house in Argos. But Atreus killed the children (all except Aegisthus) and served their remains to his brother as a meal, which Thyestes unknowingly ate. When Thyestes found this out, he cursed the house of Atreus. See House of Pelops Family Tree, p. xlii.

1295–8: “Your own mother . . . fishes!”—Agamemnon's mother was Aerope, the daughter of the Cretan king Catreus. When Catreus discovered her in bed with a slave he sent her to Nauplius, the king of Euboea, and told him to drown her. Nauplius spared her, and she married Atreus. In other myths, she has an affair with Thyestes, causing the rift between Atreus and Thyestes.

1302: Laomedon—the former king of Troy and the father of both Priam and Hesione.

To my father by none other than Heracles himself!
 I am a noble man, born of two noble parents, and I
 Will do everything to defend my brother from disgrace. 1305
 How can you look at him lying there and not feel shame
 That he has not received a proper burial?
 If you insist on casting him out, then you will have to
 Cast us out as well—three corpses will lie with him.
 I would rather die fighting for the honor of this man 1310
 Than throw my life away fighting for your wife—
 Or should I say the wife of your brother?
 I warn you, for your own sake: Don't even think
 About laying a hand on me, or you'll wish you had
 Stayed a coward rather than tried to challenge me. 1315

(Enter Odysseus through the stage left wing.)

CHORUS:

Odysseus, you are just in time if you've come
 To settle this quarrel, not make it worse.

ODYSSEUS:

What is happening here? I heard the sons of Atreus
 Shouting over the corpse of this brave man.

AGAMEMNON:

Yes, Odysseus, you should have heard what kind 1320
 Of despicable words we endured from this man.

ODYSSEUS:

What did he say? Insults are understandable
 When a man has been insulted himself.

AGAMEMNON:

I said some strong words—nothing less than he deserved.

ODYSSEUS:

But what has he done? Has he harmed you? 1325

AGAMEMNON:

He says he will not allow this corpse to go unburied
 Despite my explicit orders to the contrary.

ODYSSEUS:

Will you let a friend speak candidly
 And still let us pull together?

AGAMEMNON:

1330 Of course. I've not taken leave of my senses;
I consider you my greatest friend of all the Greeks.

ODYSSEUS:

Then listen, for the sake of the gods:
Don't be so ruthless and let this man
Be cast out and lie unburied.
1335 Control your temper, and don't let
Brutality born of hatred trample justice.
He was my enemy, too, the man I hated most
After I won the arms of Achilles, but even so
I cannot rightly begrudge him his due honors.
1340 I have to admit, he was the best fighter of all of us
Who sailed to Troy, except perhaps Achilles.
It is not right that you treat him with such contempt;
You are not hurting him, but the laws of the gods.
To dishonor a brave man in death is wrong,
1345 Even if you hate him with all your heart.

AGAMEMNON:

So you, Odysseus, take his side against me?

ODYSSEUS:

Yes, but when it was right to hate him, he was my enemy.

AGAMEMNON:

Then why not dominate him now that he's dead?

ODYSSEUS:

There's no joy, son of Atreus, in such a victory.

AGAMEMNON:

1350 It is not easy for a king to learn reverence.

ODYSSEUS:

But he can accept the good advice of a true friend.

1351: Odysseus understands that in death Ajax no longer has any power as an enemy unless it is given him by the living. Odysseus also knows that Agamemnon will be guilty of an impious act against the gods if Ajax is not buried. Yet Odysseus must allow Agamemnon to save face and retain the semblance of control.

AGAMEMNON:

A loyal man should respect his superiors!

ODYSSEUS:

Stop! You win respect by deferring to your friends.

AGAMEMNON:

Remember what kind of man you are helping.

ODYSSEUS:

He was my enemy, but he was also a noble man.

1355

AGAMEMNON:

How can you have such high regard for a dead enemy?

ODYSSEUS:

His excellence denies hatred.

AGAMEMNON:

Such men are volatile and dangerous.

ODYSSEUS:

A friend today could always be a foe tomorrow.

AGAMEMNON:

Would you want such a friend?

1360

ODYSSEUS:

Not one with such an obstinate spirit.

AGAMEMNON:

Do you want us to be called cowards?

ODYSSEUS:

No, I want all the Greeks to know you are men of justice.

AGAMEMNON:

So do you think I should let this man be buried?

ODYSSEUS:

Yes. After all, someday I'll also need to be buried.

1365

AGAMEMNON:

Ah, I see, everyone is just out for himself.

ODYSSEUS:

Who else should I serve first if not myself?

AGAMEMNON:

It must be known that it was your doing, not mine.

ODYSSEUS:

Whatever you want, it will still show your generosity.

AGAMEMNON:

1370 Know this: I would do much more for you,
But I still hate him and will forever,
Whether on earth or in the Underworld.
You can do what you like.

(Exit Agamemnon through the stage left wing.)

CHORUS:

1375 Odysseus, only a fool would say
That you are not the wisest of men.

ODYSSEUS:

1380 Let Teucer know this: From now on I am as much
His friend as I was once his enemy. I would like
To help in the burial of the dead; I'll share the work
So that every service we owe to this noblest
Of men will be done correctly.

TEUCER:

Noble Odysseus, I can only praise you for your kindness.
You have proven me wrong; you were his greatest enemy
Out of all the Greeks, and yet you alone defended him
And offered to help. Though you outlived him,
1385 You refused to dishonor him in death—
Not like that lunatic commander and his brother
Who came here to shamefully cast him out unburied.
I hope the Lord of the Skies, who rules us from above,
The remembering Fury, and all-fulfilling Justice
1390 Will bring down destruction on those evil men
Who tried to treat my brother so shamefully.
Odysseus, son of venerable Laertes,
I am reluctant to let you help with the burial
And touch the body; I do not want to offend the dead.
1395 But join with us in all the other rites,

1393–4: “I am reluctant . . . the dead”—The preparation of the body for burial and cleansing of wounds was performed by the closest relatives.

And we will ensure that anyone who comes
 From the Greek army will be more than welcome;
 I will ensure that everything is done correctly.
 Odysseus, you have been a good friend to us today.

ODYSSEUS:

I would offer to participate, 1400
 But I understand your decision. I'll go.

(Exit Odysseus through the stage left wing.)

TEUCER:

Come on! We've waited long enough.
 Some of you hollow him out a grave,
 Set the tripod over the fire,
 Mount the cauldron, 1405
 And prepare the water
 For the sacred cleansing rites.
 And fetch the armor from his tent
 That he once wore behind his shield.

(To Eurysaces.)

Come here, my boy— 1410
 With all your might take hold
 Of your father and help me lift him.
 Be gentle—dark blood still flows from his veins.
 Come now, you who called yourselves his friends;
 Come one last time to serve this noblest of men. 1415

CHORUS:

Men can only understand what they see.
 We can never predict the future;
 We can never know what lies in store. 1420

*(The ekkyklêma carrying the body of Ajax withdraws
 through the skene door and is followed by Teucer, Tecmessa,
 and Eurysaces. The chorus exit through the stage right wing.)*

—END—

Women of Trachis

Women of Trachis: Cast of Characters

DEIÁNEIRA	wife of Heracles, living as a refugee in Trachis while Heracles is completing his labors
NURSE	an old household retainer, a slave
HYLLUS	a grown son of Heracles and Deiáneira
CHORUS	of young, unmarried women of Trachis
MESSENGER	from Trachis
LICHAS	Heracles' official messenger, a herald
OLD MAN	probably a doctor
HERACLES	the hero who has recently completed his labors

Nonspeaking Roles

IOLÊ	Heracles' latest trophy, daughter of Eurytus (king of Oechalia, a city on Euboea, the long island north of Athens)
GUARDS	for the procession bringing Iolê
MEMBERS OF HERACLES' MERCENARY ARMY	

Casting

In the original production at the Theatre of Dionysus, the division of roles among the three speaking actors may have been as follows:

1. Deiáneira, Heracles
2. Hyllus, Lichas
3. Nurse, Messenger, Old Man

Women of Trachis

SCENE: *The stage shows the front of the house in Trachis where Deianeira and her family are living as guests. In the center are two great doors leading into the house. The time is early morning.*

(Enter Deianeira through the great doors, followed by the Nurse.)

DEIÁNEIRA:

People say—and they have been repeating this for ages—
That you'll never know for sure whether your life
Is good or bad until it ends in death. That's the human way.
But not for me, not for my life. No need to go down
To Hades. I know it now. My life is heavy with the weight 5
Of sorrow. Even when I was still living in Father's house—
He was Oeneus; we lived in Pleuron—I was tormented
By a courtship as nasty as any woman's in Aetolia.
I was solicited by a river, called Acheloüs.
He came in three forms to ask for me from Father: 10
He kept showing up as a bull; but at other times a snake
Would wriggle in, writhing, and that would be him.
Or he'd wear a man's belly and a bull's face. His beard
Was a dark tangle spurting out torrents of fresh water.
To be stalked by a suitor like that! I felt trapped 15
And miserable. So I prayed every day that I might die
Before I ever had to go to bed with him.
But eventually, to my delight, there came a famous man,
The son of Zeus and Alcmene, who took him on,
Fought him, won the contest, set me free. 20
How he brought this labor off I cannot say.

7: Oeneus—king in Pleuron, which is located on the north side of the Gulf of Calydon, west of the Gulf of Corinth. Aetolia is a mountainous region of western Greece. See Sophoclean Geography.

9: Acheloüs River—the greatest river in Greece, bounding Aetolia to the west; prominent in myth as a river god. See Sophoclean Geography.

19: "The son of Zeus and Alcmene"—Heracles.

Find a beggar at the hearth, anyone who was there
 And who was not paralyzed with fear—he'd tell the tale.
 But I was terror stricken. I was afraid
 25 That my beauty would someday be a source of pain.
 But the end of the contest—thanks to Zeus—was lovely.
 Well, it seemed lovely. Now I am yoked to Heracles
 As his chosen bedmate, and I feed fear upon fear
 For him, in constant anxiety. Each night brings on
 30 The pain, and the next night takes it and sends it away.
 Then we had children, and he, for goodness' sake,
 Was like a farmer who has a remote field
 That he sees once at seed time and again at harvest.
 The man had that sort of career—it sent him home,
 35 And then away from home, in constant service to Someone.
 And now that he's come through these tests at last
 I am more tormented than ever.
 From the time he killed mighty Iphitus
 We have been here in Trachis, uprooted,
 40 Staying as guests of a foreigner, while *he*
 Is living no-one-knows-where. All I know
 Is the pain that he hit me with when he went away.
 I am almost certain something terrible has happened to him.
 It's been quite a long time—ten months,
 45 And then five more—and I still haven't heard from him.
 Yes, it's something really terrible. That's what this means—
 This tablet that he left for me when he set out—
 Though I do keep praying it won't bring me grief.

NURSE:

My lady Deíaneira, I have been observing
 50 How much you grieve, how many tears
 You shed for Heracles when he's away.
 Now, if it's all right for free folk to take to heart
 A slave's advice, then I should tell you your duty:
 You have many sons. Why don't you send a boy
 55 To look for your husband? The obvious one

35: "Someone"—Heracles' taskmaster, Eurystheus, who commanded him to do the famous labors. See note to lines 1091–1101.

38: Iphitus—the son of Eurytus, king of the city with which Heracles is at war. For one version of the story, see line 270 ff.

To send is Hyllus, if he considers this a good time
To see how his father is doing.

(Enter Hyllus through the stage right wing.)

And here he is, so swift footed, running home.
If you think my advice suits you,
You can use it now and make use of him, too.

60

DEIÁNEIRA:

My son, O my child! I see that fine words can drop
From the lips of a woman who was born to low rank.
She is a slave, but she speaks as well as someone who is free.

HYLLUS:

What did she say? Tell me, if it can be told.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Your father's been abroad so long,
And you haven't been out asking where he is.
That brings you shame.

65

HYLLUS:

But I do know where he is, if we can trust the stories.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Really? What have you heard? Where on earth is he?

HYLLUS:

All of last year, that whole time, they say
He labored as a servant to a woman in Lydia.

70

DEIÁNEIRA:

If he could put up with that, we might hear anything!

HYLLUS:

Well, he got away from her. So I hear.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Then where is he? Alive or dead? What's the news?

HYLLUS:

Euboea. They say he's in that country, or about to be,
Waging war against the city of Eurytus.

75

57: The Greek here is puzzling. Lloyd-Jones translates, "If he cares at all that we should think his father prospers" (1994).

74: Euboea—an island above Attica's north shore. The city is Oechalia.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Did you know that he left me an oracle
That we can trust, that bears on this place?

HYLLUS:

What was it, Mother? I don't know this story.

DEIÁNEIRA:

It would mean either the total end of his life
80 Or else, once he'd taken this prize, from then on
He'd be able to live the rest of his life in happiness.
Since this rests on such a balance point, my son,
Why don't you go join him? Either we'll be saved,
85 If he saves his life, or we'll go down together.

HYLLUS:

I will go, Mother. Had I caught
A report of this oracle, I would be there already.
But Father's fate is usually too good for us
To be very upset or concerned about it.
90 But now that I understand,
I'll do everything I can to learn the truth.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Go now, my boy. Even a latecomer
Gains from hearing good news.

*(Exit Hyllus through the stage left wing. Enter the chorus,
singing and dancing, through the stage right wing.)*

Parodos (Entry-song)

CHORUS: *(Addressing the rising sun.)*

[Strophe a]

95 When night in its defeat is stripped of its bright stars,
It brings you to birth, as it falls asleep in a burst of flame.

77: "That bears on this place"—We follow the manuscript reading, with Easterling (1982). Lloyd-Jones (1994) and Davies (1991) read an emendation yielding "regarding this hour of need."

84: We have not translated this line, which most scholars reject as an interpolation. It merely repeats the thought of line 85.

O the sun, the sun! I call on you
 To bring me news about Alcmena's boy.
 Tell me where, tell me where
 He makes his home. 100
 Your flames are beams of brilliant light;
 You are watching him wherever he is,
 Cleaving the sea or resting on the two continents.
 Tell me, Lord of Sight!

[Antistrophe *a*]

Her mind is sick with longing—that is what I heard—
 And Deianeira, the battle trophy, is always
 Like a bird in misery of longing. 105
 She cannot even sleep without tears;
 Her mind is full of her man,
 She is nursing fear
 For his travels,
 She wastes away on her anxious bed 110
 Without a man, and she expects
 A terrible, disastrous fate.

[Strophe *b*]

Many waves to be seen; one tireless wind or another,
 South or north, whips them up,
 And they stride across the broad sea. 115
 That is how his toil
 Engulfs Heracles like the sea at Crete
 And his labor grows.
 But always some god
 Keeps him afloat, unerring, 120
 And saves him from the house of Hades.

103: "Cleaving the sea . . . two continents"—The general sense is "whether he's on sea or land" (Jebb 1892/2004); specifically, the chorus seem to be suggesting the Black Sea on the one hand and the Pillars of Heracles (Straits of Gibraltar) on the other (per Lloyd-Jones, who is followed by Davies but not by Easterling).

105: "Like a bird . . . of longing"—like the nightingale.

117: "Like the sea at Crete"—The sea north of Crete is especially tempestuous in wind and wave.

[Antistrophe *b*]*(To Deíáneira.)*

You complain about this,
 But with all respect, I disagree.
 I tell you, there is no need to rub a good hope out.
 125 Never joy without pain:
 The King Who Rules All,
 Zeus, son of Cronus,
 Gives both to humans who will die:
 After troubles, he gives delight for everyone
 130 As the Bear turns around on his circling path.

[Epode]

The bright stars do not linger over mortals in the night,
 Both poverty and wealth shall fade away.
 They move in turn, joy and loss
 135 Arriving at the same door.

 In these times, I tell you, lady,
 Cling always to hope.
 Has anyone ever seen
 140 Zeus failing to care for his children?

DEIÁNEIRA:

I suppose you came because you'd heard about my suffering.
 But how I actually feel, eating away at my heart—
 I hope you'll never learn that. You haven't felt it,
 And I hope you never do.

 A young and tender thing
 145 Grows in its own space, a space as tender as itself,
 Where neither heat of sun nor rain nor wind beats it down.
 There it rises, joyfully, its life untroubled—
 Up to a point. Once a girl is called a wife
 She gets her share of worry in the night;
 150 She is fearful for her man or for her children.

122: The text is uncertain. We follow Jebb (1892/2004); Lloyd-Jones (1994) translates the text here as, "I feel with you, but I shall oppose you."

130: "The Bear"—a constellation that circles the sky, never dropping below the horizon (*Iliad* 18.487, *Odyssey* 5.273). "The effect of the simile is to suggest predictable order as well as mutability" (Easterling 1982, p. 91).

Then she'd understand. And with her own life in mind
 She'd appreciate the weight of trouble that I bear.
 Of course, I've had a lot of painful things to cry over,
 But there's one that's new and different. I'll tell you now:
 The last trip that my lord Heracles took, 155
 When he set out from home, he left in the house
 An old tablet inscribed with a prophecy
 That he hadn't dared to give me before
 When he went out on all those adventures because
 (He explained) he was sure he'd perform 160
 His task, then slither out of danger and not die.
 But this time, as if his life was over, he told me
 How much of his property I should take, as his wife,
 And he told me what shares of land he'd give his sons,
 And he specified a time: Wait three months
 And one year of his life after he'd left this land, 165
 Then he was due to die at precisely that time—
 Unless he had slipped past the end of the term,
 In which case he'd live the rest of his life in comfort.
 These, he declared, were the fates that the gods decreed,
 To be fulfilled along with his Herculean Labors, 170
 As the ancient oak tree told him long ago (he said)
 At Dodona, where it spoke to him through dove-priestesses.
 Well, the time specified for this is up
 Precisely now, so that this must be fulfilled.
 That's why I keep leaping up from a pleasant sleep; 175
 I am tormented by fears: Will I have to stay on
 After the best man of all has died? Be left behind?

*(Enter the Messenger, slowly, through the stage left wing,
 during the end of this speech.)*

CHORUS:

Be careful what you say. There's a man coming.
 He's wearing a wreath, and that means good news.

170: "To be fulfilled along with his Herculean Labors"—or, as some scholars read the line, "as the issue of his labors."

172: Dodona—In Epirus in western Greece, Dodona is the site of the most ancient oracle of Greece, important to Heracles because the god who is believed to speak there is his father, Zeus.

179: See endnote.

MESSENGER:

180 My lady Deíáneira, I am the first to bring the news
That will set you free from fear: Alcmene's son is alive.
Believe me, he won his battle, and now he's giving
Firstfruits of his victory to the local gods.

DEIÁNEIRA:

What's this, old man? What are you telling me?

MESSENGER:

185 He'll be home right away, your wonderful husband!
You'll see him in all his triumphant power!

DEIÁNEIRA:

Who did you hear this from? One of us or a foreigner?

MESSENGER:

He was telling a big crowd in Summer-Ox Meadow—
Lichas, the herald. As soon as I heard him,
190 I came here so that I'd be the first with the news
And get some reward or thanks from you.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Well, why isn't he here—if his news is really good?

MESSENGER:

He's not just taking a rest, my lady.
He's surrounded by a circle of Malians,
195 And they're all asking him questions,
So he can't take a step forward. Each one
Simply has to hear it for himself and won't let him move
Until he's heard enough to please himself. It's not his will,
But it is theirs. So he's stuck. But you'll see him soon yourself.

DEIÁNEIRA:

200 O Zeus! God of the sacred, unreaped meadow of Oeta!
You took your time, but you gave us a blessing.

(First calling back to the house and then to the chorus.)

Raise a song, my friends, you inside the house

193: "He's not just taking a rest"—According to Lloyd-Jones (1994), the Messenger is speaking of Lichas, the herald, but Deíáneira was probably asking after Heracles.

And you outside the wall. Now is our time
To make a harvest of joy! Such a glorious surprise!

CHORUS:

Sing hallelujah! All of you who live in this house 205
And are of marriageable age,
All you men and boys,
Raise a shout of triumph to the Lord of Arrows,
Apollo, our defender.

A paean, a paean—you girls, 210
Sing out a paean to his sister
Artemis, the deer slayer of Ortygia, Lady of Torches,
And to the nymphs, her neighbors. 215

I am exalted; I will not hold back
Against the flute, O you tyrant of my mind.
Look at me! How excited!
Evohe!
The ivy stirs me;
Already I am driven into dancing for Bacchus. 220
Io, Io, paean!

(During the dance song, a procession slowly enters through the stage left wing. It consists of captured women guarded by spear-men and under the supervision of the herald Lichas. Most prominent among the women is Iolê, tall, beautiful, and distraught.)

CHORUS: *(To Deianeira.)*

Look, dear lady,
Here it is, directly before you
And clear as daylight.

205–24: A *hyporchema*, or dance-song. Probably most of the lines would be assigned to the chorus leader, who would sing them in a style appropriate to their emotional content.

205–6: “All of you . . . of marriageable age”—Lloyd-Jones translates, “Let the house that is to receive the bridegroom utter a cry of joy” (1994). Jebb (1892/2004) takes the word “marriageable” to apply only to the young women. But we think the chorus leader is calling on the young people of both genders, with specific instructions for each (so Easterling).

217: “The flute”—This is the conventional translation for *aulos*, a clarinetlike reed instrument that was used to convey powerful emotions and would have accompanied this choral passage along with drums.

DEIÁNEIRA:

225 I do see it, my friends. I am keeping a sharp watch,
 And I couldn't have missed this whole procession.
 Welcome, herald. You've shown up late, but I wish you joy
 If your news is joyful.

LICHAS:

230 I'm delighted that we've arrived, delighted to speak with you,
 My lady. When a man has such success,
 The report deserves a reward.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Dear man, I must have you say first things first:
 Tell me whether Heracles will come home alive.

LICHAS:

235 When I left him, anyway, he was strong
 And alive and healthy—no disease at all.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Where? In his own country or abroad? Tell me.

LICHAS:

On a cape in Euboea, where he has drawn a precinct
 For altars and the spoils of war, sacred to the Zeus of
 Cenaeum.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Had he made a vow to do this? Or did the oracle command?

LICHAS:

240 He vowed to do this once he'd taken the land
 Of these women you see here and destroyed it by war.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Yes, these women: Who in the world are they? Who captured
 them?
 I pity them. Or have their troubles stolen my wits?

LICHAS:

245 These are the ones he picked out when he sacked
 Eurytus' city, the cream of the crop, for him and the gods.

238: Cenaeum—a mountainous promontory sacred to Zeus on the island of Euboea. Hyllus first reported Heracles' whereabouts at line 74.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Did he spend all that time besieging this city,
All those unexpected delays, days beyond counting?

LICHAS:

No. Most of that time he spent in Lydia.
He admits it himself: He was not a free man;
He'd been bought to do service. Don't be shocked 250
At this news, lady. Zeus was plainly the cause.
Heracles was purchased by a foreign woman,
Omphale, and served out a year. As he tells it,
The ignominy gnawed at him so much
That he swore an oath—and took it to heart— 255
That the man who was the nearest cause of this
Would soon be enslaved, with wife and child.
And his word did not come to nothing.
As soon as he was purified, he got an army
Of foreigners and attacked the city of Eurytus, 260
Who was the one human being that he blamed
For what had happened to him. He had gone
To Eurytus' house as a guest, a friend
Of long standing, and Eurytus had badgered him,
Again and again, with foul-minded insults. He said, 265
"Yes, Heracles' arrows are pretty hard to dodge,
But my own sons are better at archery,
And Heracles is a free man's broken slave."
Then, when he was drunk at a banquet, he threw him out.
Heracles was furious. So when Iphitus came to Tiryns, 270
Tracking his wandering horses on the hillside,
While he was looking the other way and his mind
Was on other things, Heracles threw him off the top
Of the citadel. That sent Zeus into a wild rage.
So the Lord and Father of All, who lives on Olympus, 275

259: "As soon as he was purified"—After serving as a slave to a foreign woman, Heracles required ritual purification.

268: "A free man's broken slave"—The text here is uncertain, but the insult refers to Heracles' bondage to Eurystheus, the man who set him to do the famous labors.

270: "When Iphitus came to Tiryns"—Iphitus is a son of Eurytus; Tiryns is an ancient fortified city with special ties to Heracles.

(To Iolê.)

You look especially miserable. Who are you?
Were you unmarried? Or a young mother?
Surely you were not born to know all this suffering;
You're upper class.

Lichas, who in the world are her parents? 310
Who was her mother? Who was her father?
Tell me! I pity her more than any of the others;
She's the only one who really understands.

LICHAS:

How would I know? Why cross-examine me?
I'd guess her parents there had a fairly high rank. 315

DEIÁNEIRA:

Could she be from the ruling family? Did Eurytus have a
child?

LICHAS:

I don't know. I didn't make much of an inquiry.

DEIÁNEIRA:

You didn't even hear her name from the other women on the
road?

LICHAS:

Not at all. We came through the journey in silence.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Then *you* tell me, sad girl. I'll hear it from you. 320
It would be a shame for me not to know who you are.

LICHAS:

It would be totally different from the way she was before
If she so much as parted her lips. Nothing—
She has not uttered a single word, large or small.
She's always mourning her great loss,
Crying in misery, ever since she left the high winds 325
Of her home country. It's a nuisance,
But it's bad for her, too, and it should be forgiven.

316: Eurytus—king of Oechalia, father of Iolê.

DEIÁNEIRA:

330 Let her go, then. She may enter my house
As she pleases. I wouldn't add to her pain,
Considering all the trouble she's had already.
It's been quite enough. Let's all go inside.

(To Lichas.)

You should prepare to set off,
And I must put the house in order.

(Exit Lichas through the great doors, ushering the captured women ahead of him. The Messenger stops Deiáneira.)

MESSENGER:

335 Stay right here, for a little while, so you can find out,
Apart from them, who these people are
That you are taking into your house. There are things
You need to know that you have not heard. And I know them all.

DEIÁNEIRA:

What's this about? Why should I not go in?

MESSENGER:

340 Stop and listen! It was no waste of time
To listen to me before, and it won't be now.

DEIÁNEIRA: *(Indicating the house and then pointing to the chorus.)*

Should we call them back again,
Or would you rather speak just to me and these others?

MESSENGER:

I have no problem speaking to you and them, but let the others
go in.

DEIÁNEIRA:

345 So now they're inside, you can let the story out.

MESSENGER:

This man did not get a single thing right
When he spoke. Either he's a liar now,
Or he was a false messenger earlier.

DEIÁNEIRA:

350 What do you mean? You've got to make it clear to me—
Everything you know. I still don't understand anything!

MESSENGER:

That man said—and I heard it all,
 And many other witnesses were present as well—
 That it was on account of this girl that Heracles
 Captured Eurytus and seized his high towers in Oechalia. 355
 Love was the god, all by himself, who cast a spell
 On him and drove him to put his spear to this.
 It has nothing to do with those labors in Lydia,
 Or slaving away for Omphale, or hurling Iphitus
 To his death—contrary to what Lichas said when he was here.
 It was all because Heracles failed to talk the girl's father
 Into giving her to him to share his bed 360
 In secret. So he worked up a petty accusation
 To serve as a pretext and made war on her fatherland,
 Killed the king, her father, and sacked the city—
 The place where, as Lichas said, Eurytus held sway.

Now he's sending her to this home. 365
 He has some plan in doing this, my lady,
 And it's not to use her as a slave. Don't expect that.
 It's not likely, seeing as how he is so hot with desire.

I decided I should tell the whole story to you,
 My lady, just as I heard it from that man. 370
 A lot of Trachinians heard it with me,
 There in the central marketplace, same as me.
 So you can ask them and prove it. I am sorry
 If my news is not to your liking. But it's true.

DEIÁNEIRA:

So *I* am the one in misery. What's happened to me? 375
 Have I really welcomed into my house a pestilence
 In disguise? How horrible! And she has no name?
 Really? Lichas said she hadn't, under oath.
 But surely she's as splendid by birth as she appears.

MESSENGER:

Her father is Eurytus; she's his by birth. 380
 And she's called Iólê. The man said nothing
 About her origin because, of course, he had not asked!

379: We cannot be sure whether this line is Deíaneira's or the Messenger's, but most editors (apart from Jebb) assign it to Deíaneira. From her mouth the line carries either a biting irony or a haunting fear, or both.

CHORUS:

Death and destruction to all liars—
And to anyone who secretly harms those who trust him!

DEIÁNEIRA:

385 What should I do? (*To the chorus.*) This story
Has left me absolutely stunned.

CHORUS:

Go and ask him. He might just make things clear,
Especially if you cross-examine him by force.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Right. I'll go. You're on the mark.

MESSENGER:

390 Should we wait here? What should we do?

(*Enter Lichas through the great doors.*)

DEIÁNEIRA:

Stay here. You see he's coming back out
On his own. I sent no messengers.

LICHAS:

What message shall I take to Heracles?
Tell me because, as you see, I am about to leave.

DEIÁNEIRA:

395 Why are you rushing off in such a hurry?
You were late getting here, and we need to share the news.

LICHAS:

Well, ask away, if you wish. Here I am.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Can I trust you now to tell the truth?

LICHAS:

Yes! Zeus is my witness—as far as what I know for sure.

384: "Anyone who secretly harms those who trust him"—As a herald, Lichas is supposed to be absolutely trustworthy.

388: "Cross-examine him by force"—Athenian law required that testimony from slaves be taken under torture, so the idea was familiar to this audience.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Who is the woman you brought here? 400

LICHAS:

She's from Euboea. I can't say who her parents were.

MESSENGER:

Hey, look at me! Do you know who you're speaking to?

LICHAS:

What gives you the right to ask me questions?

MESSENGER:

Pluck up your courage and answer me, if you have any sense.

LICHAS:

To the ruler, Deiáneira, Oeneus' daughter, 405
Wife of Heracles, and, if my eyes don't deceive me,
She is my master.

MESSENGER:

That's what I wanted to hear; that's what I hoped you'd say.
She's your lady, right?

LICHAS:

Quite right, she is.

MESSENGER:

Well, then. What penalty do you think you should pay 410
If you're convicted of not doing right by her?

LICHAS:

What do you mean "not doing right"? You're making riddles.

MESSENGER:

Not at all. You've been doing what I said.

LICHAS:

I'm leaving. It was stupid of me to listen to you at all.

MESSENGER:

No, not before you respond to a little questioning. 415

LICHAS:

Go ahead, if you must. You talk too much.

MESSENGER:

That captive woman you brought to the house,
You know who I mean?

LICHAS:

Yes. What about her?

MESSENGER:

You're looking at her as if you don't know her.

420 But you said she was Iolê, offspring of Eurytus, didn't you?

LICHAS:

To whom? Where? Is there anyone, anywhere,
Who can testify that he heard me say this?

MESSENGER:

A lot of local people can. They heard you say it
In the central market of Trachis—a huge crowd.

LICHAS:

Yes.

425 I did say that I had heard talk of this. But it's not the same
To report some opinion as it is to tell a story that's been
proved.

MESSENGER:

What do you mean, "opinion"? Didn't you declare, under
oath,
That you were bringing the girl here to be Heracles' wife?

LICHAS:

I said "wife"? By god, tell me, lady,

430 Who in the world is this person? He's not one of us.

MESSENGER:

I was one of those who were there and heard what you said:
That the whole city was conquered because of a passion for
her,
That the Lydian woman did not cause its downfall. It was love
for her.

LICHAS:

Send the man away, lady. It's not a good idea

435 To go on babbling with a man who's sick in the head.

DEIÁNEIRA:

No. Before Zeus, who flashes lightning

433: "Lydian woman"—Omphale.

On sacred Oeta, do not snatch away the truth!
 The woman you will tell it to is not mean spirited;
 She has learned the human lesson well:
 Nature gives no one joy forever. 440
 And as for Love—anyone who challenges him
 To an exchange of blows is out of his mind.
 Love rules by his own whim. He rules over gods;
 He rules over me. Why not over women who are like me?
 So if I blamed my husband for catching this disease, 445
 I'd be a lunatic. And the same for her.
 What could she be responsible for, even along with him?
 Nothing shameful, nothing wicked against me.
 Absolutely not. So if *he* taught you to lie,
 You learned a terrible thing. 450
 And if you gave yourself this education,
 Even though you aimed to be admired,
 You'd only be despised. So tell me the whole truth.
 It's a terrible disgrace for a free man to be called a liar.
 And don't think you'd get away with it—it won't happen. 455
 Too many people heard you speak, and they'll tell me.
 Perhaps you were afraid that you'd cause me pain—
 No fear of that. The real agony would be not finding out.
 What's so terrible about knowing the truth?
 Hasn't Heracles taken a number of wives already? 460
 And, so far, none of them has had to bear an ugly word,
 Or any hint of blame, from me. And the same for her.
 Even if she was totally melted by their love,
 I would not blame her, because I pity her the most.
 As soon as I saw her, I realized: Her beauty 465
 Has destroyed her life, ruined her fatherland,
 Enslaved her people. She never wanted that!
 But let this flow with the wind. Now I am telling you:
 Play tricks on someone else; with me, always tell the truth.

CHORUS:

Obey her. She's speaking from her heart. 470
 You won't find fault with her later, and I'll thank you.

456: So why does Deianeira need to hear this from Lichas? Because Greek culture strongly discounts hearsay evidence. She won't know until she has heard from an eyewitness.

LICHAS:

Well, lady, now that I see your mind is human
 And you accept what is human, I will tell
 You everything. I won't hide the truth.
 475 Things are exactly as he said they were.
 A dreadful desire for this woman ran through
 Heracles, and that's the reason why Oechalia,
 Her father's land, would be devastated, captured
 At spear point. And this story—I must say this
 480 On his behalf—he never ordered me to conceal
 Or to deny. It was me, lady. I was afraid
 I'd cause your heart pain if I told you this
 And that it would be a crime for me to do this,
 If you thought it a crime. And now you know
 485 The whole story, for his sake and for yours.
 Love the woman and take care not to budge
 From what you said earlier. Because that man,
 Who won every prize by the strength of his arms—
 He's been totally defeated by his love for her.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Of course. My good sense tells me to behave this way
 And not bring a plague down on myself
 By fighting stupidly against the gods. So I'll go inside.
 I have messages to prepare for you to carry
 And gifts also—I must match gift for gift—
 495 And you'll carry those. It wouldn't be fair for you
 To return empty handed after bringing me such a procession.

(Exit Deíaneira through the great doors.)

First Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe]

How strong she is, the Love-goddess!
 She wins all the prizes.
 (I pass over the gods:

497: "Love-goddess"—The Greek has *Kupris*, a name for Aphrodite.

I will not tell how she fooled Zeus 500
 Or Hades, Lord of Night,
 Or Poseidon, Shaker of the Earth.)
 But about this bride:
 Who were the trained fighters who came to be married?
 Who entered the contest 505
 To give all those blows, to kick up all that dust?

[Antistrophe]

One had the strength of a river
 But came on all fours, with tall horns,
 In the form of a bull.
 That was Acheloüs from Oeniadae. 510
 The other came from Bacchus' city, Thebes,
 With a back-turning bow and spears, waving his club.
 He was the son of Zeus. So they came together,
 Drawn into combat by desire for bedding her,
 And between them there was only one 515
 As referee: the Love-goddess.

[Epode]

Now a fist striking, a bow twanging,
 A bull's horn breaking, a confusion of noise.
 They clinched like wrestlers climbing; 520
 They struck deadly blows

500–2: The chorus refrains from insulting the trio of gods Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon (representing sky, underworld, and sea, respectively). So the chorus will tell no tales of gods' being led astray by love. Mythology, however, was rife with such tales: Zeus often cheated on his wife Hera, Hades fell for Persephone, and Poseidon had many affairs.

510: Oeniadae—the name of a town on the shore of the Acheloüs River.

512: "Back-turning bow"—Like the bow of Odysseus, the bow of Heracles was a short reflex bow, probably made of horn, that was curved backward when not strung, requiring great strength to use.

"Waving his club"—The weapon most closely associated with Heracles in stories and paintings is an enormous club.

519: "A bull's horn breaking"—We have supplied the word "breaking"; in the myth, Heracles did break the bull's horns, and there must be some sound for us to hear in this image.

To the forehead,
 Grunting and gasping, both of them.

She was lovely and delicate of face.

On the side of a prominent rise

525 She sat waiting for a husband.

And the contest went on as I described

While the prize of the battle, a girl in form,

Awaited its pitiful end.

Then suddenly she left her mother,

530 Like a girl-calf newly weaned.

(Enter Deianeira through the great doors, carrying a box. A babble of voices from inside is heard while the doors are open.)

DEIÁNEIRA: *(To the chorus.)*

Dear friends, that noise inside is our visitor saying good-bye
 To the girls who were captured at spear point.

This gives me a chance to speak to you in secret.

I want to explain what I have contrived to do

535 And also to share my sorrow with you.

That young maiden—well, she's not that anymore;

She's been yoked—I received her like a package from the sea,

And she's a cargo that wrecks my heart and mind.

Here we are, two of us—and we are going to be embraced

540 Under one single blanket? That's what Heracles—

Although they say he's loyal and good to me—

Sends me in return for keeping his house all this time.

I know enough not to be angry at him;

He's caught this same disease often enough before.

545 But to live together with this woman! Who in the world

Would put up with that? Who'd share her own marriage?

I can see that the bloom of youth is creeping over her

While it's withering on me. His roving eye

Wants to pluck flowers while they're just opening

550 And run from the ones that are fading. So that's my fear:

Heracles may be called my loyal husband, but, in truth,

He'll belong to her. I could be angry, but, no, that's not

Appropriate for a woman with a high-class mind.

Let me explain how I have turned my pain into a relief.

554: "I have turned my pain into a relief"—The text here is disputed. The line could mean simply that she has a remedy for her pain.

I have had a gift for a very long time; an old monster 555
 Gave it to me, and I have kept it well hidden in a bronze urn.
 I was still only a girl when I collected it—blood
 From the wounds of hairy-chested Nessus, as he lay dying.
 He used to carry folks across a deep, torrential river,
 The Evenus, charging a fee and using his own arms— 560
 No boating across by oar or sail for him. He took me
 Across when my father sent me off with Heracles
 To follow him as his bride. I was riding there
 On Nessus' shoulders in the middle of the crossing
 When he touched me with his hands where he shouldn't. 565
 I let out a screech. Heracles turned right around
 And shot him with a feathered arrow. It plunged
 Into his breast and on into his lungs. As he was dying,
 The monster said all this to me: "Child of old Oeneus,
 Because you are my last passenger, you shall have 570
 This benefit from my crossings if you do as I say:
 Collect the clotted blood from my wound
 With your hands, from where the poisoned arrow struck
 (It had been dipped in the Hydra's blood);
 Use this as a charm on the mind of Heracles 575
 So he will never see a woman he loves more than you."
 I remembered this, my friends. I kept it at home,
 Locked carefully away since the time he died.

(Opening the box to display a robe.)

I rubbed this robe in it and did everything else 580
 As he instructed me before he died. And now it's all done.
 I wouldn't ever want to know how to commit a crime
 Or learn to dare to do such things. And I despise
 People who are bold enough for that.

558: Nessus—a Centaur: half man, half horse. Such creatures were famous in myth for their lust for human women. Characteristically brutish, they had been defeated in battle first by the Lapiths and later by Heracles. When they scattered, Nessus took up his post on the river Evenus.

574: Hydra—Slaying this nine-headed monster was one of the labors. Heracles collected the Lernaean Hydra's poisonous blood to tip his arrows.

575–6: "A charm . . . more than you"—Nessus does not lie; after experiencing the charm, Heracles will not live to fall in love again.

585 If charms and gentle love-spells will win Heracles
 And somehow let me overcome that girl,
 Then the work is ready to be done—but only if
 You don't believe it's wrong. If so, I'll stop.

CHORUS:

Well, if you have some confidence
 In what you are doing, I believe your judgment's sound.

DEIÁNEIRA:

590 My confidence goes only this far: I believe
 In it, but I haven't seriously tried it out.

CHORUS:

In this case, knowledge can only come from action.
 You'll never really know until you try.

DEIÁNEIRA:

595 We'll know right away then. I see the herald
 Already at the door. He'll be leaving in a hurry.
 Let's keep our secret well hidden. If one acts
 In darkness, no shame falls.

(Enter Lichas through the great doors.)

LICHAS:

What must I do? Show me, Deiáneira.
 We've already wasted far too much time.

DEIÁNEIRA:

600 That's exactly what I have been doing for you, Lichas,
 While you were inside speaking with our guests.

(Offering him the closed box.)

Now I want you to take this long woven robe for me
 As a gift to my husband, made with my own hands.
 When you give it to him, tell him that no one at all
 605 May wear this next to his skin before he does,
 And that it must not be seen by glare of sun,
 Nor flare of sacred precinct, nor flame of hearth fire,
 Until he takes his stand in plain view of everyone
 And presents himself to the gods on the day of sacrifice
 610 For bulls. I have made this oath: If ever I should see
 Or hear that he is safe and coming home, then

(As is my right and duty) I would clothe him new,
 In a new robe, for the gods to see, as my offering.
 And you will have a sign for this, which he will find
 Familiar and recognize on the circle of this seal.

615

Now off you go. And follow this rule first:
 When carrying a message, do not do anything else.
 And, second, take care to earn his thanks,
 As you have earned mine, so as to double your reward.

LICHAS:

Well, if I have mastered Hermes' trade
 Perfectly, I'll never fail you in this mission.
 I'll take the package as you gave it to me
 And attach your words of explanation also.

620

DEIÁNEIRA:

Now you really must leave. You know very well
 How things are in this house.

625

LICHAS:

I understand. I'll say that everything is safe here.

DEIÁNEIRA:

And you know well—because you saw it yourself—
 How friendly a welcome I gave to that guest of ours.

LICHAS:

Yes indeed. It filled my heart with pleasure.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Is there anything more you could say? I have this fear
 That it would be premature for you to say how much
 I long for him until I know that I am longed for, too.

630

*(Exit Deianeira through the great doors. Exit Lichas through
 the stage left wing.)*

Second Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

Listen! All of you who live around the harbor
 Or the hot springs in the rocks

635 Or the peaks of Oeta, and you from the shores
 Of the lagoon of Malis,
 Sacred to the Maiden of Golden Arrows,
 Where gatherings of Greeks met at Pylae,

[Antistrophe *a*]

640 Listen! Soon the lovely voice of the flute will rise for you again—
 Nothing ugly, no shrill grieving,
 But in heavenly counterpoint to the lyre—
 Because the son of Zeus and Alcmene
 Is speeding homeward, bearing trophies,
 645 Rewards for every kind of excellence.

[Strophe *b*]

He was a man without a city, we thought,
 As we waited twelve long months,
 A man of the sea. Because we had no news.
 650 His loving wife wept for him,
 And her heart was sad beyond sadness,
 Dissolving in tears.
 But now, Ares, the Lord of Rage,
 Has set her free from these days of pain.

[Antistrophe *b*]

655 Bring him home, bring him home,
 O ship of many oars, and do not rest
 Till he has reached this city
 After leaving the home of the islanders,
 Where they say he is making a sacrifice.
 660 We pray that he arrives with every desire
 Stained by the ointment of Persuasion,
 Melted in beguilement by the beast.

(Enter Deíaneira through the great doors, rushing.)

636: "The Maiden of Golden Arrows"—Artemis.

660: "With every desire"—We follow an emendation preferred by Jebb and other editors. The manuscript is unintelligible here. It would mean "daily" or "all day long."

661–2: Here we translate a text based on conjectures. See endnote.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Friends, I am so afraid! I may have gone too far
In all those things I did a few minutes ago.

CHORUS:

What is it, Deíaneira, daughter of Oeneus?

665

DEIÁNEIRA:

I don't know. I am losing heart. I may have done something
terrible.

If it turns out that way, it was only because I hoped so much.

CHORUS:

So this is not about your gift to Heracles?

DEIÁNEIRA:

Yes, it is—exactly. And now I'd never urge anyone
To plunge into the unknown with such eager zeal.

670

CHORUS:

Tell us, if it may be told. What frightened you?

DEIÁNEIRA:

What happened was so strange that if I tell it to you,
My friends, you'll call it a miracle—totally unexpected.

The stuff I used just now to smear that special robe—
It was a ball of white fleecy sheep's wool—

675

Has disappeared. It wasn't eaten by anything in there;
It devoured itself, wasted itself away,

Turned to dust, and blew off the high stone shelf.

But I'll need more time to tell you the whole story:

While that monstrous Centaur was in pain

680

From the arrowhead biting his lung, he gave me

Quite precise instructions about the ritual I should follow.

I have not forgotten; I kept them as if engraved in bronze.

This is what he told me to do, and this is what I did:

To preserve the drug away from fire and store it deep

685

In the house where the warmth of the sun would never touch it,

Until it was time to prepare and use the drug.

And I did. So now the time came, and in total secret

At home, in the house, I spread the drug,

684: This line may not be genuine. Lloyd-Jones rejects it; but Jebb defends it, and Easterling accepts it.

690 Using wool I yanked from a household sheep.
 Then I folded the gift and put it away from sun
 And light in the closed box that you saw.
 But then, as I turned back into the house, I noticed . . .
 Well, it was a riddle. No one could know what it meant at all.
 695 It turned out I'd thrown that scrap of wool
 Into a ray of the sun. As it grew warm,
 It completely disappeared, crumbled into the earth.
 It was just like seeing dust fall in showers
 700 From the blade of a woodworking saw.
 And so it lay scattered on the ground. And there,
 Where it lay, gouts of foam bubbled up from the earth
 Like the thick juice of gleaming ripe grapes
 Squeezed out on the ground from the dark fruit of Bacchus.
 705 That's why I am so distraught: I don't know what to think.
 All I see is, I've become the perpetrator of a crime
 That's dreadful. Why in the world would the dying beast
 Want to do me a kindness? I caused his death.
 There's no way. Clearly he wanted to kill the man
 710 Who struck him, and for that he stole my wits.
 Only now, when it's too late to do any good,
 I've figured it out. It will be only me—
 Unless I've got it wrong—who caused his death
 Because the same arrow that struck Nessus
 715 Also injured a god, Chiron. I knew that. So
 Whatever beast it touches, it kills—monsters, too.
 And this black poison of the blood, oozing out of his wounds,

696: Editors agree that line 696 is not genuine. It reads, "The one I'd used to apply the ointment into the central blaze."

712–3: "It will be only me . . . who caused his death"—Deiáneira should know better. Once Heracles hears the tale, he will say that it was the Centaur Nessus who killed him (1162), though surely Heracles must bear some part of the blame himself. Deiáneira and Heracles' son Hyllus will hold the captive Iolê solely responsible (1234); but, in the end, Hyllus will say that it is all Zeus (1278). On issues of responsibility, see Introduction, pp. ix–xi.

715: Chiron—a Centaur, but of immortal parentage and unrelated to Nessus and his kin. The legendary teacher of Achilles, Chiron was wise and kind. He was accidentally wounded by Heracles' poisonous arrows in the hero's battle with the Centaurs.

How could it not destroy his killer, too? I think it will.
 And so it's decided: If he should fall, I too shall die
 At the same time, in the same rush of events. To live? And hear 720
 Men say that I've done wrong? No woman could bear it,
 Not if she's always held herself above wrongdoing.

CHORUS:

Of course you'll give in to panic—if the facts are dreadful.
 But don't decide now. Until we know, keep hope alive.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Not possible. I can't find hope in bad advice, 725
 No hope, not even a wisp of false confidence.

CHORUS:

But when people stumble unwittingly,
 Anger is softer. And that's what fits your case.

DEIÁNEIRA:

No one could say such a thing if he'd had a hand 730
 In crime, only if he's innocent through and through.

CHORUS:

Be quiet now. You shouldn't say another word
 Unless you mean to say it to your son.
 Here he is, the one who went to search for his father.

(Enter Hyllus through the stage left wing.)

HYLLUS:

Mother, there are only three things I could wish for you now:
 To be dead. Or, if you stay alive, to be anyone else's 735
 Mother than my own. Or that you'd exchanged
 Your mind for something better than the one you have now.

DEIÁNEIRA:

What is it? My son, why am I so loathsome to you?

HYLLUS:

Listen, that man, your husband, the man
 I call Father—you've killed him this very day. 740

DEIÁNEIRA:

No, no! My son, what is this story you've brought?

HYLLUS:

It's a story that cannot fail to be true. It was seen.
And no one can make a known fact go away.

DEIÁNEIRA:

745 What's that? Where did you hear this?
Who told you I'd done this pitiful thing?

HYLLUS:

It's not hearsay. I saw it—it was terrible—
I saw what happened to Father with my own eyes.

DEIÁNEIRA:

Where were you? Nearby? At his side?

HYLLUS:

If you have to hear it, then I have to tell it all.
750 After he seized Eurytus' rich city, he sacked it
And carried off his pick of the plunder as his trophies.
He went to the tall headland of Euboea, where the surf
Breaks on both sides, Cenaeum, and there he built altars
And founded a sacred grove of trees to his father, Zeus.
755 That's where I saw him for the first time; it was pure joy.
I had longed for that sight. He was about to sacrifice
A lot of cattle, but his personal messenger came from home—
Lichas—and brought that gift of yours, the deadly robe.
He put it on, exactly as you directed,
760 And started his cattle-killing with twelve bulls,
Gentle ones with perfect features; then, in all,
He brought on one hundred cattle of various kinds.
At first, the poor man kept a cheerful mind;
His handsome clothes made him so happy while he prayed.
765 But as soon as the solemn ritual caught fire
And a flame shot over the blood from the pitch-drenched pine,
Then sweat rose on his skin, and that cloak
Started sticking to his sides as if it had been glued
By a craftsman to every limb. A biting pain
770 Shot through his bones in spasms. Then it was cruel—
As if he was being dissolved by the venom of a snake
That had attacked him. At that point he roared at Lichas
(Unlucky man, he wasn't to blame for your crime):
"What kind of a sneaky plot made you bring me that robe?"
775 The doomed man didn't know a thing, so he said

That he brought the gift from you exactly as you sent it.
 Just when Heracles heard this, he was racked with a spasm
 Of pain in his lungs. Then he grabbed Lichas by the foot,
 Right where it bends easily at the ankle joint
 And threw him against a rock where the surf breaks 780
 On all sides. So the white brains spilled out
 Through his hair where his skull shattered, and blood flowed.
 Then all the people cried out with a great groan
 Against the omen, both for the man who was sick
 And the one who was finished. But no one dared stand up 785
 Against the man. He dashed himself to the ground,
 Leapt into the air, yelling and howling. The rocks
 Threw back the echo from all sides, from the peaks
 Of Locri and the points of Euboea. So he wore himself out,
 Tossing on the ground with huge cries of pain 790
 And railing on against his marriage to you—
 How poorly matched you two were, what a disaster
 It had been, his whole life long, to be linked to Oeneus.
 Then the cloud of altar smoke cleared. He raised an eye
 And saw me in tears in the middle of the armed crowd. 795
 He fixed me with a look and summoned me:
 “My boy, come nearer; do not try to escape my trouble,
 Even if it means you have to die along with me.
 Get me out of here. First of all, move me to a place
 Where no one will see me, no human being anyway. 800
 Or, if you feel too much pity for that, just get me out of this land;
 Do it as quickly as possible, so I do not die here.”

Those were his commands. We laid him on board,
 Amidships, and brought him into harbor here,
 Barely alive; he’s so badly torn up with pain. 805
 In a moment you’ll see him, alive or just dead.

So that’s it, Mother: You’ve been caught in a plot
 That you planned and carried out against my father.
 And for that, may Justice the Punisher and the Furies
 Make you pay! It’s only right, since I swear you treat 810
 Righteousness with contempt. He was the best man on earth,
 And you killed him. You will never see a man to equal him.

788–9: “The peaks of Locri”—mountains east of Aetolia.

793: Oeneus—Deiáneira’s father. See note on line 7.

(Deiáneira turns to exit through the great doors.)

CHORUS: *(To Deiáneira.)*

Why are you slinking away in silence?
Don't you see, your silence supports his accusation?

HYLLUS:

815 Let her sneak away. It will be a fair wind
That blows her a long way out of my sight.
Why should I treat her with respect?
She's called a mother, but she doesn't act like one.
So she can sneak off and be happy for all I care;
820 I wish her all the joy she gave my father.

Third Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

Look, girls: How suddenly the word
Of god's oracle came through for us,
The ancient prophecy
That announced, "When the last month
825 Of the twelfth year has passed, then these labors
That Zeus' son took up
Will come to an end."
And the truth of this has blown in upon a breeze.
How could a man whose light has gone out
Labor any longer
830 In service once he's dead?

[Antistrophe *a*]

Caught in the Centaur's fog of death,
His sides lathered by force of a clever scheme,
Death-spawned venom,
Clinging to his sides, dragon-spawned
From the bright-scaled serpent—
835 How could he expect to see the sun come up again

834: The dragon-serpent is the Hydra, the source of the poison Heracles used on the arrow that killed Nessus, which is the very poison that has now been recycled to kill Heracles.

Now that he is surrounded
 By the dreadful power of the Hydra?
 A froth of pain, streaming black
 As hair, a farrago of tortures torments him,
 And the deadly words of deceit. 840

[Strophe *b*]

For this she weeps.
 Unhappy, impatient, she foresaw a great calamity
 Arising from the new marriage.
 Some of this she caused herself;
 Some of it came from the advice of a stranger 845
 Encountered in devastation.
 Now she cries out at the destruction;
 Now she dissolves in floods of dew, the tender tears.
 Fate is on the march. It says,
 "This scheme brings ruin and madness." 850

[Antistrophe *b*]

Tears well up into rivers;
 The sickness pours over him.
 Oh, none of his enemies
 Ever gave his glorious body
 So much pain. 855
 Oh no! Blame the bloodstained point
 Of the spear, our defender, that brought the girl
 So swiftly from the heights of Oechalia by war.
 The Love-goddess surrounds us in silence, 860
 But now she is revealed: She is the one who caused this.

(The Nurse cries out in horror from inside the house.)

837: The text here is uncertain. See endnote.

838: The manuscripts add the name *Nessus* to this line, so that the black hair is his, rather than a visualization of the poison; but this does not fit the metrical pattern.

840: "The deadly words of deceit"—the words Nessus used to persuade Deianeira that the poison was a love potion.

860: "The Love-goddess . . . silence"—Heracles had not told anyone that his reason for attacking the city was his love for Iolê.

HALF-CHORUS 1:

Am I hearing things? That sounded like a cry
Rising in the house.

865 What's happening?

HALF-CHORUS 2:

No, I heard it clearly—it was a scream.
There must be some new disaster in the house.

(Enter the Nurse through the great doors.)

CHORUS:

Look! How sad she is, what a dark frown!

870 The old woman has something to tell us.

What is it, old woman? Something new?

NURSE:

Oh, my girls, what a load of trouble

Came to us from that gift to Heracles!

Deiáneira has gone, on the last of her journeys,

875 And she did not move her feet.

CHORUS:

Don't tell me she's dead!

NURSE:

You've heard the whole thing.

CHORUS:

So is she dead?

NURSE:

I told you: You've heard it.

CHORUS:

Poor woman. How did she die?

863–8: These lines from the chorus were probably spoken by the leaders of the two half-choruses. Here we follow Jebb's suggestion for distributing the lines.

869–71: These lines were delivered by the chorus leader. Because the actor playing the nurse is masked, someone must tell us that her face is suffused with grief.

878–95: These lines are written in lyric meter so that they could be sung in a way that expresses their emotional content. Such a passage is known as a *kommós*.

NURSE:

It was horrible, the way it happened.

CHORUS:

Tell us how she came to die.

880

NURSE:

She destroyed herself with a sword.

CHORUS:

What sickness of the mind forced her

To this fierce violence?

How did she plan

Death on top of death

And bring it off alone?

885

NURSE:

With a stroke of the groaning sword.

CHORUS:

Did you see it, this outrage? And you couldn't stop it?

NURSE:

I saw it. I was a bystander, not far away.

CHORUS:

Who was there? How? Tell me?

890

NURSE:

She did this entirely by herself.

CHORUS:

What are you telling us?

NURSE:

The plain truth.

CHORUS:

She has given birth, given birth,

This unsanctified bride,

To a fury for this house.

895

NURSE:

How true. And if you'd been there, nearby,

And seen what Deíaneira did, you'd pity her even more.

881: The text here is uncertain at several points. This is a likely reading.

894: "This unsanctified bride"—Iolê.

CHORUS:

So a woman really had enough daring to do this?

NURSE:

Yes, and it was dreadful. Listen so you can bear witness for me:

900 After she went into the house alone,
 She saw the boy in the courtyard spreading soft coverings
 On a stretcher so he could go back and meet his father.
 Then she covered her face so that no one could see her,
 And she sobbed at the altars; she fell down in front of them
 905 And cried that soon there would be no one to tend them.
 She ran her hands over the tools that she had used
 In former days and wept. She kept churning around the house
 This way and that way, and when she saw a slave she loved,
 She wept again at the sight, poor woman,
 910 And she would call upon whatever god had steered her fate.
 When her tears subsided, suddenly I saw her
 Rush into Heracles' bedroom. I shadowed her,
 And I watched from a secret guard post.
 915 I saw the woman tossing blankets and sheets
 On Heracles' bed, spreading out the covers.
 And when she had done this, she leapt up
 And sat in the middle of her marriage bed.
 Then tears burst out in hot streams,
 920 And she said, "Oh, my marriage! And this bed of mine!
 It's all over. Good-bye. You'll never have me

903: "She covered her face"—Most translations take the Greek to mean that Deianeira hid herself, but that would be inconsistent with what follows, which is, at first, in public parts of the great house. The point is that she does not want her servants to guess from her face what she intends to do.

904: "She sobbed at the altars"—These are the household altars, which Deianeira, as mistress of the house, has a duty to tend.

905: "No one to tend them"—Once Heracles and Deianeira are both dead, the family altars will be abandoned.

911: We omit this messy line, which is rejected by Lloyd-Jones and others. It means, "and for her childlessness for the rest of her existence," which would make no sense here. Besides, the word we have stretched to translate "existence" normally means "property," which cannot be right.

Here again, no going to bed, no being a wife."
 As she said this, she tore at her dress fiercely
 And pulled it down where the beaten gold pin
 Held it above her breasts, so that she uncovered 925
 Her whole side, her arm, and her wrist.
 Then I ran fast, with all the strength I had,
 To tell her son what she was doing so methodically,
 But the moment we rushed back in there,
 We saw her with a two-edged sword 930
 Piercing her side, right into her liver and guts.
 When he saw this, the boy cried out in grief.
 He knew, poor boy, that his anger made her do this;
 The servants had told him—too late—how she had not 935
 Intended the outcome, that this came, instead, from the beast.
 After that the poor boy could not stop crying
 And moaning and pressing his lips to hers,
 And he lay side by side with her, wailing
 That he had killed her by striking her 940
 With a false accusation. He mourned the double loss
 That made him twice an orphan in one day, losing both
 His father and her. That's what happened inside.
 It just shows: If you plan ahead two days or more,
 You're a fool. Remember, there's no tomorrow 945
 Until you've made it successfully through today.

Fourth Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

Which shall I mourn first?
 Which sadness exceeds the other?
 I can't find one worse than the other.

[Antistrophe *a*]

One of these we have visible in the house; 950
 The other we are waiting to see, in suspense.
 But to have and to expect are much the same.

936: "The beast"—the Centaur. See note on line 558.

[Strophe *b*]

I pray for a breeze, a fair wind at our hearth,
 955 To carry me away from this place
 So that I won't die of horror
 Merely from catching sight of him,
 The powerful son of Zeus.
 They say he's on his way here
 960 In unremitting pain,
 An unspeakable sight.

(As the chorus continue, they catch sight of a procession advancing toward the house from the stage left wing. Men from Heracles' mercenary army, strangers to Trachis, are carrying him on a stretcher. The Old Man attends the dying hero as doctor.)

[Antistrophe *b*]

And it's near, very near,
 This thing I warned about,
 Singing shrill, like a nightingale.
 Visitors—a crowd of them—coming our way.
 965 And how do they carry him? As someone they love.
 Pensive, heavy with grief, silent,
 They make their way.
 Oh no! Why are they so quiet?
 What should I think?
 970 Is he dead or asleep?

HYLLUS: *(With a cry of lamentation.)*

O Father! I can't bear it! What's happening to me?
 What can I possibly do?

OLD MAN: *(Whispering.)*

Be quiet, boy, or you'll stir up the bitter pain
 975 In your father, and he'll be even more bloody-minded.
 He's alive, but he's flat out. Hold your tongue;
 Bite your lips.

HYLLUS:

What are you talking about? Is he alive?

OLD MAN: (*Whispering.*)

You must not wake him up when he's asleep,
Or you'll stir up this dreadful disease,
My boy, and strengthen his madness.

980

HYLLUS:

But it's so horrible, this enormous weight
Of sadness. It's driving me crazy.

HERACLES: (*Waking.*)

O Zeus!
Where on earth am I? Who are these people?
I'm in agony here, stabbing pain, total misery.

985

(*Cry of pain.*)

Blasted thing's biting me again.

OLD MAN:

See? I knew how important it was to hide
And be quiet and not shake the sleep
Out of his head.

990

HYLLUS:

But there's no way I could hold back:
How could I stand to see him in this horrible state?

HERACLES:

That rock of Ceneaeum, with altars,
What good was it for me to see that?
What miserable thanks I get
For such a gift to the gods!
Zeus!

995

So much harm, so much harm
You've done to me,
And no cure for this palpable
Flowering of madness.

Where's a magician, a practitioner
Of medicine, who could calm

1000

993–1043: The passage is set in lyric meters, used for singing. Lines 1004–16 and lines 1023–40 match in meter.

994–8: Here some modern editors believe that lines have been transposed, but this does not affect the meaning of the speech.

This raging pain
 Without Zeus?
 That would be a wonder to see,
 Even from far away.

(Cry of pain.)

Let me go, let me go!
 1005 Let me sleep, it's so awful!
 Let me go, let me go!
 It's too hard for me, let me sleep,
 Let me go, it's so hard.

(Hyllus tries to shift his limbs to a more comfortable position.)

Lay hands on me—why? You're shifting me—where?
 You're killing me, killing me.
 My pains were starting to fall asleep,
 But you've stirred them all up.
 Hell, hell, hell—they grabbed me, crawled in again.

1010 You men in Greece, are you really Greeks?
 Real Greeks would treat me fairly.
 For you I scoured clean the sea and all the forests;
 I gave my whole wretched life to make them safe for you.
 And now that I am sick
 None of you helps me;
 No one brings fire or sword.

(Cry of pain.)

1015 Strike off my head! Kill me! No?
 Hurry up! Fools, ingrates! I cannot bear to be alive.

OLD MAN:

You're his son; this job is too big for me;
 I am not strong enough. You take it on.
 Your eye is clear. I can't save him.

1012: "Scoured clean"—Heracles cleared away dangerous beasts and monsters to make land and sea safe for human beings.

1016: "Fools, ingrates!"—The Greek is an untranslatable expression of disgust.

HYLLUS:

I am holding him. But I can't kill his pain. 1020
 There's no relief from inside or outside
 For the pain in his life. Zeus controls this.

HERACLES: (*Cry of pain.*)

My son, where the hell are you?
 Here, right here.

(*Showing him where to lift.*)

Help me ease myself up. 1025

(*Cry of pain.*)

O god!

It's building up again, it's building up. It's horrible.
 It's killing me.

Nothing helps. It rages, wildly, this sickness. 1030

O Pallas, Pallas! The pain is back. It's torture!

My son, pity your father. Take your sword—
 I won't blame you—strike me below the collarbone;
 Fix this agony for good.

Your mother is godless;

She brought this rage on me. 1035

I want to see her brought down
 With the same pain, same death
 As mine.

O sweet Hades, 1040

(*Cry of pain.*)

Brother of Zeus,

Let me sleep, sleep.

Give my fate wings. Finish me now.

CHORUS:

I am horrified to hear of these troubles, my friends. What
 suffering!

What torments he has come into, the lord of this house. 1045

1031: Pallas—A name for Athena, the goddess who has been Heracles' protector.

HERACLES:

The hot work I have had, those horrible labors,
 Tormented my hands and my back,
 But nothing like this.
 Even the wife of Zeus never assigned me so much pain.
 And neither did Eurystheus, for all his hatred.
 1050 But that girl, that tricky-faced daughter of Oeneus,
 She got me trapped in this woven net
 Of Furies. It's killing me;
 It's plastered to my ribs, gnaws into me,
 Eats my muscles; it's glued to my windpipe;
 It sucks the air out of my lungs,
 1055 Slurps up the bright blood, wastes my frame
 Completely. I have been bested by this
 Unspeakable halter. I had never been defeated.
 No spear on a battlefield, no earth-sprouted force
 Of giants, no onslaught of wild beasts,
 1060 No Greeks, no foreigners, no one from any land
 To which I came, scouring it clean, ever did this to me.
 A woman, however, a female woman, a coward by birth—
 She brought me down, alone, without a sword.
 My son, you must become a true-born son to me
 1065 And give your mother's name no honor anymore.
 Give me the woman who gave you birth.
 Haul her out of the house with your own hands
 And put her in mine. I want to know for sure
 Whether you suffer more for me in my pain or for her
 When you see her get the trouble she deserves.
 1070 Go, my child. Be brave. And pity me.
 Most people would. Here I am, like a girl,
 Howling and wailing. And this is a thing no man alive
 Could ever say he's seen me do before. I was too noble

1048: "Wife of Zeus"—Hera, who resented the children Zeus fathered with human women.

1049: Eurystheus—Heracles' cruel taskmaster, who set him on the famous labors.

1050: "Daughter of Oeneus"—Deiáneira.

1062: "A coward by birth"—Heracles, like many Greek men, believes that women are cowardly by nature.

To cry when times were hard. But now, what a change!
 You see: I've turned female in my misery. 1075

Come now, stand right here by your father
 So you can see what this catastrophe has done to me.
 Look. I'll show you what's under the covers.
 All of you, fasten your eyes on this tormented frame.
 See how miserable? How pitiful I am? 1080

(Cry of pain.)

Horrible!

(Cry of pain.)

It burns, a raging blind spasm, right now, again.
 It shoots through my ribs, won't let me rest.
 I have to fight it; it devours me. That's how it feels,
 This damn plague.

Lord Hades, take me! 1085

Zeus' flash of fire, strike me!

Take up your weapon, Lord. Strike me down,
 Father, with thunder. It's eating at me again,
 At its worst, assaulting me.

O my hands, my shoulders, my chest, my dear arms, 1090
 Look how you are now! But in old days . . .

Remember the beast in Nemea that chased cowherds—
 That lion? No one could get near him; no one could touch him.
 But you, my arms, you overcame him by your sheer strength.
 And the Hydra of Lerna. And that unbeatable army 1095
 Of Centaurs—insolent, lawless man-beasts, out of bounds,
 Violent. And that wild thing on Mt. Erymanthus.

1091–4: The huge Nemean lion was invulnerable to weapons, but Heracles was strong enough to strangle him by brute strength.

1091–1101: This passage reviews many of Heracles' achievements. Among these are his killing of fabulously dangerous beasts, such as the Nemean lion, the Hydra of Lerna (from which came the poison for his arrows), and the wild boar of Mt. Erymanthus. By these labors he made the world safer for human habitation, as he did when he drove off a wine-crazed pack of Centaurs (not part of his assigned labors). A different sort of tale tells how, on a visit to the Underworld, he kidnapped the three-headed guard dog, Cerberus, or how he traveled to the ends of the earth to take golden apples from a tree guarded by a dragon.

And that three-headed dog of Hades, under the earth—
 An unforgettable monster, Echidna's whelp.
 1100 And then the dragon that guarded the golden apples
 At the ends of the earth. And thousands of labors besides.
 I have tasted all these triumphs, and no one has ever stood
 Between me and my glory. But now my joints are unhinged;
 My flesh is torn to bits; I'm tortured by a wild, unseen rage.
 1105 And they said my mother was the best of women.
 They proclaimed that my father in the starry sky was Zeus.

 But you'd better believe this and know it cold: It's true
 That I am nothing and I cannot even crawl. But that woman
 Who caused this—I'll take her in hand
 1110 Even from here. Just let her come and learn to tell the world:
 Living or dying, I make criminals pay their debts.

CHORUS:

I weep for Greece! What sadness there will be
 Over the loss of this man when he is gone.

HYLLUS:

You've paused for an answer, Father. Sick as you are,
 1115 Please be quiet and listen to me. I shall ask no more
 Than what is fair for you to give—your attention.
 Please don't be so bitter in your pain. Otherwise,
 You'll never know what's going on! You've set your heart
 On the joy of revenge, but your agony is wasted.

HERACLES:

1120 Say what you must and shut up. I am too sick
 To understand a damn thing when you talk so fancy.

HYLLUS:

I came about the mother—my mother—to tell you
 The circumstances in which she went wrong—involuntarily.

HERACLES:

1125 You're totally out of line. Why would you even mention
 Your mother in my hearing? You know she killed your father!

1099: Echidna—a monstrous snake-woman, mother of other monsters, including Cerberus.

1105: Heracles' mother, Alcmena, came from a family that was supposed to be descended from Zeus.

HYLLUS:

As things are, it would be wrong for me to keep silent.

HERACLES:

Quite right! Let's have no silence about the crime she did yesterday.

HYLLUS:

And let's have none about the things she did today.

HERACLES:

Tell me. But take care: Don't make me think you were born a bastard.

HYLLUS:

I'll speak. She's dead, killed just now.

1130

HERACLES:

By whom? It's incredible, a miracle, but from a bad source!

HYLLUS:

By herself. She killed herself, no outsider involved.

HERACLES:

Damn! I'm too late. She should have died at my hands.

HYLLUS:

You'd turn your anger down if you knew the whole story.

HERACLES:

Terrible way to start a speech, but say what's on your mind.

1135

HYLLUS:

In a nutshell: She went wrong trying to do right.

HERACLES:

Right? Damn you! She was killing your father!

HYLLUS:

She thought her weapon was a love-charm,
Though it missed. She saw your new bride at home.

HERACLES:

And who in Trachis can make drugs like this?

1140

HYLLUS:

Nessus the Centaur persuaded her long ago
To drive you mad with love, using this drug.

HERACLES:

Damn! Damn! Damn! I'm finished—
 Dead. I'm dead. No joy left for me.
 1145 Now I know exactly where I stand.
 Come, my child, your father is no more.
 Call all my children—your brothers and sisters—
 And call Alcmene, poor woman.
 She married Zeus, but nothing came of it.
 1150 I want you all to hear my last words—a prophecy I know.

HYLLUS:

But your mother isn't here. She's on the coast
 At Tiryns, where she's settled now.
 Some of your children are there in her care,
 And you should know that some are in the city of Thebes.
 1155 But all of us who are present, Father,
 Are at your service, to hear what we must hear.

HERACLES:

Then listen. This is what you have to do: The time has come
 For you to prove you're worthy to be called my son.
 I had a prophecy from my father long ago
 1160 That I would die at the hand of no one who drew breath,
 But someone who had died and gone to make his home in
 Hades.
 So this wild Centaur did what the god's prophecy said:
 I was living; he was dead—but he killed me.
 Now I'll reveal a new oracle that fits
 1165 The old ones well and speaks on their behalf:
 I was visiting the Selli—those mountain folk
 Who sleep on the ground—when I wrote this down
 As I heard it from my father's many-tongued oak tree.
 It told me that this present living moment

1149: "Nothing came of it"—Heracles means that his life has come to nothing.

1166: Selli—the priests at the oracular site of Dodona (see note on line 172 and *Iliad* 16.234, *Odyssey* 14.327).

1168: "My father's many-tongued oak tree"—the oak tree at Dodona that was sacred to Zeus and served as the source of an ancient oracle. The many tongues are either the leaves or the calls of the birds.

Is the time for me to be released from the labors 1170
 Assigned to me. So I expected to live well after this.
 But all it meant was that I shall die.
 There are no more labors for the dead.
 Now, since this oracle is plainly coming true, bright and clear,
 My child, you've got to make yourself an ally to this man— 1175
 To me—and don't hang back, or you'll sharpen my tongue.
 Do for me as I ask, out of your own consent;
 Make the best law your own: Obey your father.

HYLLUS:

Yes, Father. You seem to imply some conflict, and that
 Disturbs me. But I will follow your commands.

HERACLES:

First, put your right hand in mine. 1180

HYLLUS:

Why insist so strongly? What must I promise?

HERACLES:

Hurry up. Put it here. Don't disobey me.

HYLLUS:

Look, here it is. It will not oppose you.

HERACLES:

Now swear by the head of Zeus, my father. 1185

HYLLUS:

To do what? You have to spell this out.

HERACLES:

To complete the task that I will specify.

HYLLUS:

I swear. Zeus is my witness.

HERACLES:

Now pray to be struck with agony if you break this oath.

HYLLUS:

No agony. I'll do it. But I am praying that anyway. 1190

1172-4: See endnote for Ezra Pound's take on this passage.

HERACLES:

Do you know the highest peak of Mt. Oeta, sacred to Zeus?

HYLLUS:

I do. I have stood there many times at sacrifice.

HERACLES:

That's the place. You must carry my body up there
In your own hands, with the help of friends of your choice.

1195 Then cut off a lot of wood from the deep-rooted oak tree,
And, at the same time, cut down a lot of tough
Wild olive trees. Throw my body on top,
And light a fire with a flaming torch of pinewood.
And don't let me see one tear of mourning.

1200 There must be absolutely no weeping or wailing;
If you're really this man's son, do it dry-eyed.
If you don't, my curse shall lie heavy upon you,
Forever, from the grave.

HYLLUS:

How horrible! Father, what are you saying?
What are you making me do?

HERACLES:

1205 What you will do. If not, go find another father.
You will no longer be called my son.

HYLLUS:

How horrible!
Worse and worse! What you're asking me to do,
Father, it's to be your killer, your murderer!

HERACLES:

I am not. It's to be the healer of my maladies,
My only doctor to cure these troubles.

HYLLUS:

1210 So I set your body on fire—how does that heal it?

1191: Mt. Oeta—The scene of Heracles' funeral pyre and eventual apotheosis rises not far from Trachis.

1195: "The deep-rooted oak tree"—A tree on Mt. Oeta, far away from the oak tree at Dodona that served as an oracle. See Sophoclean Geography.

HERACLES:

All right, if you're afraid of that, do all the other parts.

HYLLUS:

I'd have no qualms about carrying you, anyway.

HERACLES:

And about building up the bonfire, as I asked?

HYLLUS:

That's fine—up to the point of putting my own hands to it.

But I'll do all the rest, and you'll have no interference from me. 1215

HERACLES:

That's good enough. But one small gift to me.

Add this to the larger ones.

HYLLUS:

Even if it's enormous, it shall be done.

HERACLES:

You must know this girl, the daughter of Eurytus?

HYLLUS:

You mean Iolê, I suppose? 1220

HERACLES:

You've got it. Now here's your assignment:

This woman—when I am dead, and if you wish to be

Reverent and remember the oath you swore to your father—

You will take her as your wife and not disobey your father.

No other man may take her. She slept with me. 1225

That's why only you, my son, may marry her.

You must do it. Obey me. If you follow my big commands

And skip the small ones, I won't thank you for any of it.

HYLLUS:

How horrible! It's a bad thing to provoke a sick man 1230

To anger. But who could bear to see him planning *this*?

1214: Hyllus will cut the wood, apparently, but others must pile it. Appropriately in view of his culture's horror of father-killing, he refuses to be implicated in his father's death. Philoctetes will light the pyre and in return receive Heracles' famous bow, the weapon that makes Philoctetes famous and necessary to the army at Troy.

HERACLES:

You're wailing like a man who won't do what I ask.

HYLLUS:

Who *would* do it? She's the one, the only one
 Who caused my mother's death—and yours—really!
 1235 Who would want this done if he weren't crazed
 With sickness? It would be better for me to die,
 Father, than live in marriage with our worst enemy.

HERACLES:

This man will not give me my due even when I am dying.
 But the curse of the gods hangs over you
 1240 For not obeying my commands.

HYLLUS:

How sick you seem to be! It's horrible to see this.

HERACLES:

Of course I am sick. My pain was asleep, but you stirred it up.

HYLLUS:

I am afraid. Whatever I do is going to be wrong.

HERACLES:

Because you think it's wrong to listen to your father.

HYLLUS:

1245 So I must master the art of impiety, Father?

HERACLES:

It's not impiety if you give my heart joy.

HYLLUS:

Are you commanding me to do this thing then
 And telling me that it's entirely right?

HERACLES:

I am. May the gods be my witnesses.

1243: "Whatever I do is going to be wrong"—The Greek says, "I will be facing many *aporiai*." An *aporia* is generally an impasse; here it means a moral dilemma. Hyllus' dilemma is that he would commit impiety if he disobeyed his father and that he would commit impiety if he married his family's enemy.

HYLLUS:

Then I will do it without any qualms if I can show
 The gods that the deed is yours. No one will find fault 1250
 With me for being obedient to you, Father.

HERACLES:

Good, good, at long last. Now quickly put the work
 Behind your fine words. Before my next spasm of pain
 Strikes me, put me up on the bonfire.
 Hurry up, make tracks. Lift me. This puts a stop 1255
 To my torment. It is the utmost end for this man.

HYLLUS:

Nothing will keep you from the end you want. It shall be done
 Because you command it and you force us to it, Father.

HERACLES:

Come now, before you stir up this pain again.
 O my sturdy soul, put a brace 1260
 Of steel to my lips, like a clamp to bind stones,
 And hold back their cries. This is cause for joy,
 This final, though unchosen, achievement.

HYLLUS:

Lift him up, my friends, and grant me,
 For doing this, great compassion. 1265
 And also see the great ruthlessness
 Of the gods in these actions.
 They sow children, we honor them
 As our fathers, and yet they watch so much suffering.

What is to come is not for anyone to see, 1270
 But what stands now is pitiful for us
 And shameful for them,
 But most harsh for him, of all men,
 The one who bears this rage.

(To the chorus leader.)

1263: "The hero of physical strength, addressing his soul or *psuchê*, becomes a hero of inner strength" (Segal 1995b, p. 51).

1272: "And shameful for them"—apparently, for the gods.

1275 Do not leave this home, young woman.
You have seen majesty in death, and novelty,
Much suffering, and suffering in new forms—
And nothing in this is not Zeus.

—END—

1275–8: Some manuscripts assign these lines to the chorus; some 19th-century editors rejected the lines altogether.

In line 1275, “Do not leave this home” seems to be the meaning of the manuscript, but an ancient commentator (a scholiast) reads a different Greek preposition that would yield “Do not stay at home.” Jebb follows that reading. The “young woman” is probably in the chorus; Iolê has not been present during the scene, and we have no reason to think she enters now.

See Introduction, p. x, on line 1278 and the issue of responsibility.

Electra

Electra: Cast of Characters

TUTOR	an old man who raised Orestes away from home
ORESTES	younger brother of Electra
ELECTRA	daughter of Agamemnon who has grown past the age of marriage
CHORUS	of women of Mycenae
CHRYSÓTHEMIS	Electra's sister, also unmarried
CLYTEMNESTRA	Agamemnon's widow; mother of Electra, Chrysóthemis, and Orestes
AEGISTHUS	Clytemnestra's lover and second husband, partner in the murder of Agamemnon

Nonspeaking Roles

PYLADES	Orestes' close friend
ATTENDANTS	to Clytemnestra

Casting

In the original production at the Theatre of Dionysus, the division of roles among the three speaking actors may have been as follows:

1. Electra
2. Orestes, Clytemnestra
3. Tutor, Chrysóthemis, Aegisthus

Electra

SCENE: *The front of the royal house at Mycenae, where Agamemnon used to rule, with two great doors in the center of the set. Near the doors, in front of the house, stands a statue of Apollo. The time is about ten years after the murder of Electra's father, Agamemnon, by Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus.*

(Enter the Tutor, Orestes, and Pylades through the stage left wing. They stand some distance from the great doors. Orestes has reached military age, about twenty years old.)

TUTOR:

My boy, your father commanded the army at Troy.
You are Agamemnon's son. And now you are here at last
To see for yourself, as you always wanted to do,
This place, this legend-haunted, longed-for land of Argos.
Io was driven across this plain by stinging flies. 5
And over there, Orestes, Apollo Wolf-slayer
Gave his name to the agora. That place on the left
Is Hera's famous temple. Where we stand now,
You may say you are looking at gold-rich Mycenae.

(Pointing to the great doors.)

And this blood-drenched house belongs to the family 10

4: Argos—the land of which Mycenae was the capital during Homer's life, the same time depicted in the play. In myth, Io was transformed into a cow and driven across this plain. Argos was also the name of the capital city at the time the play was written. It was known for its agora, a public market area dedicated to Apollo, and for its temple to Hera.

6: Apollo—the presiding deity of this play. For his importance to the underlying myth, see Introduction, p. xxviii. His epithet *Lykeios* could refer to his special affinity for light ("Lord of Light") or to some connection with wolves, probably through his role as protector of sheep from wolves ("Wolfish"). Here Sophocles refers to the myth of wolf-slaying that gave the agora at Argos its name. See lines 645 and 1379.

Of Pelops. I carried you away from your father's murder,
 Away from this place, when your own blood sister
 Gave you to me, so that I could save your life,
 Bring you up to young manhood, and train you
 15 To be the avenger of your father's death. Now, therefore,
 Orestes, and you too, Pylades, dearest friend,
 We must decide quickly what to do. The sun's rays,
 As you see, are already raising the voices of birds,
 And stars are fading from the dark and kindly skies.
 20 So before the first man ventures from this house,
 We'd better say enough to settle a plan. We mustn't shrink
 Or hesitate a moment longer. Now is the time to act.

ORESTES:

You are very near my heart, more than any other serving man.
 You've proved your nobility to me many times.
 25 You are like a well-bred horse: Even when it's old,
 A fine horse shows spirit at terrible threats
 And pricks up its ears. That's the way
 You spur me on and follow in the front rank.
 Now I'll reveal my secret plans to you.
 30 You must keep a sharp ear to what I say,
 And if I miss my target, you must set me right.
 You know I went to the Pythian Oracle at Delphi
 To find out what strategy would make
 My father's murderers pay the price for what they did.
 35 Apollo answered my questions along these lines:
 By myself, without mustering an armed force,
 To trick them, sneak in, and, with my own hand, do
 The slaughter they deserve. So on this basis,
 You are to go and, when the right moment strikes you,

11: Pelops—See note on line 505 for the tale of the curse on Pelops. See also House of Pelops Family Tree.

16: Pylades—Orestes' friend. In this play he has no lines, but he is always present with Orestes, and he presumably helps in the killing that will take place.

32: Pythia—the priestess who spoke for Apollo as the oracle at Delphi.

35–8: For the interpretation of Apollo's message to Orestes, see endnote.

39: "The right moment"—*kairos*, a term that will have a major role in this text. See line 76, "good timing."

Enter this house and find out everything they are doing, 40
 So that you can give me a report from firsthand knowledge.
 Your old age and the passing of many years will keep you
 From being recognized. They won't suspect a thing.
 Tell them this story: You are a visitor who's come
 From Phocis, and you represent Phanoteus, 45
 Who happens to be their biggest ally.
 Give them this message under oath:
 Orestes died in a fatal accident.
 When he was chariot racing at the Pythian Games,
 He was thrown from his perch. That's your story. 50
 As for us, we'll go first to Father's tomb, as the god directed,
 To make a libation, and I'll cut a fine bunch of hair
 To crown his grave. Then we'll come back here again,
 Carrying in our hands the bronze urn—
 You know, the one we hid in the bushes— 55
 So that we can sneak in with a phony tale
 That will delight them. We'll say that my remains
 Are already burned and reduced to ashes.
 How could this hurt me? I'll be dead, according to what I say,
 But what I do will make me safe—and famous. 60
 In my opinion, if a statement gives you an advantage,
 It's never bad. I've known many clever men
 Who were falsely reported dead. Then, when they came
 Back home, their reputation was higher than ever.
 So it is for me: I proclaim that through this message 65
 I shall strike the eyes of my enemies like a flaming star.
 And now, land of my father, gods of this place,
 Receive me on this successful journey of mine.
 And you,

(Turning to the great doors.)

45: Phocis—the land where Orestes grew up in safety, not far from Delphi, where his host was Strophius. See Sophoclean Geography. Strophius had a long-standing feud with his twin brother, beginning before they were born when they fought in their mother's womb. Phanoteus (or Panoteus) is the son of Strophius' brother; as the hereditary enemy of Orestes' host, he is a friend and ally of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

49: Pythian Games—games that were held at Delphi, where ruins of the stadium remain to this day. The events were similar to those of the Olympian Games; in both, the greatest glory was attached to the chariot race.

home of my father, I have come with justice
 70 On a mission from the gods to scrub out the stain.
 Do not reject me from this land in disgrace.
 Give me mastery of my wealth and power to bring order
 To my house. That is what I have to say.

Now, old man, go and look after your assigned job.
 75 We two will leave. The time is ripe, and when men act,
 They are governed above all by good timing.

ELECTRA: (*With a cry offstage.*)
 I am so miserable!

TUTOR:
 Listen, child. I think I heard one of the maidservants
 Crying inside the house.

(Enter Electra through the great doors. She stands at center stage.)

ORESTES:
 80 Is this Electra? Poor thing! What do you want to do?
 Should we stay and listen to her grief?

TUTOR:
 Certainly not. Nothing before Apollo's command;
 We must set out to follow that as our guide
 And make the libation to your father. This leads
 85 To victory, I assure you, and power over the perpetrators.

(Exit the Tutor, followed by Orestes and Pylades, through the stage right wing.)

ELECTRA:
 O holy light!
 O air, earth's equal partner!

With a cry: This stage direction marks an expression of grief in the Greek. The ancient text gives no stage directions, but it frequently includes expressions of grief that are not translatable into English, which does not have resources for expressing emotion that are as credible as those in ancient Greek. At places with this stage direction, actors may groan or cry appropriately.

85: "Power over the perpetrators"—in an alternative translation, "power in our actions." The Greek wording is ambiguous.

How many cries of grief have you heard?
 How many times have you seen me
 Draw blood as I beat at my breast 90
 When black night lifted?
 O these all-night festivals of weeping!
 That loathsome bed at home—
 How well I know every lump in it, lying awake,
 Mourning for my poor father. 95
 He could have been an honored guest in a foreign grave
 If the bloody war had taken him.

But no. My mother and her playmate in bed,
 Aegisthus, like a pair of lumberjacks
 At an oak tree, took a bloody axe and split his skull. 100
 Now, O my father, no one weeps for you but me.
 I am the only one who cries out against your murder.
 And I will never stop.
 I will shout my sadness to the world,
 So long as shining stars plunge around the sky 105
 Or sunlight beams into my eyes.
 Like the nightingale who sings
 For her murdered child, I will proclaim
 My raging grief to everyone
 In front of these, my father's gates. 110

I call on hell, home of Hades and Persephone;
 I call Hermes out of the dark earth
 And Ara, Mistress of the Curse;
 I call the god-begotten holy Furies—

107: "The nightingale"—According to legend, Procne was transformed into a nightingale after killing her child Itys in an act of revenge against Itys' father. As a bird, she sings mournfully, "Itys, Itys" (148). An ambiguity in the Greek allows us to read, with Jebb (1893/2004), "the nightingale, slayer of her offspring," but we agree with Kells (1973) that Electra here alludes simply to grief for a murdered child, leaving open the issue of responsibility.

111–4: Hades and Persephone preside over the Underworld, where the dead live. Hermes is the messenger god who guides the dead to Hades and may also serve as a guide to those who avenge the dead. Ara is the personification of the curse Agamemnon presumably called down on his killers. The Furies (Erinyes) are deities of vengeance who pursue killers.

[Antistrophe *a*]

CHORUS:

But you—

You'll never raise him up!

Hades sucks everyone down.

Your father needs no tears or prayers from you!

You were right to grieve at first,

But now it's absurd, this endless wailing.

You'll cry yourself to death. Tell me:

Why are you so devoted to your pain?

140

ELECTRA:

Could anyone forget

The horror of a parent's death?

Or learn to be as silent as a baby?

My mind is stamped in the image of a crying bird,

Who calls for her dead child forever, "Itys, Itys!"

And mindless with grief, she is Zeus' messenger.

O you all-suffering Niobe, I follow you as my goddess

Because you kept on weeping, weeping

While you were transformed into stone,

(A loud cry of anguish.)

And even your rock-tomb wept!

145

150

[Strophe *b*]

CHORUS:

But you are not alone, child:

All mortals suffer pain. You let it hurt too much.

The others in your house—

Same father, same blood as you,

155

147–8: "Crying bird . . . 'Itys, Itys!'"—The nightingale ushers in spring and, in this way is a messenger of Zeus. Its cry is heard as one of mourning for its dead child. For the myth, see note on line 107.

150: Niobe had offended the goddess Leto by bragging about her human children. Leto's divine offspring, Apollo and Artemis, killed the children to punish Niobe. According to the story, as Niobe wept for her loss, she became a granite surface in the mountains, over which water dripped perpetually, like a woman who never ceases to weep. See Sophocles' *Antigone* 832.

Chrysóthemis and Iphianassa—
 They live with the same loss as you;
 Why do you take it over the edge?
 160 And what about the boy who was hidden from pain?
 He is well born and happy, and someday
 Mycenae, our famous land, will have him back
 At the altar of Zeus, who cares for us. Orestes will come!

ELECTRA:

He's the one I'm waiting for! I never give up.
 165 I hang on—unmarried, childless, fluttering in misery,
 Sodden with tears—while my string of bad luck
 Runs on and on. But Orestes forgets his pain
 And what he knows of mine.
 How can he send message after message?
 170 None of them come true!
 Always he says, "I long to come! I long to come!"
 All right! But then show yourself to me!

[Antistrophe *b*]

CHORUS:

Be hopeful, child, be hopeful.
 Even now, in heaven, great Zeus
 175 Sees all, rules all.
 Let *him* bear your grief. It is too much for you.
 And as for those you hate, do not forget,
 But do not hate too much.
 Time is a soft and gentle god.
 And still the lord of the cow-grazed height of Crisa,
 180 Apollo, turns this over and over in his mind.

157: Iphianassa—in Homeric legend, the name of one of Agamemnon's daughters. In one surviving version of the story of Agamemnon's human sacrifice, she replaces Iphigenia (whose name was unknown to Homer) as the daughter whose life Agamemnon gave to obtain a fair wind for Troy. Here she is simply another sister of Electra.

165: "I hang on—unmarried"—Electra's name means "unmarried."

179: Crisa—a plain, sacred to Apollo, that runs from near Delphi to the sea at the Gulf of Corinth. See Sophoclean Geography for Crisa's proximity to Phocis, Orestes' place of exile.

So does Agamemnon's son.
And so does the godlike king himself, by Acheron.

ELECTRA:

But what about me? What hope can I have? 185
My life drains away; my strength is gone.
I am some childless woman
With no man to depend on.
I am no better than a foreign servant, a worthless woman,
Brought to tend my father's room, 190
Dressed in these rags, laying food on a table
That has no place for me.

[Strophe c]

CHORUS: (*Remembering the killing of Agamemnon.*)

Agony to hear, a scream at homecoming,
Agony, in the lap of ancestors,
When he faced the bronze jaws, 195
Startled by their assault.
Deception spoke then, lust had its way,
And what they conceived was horrible, horribly given shape,
Whether it was a human—or a god—
Who made it be. 200

ELECTRA:

The day I hate beyond all others,
The day of my worst enemies!
The night, festival of anguish,
Unspeakable, when my father saw 205
His own death, his murder at their hands.
When they caught up my life

182: "The godlike king himself, by Acheron"—Agamemnon. In myth, Acheron is a river in the Underworld. The Greek allows another translation: "the god who is lord by Acheron," i.e., Hades (so Jebb). Our translation follows Kells.

195: "The bronze jaws"—the two-bladed axe used in the killing.

199–200: "Whether it was a human . . . made it be"—The chorus refer to the tradition that such events in Agamemnon's family are due to the curse on the house of Pelops, but this in no way weakens their charge against the lovers who killed the king. On responsibility in Sophocles, see Introduction, pp. ix–xi.

And threw it away, ruined.
 Great god on Olympus,
 210 Make them pay the full price in pain!
 Never let them taste the joy of triumph,
 Because they did this thing.

[Antistrophe c]

CHORUS:

Tell yourself: "Do not raise your voice again."
 Have you any idea where this leads?
 215 You are so far out of line, you'll fall
 Blindly into ruin, your own blindness.
 You'll get more than your share of trouble
 If the sick spirit in your soul
 Is pregnant with battle, if it always hatches war.
 220 Never launch a quarrel against the powers that be!

ELECTRA:

But I have to be dreadful in dreadful times. Necessity!
 I understand my passions; they are no mystery to me.
 But in dreadful times, how could I hold back?
 This blind fury seethes
 225 Until I die.
 Dear friends, noble as you are, no one now
 Can tell me anything that helps.
 No one with good sense would think otherwise.
 Please go away; spare me your comfort.
 230 My pain is beyond cure,
 And I will never let it go.
 I will weep without end.

[Epode]

CHORUS:

All right, but I meant well.
 I spoke like a mother, from my heart:
 235 Trust me! Do not hatch ruin out of ruin!

209: Olympus—in myth, the mountain home of Zeus and his family of gods.

226–7: See endnote for different readings.

ELECTRA:

Set limits to evil? Impossible!
 How could it be good to neglect the dead?
 Would human nature bear it?
 Save me from the "honor" of restraint!
 And, if I may speak from my heart, 240
 Save me from the peaceful life
 That would dishonor my parents
 And clip the wings from my shrill soaring cries.
 Because my poor father lies dead, 245
 Because he is earth and nothing,
 They, in return,
 Shall pay the price—death for death—
 If any strength remains
 In the reverence and respect of mortals. 250

CHORUS:

As for me, dear child, I came because I care
 Deeply for you, as for myself. If I speak wrong,
 You win. I will follow you.

ELECTRA:

It shames me, ladies, if you judge
 Me guilty of excessive pain and grief. 255
 But be understanding: Violence forces me
 To act this way. How could any highborn
 Woman see her father's suffering and not act so?
 His death is always before my eyes,
 Day and night, growing like a healthy weed. 260
 First, my mother's part in this—because she bore me—
 Is the cruelest blow of all. And then,
 In my own home I rub shoulders with the killers
 Of my father. I am at their command; I depend
 On them. Sometimes they give me what I need; 265
 Sometimes they don't. And what kind of life
 Do you think I can lead? When Aegisthus sits
 In front of me on the throne that was my father's,
 When he wears Father's clothes and pours libations
 For hearth and home right where they killed him—
 And I have no choice but to watch all this? 270
 Then the ultimate outrage—I see him,
 The murderer himself, in Father's bed

With Mother. "Mother"? That disaster of a woman!
 Can I really call her that when she's the bedmate
 275 Of that man? She is so shameless, she sleeps
 With pollution, and she does not fear the fury
 Of the gods! It's as if she's laughing away her crimes.
 She keeps track of the anniversary of the day
 She killed my father after tricking him.
 280 And on that day she has a festival
 Of sacred dance and sacrifices to the gods,
 Gods she thinks will protect her.
 Poor me! I watch all this from under the same roof,
 Wasting myself with tears, screaming at the horror
 Of the feast named for my father.
 285 I cry alone, by myself, with never enough tears
 To satisfy the hunger of my angry soul.
 And she mocks me: "So! One high-toned woman—only one—
 Keeps saying this was wrong. No one else complains
 Or calls it hateful to the gods. Are you the first
 290 To have a father die? The only human being
 To suffer and to grieve? Devil take you!
 I hope the gods below never set you free
 From all your weeping and wailing." That's how
 She insults me. But when she hears that Orestes
 295 May be on the way, she comes after me,
 Shouting like mad, "It's all your fault! You did it!
 You stole Orestes right out of my hands.
 Damn sure I'll make you pay for that."
 That's how she howls for justice. And he's beside her,
 300 Cheering her on, her famous fresh-made husband,
 Totally pathetic, can't do anything on his own,
 Has to have a woman fight his battles for him.
 So while I keep waiting for Orestes to come
 And put a stop to all my trouble, I am perishing here.
 305 And what's Orestes doing? Nothing but having good

275–6: "She sleeps with pollution"—As the killer of Clytemnestra's husband, Aegisthus carries a kind of curse, a pollution that has not been washed away. According to tradition, when a murderer remains in the land of his victim, pollution lies on the land. This idea lies behind the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Intentions, which are smashing all my hopes,
 Both here and there. At times like these, my friends,
 It would be crazy to be sane or reverent.
 Bad times make bad deeds a necessity.

CHORUS:

Tell me: Is Aegisthus at home? Would you 310
 Say this while he's near? Or is he away?

ELECTRA:

Of course he's away. If he were near,
 I'd have stayed indoors. Right now he's in the fields.

CHORUS:

Well then, in that case, I might find 315
 The courage to join in what you say.

ELECTRA:

He's gone all right. What do you want to know?

CHORUS:

Here's my question for you: Your brother—
 Is he coming now or later? I want to know.

ELECTRA:

He says he's coming, but he doesn't do what he says.

CHORUS:

Men often hold back when the job is enormous. 320

ELECTRA:

But I saved his life. And it wasn't by holding back!

CHORUS:

Be hopeful. A noble nature never fails his friends.

ELECTRA:

So I believe. That's what's kept me alive this long.

(Enter Chrysothemis through the great doors during the following speech.)

CHORUS:

No more words now, nothing. I see your sister 325
 Coming from the house—Chrysothemis. Like you,
 She has her father's nature—and her mother's. Look!

In her hands she has gifts to offer, as custom dictates, to the dead.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

What is this noise you're making just outside
 Our doorway? Sister, what are you saying?
 330 After so much time, are you still refusing to learn
 How silly it is to indulge in empty displays of emotion?
 At least I understand the situation I am in:
 I am in so much agony over the way things are now.
 If I were strong enough, I'd show them what I think of them,
 335 But I have decided that in a storm it's best to slacken sail
 And not pretend to take action when you're causing them
 No pain. You should follow my example. As for justice,
 I agree: I am not speaking up for justice;
 Your judgment is correct. Still, I must live in freedom,
 340 And to do that I must totally obey the powers that be.

ELECTRA:

Dreadful! Absurd! Your father's the source of who you are.
 Yet you forget him and think only of the woman
 Who gave you birth. You learned everything from her.
 When you scold me, it comes from her, not you.
 345 Take your pick: Either you are out of your mind,
 Or you've stayed sane by putting family out of mind.
 The way you are speaking now, if you were strong,
 You'd show how much you hate all this.
 But when I demand total vengeance for Father,
 350 You won't act with me. And when I act, you try to stop me.
 What is this but cowardice on top of our trouble?
 Explain to me—or else take my point—
 What would I gain by silencing my grief?
 I have my life, don't I? It's bad, but it's enough
 355 For me. And I give pain to *them*, so if there's any joy
 Down there, the dead man has some satisfaction.
 Yes, you hate, but your hatred is only a word.

327: "Gifts to offer . . . to the dead"—in this case, offerings meant to pacify the angry dead, probably consisting of a pitcher for pouring out fine oil as a libation, flowers, and cakes (so Jebb 1893/2004; see lines 433–4).

346: "Family"—*philoí*, "dear ones." In this context it means family and specifically the women's father (so Jebb).

Action killed Father, and you're cozy with the killers.
 I would never give in to those people—
 Even if they promised me all the luxuries 360
 You revel in today. Never! You can have
 That gourmet food. Stuff yourself with it.
 All the nourishment I need I take by not disappointing
 Myself. I don't want any part of the rewards you get,
 And you wouldn't either if you were sane. You had a chance 365
 To be known for the excellence of our wonderful father,
 And you chose Mother. So most people think you're rotten,
 Now that Father's dead, and you've betrayed your own family.

CHORUS:

Not so angry, by the gods! You'd both be better off
 If you learned something from each other. You should apply 370
 Her words to your life, and she should apply yours to hers.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

As for me, ladies, I have become rather accustomed
 To the things she says. I would never have brought it up,
 Except that trouble is coming her way on a huge scale,
 So I heard. That will stop her endless wailing. 375

ELECTRA:

Really? Tell me what's so dreadful. If it's worse
 Than the trouble I have now, I'll stop arguing.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

All right, I'll tell you everything I know.
 Their plan is this: If you don't quit this lamentation,
 They will send you away to a place where never again 380
 Will you see the light of the sun. You will be alive
 Under the roof of a dungeon far from this land, and there
 You may sing of your troubles. Think this over, and, later on,
 Don't blame me if you suffer. Now is the time to get smart.

ELECTRA:

That is what they plan to do to me? 385

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Absolutely. As soon as Aegisthus comes home.

ELECTRA:

Then I hope he makes it here quickly.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

What are you saying? It will haunt you.

ELECTRA:

I want him to come if he has a mind to do any of this.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

390 What are you aiming at? Have you lost your mind?

ELECTRA:

I aim to get as far as I can away from all of you.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Don't you care at all about the life you have now?

ELECTRA:

Yes, it's a fine life I lead. Wonderful.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

But it would be—if you'd only learn to think straight.

ELECTRA:

395 Don't you try to persuade me to turn against family.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I am not trying to persuade you to do anything.
Just give in to the powers that be.

ELECTRA:

You mean suck up to them, like you! I can't live your way!

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

But good judgment is a fine thing if it keeps you from falling
down.

ELECTRA:

I'll fall, if I have to, avenging Father.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

400 Father would understand this and forgive.

ELECTRA:

Congratulations on your wisdom! A coward would say the same.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

So you're not persuaded? You won't agree with me?

395: "Family"—See note on line 346.

ELECTRA:

No way. I hope I'll never be such an idiot.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Then I will leave you. I was sent out for a purpose.

ELECTRA:

Where *are* you going? These offerings—who are they for?

405

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Mother sent me to pour libations at Father's tomb.

ELECTRA:

What? Though he hates her more than anyone?

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Though she killed him. That's what you meant to say.

ELECTRA:

Did she get this idea from some friend? Who is she trying to please?

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

She got it from fear, because of her dream. That's what I think.

410

ELECTRA: (*Cheerfully.*)

O gods of our father, be with us now, above all!

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Does Mother's panic give you some reason to hope?

ELECTRA:

Tell me what she saw. Then I'll answer.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

But I don't know much; I can say only a little.

ELECTRA:

Then tell me that! Often, a few words are enough
To ruin a human life or to save one.

415

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Word is that she saw our father, yours and mine,
And he was living with her again, after he had returned
Into the light. And then, in front of the hearth,
He took and planted his scepter, the one he used to hold,
Which Aegisthus has now, and from it sprang

420

A vigorous young branch that cast its shade
 Over all the land of Mycenae.
 I heard these details from someone who was there
 425 When Mother revealed her dream to the Sun.
 More than this I do not know. Except:
 She sent me out on account of this fear.
 Now, I beg you, by the gods of our people, take my advice:
 Don't let yourself fall down as a result of bad judgment.
 430 If you push me away now, you'll be back when you're in trouble.

ELECTRA:

No, darling! Those things you are carrying—
 Don't let any of them touch his tomb. It would be an outrage,
 An irreverence, to bring that hateful woman's gifts
 As offerings for Father's grave. No libations, either.
 435 No. Toss them in the wind or dig them a hole
 Deep in the earth, where none of them will ever come near
 Our father's resting place. *She* can have them when she dies,
 Her own little buried treasure, which we saved for her.
 First off, if she weren't the hardest-hearted woman on earth,
 440 She'd never send you to honor the man she killed
 With a crown of offerings, a libation of hate.
 Ask yourself: Do you think the dead man would accept
 These gifts as tokens of friendship? When he died
 At her hand, dishonored, like a worthless enemy?
 445 When she hacked off his legs? Wiped the blood
 Off her hands onto his hair? Don't tell me you believe

425: "Revealed her dream to the Sun"—Helios, the sun god.

428–30: The manuscripts assign these lines to Electra, but that is impossible. The warning against bad judgment can only come from Chrysothemis.

444: "Dishonored, like a worthless enemy"—A killer outside of war normally would have to pay a blood price to the victim's relatives. But Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon as if he were an enemy in war and therefore did not expect to have to pay for it.

445: "Hacked off his legs"—so that his ghost would not be able to move, and so could not endanger her. This explanation comes from an ancient scholar ("a scholiast") commenting on the text. Compare Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers* 439.

445–6: "Wiped the blood . . . onto his hair"—a sign that the blood is on Agamemnon's own head, that he made himself responsible for his own death by killing Iphigenia (so an ancient commentator).

You could wash her crimes away! Not with the things
 You carry. No way! Get rid of them. Do this instead:
 Cut off the waving tresses of your hair at the end,
 And cut mine, too. It isn't much, but in my sad state, 450
 That's all I have, dull as it is. But give it to him, please,
 And take this belt of mine, although it's very plain.
 Fall on your knees and make this prayer: "May he rise
 From the earth to be our friend and ally, may he strike
 Our enemies, and may his son Orestes have the upper hand. 455
 May our enemies learn that he is still alive
 When he has crushed them under his foot
 So we may crown him with richer hands
 Than those we have today." Listen, I believe
 He cares for us; I believe he sent her the nightmare 460
 For our sake, for you and me, my sister, as a helping hand.
 He is a true friend, though he sleeps below, in Hades;
 No one is closer, or more dear to us both, than Father.

CHORUS:

Reverence agrees with the girl.
 If your mind is sound, you'll do what she said. 465

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I'll do it. Justice forbids debating on both sides
 When what it demands is immediate action.
 But please, for my sake, my friends,
 Be quiet about it while I carry out this plan.
 If Mother learns about it, bitter pain 470
 Will strike me if I dare to carry on.

(Exit Chrysóthemis through the stage right wing.)

451: "Dull as it is"—a translation of the manuscript reading, which implies that her hair is dull, probably because she could not afford to dress it with fine oils or unguents. Most modern editors prefer to read a word meaning "shining" or "oily" and, by implication, "denoting supplication" (Lloyd-Jones 1994).

466: "Justice forbids"—perhaps stronger than the Greek. The unusual construction could mean either (1) it makes no sense to have a two-sided debate about justice, or (2) when justice clearly requires one action, no matter what, there can be no just grounds for a two-sided debate.

First Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe]

Unless I have totally lost my mind
 Like some raving fortune-teller,
 It was Justice that spoke through that dream,
 475 And the force of her hand will bring justice here
 Very, very soon.
 My confidence soared
 480 As soon as I heard
 The sweet breath of this dream.
 Now there will be no forgetting:
 Your father, king of the Greeks, remembers,
 485 And so does the old bronze-made double blade
 That hacked him down,
 A shameful, shameful crime.

[Antistrophe]

The Fury will be here in bronze,
 With a multitude of feet,
 490 An army of hands.
 She lies in ambush, terrible,
 The Fury who came against
 This marriage that is no marriage,
 Blood drenched, forbidden.
 We can be sure of this:
 495 When people commit such crimes
 Or conspire to do them with someone else,
 The only miracle they can expect
 Is monstrous—their own punishment.
 Surely human prophecy

484: "King of the Greeks"—Agamemnon. Although he was not king of all Greeks, he was the king whom the other kings had sworn to follow in the event of war with Troy.

488: "The Fury"—Erinys, one of the divine beings that wreak vengeance on criminals who have not been punished by their victims' kin. In the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus' trilogy on this myth, as Sophocles' audience well knew, the Furies pursue Orestes after he kills his mother.

Cannot depend on oracles
 Or on dreams of terror 500
 Unless this vision of the night,
 As we hope, comes true.

[Epode]

O Pelops! Your victory
 In that old chariot race! 505
 How painfully it weighs, endlessly,
 On our land.
 From the time when Myrtilus
 Went to sleep beneath the sea,
 Where he was tossed from a chariot of gold, 510
 Hurlled like an uprooted tree,
 In a miserable crime.
 After that,
 This house has never been free
 From the pain that flows from a crime. 515

*(Enter Clytemnestra through the great doors. She confronts
 Electra.)*

CLYTEMNESTRA:

So! I suppose you think you're free to roam about
 Now that Aegisthus is away. He'd keep you in bounds,
 Indoors, so you wouldn't be such a disgusting embarrassment
 To your dear family. Well, he's gone, and you never listen
 To me. And yet you have lots and lots of things to say 520
 About me to the people. You call me cruel!
 You say I rule with no regard for justice, that I treat you

505: The chariot race of Pelops was the source of the curse on the family of Pelops, from whom Agamemnon and Aegisthus are both descended (see House of Pelops Family Tree). King Oenomaus had offered the hand of his daughter Hippodamia to the man who could beat him in a chariot race. Pelops raced Oenomaus after taking the precaution of bribing Oenomaus' charioteer—Myrtilus—to remove the linchpin on Oenomaus' vehicle (that pin keeps the wheel from sliding off the axle). Oenomaus died in the race, so Pelops was the winner. But Myrtilus claimed Hippodamia, and Pelops then threw the charioteer into the ocean. Just before Myrtilus drowned, he placed a curse on Pelops and Pelops' descendants.

Arrogantly, outrageously! But the outrage isn't coming from me.
 I am only giving you back the insults you give me.
 525 Your father—that's your only charge against me—
 That his death came from me. From me!
 I know that well enough. I can't deny it.
 But it was justice that took him; I didn't do it alone.
 And you should have helped, too, if you'd had any sense,
 530 Because this father of yours—the one you're always
 Weeping about—was the only Greek hard hearted enough
 To sacrifice a girl to the gods—your sister. The pains he took
 To father her were nothing like the pain I had in giving birth.
 All right. Can you convince me he had a reason to sacrifice her?
 535 For what? For the Greeks? They had no business killing a girl
 Who belonged to me. Was it for his brother Menelaus
 That he killed her? If so, don't I still have a right to justice?
 Didn't Menelaus have two children?
 And didn't they have a better reason to die?
 540 After all, it was their father and mother who launched those
 ships.
 Do you think Hades had a greater appetite for my children
 Than for hers? Or did your wretched father
 Let his love for my children fade away
 While his love was still strong for those of Menelaus?
 545 Would any father do these things
 Unless he had foul judgment and a wicked mind?
 I don't think so, though I know your mind is different.
 She would agree with me, the dead girl would, if she had a voice.
 As for me, I have no regrets about what I did.
 550 Do you think I'm not making any sense? Wait till your mind
 Sides with justice before you start blaming your neighbors.

ELECTRA:

This time you won't say that it was I who began
 A round of insults. Still, if you permit,
 I'd like to set the record straight
 555 About my dead father and also about my sister.

536: "His brother Menelaus"—The Greek armada had formed to sail across to Troy and recover the beautiful Helen, who had been Menelaus' wife before she was carried off to Troy by Paris. Agamemnon and other Greek leaders had sworn to defend the marriage of Menelaus and Helen.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

By all means, plunge ahead. If you always began
A speech this way, you wouldn't be so painful to hear.

ELECTRA:

All right, I will speak out: You admit you killed Father.
Could anything be more disgusting than that?

No! Even if you had justice on your side!

560

But I tell you, there was no justice in your killing.

You were controlled—brainwashed—by that wicked man,

The one you sleep with now. Would you demand an account

From Artemis, the dog driver, why she locked up the winds at
Aulis?

Punishing what? I'll explain, since asking her is out of bounds.

565

One day, I'm told, my father went for sport

Through woods belonging to the goddess,

And there he startled a dear, a spotted buck

With antlers. He killed it, and, in doing that,

He struck the goddess with an arrogant boast.

570

This so enraged her that she held the Greek army back,

So that my father would have to pay for his kill

By sacrificing his own daughter. That's how it was—

Her sacrificial death. The army had no other way

To move—no going home, no going on to Troy.

This forced him to do it, though he fought it hard,

575

And it was hard for him to sacrifice the girl. It was not

A favor to Menelaus. But suppose it was, as you claim,

And he did this to benefit his brother.

Should he die for that? At *your* hand? By whose law?

Think what you lay on yourself by imposing this law

580

563–4: “Would you demand an account from Artemis”—Electra implies that when Clytemnestra condemns her father for sacrificing Iphigenia (lines 530–46), she is calling Artemis to account. But the story does not do Agamemnon credit.

564: “Dog driver”—Artemis is called the “dog driver” because she is the goddess of the hunt.

565: “Asking her is out of bounds”—It would be wrong for a human being to insist that a goddess explain her actions.

570: “Arrogant boast”—Agamemnon killed a sacred deer in a sacred precinct and claimed credit for it, thus insulting Artemis.

On others. Watch out, it may be grief and repentance.
 Because if we start taking a life for a life, each time
 You'll be the first to die—if justice comes your way.
 Take care: Your plea of justice will not stand.
 585 Please, if you like, convince me you had cause
 To commit your own more recent foul, disgusting crimes:
 One, you are sleeping with a man whose hands
 Are stained with blood (your helper, back then, in killing Father);
 Two, you are making babies while you turn the ones you had
 590 Back then into outcasts, although they had grown up true
 To the family and from a true marriage. For these two crimes
 How can I say a single word of praise? Are you telling me
 That you did them to avenge your daughter?
 Ridiculous! Whatever you say, it's disgusting
 To marry an enemy to get even for a daughter's death.
 595 Yet I am not allowed to say a single word against you
 Without you shouting to the whole wide world
 That I have a filthy mouth. And what are you to me?
 More tyrant than mother, in my judgment.
 My life is a misery; I bed down with pain
 600 And endless anguish all because of you—and him,
 Your partner. As for the one of us who got away,
 Orestes, he suffers still, though you can't reach him now.
 You keep accusing me of raising him to wash away
 Blood-guilt by vengeance. Well, if I had the strength,
 605 I would have done it for sure. Because of him, you blare
 Insults at me from the rooftops: "Wicked slut" you say,
 Or "foul-mouthed," or "no sense of shame at all."
 All right, if I was born like that, it came from you.
 So I have my mother's nature: I'm not ashamed of that.

CHORUS:

610 I see she is huffing with anger. Is she giving any thought
 To whether justice is on her side? I don't see that yet.

589: "You are making babies"—Among the children of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra was a daughter, Erigone. According to one story, she was the mother of Orestes' illegitimate son Penthilus.

610: "I see she is huffing with anger"—Who is the chorus referring to—Electra or Clytemnestra? The text is unclear. See endnote.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

What kind of thought should I have toward her?
 She treats her mother so outrageously—and at her age, too!
 Don't you understand? She has no sense of shame.
 She'd stop at nothing, no matter how disgusting. 615

ELECTRA:

Listen, of course I am ashamed of what I do,
 Even if you can't tell. I learn from what I see,
 And so I act in ways that are not right for me.
 It's all because you hate me so much.
 You absolutely force me to act the way I do. 620
 You know: "Act ugly, ugly actions teach."

CLYTEMNESTRA:

You nasty bitch! So I'm to blame! Really?
 My words, my actions—they're making you talk too much?

ELECTRA:

It's you. You're the one who's talking, not me.
 The action was yours, and action is the cause of words. 625

CLYTEMNESTRA:

My god! By Artemis, I swear you'll pay for this
 Insolence. Just wait till Aegisthus is home.

ELECTRA:

Look at that! You just flew into a rage! You said I could say
 What I want, but you don't know how to listen!

CLYTEMNESTRA:

Won't you let me make my sacrifice? A decent silence, please; 630
 No more shouting. I let you say everything you wanted.

ELECTRA:

Make your sacrifice! My lips are sealed.
 I won't say another word that offends you.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

(To a servant, who is carrying a tray of garden-grown offerings.)

621: "Act ugly, ugly actions teach"—apparently, a proverb. The word translated "ugly"—the opposite of "beautiful," "noble"—is often translated as "shameful" or "disgusting."

Then I ask you to stand by me and lift up
 635 These bountiful offerings so that I may raise a prayer
 To this lord to release me from the fears that I have now.

(To the statue.)

Hear my words I pray, Apollo, guardian of our house,
 And understand their secret meaning. I am not among friends,
 And it would be a mistake for me to bring everything
 640 Openly into the light while she is standing next to me.
 If I did, her tongue is so busy screaming in anger
 That she'd spread false, malicious words all over the city.
 So listen to me as I asked, since this is how I'll speak.
 The images I saw last night in that dream with two meanings—
 645 O Wolf-slayer, if what they promise is good,
 Grant that they may come true! But if not,
 If what they promise is hostile, send them back
 Against my enemies. And if anyone has a secret plot
 To throw me out of my position of wealth, don't let them.
 650 But allow me to live my life, as before, in total safety,
 Looking after this house and the royal power
 Of the sons of Atreus. Allow me to share
 Day after day of happiness with my friends
 And my children—the ones who do not hate me
 655 Or carry bitter pain. For these things, Apollo
 Wolf-slayer, I pray. Hear me graciously,

638: "I am not among friends"—Clytemnestra is trying to convey her meaning about the dream to Apollo while concealing it from Electra, her enemy. She does not know that Electra has already heard the content of the dream.

644: "That dream with two meanings"—literally, "that double dream," the one described at lines 417–23. The meaning depends on which king is represented by the branching scepter. If it is Aegisthus, the dream is good for Clytemnestra because it means their son will rule. But if it is Agamemnon, as she fears, then it means that Orestes will recover the kingdom.

645: "Wolf-slayer"—literally, "Wolfish." This phrase could also be translated "Lord of Light," but here Clytemnestra is most likely thinking of Apollo as the god who protects the family from threats such as wolves. See note on line 6.

652: "The sons of Atreus"—Agamemnon and Menelaus.

And grant us all that we request. What I've not said
I believe you understand, though I am silent.
As a god, as a son of Zeus, you must know everything.

(Enter the Tutor through the stage right wing.)

TUTOR:

Greetings to you, women. As your guest, I ask if I can be
Certain that this is the house of the tyrant Aegisthus. 660

CHORUS:

It is here, my friend. Your guess was right.

TUTOR:

Now I am also guessing that this is the woman in charge.
Am I right? She looks like a ruler.

CHORUS:

She certainly is. And she's right there beside you. 665

TUTOR:

I wish you joy, lady. I am here with a report from a friend.
It will be a pleasure for you to hear and for Aegisthus as well.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

What a good omen! I accept it. But first,
I must know who it was that sent you to me.

TUTOR:

Phanoteus of Phocis. And the matter is weighty. 670

CLYTEMNESTRA:

What is it, visitor? Tell me. It comes from a man
Who is our friend, as I know clearly, so I expect friendly news.

TUTOR:

Orestes is dead, to put it succinctly.

ELECTRA:

Oh no! Misery! I'm finished. Today's the end for me.

661: "Tyrant"—a word that need not carry an offensive meaning. The irony here is that it does carry such a negative connotation to the Tutor (as it would to the Athenian audience), but not to Clytemnestra.

670: "Phanoteus of Phocis"—a special friend of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; Phocis is the place where Orestes grew safely to manhood. See note on line 45 and Sophoclean Geography.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

675 What are you saying? What are you saying? Don't listen to her.

TUTOR:

Orestes is dead. I said it once; I'll say it again.

ELECTRA:

I'm finished. A miserable nothing. It's all over for me now.

CLYTEMNESTRA: (*To Electra.*)

Mind your own business and get to work. Now you,
Visitor. Tell me the truth: In what way did he die?

TUTOR:

680 I was sent on this mission, so I will tell you everything.
Orestes came to the glorious showplace of Greece
To compete for prizes in the Delphic Games.
And when he had heard the announcer, in a great voice,
Call for the footrace, the very first event,
685 He entered it. His body had a glow
That struck awe into everyone. He completed the course
As well as he began it and came out with the prize.
Well, to make a long story short for you,
I never knew such a man for winning prizes.
690 This much is certain: In every race the referee announced,
The one on the double track and all the usual ones,
He carried off the wreaths of victory.
Everyone thought he was blessed with happiness,
And they hailed him as Orestes from Argos, the son
695 Of Agamemnon, who, once upon a time,
Mustered the glorious army of Greece. And so it was.
But when a god is being destructive, there is no strength
That can escape. So, on another day,
When the chariot race was set to begin at dawn,
700 He entered the swift contest against many charioteers.
One was Achaean, one from Sparta, and two

682: Delphic Games—See line 49, with note. During the Pythian Festival at Delphi there were contests in the arts, in athletics, and in racing chariots and horses, in that order. The chariot race took the form of laps between turning posts. For Homer's account of such a race, see Book 23 of the *Iliad*.

686–7: See endnote for an alternative reading.

Of them were expert yoke-masters from Libya.
 There was one who had horses from Thessaly
 (He was the fifth); the sixth came from Aetolia
 And was driving chestnut fillies. The seventh was 705
 Magnesian; the eighth, with white horses, was Aenian;
 The ninth one came from Athens, a city built by gods.
 And there was a Boeotian, who manned the tenth chariot.
 They took their places where the appointed referees,
 After casting lots, assigned each vehicle. 710
 Then, at a trumpet blast, they were off like a shot,
 Cheering on their horses with one voice, snapping the reins.
 Then all the racecourse was bursting with sound,
 The clatter and clash of chariots, and the dust
 Billowed up. Soon they were all in a close pack, 715
 Goading their horses like mad, each one trying
 To pass the other's axle and snorting horses,
 For everywhere their flanks and their spinning wheels
 Were spattered with foam from horses' panting breath.
 Now, at each turn, Orestes kept close to the post, 720
 Just touching it with his axle-housing and giving
 His right-hand horse free rein to block the next team.
 At first, they all stayed upright in their chariots,
 But then the Aenian racer lost control
 Of his colts—they were too hard mouthed to feel 725
 The bridle—right at the turn at the end of the sixth lap.
 As the seventh lap began, his colts dashed their heads
 On a chariot from Libya. Then one piled into another
 In a single disaster of broken, colliding chariots, and the whole
 Plain of Crisa was filled with the wreckage of horse-gear. 730
 Seeing this, the Athenian, who was an expert with reins,
 Jerked his team aside and held them back
 So he avoided the maelstrom of horses at the center.
 Orestes was driving in the first lane, holding his colts
 Just behind the others, trusting in a strong finish. 735
 When he saw that only one other remained on the course,
 He barked a sharp command into his horses' ears
 And gave chase. The two were driving yoke to yoke;
 Now one, now the other, took the lead,
 But never by more than a horse's head. 740
 Now, during all the laps so far, Orestes drove safely,
 And the poor man kept his vehicle straight and upright.

But then he slacked off on the left-hand reins
 As the horse was turning—he wasn't paying attention.
 745 He crashed against the post, shattered
 His axle-housing, dived over the railing,
 Got tangled in the cut-leather reins. As he fell,
 His horses skittered off into the middle of the course.
 The people, when they saw he was thrown from his chariot,
 750 Were wailing with pity for this young man,
 Who, after doing such great deeds, had wound up
 In such a disaster. Now he was thrown in the dust,
 Now tossed to the sky, his legs flashing, until drivers,
 With great difficulty, got his horses under control.
 755 Then they cut him free, but he was such a wreck
 Of blood and gore that his friends would not know him.
 They burned him right away, and now a little bronze
 Holds that magnificent body's miserable ashes.
 Men of Phocis were chosen to bring him here
 760 So that he could be buried in the land of his father.
 So it came about. It is painful enough to hear
 A report, but to see it, as we did,
 Why, it was the worst disaster I have ever seen.

CHORUS: (*With groans of horror.*)

The ruling family
 765 Is wiped out like an uprooted tree.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

O Zeus! What can I say? Is it good luck?
 Or horrible? But is it to my advantage?
 What agony this is—I save my life by losing so much!

TUTOR:

Why are you so downhearted, lady, at this news?

CLYTEMNESTRA:

770 It's wonderful and horrible to be a mother—
 Even when he treats you badly, you cannot hate your child.

TUTOR:

Apparently we should not have come. It was a waste of time.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

No, not at all, no waste of time. How could it be?
 Not if you have brought with you compelling evidence

CLYTEMNESTRA: (*To the Tutor.*)

Your visit, sir, deserves a great reward
If you have stopped her screaming voice.

TUTOR:

Then I should be off now that all is well.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

800 Certainly not. You deserve better,
And so does the friend who sent you.
Come right in; leave this woman outside.
Let her bawl over her troubles out here.

(*Exit the Tutor, ushered by Clytemnestra, through the great doors.*)

ELECTRA: (*To the chorus.*)

Do *you* think she had pain behind those groans?
805 And was it horror—or cleverness—that made her weep
And wail? A sad woman mourning for her son?
I jeered at her, but I myself have passed away. Orestes!
Orestes! Your death wipes me out.
When you went away, you ripped hope out of my mind,
810 The only hope left to me—for you to be alive
And come avenge your father. And me.
Now where can I turn? I am alone,
Bereft. You and Father both are gone.
For a long time now I've been a slave
815 To people I detest, my worst enemies,
My father's killers. Could this be right?
No! I'll never go back inside.
I'll never be at home again. I'll stay here
At the gate, now that I have no friend or family,
And let my life fade away. Or let *them* kill me—
820 The people inside—if I bother them. It'd be a favor
To be killed! Life is pain. I do not want to live.

[Strophe *a*]

CHORUS:

Where is Zeus' thunderbolt now? Where is shining Apollo?

822–70: This passage in lyric meter, with the balanced structure of a choral ode, expresses Electra's powerful emotions and is known as a *kommos*.

How can they watch this scene from their hiding places?
Why don't they do something?

825

ELECTRA: (*A loud cry.*)
Aaah! Aaah!

CHORUS:
Dear child! Why so loud?

ELECTRA: (*Louder.*)
Aaah! Horrible!

CHORUS:
Don't make so much noise when you cry!

830

ELECTRA:
You're killing me!

CHORUS:
How?

ELECTRA:
If you are going to pretend there's hope
When anyone can see they've gone to Hades,
You'll just be trampling a woman who is already down.

835

[*Antistrophe a*]

CHORUS:
But I know about Amphiaraus, the lord of seers.
After he had been caught by a woman
In a golden necklace and hidden away
Beneath the earth . . .

834: Hades—the Underworld.

836: Amphiaraus—Amphiaraus' wife Eriphyle was bribed with a golden necklace to persuade him to go to war. So he joined the army of Argos that was led by Oedipus' son Polynices, who hoped to recover the throne of Thebes. After the army's momentous defeat at the seven gates, Amphiaraus was swallowed by the earth and honored as a semidivine prophetic hero. His son Alcmeon was persuaded by Eriphyle—who had been bribed a second time—to join in a second attempt on Thebes. On Alcmeon's return, he punished her with death.

[Antistrophe *b*]

CHORUS:

All mortals are born to die.

860

ELECTRA:

But are they born for a chariot wreck?
 To crash, like him? To be caught
 In a whip of harness, a flash of hooves?

CHORUS:

It's a horror beyond imagining.

ELECTRA:

How could anyone have imagined it?
 He died in a strange land
 Where I could not lay him out with my own hands.

865

(The chorus emit a sympathetic cry.)

ELECTRA:

He was simply put underground
 Without a funeral,
 And I was not there to weep for him.

870

(Enter Chrysóthemis, excited and in haste, through the stage right wing.)

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I am so excited by joy, dear sister, that I came
 Back in a rush. It's no time for decorum;
 I bring news of joy. This is the end
 Of all those troubles you've been weeping about.

ELECTRA:

You? Where would *you* find an antidote?
 The pain is mine; it is beyond cure.

875

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

He's here with us! Orestes! Listen to me:
 He's here, as sure as you're seeing me now.

864: "Beyond imagining"—The Greek here ranges in meaning from "unlooked for" to "incredible" and from that to "unconscionable," as Lloyd-Jones renders it (1994).

ELECTRA:

880 Have you lost your mind? You're in a sorry state—
This is your disaster, too. It's not a joke.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

No, by Father's hearthstone! It's no joke;
I'm not abusing you. He's right nearby.

ELECTRA:

You *are* in a sad way. Who in the whole wide world
Could make you believe a tale like that so strongly?

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

885 Me, myself. No one else. I saw the evidence,
Clear enough to prove that the story is true.

ELECTRA:

What was the evidence you saw, poor thing?
It warmed you with all the comfort . . . of a deadly fire!

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

890 For gods' sake, listen to me tell the whole story.
Then you'll know if I am a sensible woman or a fool.

ELECTRA:

Tell the story, then, if talking makes you happy.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

All right, I'll tell you exactly everything I saw.
When I came to Father's tomb on the ancient mound,
I saw fresh streams of milk springing from the top,
895 And all the flowers that are in bloom
Were twisted in a wreath to crown Father's grave.
I saw this and I was amazed. I looked around,
Thinking someone else might be there with me.
But stillness was all I could find in that place,
900 So I crept up on the tomb, and at the edge I saw,
On the burial site, a freshly cut lock of hair.
Then immediately my poor soul was struck

894–6: Chrysóthemis is describing an ordinary offering at a tomb, but her imagery—rivulets and springs of milk, flowers of every kind—suggests a miracle.

With a long-familiar precious sight—the man I love
 More than anyone, Orestes. This was evidence of him!
 I took and felt it with my hands, not daring to say a word, 905
 But joy immediately filled my eyes with tears.
 And now I know for sure, as I did then:
 This lovely gift could only have come from him.
 Who else is supposed to do this? Only me and you.
 Me, I did not do it—that's for sure. 910
 And neither did you, because if you leave this house
 Even to visit a shrine, you're made to regret it.
 And as for Mother, her mind does not incline that way,
 And if she'd done a thing like that, we'd have seen her.
 So Orestes is the one who left these burial gifts. 915
 So cheer up, dear sister; the same people
 Do not always have the same run of luck.
 Ours has been dreadful up to now. But today,
 Perhaps, will guarantee us a brilliant future.

ELECTRA:
 You don't have a clue. As you talked, I pitied you. 920

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:
 What? Aren't you happy about my news?

ELECTRA:
 You don't know what path or plan you are following.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:
 What do you mean? I saw it with my own eyes!

ELECTRA:
 He's dead. I am sorry. All hope of him is gone.
 He won't save us. Don't expect anything from him. 925

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:
 Don't say that! Who told you this?

ELECTRA:
 A man who was beside him when he died.

903: "A long-familiar precious sight"—a mental image of Orestes as he must be, now that he has grown up. It is familiar because she has imagined it so often, during her long wait for his arrival.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

So where is he now? I'm amazed; I'm overcome.

ELECTRA:

In the house, where Mother is delighted with him, not pained.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

930 No, don't say this. Then who could it possibly be
Who made all those offerings at Father's tomb?

ELECTRA:

My best guess is they're for Orestes now that he's dead,
Put there as a memorial by someone or other.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

935 This is terrible! I came in such a hurry to bring
You this joyful news, but I did not really know
How deeply we were ruined. Now that I'm here—
Our old reality was horrible, but I find this far worse.

ELECTRA:

That's how things are with you, but listen to me:
You can shake off the weight of all this grief.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

940 What am I going to do—raise the dead?

ELECTRA:

That was not my point. I wasn't born a fool.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

So what are you asking me to do that I can do?

ELECTRA:

To have the courage to do as I direct.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

If it will help us, I won't refuse.

ELECTRA:

945 But look, it will be tough. No pain, no happiness.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I see. I'll take as tough a load as I can bear.

ELECTRA:

Pay attention now; here's my plan:

You know as well as I we've no friends here to help;
 There's no one left for us. Hades took them all
 And left us solitary and bereft. Now, as for me, 950
 So long as I was told our brother lived
 And flourished, I had hopes that someday soon
He'd take on the job and avenge our father's death.
 But now that he's no more, it's you I'm looking at.
 This red-handed murderer who killed Father— 955
 You won't hesitate, will you?—kill Aegisthus!
 I don't need to hide things from you any longer.
 Look! How could you go on living otherwise?
 What can you hope for to set things right? When a girl
 Inherits from her father nothing but grief— 960
 None of his wealth—then what is her legacy,
 Aside from time to grow old? She ages her life away,
 Unmarried and unwedded. Hopeless.
 Would Aegisthus ever allow either you or me
 To carry on our family and breed a new generation 965
 Of threats to him? It's obvious: No one could be so stupid.
 But if you adopt my plan, here's what will happen:
 First, you'll earn sacred goodwill from both
 Of those who are dead and buried, our father and our brother.
 On top of that, you'll call yourself what you were born to be— 970
 A free woman—and after that you'll win
 A husband of your social rank. All men
 Are dazzled by success. You'll never have
 So much fame unless you throw in with me.
 And anyone who sees you then, citizen or foreigner— 975
 Wouldn't he heap you with praise? Wouldn't he say,
 "Look, my friends, this is the pair of sisters
 Who saved their father's house. They staked their lives
 On this, when their enemies were well ensconced,
 To bring them to account for murder. 980
 Everyone should love and treat them with respect.
 In festivals or assemblies of the city, everyone
 Should honor them for manly courage." That
 Is the way they all will boast about us then,
 And glorious fame will follow us in life or death 985
 Forever. So trust me, sister dear; do as I say.
 Take up the burden of our father's pain!
 Take up our brother's trouble! Release me

From evil! Release yourself! And keep this in mind:
It's shameful for well-born folk to live in disgrace.

CHORUS:

990 In a case like this, you should think ahead.
Forethought is your ally, whether you speak or listen.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

(To the chorus.)

Yes, my friends. And if she were endowed with an intellect
That was not so badly flawed, she would have taken care
To be discreet, which she certainly has not been.

(To Electra.)

995 What could you possibly expect from this? You lift
Your fierceness like a sword, and you ask me for support?
Can't you see? You're a woman—that's your nature.
You're not a man; you're not as strong as your enemies in a fight.
Good luck is blooming for them, growing by the day.
1000 For us, it is draining away; it goes to nothing.
Could anyone hope to take down a man like that
And come away without agony, without ruin?
Our troubles are bad enough, so you'd best take care:
They'd be worse if someone heard what you just said.
1005 It won't save us and it won't do us any good
To become famous on our way to a disgraceful death.
I don't hate dying so much as not having the power
To die when that would be a blessing.
So I beg of you, before we are totally destroyed,
1010 Before our family is wiped clean away,
Contain your anger! Now, all those things you've said—
I'll not let them be said again. They're null and void.
Please be sensible for once in this long time,
And, since you are so weak, give in to our rulers.

CHORUS:

1015 Do as she says. Foresight always gives the best
Advantage to human beings. That, and wisdom.

1007–8: Some editors consider these lines an interpolation.

ELECTRA:

Just as I expected! I knew perfectly well
 You'd toss my proposal away.
 So. I'm single-handed: I'll have to do this thing
 Alone. I'll never let it go.

1020

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Oh,
 How I wish you'd had a plan like that when Father died.
 You could have overcome everything.

ELECTRA:

I was as strong by nature then, but not so strong-minded.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

You should train your mind always to be the same.

ELECTRA:

So you won't help me take action—you want me to mind you?

1025

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Because if you start this way, I expect you'll end badly.

ELECTRA:

I do admire your mind; it's your cowardice I hate.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I'll accept what you say, too, when I hear compliments.

ELECTRA:

You'll never hear compliments from me.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Time will tell, and there's plenty of it left.

1030

ELECTRA:

Get out of here! You're no use at all.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I am, too. But you don't know anything.

ELECTRA:

You'll run to your mother and tell her everything.

1023–7: These lines play on the Greek word for "mind," *nous*, which here ranges in meaning from "mind" to "good intention" and "good sense."

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I don't hate you that much. Really, I don't.

ELECTRA:

1035 But don't you see you're leading me into disgrace?

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Disgrace, no. Thinking ahead, yes. For your own sake.

ELECTRA:

Do I really have to obey your rules of justice?

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Come to your senses, and you'll be leading us both.

ELECTRA:

It's horrible to speak so well and be so wrong!

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

1040 You're quite right—speaking of yourself.

ELECTRA:

What? You can't think that you're speaking on the side of justice.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

No. There's a time when even justice causes harm.

ELECTRA:

I should live by those laws? They're not for me.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Do what you want. You'll respect me afterward.

ELECTRA:

1045 Of course I'll do what I want. You don't scare me.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Is this really true? You won't discuss it and reconsider?

ELECTRA:

Discuss it? What could be more hateful than discussion with a coward?

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

I don't think you have any idea what I am talking about.

ELECTRA:

It was ages ago that I made this decision, not just recently.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

Then I'll leave. My words will never earn your respect, 1050
And, the way you're going, your actions will never earn mine.

ELECTRA:

OK, go inside then. I'll never follow you,
No matter how passionately you want me to do so.
It's pure foolishness, chasing phantoms.

CHRYSÓTHEMIS:

OK. So you claim these decisions of yours 1055
Are good thinking. Then go ahead and think that way.
Later, when you're in bad trouble, you'll respect what I said.

(Exit Chrysothemis through the great doors.)

Second Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

Birds above are wisest.
We watch them tend the needs
Of those from whom they grew 1060
And those who were good to them.
Why don't we do the same?
But the time will come—
The thunderbolt of Zeus,
The dictate of heaven will bring it on—
Soon people will pay, in anguish. 1065

O voice that cries to the dead in the earth,
Shriek into the ears of Agamemnon down below
For my sake and tell him, "Shame!"

1050–4: These lines are considered an interpolation by Lloyd-Jones. The word translated as "respect" normally means "praise."

1058: "Birds above are wisest"—Storks proverbially looked after their parents. The contrast is evidently being made to Agamemnon's children, who still, after so many years, have not avenged his killing.

[Antistrophe *a*]

1070 Tell him his home is now tormented
 With plague. His children
 Shout battle cries at one another;
 Family love is drowned.
 The girl who weeps alone
 1075 Endlessly for her father's death,
 This girl has been abandoned to the storms;
 She cries in misery
 Like a plaintive nightingale.

She would give her life and leave the light
 1080 If only she could bring the Furies down on both!
 Has any other hero's daughter burst into such bloom?

[Strophe *b*]

No one from a fine family
 Who is forced to live like garbage
 Would ever trade her glory
 For the shame of silence.
 1085 Oh, child, dear child, what a public spectacle
 You have made of your misery!
 You put on the full armor against shame,
 So now your name is two in one:
 You are "the wise-and-good."

[Antistrophe *b*]

1090 I pray you will rise as high
 On the palm of wealth as now you sink
 Beneath the hand of your enemies.
 Although I see you now
 Caught in a horrible life,
 1095 The laws that grew strongest

1074–5: See endnote for a problem with the text.

1081: "Has any . . . such bloom?"—Deliberately ambiguous, this succinct line refers at once to Electra's noble birth, her self-sacrificing loyalty to her father, and the horror of her present circumstances.

1095: "The laws that grew strongest"—The verb "grew" suggests a natural growth, as in plants. Accordingly, most scholars have identified

Will give you victory
Because of your reverence for Zeus.

*(Enter Orestes and Pylades through the stage right wing.
Pylades is carrying a small brass burial urn.)*

ORESTES:

Greetings! Did we hear right? Are we
On the right road for where we need to be?

CHORUS:

What are you looking for? What brought you here? 1100

ORESTES:

Aegisthus—I've been asking where he lives.

CHORUS:

You've come right. Your guide was faultless.

ORESTES:

Is there one of you who could tell the family
About our group's arrival? It has been eagerly awaited.

CHORUS: *(Pointing to Electra.)*

She could, if you want to ask the closest relative. 1105

ORESTES:

Miss, could you go inside and tell them
That some men from Phocis are asking for Aegisthus?

ELECTRA:

Oh no! Don't tell me that what you're carrying is proof—
Visible proof—of the story we have heard.

ORESTES:

I don't know what rumor you heard, but an old man 1110
Named Strophius sent us with news about Orestes.

these laws with those of nature, such as the laws followed by the storks and by Electra, but not by her siblings. These siblings are represented by the chorus as unnatural human beings (line 1058 ff., with note).

1111: Strophius—the king in Phocis who had been Orestes' host while he grew up there. Strophius is an ally of Agamemnon, while his uncle and hereditary enemy, Phanoteus, is an ally of Aegisthus. See lines 45 and 670, with notes.

ELECTRA:

What is it? How quickly fear comes over me!

ORESTES:

Here is the little that remains of him. He's dead.
As you can see, the urn we bring is very small.

ELECTRA:

1115 Oh, misery! So this is it. It's clear.
So now I see this heavy load straight on.

ORESTES:

Are you weeping over Orestes' sad fate?
Then you should know: This is the container for his body.

ELECTRA:

1120 Visitor, give it to me, please, right now.
Is he really hidden in this urn? Let me hold it
In my own hands. I need to weep and mourn
Over these ashes for me and my whole family.

ORESTES: (*To Pylades.*)

1125 Here, give this to the woman, whoever she is.
There's no hostility in her request; she must be
Close to the family, perhaps a blood relative.

ELECTRA:

So this is all I have to remember him.
No one was closer to me than Orestes. I sent him off
With such high hopes, and I'm taking him back
With none. This thing I hold in my hands
1130 Is nothing. But you, my child, were a blaze of light
When I sent you from home. I should have died
Before these hands stole you and sent you abroad.
I saved you from murder, but I stole from you
The opportunity to die at home, on the same day
1135 As Father, and to be buried with him in his tomb.
But as it was, you were on foreign ground, a refugee.
What a horrible way to die—cut off from your sister!
So I could not take your body in my own
Dear hands and grieve, and bathe, and lay you out.
1140 And I could not rake the sad burden of bones
Out of the scorching coals, as I should have done.
It was foreign hands that put your little remnant

In a little urn. Now I weep for the times gone by
 When I would care for you. What a waste that was—
 All the sweet trouble I took for you! 1145
 You never belonged to Mother as much as to me.
 I loved you more than she did. No servants looked after you
 But me. You always called me “Sister.”
 Now all of this has been lost in one day,
 The day you died. You swept everything away 1150
 Like a tornado, and you are gone. Father’s gone.
 I’m dead, thanks to you. You’re absolutely dead.
 Laughter from our enemies! A wild rage of joy
 From our mother—*un*-mother, I mean—the one you said
 (By secret messages) that you would come 1155
 And punish on your own. But now our demon luck,
 Yours and mine, has ripped this away from us.
 All it’s given us, instead of your dear shape,
 Is ash and shadow.
 I am so miserable. 1160
 Pity this poor corpse!

(She cries in grief.)

Frightful, horrible, the paths you had to take.
 You destroyed me,
 Really destroyed me, my dear brother.
 So take me now under this roof of yours; 1165
 Take this nothing into nothing so that I may be at home,
 Below, with you, forever after. While you were above,
 I was your equal partner. Now I beg to be
 With you, to die and never leave your tomb
 Because I see the dead are free from pain. 1170

CHORUS:

You come from a father who was subject to death,
 Electra. Keep that in mind. Orestes too is mortal,
 So do not mourn too much. We all must die.

ORESTES:

Oh no! What can I say? Words fail me.
 I do not have the strength to control my tongue. 1175

ELECTRA:

You’re in pain suddenly. Why? What is this about?

ORESTES:

You look like someone famous. Are you Electra?

ELECTRA:

I am. And I am in total agony.

ORESTES: (*With a cry of grief.*)

How sadly things turned out for you!

ELECTRA:

1180 It's not possible—you're a visitor. Why weep for me?

ORESTES:

They've made a wreck of your body—what contempt! What godlessness!

ELECTRA:

You're talking about me? Why are you so sad?

ORESTES:

What misery! Not married, not enough food.

ELECTRA:

Why are you looking at me this way, weeping?

ORESTES:

1185 I had no idea how rotten my situation was.

ELECTRA:

How could you learn this from what you've heard?

ORESTES:

Because I see you; your suffering is so conspicuous.

ELECTRA:

But really, you're seeing only a few of my troubles.

ORESTES:

Could anything be more hateful than what I see now?

ELECTRA:

1190 Yes, because I live and feed with the murderers.

ORESTES:

Of whom? Where'd this trouble come from? Be clear.

1183: "Not married"—Electra's name means "unmarried." See also line 165.

ELECTRA:

My father. I am the slave of the people who murdered him.

ORESTES:

Someone's compelling you to live like this: Who is it?

ELECTRA:

She's called my mother. But she's nothing like a mother.

ORESTES:

What does she do? Lay hands on you? Starve you?

1195

ELECTRA:

Lay hands and starve and everything.

ORESTES:

Isn't there anyone to help or protect you?

ELECTRA:

No, there was. But you gave me his ashes.

ORESTES:

It's so hard! The moment I saw you I pitied you.

ELECTRA:

The only one who's ever pitied me is you. That's for sure.

1200

ORESTES:

The only one! Well, I am here. And your pain is mine.

ELECTRA:

You're not some relative of ours, are you, from somewhere?

ORESTES:

I'd like to tell you. Are these people on our side?

ELECTRA:

Yes, they are. You can talk safely.

ORESTES:

Then set this urn aside if you want to learn everything.

1205

ELECTRA:

For gods' sake, stranger, don't do this to me!

ORESTES: (*Trying to relieve her of the burden of the urn.*)

Put this container down, and I'll tell you everything.

ELECTRA:

No! It's what I love most. As you are a man, don't take it!

ORESTES:

You can't keep it.

ELECTRA:

This is horrible!

1210 Orestes, if I am not allowed to bury you . . .

ORESTES:

Careful what you say. It's wrong for you to weep.

ELECTRA:

How could it be wrong? It's my brother who died!

ORESTES:

It's not for you to say this.

ELECTRA:

Have I lost the right to mourn for him? How?

ORESTES:

1215 You haven't lost any rights. This isn't yours.

ELECTRA:

Of course it is! If what I hold is the body of Orestes.

ORESTES:

It's not Orestes. That was just a story we made up.

ELECTRA:

Then where is the poor man's casket?

ORESTES:

There isn't one. A living man doesn't have a casket.

ELECTRA:

What did you say, my child?

ORESTES:

1220 Nothing false.

ELECTRA:

Is the man alive?

ORESTES:

If I am breathing.

ELECTRA:

Is it you?

ORESTES: (*Showing her his signet ring.*)

Look at this seal—

It was my father's—then you'll know.

ELECTRA:

O my dearest light!

ORESTES:

Dearest, I swear.

ELECTRA:

Your voice, it's here!

ORESTES:

No need to hear from others now.

1225

ELECTRA:

I have you in my arms!

ORESTES:

And forever after.

ELECTRA:

Dearest women, women of the city,

Look, here's Orestes. It was only a trick

That he was dead, and that trick has kept him alive!

CHORUS:

We see him, dear child. Such good luck!

1230

Joy brings tears to our eyes.

[Strophe]

ELECTRA:

O beloved seed, beloved child,

You're here now.

You found; you came; you saw those you longed for.

1235

1225: "No need to hear from others now"—literally, "No longer inquire from any another source." For all these years, Electra had to hear news of Orestes from other people.

1231–87: Second Kommos—Once again strong emotion sends the speakers into balanced stanzas of lyric meter, here broken into dialogue. The actors would sing the lines for greater emotional impact on the audience.

ORESTES:

Yes, we're here. But keep it quiet.

ELECTRA:

Why?

ORESTES:

Quiet is better, so no one inside hears.

ELECTRA:

No, by Artemis,
Goddess undominated, always unmarried!
1240 I will never consent to tremble
At the women who stay indoors,
That wasteful burden on the land.

ORESTES:

But look, there's war in women, too.
You learned that from your own experience.

ELECTRA:

1245 O pain, pain, pain!
This evil thing you've brought up,
Not covered by clouds,
Never to be dispersed,
Never to be forgotten,
1250 This evil, which we have by birth.

ORESTES:

I know this very well. But wait till their arrival
Prompts us; then we should remember what they did.

1242: "That wasteful burden on the land"—words that would remind the Greek audience of the Homeric idea that nobles who do not fight are a useless burden on farmland. See *Iliad* 12.310–21. Electra lays this charge on women, but that is unfair.

1246–50: "This evil thing . . . which we have by birth"—Electra and Orestes have had a painful experience of the spirit of war that is in women from their mother, and the murder of their father has left them forever spotlighted by evil. One editor reads line 1247 differently—"covered by clouds" (Kells 1973)—because Greek rarely portrays evil as being bright; but this evil is, as we would say in English, glaring.

1251–2: See endnote.

[Antistrophe]

ELECTRA:

Every time is the right time for me, every moment;
 It's always proper to speak out on this.
 Till now I barely had the freedom to open my mouth.

1255

ORESTES:

I entirely agree with you. So protect your freedom.

ELECTRA:

How?

ORESTES:

Stop trying to talk so much when it's not the right time!

ELECTRA:

But you are here, brilliantly! How could I react
 With utter silence? It wouldn't be a fair trade.
 I couldn't think, I couldn't hope
 To see you. And now I do!

1260

ORESTES:

You certainly do, now that the gods have goaded me into it.

ELECTRA:

O joy beyond joy,
 If a god brought you to our house!
 I declare that all of this
 Is moved by a divine spirit.

1265

1270

1256: "Till now . . . open my mouth"—An alternative translation, following Kells, is "Just now I could hardly hold back from shouting freely," which takes the main verb (*eschon*) in its usual sense. We follow other editors, such as Lloyd-Jones and Jebb.

1257: "So protect your freedom"—Orestes means that Electra should keep her outbursts in check. Otherwise, if she is overheard, she will lose the freedom of speech she hopes she has now won. See line 1283.

1264: "Now that the gods have goaded me into it."—To what extent has Orestes been goaded by the gods? See endnote on lines 35–8 with Introduction, p. xxviii.

A line is missing from the manuscript after 1264, corresponding metrically to line 1252. The traditional line count between 1265 and 1270 does not give us enough lines, but none are missing there.

ORESTES:

This joy of yours—I'd hate to cut it back,
But I am afraid it's too much. It's carrying you away.

(He starts to turn away from her.)

[Epode]

ELECTRA:

Don't!
It's been so long. You chose to come.
1275 Your coming is so dear to me.
Don't! You see me full of sorrow.

ORESTES:

Don't what?

ELECTRA:

Don't take your face away from me.
You'd ruin everything. *(Trying to touch his face.)*

ORESTES:

I'd certainly be furious if anyone else took us apart.

ELECTRA:

So I may?

ORESTES:

1280 Of course!
(They embrace.)

ELECTRA:

Dear one, when I had lost all hope
I heard a voice,
But I kept my passion without a voice.
I did not shout aloud when I heard it in my misery.
1285 But now I have you right in front of me,
The face I love the most.
My troubles would never make me forget you.

ORESTES:

This is too much talk. Let it go.
You don't need to convince me that Mother's a bad woman

Or that Aegisthus is sopping up Father's wealth, 1290
 Pouring it out or sprinkling it around foolishly.
 Your talk would hold us back from the time to act.
 Instead focus on our current situation:
 Tell me where we should show ourselves, or hide,
 To complete our mission and wipe the smile 1295
 From our enemies' faces. And make sure Mother does not guess
 The truth that we've come home. She mustn't see you
 With a shining face. So pretend it's a disaster, as was reported,
 And keep crying. When we have succeeded, then
 You may be happy and smile as much as you like. 1300

ELECTRA:

My brother, whatever you care about,
 I will make that my care also. Every joy
 I have I got from you, not on my own.
 And I would not cause you the least bit of pain—
 Even if it were of some great advantage to me. 1305
 That would be no way to serve the divinity
 That is at work here.

Now, you know what's inside—
 Of course you do. You heard Aegisthus is away
 But Mother's home. No fear: She won't see me
 With a smile or a shining face. 1310
 I've hated her for ages, in the extreme,
 And now that I have seen you I can't stop
 Crying out of happiness. How could I possibly?
 One and the same road brought you to me, dead
 And alive for me to see. You surprised me so much 1315
 That if Father walked in right now,
 I would not call it a miracle. I'd believe I saw him.
 Your coming brings me so much joy;
 You must give me whatever orders you please.
 If I were alone, I'd get one thing right out of two— 1320
 A noble way to save myself or a noble death.

ORESTES:

Please be quiet. I hear someone leaving
 The house, coming our way.

ELECTRA: (*To Orestes and Pylades.*)

Go inside, you two.

1325 It's important: No one at home could ward off the thing
You are bringing them, and they won't receive it with
pleasure.

(*Enter the Tutor through the great doors.*)

TUTOR:

You're being total idiots. Have you lost your minds?
Don't you care about your lives?
Were you born stupid?
The greatest possible danger is not around the corner;
1330 It's right here on top of us now, and you don't realize it.
If I had not stationed myself just inside these doors
And been standing watch over you for some time,
Your plans would have gotten into the house before you did.
As it is, I have taken care to prevent that.
1335 Now, you two, shut down this long conversation,
Put aside these endless exclamations of joy,
And go inside. At a time like this, danger is imminent,
And you must finish your business right now. It's time.

ORESTES:

So how will it be for me in there?

TUTOR:

1340 Fine. It's settled that no one knows you.

ORESTES:

So you must have told them I am dead.

TUTOR:

As far as they know, you are in Hades.

ORESTES:

Were they happy about that? What did they say?

1324–5: "The thing . . . bringing them"—the ashes of Orestes. Electra means to be overheard by whoever is coming through the doors. But, by a nice irony, she also means vengeance.

1340: "It's settled that no one knows you"—This is what the manuscripts say. Lloyd-Jones and some others supply *me* (me) in place of *se* (you), so that the Tutor is assuring them that he himself hasn't been recognized. But this makes nonsense of line 1341.

TUTOR:

I'll tell you when it's all done. For now,
Things are fine with them, even what's not fine.

1345

ELECTRA:

Who is this, brother? For gods' sake, tell me.

ORESTES:

You haven't guessed?

ELECTRA:

Nothing comes to mind.

ORESTES:

Don't you remember the man you gave me to once?

ELECTRA:

What? What sort of man?

ORESTES:

It was his hand
That guided me to the land of Phocis, as you wished.

1350

ELECTRA:

Is this the man? The only one I found, out of all of them,
Who was faithful when Father was murdered?

ORESTES:

He's the one. Now, no more cross-examination.

ELECTRA:

You dear light! You are the only one who saved the house
Of Agamemnon. Could you really be here? Is it really you
Who saved him, and me, from all that trouble?
Your dear, dear hands! And your feet—
What delicious work they have done! You've been here so long—

1355

1345: "Things are fine . . . even what's not fine"—This line hints that Clytemnestra is delighted at the news of Orestes' death, so things are fine with her. But her being delighted is odious, so things are not fine. The Tutor does not want to spend any more words on this.

1347: "Nothing comes to mind"—an unusual formation in Greek, appearing in the manuscripts. Lloyd-Jones follows a correction that translates this line into a more usual Greek expression: "I have never seen him" (1994). Here more than before, Electra's emotions threaten to spoil her plan.

How could I not recognize you? You killed me
 1360 By what you said. But what you did was joy to me.
 Welcome, Father. You seem like a father to me.
 Welcome! You can be sure there's no one in the world
 I hated so much and loved so much as you on the same day.

TUTOR:

That's enough. Our story, about after we left,
 1365 Will be told over many cycles of days and nights,
 And you will know it all clearly then, Electra.
 But I am telling you, while you're just standing around,
 That the right time for action is now. Now Clytemnestra is
 alone;
 Now none of her men are inside. If you let the moment go,
 1370 Keep this in mind: You will have to fight
 More men than these, and they will be more cunning.

ORESTES:

We don't have time for so much talking. Pylades,
 We need to go inside and get our job done quickly.
 But first, let's greet the gods whose images are set
 In front of Father's house.

1375 *(They pray silently.)*

ELECTRA:

Lord Apollo, graciously hear their prayer,
 And let me add my own to theirs.
 My eager hands have made you many offerings
 From whatever I might have. Lord of Light, Apollo,
 1380 I have little now to give. I beg, I entreat you on my knees:
 Be our ally in these plans we've made, and show
 All people how great a penalty the gods hand out
 To those who trample on reverence.

1359–60: “You killed me . . . joy to me”—Rhetoric of this period delights in the contrast of word and deed; the Tutor’s words were devastating to Electra, but what he did with those words—deceive Clytemnestra—led to the happy result (for Electra) that Orestes has a clear path to killing Clytemnestra.

1379: “Lord of Light”—Sophocles may have in mind the popular meaning of the word, “Wolfish” or “Wolf-slayer,” referring to the myth that gave the agora at Argos its name. See note to line 6.

(Exit Orestes and Pylades through the great doors, followed by the Tutor. Electra follows to the doorway so that she can see what takes place and report to the chorus.)

Third Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe]

Look! He is on the move, Ares, 1385
 Blasting gales of foul strife and blood.
 Already the hounds have tracked their evil prey
 Beneath the roof. They are inescapable.
 Soon now my heart's dream 1390
 Will come true here on earth.

[Antistrophe]

Now the defender of the dead 1395
 Is being led on the silent feet of deception
 Right to the center of his father's former wealth,
 And the blood is ready for his hands.
 Hermes, son of Maia,
 Guides him in darkness,
 Concealing the trick till now,
 Waiting for this moment.
 But he waits no longer.

ELECTRA:

My dear women, the men are at the very point
 Of doing this thing, so keep it quiet.

CHORUS:

What are they doing now?

ELECTRA: *(Darting away from the doors.)*

She has the burial urn. 1400
 She's dressing it for burial. Those two stand near.

1385: Ares—god of war and violence.

1395: "Hermes, son of Maia"—See line 112. Hermes is both guide and trickster. He is a god of the deep earth, who guides souls down to the place of the dead. Maia is the eldest daughter of Atlas, associated with mountains.

CHORUS:

But why did you rush back out?

ELECTRA:

I'm standing guard
So we'll know if Aegisthus starts to come inside.

CLYTEMNESTRA: (*With a shriek.*)

This house

1405 Is full of killers! There's no one on my side!

ELECTRA:

Someone is shouting inside. Do you hear it?

CHORUS:

Yes, I heard it. I wish I hadn't.
Horrible. It made my flesh creep.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

I'm finished! Aegisthus, where are you now?

ELECTRA:

Listen! What a horrible scream!

CLYTEMNESTRA:

1410 My child, O my child!
I gave you birth! Have pity on me!

ELECTRA:

But you had none—
There was no pity in you for the father who planted the seed.

CHORUS:

O city! O family!
What misery! Your days are coming to an end.

CLYTEMNESTRA: (*With a shriek.*)

I'm hit!

ELECTRA:

1415 Hit her again! Make it twice if you're strong enough.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

Another blow!

ELECTRA:

How I wish Aegisthus had the same!

CHORUS:

Curses fulfilled! Drop by drop, the thirsty dead,
 Alive beneath the ground, suck back the blood
 Of those who killed them long ago.

1420

*(Enter Orestes and Pylades through the great doors. Their
 swords are bloody.)*

[Antistrophe]

And here they are. His hand drips red
 From a sacrifice to Ares.
 I do not know what to say.

ELECTRA:

Orestes! How did it go?

ORESTES:

In the house,
 It's good, if Apollo's oracle was good.

1425

ELECTRA:

Is she dead? Miserable woman!

ORESTES:

You'll never be afraid again.
 Mother's pride will not humiliate you any longer.

CHORUS:

Be quiet. I see Aegisthus.
 He is very close.

ELECTRA:

Boys, you'd better go back.

1422–3: The manuscripts assign these lines to Electra, but modern editors assign them to the chorus leader.

1423: "I do not know what to say"—following the manuscript reading. Almost all modern editors correct the text to read, "Nor can I find fault with it [the sacrifice]" (Lloyd-Jones 1994), putting *psegein* in place of *legein*.

1426: The manuscripts mistakenly assign this line to Orestes.

1427: Several lines are missing from the manuscripts, two of Orestes' and one of Electra's.

ORESTES:

1430

Where do you see him?

ELECTRA:

He's coming home from the outskirts of town
Full of joy . . .

CHORUS:

Go quick to the entryway.
Do it now! Other things can wait.

ORESTES:

Don't worry, we'll finish the job.

ELECTRA:

1435

Hurry up now; follow your plan.

ORESTES:

I'm going, I'm gone.

ELECTRA:

I'll see to things out here.

CHORUS:

1440

Speak gently in his ear, and don't say very much—
That would be best—so he'll dash blindly
Into the hidden toils of justice.

(Enter Aegisthus, quickly, through the stage left wing.)

AEGISTHUS:

Where are the visitors from Phocis? Which of you knows?
I heard they brought us news that Orestes had lost
His life in a chariot wreck.

(No one answers. They are trying to give Orestes time to get ready. Aegisthus singles out Electra.)

1445

You! I choose you. Yes, you. Where's that rough tongue
You used to have?

(Electra still does not answer.)

This is largely your concern,
I think, so you should know the most. Answer my question!

1435: "Hurry up now; follow your plan"—wrongly assigned by the manuscripts to Orestes.

ELECTRA:

Of course I know. How could I forget
This catastrophe, this loss of my nearest and dearest?

AEGISTHUS:

So where might our guests actually be? Tell me. 1450

ELECTRA:

Inside. They got to their hostess with ties of friendship.

AEGISTHUS:

Is it really true they brought news of a death?

ELECTRA:

No, not news, not mere words. They proved it.

AEGISTHUS:

So we can be sure, on the basis of visual evidence?

ELECTRA:

Of course you can. But it is not a happy sight to see. 1455

AEGISTHUS:

For once, after all these years, you've said something that
gives me joy.

ELECTRA:

Have your joy, then, if you enjoy these things.

AEGISTHUS:

Open the palace doors—I command it. And show
What's there to all the people of Mycenae and Argos,
So that if any of them have been hanging on empty hopes 1460
For this man, now they'll see him dead.
Then they'll answer to the reins I pull, and they won't need me
To force them, through punishment, to grow some good sense.

1451: "They got to their hostess with ties of friendship"—a double case of double meaning. Orestes and Pylades "got to" Clytemnestra by killing her, but Aegisthus is to understand that they received a warm welcome from her. Ties of friendship are most commonly those of family. At the level Aegisthus is supposed to understand, the two young men have made a friend of Orestes' mother by bringing news of his death. But Electra means that they are family to each other, rather than guest and hostess. Jebb translates both double meanings together: "They have found a way to the heart of their hostess" (1893/2004).

ELECTRA:

1465 My part of that is finished; after so much time, I've got it—
My mind is sound. I've learned to serve those who are
stronger.

(Attendants open the doors, and the ekkyklêma inside—a wheeled platform—reveals the body, laid out in funeral wrappings. Orestes and Pylades stand over it. Aegisthus speaks at first without uncovering the face.)

AEGISTHUS:

Zeus! What an apparition! This fall of the dice
Is due to some grudge of the gods—Nemesis, perhaps,
But I won't say that. Uncover its face. It's my kin.
Let it have the opportunity to be mourned by me.

ORESTES:

1470 Use your own hands. It isn't my duty; it's yours
To look at this and speak to it like a close relative.

AEGISTHUS:

That's good advice, and I'll follow it. Now you:
Is Clytemnestra at home? If so, call her for me.

ORESTES:

She's very close to you. Don't expect her anywhere but here.

(Aegisthus uncovers the face of Clytemnestra's body.)

AEGISTHUS:

What the hell is this?

ORESTES:

1475 Are you afraid of someone? Someone you don't recognize?

1465: "I've learned . . . stronger"—to work to the advantage of those who are either better or in power. (The Greek for "stronger" can mean either "better" or "more powerful.") Electra's words have a double meaning: Aegisthus thinks she means to serve him, but she means she is serving the gods. The Greek is echoed in Plato's *Republic* by Thrasymachus' definition of justice as what serves those in power (338c2), where the same double meaning is in play.

1467: Nemesis—goddess of righteous vengeance. See line 792.

AEGISTHUS:

Who are these men? What is this trap I've fallen into?
What a miserable throw of the dice!

ORESTES:

Didn't you notice awhile ago
That although you're alive, you've been matching words with
the dead?

AEGISTHUS:

I see what you are saying. It has to be—
It can only be—Orestes who is talking to me.

1480

ORESTES:

What a superb prophet you are! You missed it for ages.

AEGISTHUS:

I'm finished. It's horrible. But let me say something.
I'll be brief.

ELECTRA:

Don't let him speak another word,
For gods' sake, brother. He'd just draw things out.
When someone's in a tough spot, about to die,
What's the point of having more time?
Kill him right away, and when you've killed him,
Let whoever might take him give him a burial
Out of my sight. That is the only way,
After all these years of misery, that I'll be released.

1485

1490

ORESTES: (*To Aegisthus.*)

Go inside; hurry up. Words are not the issue
Any longer. It's your life that is at stake.

AEGISTHUS:

Why are you taking me inside? If this is right, this thing
You're doing, why do it in the dark? Aren't you ready to kill?

1477–8: “Didn’t you notice . . . words with the dead”—In other words, although you’re alive, you’ve been addressing on an equal basis men you believe to be dead. Orestes leaves this implication unsaid: we are in fact alive, and you are now a dead man. On the text, see endnote to line 1478.

ORESTES:

1495 Don't give me orders. Go where you killed
My father so you can die in the same place.

AEGISTHUS:

Is it really necessary that this very house should see
The evils that come to Pelops' heirs, now and in the future?

ORESTES:

It will see yours. On that point, I am the top prophet.

AEGISTHUS:

1500 You claim a skill your father did not have.

ORESTES:

You're talking back too much. You lengthen the road.
Get moving!

AEGISTHUS:

Lead on.

ORESTES:

You go first.

AEGISTHUS:

So I won't escape?

ORESTES:

1505 No, so you won't
Find a pleasant way to die. I must make sure it hurts
Bitterly. This is justice for all: Kill them on the spot,
All of them who choose to violate the law.
Then there won't be so much crime.

(During this speech, he forces Aegisthus through the great doors, and at the end of it, he follows. The doors close.)

1498: "Pelops' heirs"—Aegisthus is begging for family sympathy (Jebb). He too is a descendant of Pelops and has inherited an equal share in the curse. See House of Pelops Family Tree and note on line 505.

1500: "You claim a skill your father did not have"—Agamemnon did not foresee his own murder, but Orestes claims to foresee Aegisthus' death.

CHORUS:

Seed of Atreus, how much you suffered
Before you won through to freedom—barely—
But perfectly now, from this beginning.

—END—

1508: “Seed of Atreus”—Agamemnon was a son of Atreus, so his heirs are descendants of Atreus. See House of Pelops Family Tree.

Philoctetes

Philoctetes: Cast of Characters

ODYSSEUS	a Greek commander from Ithaca
NEOPTOLEMUS	the son of Achilles
CHORUS	of Neoptolemus' warriors
PHILOCTETES	a Greek warrior marooned on Lemnos
TRADER	Neoptolemus' crewmate dressed as a trader (possibly Odysseus in disguise)
HERACLES	the demigod (possibly Odysseus in disguise)

Nonspeaking Roles

SAILOR	from Neoptolemus' ship
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Casting

In the original production at the Theatre of Dionysus, the division of roles between the three speaking actors may have been as follows:

1. Odysseus, Trader, Heracles
2. Neoptolemus
3. Philoctetes

This translation is based on a version developed by Peter Meineck for the Aquila Theatre Company in 1994 for a U.S. tour. The original cast included Nina Lucking, Celia Nelson, Steve Owen, Robert Richmond, and Karlyn Stephen.

Philoctetes

SCENE: *The rocky coast of the island of Lemnos during the last year of the Trojan War.*

(Enter Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and a warrior through the stage right wing into the orchestra.)

ODYSSEUS:

The peninsula of sea-washed Lemnos,
Deserted: no one sets foot here.
Neoptolemus, true-bred son of Achilles,
Your father was the best of the Greeks.
It was here I marooned the Malian,
The son of Poeas, under orders.
His wounded foot was weeping disease,
And no libation nor sacrifice
Could be made in peace while he cursed
The fleet with his horrendous wailing,
Constantly screaming and shouting.

5

10

Enter Odysseus, Neoptolemus . . . into the orchestra: This entrance may have been made through the stage right wing into the orchestra (a level playing space). Odysseus' first words would identify the stage (a raised platform upstage of the orchestra) and *skene* (the scene building with one central door) as the cliffs of Lemnos.

1: Lemnos—an island of about 150 square miles in the northeastern Aegean Sea between the peninsulas of Chalcidice (northern Greece) and the coast of Asia Minor (Turkey).

1–2: See endnote.

3: Neoptolemus—The name means “new warrior,” which is apt for a character depicted as an *epebe*—a young man undergoing initiation into adulthood through a test of martial or hunting prowess. Achilles was the finest Greek warrior at Troy and had recently been killed.

5–6: Malis is a territory on the northeast coast of mainland Greece ruled by King Poeas, the father of Philoctetes.

7–11: “His wounded foot . . . shouting”—Ten years earlier the Greeks had abandoned Philoctetes on Lemnos on their way to Troy. He was bitten by a poisonous snake at the tomb of the goddess Chryse, and that caused his festering wound.

I shouldn't speak about such things; this is no
 Time for talk. If he finds out I'm here, my plan
 15 To take him by surprise will be wasted.
 Now to work—you must undertake this task:
 Search this place for a cave with two mouths,
 Both kissed by warming winter sun and cooled
 By summer breezes wafting through the tunnel.
 20 Beneath, a little to the left, you will find
 A freshwater spring, if it still flows.
 Move stealthily and signal whether he is still there
 Or we should be searching in some other place.
 Do this and I will explain our mission.
 25 Once you understand, we will complete it together.

(Neoptolemus and his attendant climb the steps and mount the stage. Then Neoptolemus calls down to the orchestra.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Lord Odysseus, your task will not take long.
 I think I can see the cave you described.

ODYSSEUS:

Above or below you? I cannot see.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Up here. And there's a trail, but not a sound.

ODYSSEUS:

30 Look inside. He could be sleeping.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I'm looking. It's empty, not a soul.

(Neoptolemus starts toward the skene door.)

ODYSSEUS:

No signs of habitation?

17–9: "A cave . . . through the tunnel"—This description suggests that the cave is a passageway through the rocks with an entrance on either side.

Neoptolemus and his attendant . . . to the orchestra: Neoptolemus may have climbed the steps up onto the stage, indicating the open doors of the *skene* as Philoctetes' cave. Odysseus remains in the orchestra.

28: See endnote.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

There's a bed of leaves; somebody *has* been here!

ODYSSEUS:

Is it otherwise empty? Is there anything else in there?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

A wooden beaker—some man's crude handiwork—
And a few scattered piles of firewood.

35

ODYSSEUS:

To him those are treasures.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Oh! Oh! Rags! Out here, drying in the sun,
Wrappings for a rancid wound.

ODYSSEUS:

Then clearly the man still lives in these parts.
He must be close; a man can't go very far
On a foot mutilated by that merciless disease.
He may be out foraging for food or some
Pain-relieving herb he has found growing here.
Post your man to keep watch in case he returns
And catches us off guard. Out of all the Greeks,
He would love to get his hands on me.

40

45

*(Neoptolemus returns to Odysseus. Exit the attendant through
the stage right wing.)*

NEOPTOLEMUS:

My man is on his way; the trail will be watched.
There's more you need to tell me. Can you speak now?

ODYSSEUS:

Son of Achilles, you must stay true to this task,
And your lineage, in both mind and body.

50

38: "Rags! Out here"—Neoptolemus has been peering into the *skene* and reporting back to Odysseus. It would not have been necessary to place real rags outside the cave. Sophocles creates a textual picture of the scene, provoking the audience's imagination.

Neoptolemus returns to . . . stage right wing: The attendant stays onstage and is posted off stage left. Neoptolemus returns to the orchestra.

Should you hear something different or another plan
 Unfold, you must still serve; you are here to serve.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What are your orders?

ODYSSEUS:

You must maneuver the mind

55 Of Philoctetes and deceive him with beguiling words.
 When he asks who you are and where you come from,
 Tell him you're the son of Achilles—that should never be
 hidden—
 But say you are heading home and you have abandoned
 The Greek war fleet, bearing a great grudge.

60 Say they implored you to leave home and join them
 As the only man who could bring down Troy,
 But they did not regard you worthy of Achilles' arms
 When you claimed them by true right of birth; instead
 They awarded them to Odysseus. Say what you will,

65 As bad as bad can be, the worst things imaginable;
 It will do me no harm. But if you fail in this task,
 You will inflict terrible pain on your fellow Greeks.
 If you cannot capture his bow,
 You will never bring down Troy.

70 You know I could never speak to him as you can;
 He will trust you, and you will stay safe.
 You were not forced to sail, you swore no oath,
 Nor did you have any part in the first voyage here;

62: "Achilles' arms"—In Sophocles' *Ajax*, the Greeks honored Odysseus by awarding him the arms of Achilles. Ajax tries but fails to kill the Greek leaders to avenge the dishonor of not having been awarded the arms and commits suicide.

68: "His bow"—Philoctetes lit the funeral pyre that allowed Heracles to become a demigod. As a reward, he was given the bow. For the death of Heracles, see *Women of Trachis*.

72: "You swore no oath"—The suitors of Helen, Odysseus among them, all swore an oath to uphold her marriage to Menelaus. Odysseus pretended to be mad to avoid leaving Ithaca and going to Troy; but his trick was uncovered, and he was forced to join the expedition.

73: "The first voyage here"—when the Greeks marooned Philoctetes ten years earlier.

I cannot deny any of those charges. If he should sense
 My presence while he has his bow, I am a dead man, 75
 And as my companion you will share my fate.
 No, this must be expertly contrived so you
 Can take his unassailable weapon by stealth.
 Son, I know that it's not in your nature
 To consider or articulate such cunning, 80
 But victory is sweet, and he who dares, wins.
 One day it will be revealed that we were right.
 Now give me just one little day of shamelessness,
 And for the rest of time you will be known
 As the most virtuous of all living men. 85

NEOPTOLEMUS:

When words are too painful to hear, son of Laertes,
 Then I hate to have to put them into action.
 And it is not in my nature to practice treachery,
 Nor, so I am told, was it my father's.
 I am more than ready to take this man by force, 90
 But not by deception. He is just one man, with one foot.
 How could he hope to ever defeat so many of us?
 But I was sent to serve alongside you, and I fear
 Being called a traitor. My lord, I would rather
 Do right and fail than do wrong to win. 95

ODYSSEUS:

You are your father's son. When I was young,
 Like you, I had a reticent tongue and a quick hand.
 Now, when I consider all I've seen, I know
 That men are mastered by words, not deeds.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What are you telling me then? That I should lie? 100

ODYSSEUS:

I am saying that you must take Philoctetes by deception.

79: "Nature"—*physis*, a person's inborn character, as opposed to learned traits. One of the main themes of the play is Neoptolemus' struggle between two opposing views of himself advocated by the equivocating Odysseus and the intransigent Philoctetes. Neoptolemus may have been born to be a straight talker, but he is learning to deceive from Odysseus.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Why must I deceive him? I could persuade him.

ODYSSEUS:

He will not listen, and you won't take him by force.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What terrifying power makes him so bold?

ODYSSEUS:

105 Inescapable arrows that send certain death.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Will no one dare go near him?

ODYSSEUS:

As I said, he will be taken only by deception.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Don't you think it shameful to lie?

ODYSSEUS:

Not if the lie brings deliverance.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

110 How can such a liar ever show his face?

ODYSSEUS:

Never hide when there's profit to be gained.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

How do I profit if he comes to Troy?

ODYSSEUS:

Troy can be taken only with his bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

But you said I would take Troy, didn't you?

ODYSSEUS:

115 Neither you without the bow, nor the bow without you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Then if that's the way it's to be, I should hunt him down.

116: "Hunt him down"—The language of hunting and trapping is indicative of the schooling by which a young warrior (an *ephebe*) was initiated through wilderness training and feats of cunning.

ODYSSEUS:

Do this and you could gain two rewards.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What are they? Show me how I can accept this task.

ODYSSEUS:

You would be called shrewd *and* courageous.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Then come what may, I'll put my shame aside and do it. 120

ODYSSEUS:

Will you remember what I've taught you?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Absolutely, now that we've agreed.

ODYSSEUS:

Then remain here in wait for him—
I'll leave so he doesn't see me with you. 125

Order your sentry back to the ship—

If I think you are taking too long,

I'll send him back disguised

As the master of a trading vessel.

We have secrecy on our side.

And, son, as he spins his story, 130

Take your cues from his speech,

And turn them to your advantage.

I must get back to the ship; the rest is up to you.

Hermes, trickster-god, guide us.

Athena, my constant savior, bring victory. 135

(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing. Enter the chorus of warriors through the stage right wing.)

134: Hermes—the messenger god, crosser of boundaries, and guide to the dead on their way to Hades. He protected heralds and traders and was also the patron god of thieves and tricksters.

135: Athena—the goddess of strategy and craft and often associated with Odysseus. She is invoked here by her cult title *polias*, which means “of the city,” perhaps because Odysseus believes he is acting for the greater good of the Greeks. A large statue of Athena Polias stood before the Parthenon, Athena’s temple on the Acropolis above the Theatre of Dionysus.

Enter the chorus . . . wing: See endnote.

Parodos (Entry-song)

[Strophe *a*]

CHORUS:

What can I do? What can I do?
 A stranger in a strange land.
 What to hide? What to say
 To a man who knows not to trust?
 140 Sir, give us your advice; your skills
 In judgment surpass ours.
 You hold the god-given scepter of Zeus
 And ancient sovereignty handed down.
 How best can *we* serve *you*?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You want to see where he lives?
 145 Up there, clinging to the coastline.
 There's nothing to fear here
 When this dreaded drifter returns.
 Watch out for my signal,
 150 And come and help when I need you.

[Antistrophe *a*]

CHORUS:

I always look out for you, sir,
 And I'll keep a careful eye on you now.
 But describe to us this shelter
 He has made his home.
 155 And where do you think he is now?
 We need to find out;
 This could be an ambush.
 Where does he go? When does he rest?
 Is he here now or somewhere else?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You see the cave with two entrances in the rocks?
 160 That is where he lives.

CHORUS:

A poor place—and where's the occupant?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Scavenging for food? Dragging that twisted limb,
 He can't be that far away.
 I've heard it said that he lives
 By feeding on wild beasts
 Felled by his poisoned arrows. 165
 Misery and more misery—
 And never the hope of a cure.

CHORUS:

[Strophe *b*]

I feel sorry for him. To think
 He's had no one to care for him; 170
 He's never seen a friendly face—
 Alone, always alone,
 Ravaged by a foul disease,
 Adrift at meeting his needs.
 How does he even survive? 175
 What schemes the gods have a hand in!
 Poor humanity, when life can
 Become more than one can bear.

[Antistrophe *b*]

This man was born nobility, 180
 From a house second to none.
 Now he has lost everything,
 Alone without a friend in the world,
 Living among beasts in the wilds—
 Miserable, hungry, and desperate, 185
 Suffering incurable, endless agony.
 The only answer to his hopeless cries
 Is the perpetual call of Echo,
 Far, far away in the distance. 190

189: Echo—In Greek mythology, Echo was confined to a cave and forced to repeat all she heard after Hera discovered her affair with Zeus. Echo fell in love with Narcissus; but he refused her, and she withered away until only her voice remained, calling from the mountains.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

None of this amazes me;
 It was the will of the gods,
 If I am any kind of judge.
 Savage Chryse sent this lonely,
 195 Solitary suffering.
 It must have been ordained
 To prevent him from bending
 His god-given bow against Troy
 Until that time when
 200 The city is destined to fall.

(An offstage moan is heard.)

[Strophe c]

CHORUS:

Be quiet, boy!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What is it?

CHORUS:

A sound!
 Falling on the air, a broken moan,
 It came from . . . over there . . . somewhere?
 It falls again, and again. There—up the trail!
 205 A man crawling in agony, there's no mistaking
 Those cries; I know the sound of suffering.
 But wait, my son . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What? Speak!

194: Chryse—a goddess who had a shrine on Chryse Island, off the coast of Lemnos. She has been identified with Athena, Artemis, and the Thracian moon goddess Bendis. Her name means “golden.” Philoctetes was bitten by a snake that guarded her shrine. (See endnote on lines 194–5.)

194–5: See endnote.

198: This bow was a gift to Heracles by Apollo. In Greek mythology, the bow is a symbol of hunting, ancient technology, and male initiation, and archers are both feared for their deadly accuracy and reviled for their reluctance to stand and fight.

[Antistrophe c]

CHORUS:

Another thought:

He's not far off now and getting closer— 210
 This isn't some country bumpkin
 Coming home playing his pipe.
 Do you hear that howling?
 He's fallen, hobbling home, racked by pain!
 He's groaning in anguish, 215
 Or he's seen a ship anchored off these inhospitable shores.
 Those are terrible cries.

(*Enter Philoctetes carrying the bow and a quiver of arrows.*)

PHILOCTETES:

Strangers.
 Who are you? Where did you come from? 220
 Why did you beach your ship
 On these desolate, inhospitable shores?
 What's your country, your people?
 You look like Greeks to me—Greeks!
 What a sight for sore eyes! Say something; 225
 Let me hear you speak. Don't be scared!
 I know, I must look like a wild man,
 But have a heart for what I've endured.
 I have no one, nothing; I'm all alone.
 Speak to me please if you're friendly;
 Go on, say something! Don't let me down, 230
 Not now; it'd be bad for the both of us.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Stranger, I can tell you what you want to know:
 We are indeed Greeks.

PHILOCTETES:

Oh, what a beautiful sound! I can't believe,
 After all this time, a Greek is speaking to me! 235

Enter Philoctetes . . . quiver of arrows: Though it is not clear from which entrance Philoctetes enters, the length of the description of his entrance would strongly suggest that it is from the wing entrance. He may have also emerged from the doorway of the *skene*, because his cave is described as having two entrances, one at either end of a tunnel (see line 17).

What's brought you to these shores, my lad?
 What kind wind and what bold venture drew you here?
 Speak up! Tell me everything; tell me who you are.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

240 I come from the island of Skyros,
 And I'm homeward bound. My name
 Is Neoptolemus. I am the son of Achilles.

PHILOCTETES:

Oh, son of a beloved father and a fine country!
 You must have been raised by old Lycomedes.
 What brings you here? Where did you sail from?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

245 I put out from Troy.

PHILOCTETES:

What are you saying? You weren't with us
 When we launched on Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You were a part of that campaign?

PHILOCTETES:

My son, have you no idea who I am?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

250 How could I know someone I've never seen before?

PHILOCTETES:

Have you never heard my name
 Nor anyone speak of my suffering?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You're asking me questions I know nothing about.

239: Skyros—An island in the western Aegean Sea just off the coast of Euboea, Skyros is one of four islands called the Northern Sporades. Thetis, knowing that her son was destined to die at Troy, hid the young Achilles on Skyros, dressed as a girl. Achilles slept with Deidamia, the daughter of King Lycomedes, and Neoptolemus was conceived.

243: Lycomedes—the king of Skyros. He hid Achilles in his palace and raised Neoptolemus to young manhood.

PHILOCTETES:

I must be the most detested of men, hated by the gods,
 When no word of my plight has reached home 255
 And nothing is known throughout all of Greece!
 Those depraved men who marooned me here
 Cackle at each other—their secret safe—
 As my sickness surges on in strength.
 O my boy, son of Achilles, 260
 You must have heard of me. I am the one
 Called “Master of the Bow of Heracles,”
 The son of Poeas—Philoctetes!—
 Whom the twin commanders and that Cephallenian
 King shamefully discarded into desolation. 265
 A fierce plague was eating away at me,
 The vicious brand of a murderous serpent’s bite.
 With that for company, son, they brought me here
 And deserted me. The fleet put in on this coast
 After leaving Chryse Island. At sea, all I could do 270
 Was writhe in pain. We came ashore, and I found
 Shelter in this cave. Finally I fell asleep, exhausted.
 And they, they abandoned me, leaving next to nothing—
 A few filthy rags and food not fit for a beggar!
 May the gods one day send them the same fate! 275
 O my lad, can you imagine what it was like
 When I woke to find that they had gone?
 Oh, the cruel tears I shed, the anguished cries.
 The ships I sailed with had completely disappeared,
 And not another single soul remained behind, 280
 None to help me, none to tend my overpowering
 Sickness. I tried to explore, but
 All I discovered was terrible pain,
 And there was more than enough of that, my lad.
 Day after day, time slowly passed me by, 285
 Alone in this ramshackle shelter.
 I was forced to fend for myself, my hunger
 Fed by this bow. I shoot birds on the wing by
 Stretching back the bowstring and striking. 290

264–5: “Cephallenian king”—Odysseus. “Cephallenian” refers to the Ionian Islands off the western coast of Greece, including Ithaca, the home of Odysseus.

Then I crawl painfully to my quarry, dragging
 My withered foot as far as I need to go.
 Somehow I manage, trailing in utter agony,
 To go and fetch water, and in the frosts
 295 Of winter I gather kindling to break for a fire.
 At first I had no heat, but by rubbing stone on stone,
 I found the hidden sparks that keep me alive.
 Now I have all a man needs—a roof over his head
 And the warmth of a fire, everything except a cure.
 300 Come on, lad. Let me teach you about my island.
 No sailor would ever weigh anchor here out of choice;
 There are no good moorings and no welcome port
 Where he could unload his cargo for profit;
 A wise man would have no reason to sail here.
 305 But what if someone had put in accidentally?
 It can happen over the course of a lifetime.
 These people, when they did come, my son,
 Always expressed sympathy and, now and again
 Moved to pity, would leave a bit of food or clothing.
 310 But the one thing I always begged for was never given:
 Safe passage home. No, I've been here ten years now,
 Wasting away, suffering starvation and misery,
 Feeding my flesh to this insatiable sickness.
 This is what the sons of Atreus and Odysseus
 315 Have inflicted on me. May the gods on Olympus
 One day make them suffer for what they did!

CHORUS:

Like those who came before us, I feel sorry
 For you, son of Poëas.

296–7: See endnote.

297: “Sparks”—Fire is a recurring motif in *Philoctetes*. Lemnos was sacred to Hephaestus, the god of the forge, and, according to legend, a volcano was said to have once stood on the island, though none has ever been found. See endnote on line 297.

314: “Sons of Atreus”—Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and leader of the Greeks at Troy, and his brother Menelaus of Sparta, the husband of Helen. Atreus usurped power from his brother Thyestes, killing all of Thyestes’ children except Aegisthus. See House of Pelops Family Tree.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I know for certain that he's telling us the truth;
I have personal experience of the kind of malice 320
The sons of Atreus and Odysseus are capable of inflicting.

CHORUS:

What? You also hold a grudge against those damned
Sons of Atreus? Did they do something to provoke your
anger?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

One day I'll show my hand and vent my rage;
Then Mycenae and Sparta will know 325
That the sons of Skyros are fearless men.

PHILOCTETES:

Well said, my boy! And what caused
Your great wrath against them?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Son of Poeas, I will tell you, but it is hard to speak
Of the harm they did me when I arrived: 330
When Fate decreed that Achilles should die . . .

PHILOCTETES:

Oh no! Don't say any more! First, I need to understand:
Are you telling me that the son of Peleus is dead?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

He is dead, not by the hand of a man, but a god—
Shot down, so they say, by Apollo's arrow. 335

PHILOCTETES:

Both the killer and the killed were noble.
I hardly know what to do next, my son—hear how
You were disgraced or grieve for the dead.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I think you have troubles enough of your own
Without mourning over the misfortunes of others. 340

325: Mycenae and Sparta—the homes of Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus.

335: "Shot down . . . arrow"—According to mythology, Apollo, the archer god, guided the arrow shot by Paris.

PHILOCTETES:

You're right. Continue your story:
How did they outrage you?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

They came in a ship bedecked with garlands,
Godlike Odysseus and Phoenix, my father's mentor.
345 They told me, and who knows whether it's true or false,
Since the death of my father, it had been ordained
That towering Troy would fall only to me.
Of course, when I heard this I wasted no time
And set sail with them as quickly as possible.
350 I wanted to pay my respects before the funeral
And see my father for the first and the last time.
Then there was their promise of victory:
I was the one who would conquer Troy.
After only two days at sea, sped by strong winds
355 And swift oars, we landed at bitter Sigeion.
When I disembarked the army crowded around,
Welcoming me, and swore that they were seeing
Their lost Achilles alive again.
But he lay dead and in misery. I wept.
360 Eventually I went to the sons of Atreus,
Naturally in friendship, and claimed
My father's arms and possessions.
But what an insolent answer they gave me:
"Offspring of Achilles, you may have all
365 Of your father's property except his arms.
Another man owns them now—Laertes' son."
Tears welled, stinging my eyes, and I leapt up

344: Phoenix—an exile from the house of his father, Amyntor, taken in by Peleus, the father of Achilles. Phoenix was appointed tutor to Achilles and was his most trusted adviser.

351: "For the first . . . time"—Neoptolemus had only just been born when Achilles either returned to his homeland of Phthia or was tricked by Odysseus to reveal himself as a man and forced to go to Troy. There are differing mythic traditions, but in all of them Neoptolemus has never seen his father.

355: Sigeion—a spur of land to the northwest of Troy on the southern side of the Hellespont and about 125 miles from the island of Skyros. Sigeion was also the legendary location of Achilles' tomb.

In a passionate rage, smarting with anger and said,
 "Violators! How dare you award *my* arms
 To another man without my consent!" 370
 Then Odysseus, who was close at hand, said,
 "Boy, it was their right to give them;
 I saved his arms, and I saved their master."
 In my great rage I spared him nothing;
 I flung every insult and said it all. 375
 I was not going to lose my arms to *him!*
 And although he was a man slow to anger,
 He was stung by the abuse and countered,
 "You should have been here, with us,
 But you chose to neglect your duty.
 Since you cannot keep a civil tongue in your head, 380
 You'll never take these arms back to Skyros."

Abused and insulted, I am sailing for home
 Deprived of what is rightfully mine
 By that bastard son of bastards, Odysseus.
 I hold the commanders accountable. 385
 An army is like a city and reflects its leaders;
 If its people behave immorally,
 They have learned to by example.
 I have told you the whole story. May the gods
 Love an enemy of Atreus' sons as much as I do! 390

[Strophe]

CHORUS:

Mistress of the Mountains,
 All-giving Earth,

373: "I saved their master"—Odysseus and Ajax were primarily responsible for retrieving Achilles' body from the battlefield.

384: "Bastard son of bastards"—Odysseus, brought up as the son of Laertes, was often called "the son of Sisyphus" because of his reputation as a trickster. Sisyphus was the legendary founder of Corinth and was eternally punished in Hades for attempting to cheat death. One version of the myth has Anticleia and Sisyphus conceive Odysseus before Anticleia marries Laertes. Cf. note on *Ajax* 188.

391–402: a passage in lyric meter written to be sung by the chorus leader while the chorus dance. This strophe is matched by lines 507–18. Together they form what is known as a *hyporchema*, or dance-song.

Mother of Zeus
 From Paktolos' glittering streams,
 395 I called on you, sovereign mother,
 When the sons of Atreus
 Outraged him
 By giving away
 His matchless father's arms
 400 To the son of Laertes.
 Hear this blessed goddess
 Who rides on bull-killing lions.

PHILOCTETES:

Strangers, it seems to me that you've sailed
 Here with a cargo of common grievances.
 405 You and I sing the same song, and I know
 The work of the sons of Atreus and Odysseus:
 He could put any atrocity into words
 And lend himself to all kinds of treachery
 In the hope of perverting justice.
 410 None of this comes as a shock, except
 That Ajax could stand to watch it happen.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

He was already dead. Had he lived,
 I would never have been cheated like this.

PHILOCTETES:

What are you saying? He too is dead and gone?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

415 Gone. He no longer sees the light.

PHILOCTETES:

Oh no, no! But Diomedes, Tydeus' son,

394: Paktolos—a river in the Phrygian kingdom of Lydia, modern-day western Turkey, which was said to flow with gold dust from Mt. Tmolus. The area was associated with the worship of Cybele, the mother goddess.

416: Diomedes—Diomedes of Argos is one of the most fearsome warriors in the *Iliad*; he even went into combat with Ares and Aphrodite. In an earlier version of the Philoctetes myth, Diomedes had accompanied Odysseus to Lemnos.

And that spawn of Sisyphus sold to Laertes,
They never die! They don't deserve to live!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

No, they don't; you can be sure of that.
They are thriving in the Greek army.

420

PHILOCTETES:

And what of my dear old brave friend
Nestor of Pylos—is he still alive? He could
Counter their schemes with his sage advice.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

He is alive but in great difficulty: His son
Antilochus is dead, and he has no protection.

425

PHILOCTETES:

Oh no, not another. Two more deaths
Too hard to bear. I wish I never knew!
Oh, oh, what can we look to when men
Like this are dead while Odysseus lives?
It is he who should be counted among the dead.

430

NEOPTOLEMUS:

He's a cunning wrestler, but even the most cunning
Stratagems, Philoctetes, can be tripped up.

PHILOCTETES:

For the sake of the gods, where was Patroclus—
Your father's closest friend—when you needed him?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

He too had been killed, let me tell you;
War never wants evil men
But always takes the good.

435

417: Spawn of Sisyphus—See note on line 384.

422: Nestor—the old king of Pylos and the voice of experience among the Greeks at Troy.

425: Antilochus—killed attempting to help his father against the Trojan warrior Memnon.

433: Patroclus—Achilles' lieutenant and closest comrade, killed by Hector in Book 16 of the *Iliad* after he led the Greeks in a counterattack wearing Achilles' armor.

PHILOCTETES:

I'll bear witness to that, and on that subject
 Let me ask you about a worthless man
 440 Who had a sharp tongue and mind for schemes.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You can only mean Odysseus.

PHILOCTETES:

No, not him, but a fellow named Thersites
 Who never knew when to keep quiet,
 Though it drove men mad. Is he still alive?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

445 I never saw the man, but I heard he was still alive.

PHILOCTETES:

He would be. Evil creatures are never destroyed;
 Some unseen power carefully protects them
 And takes perverse pleasure in diverting
 Criminals and wrongdoers away from Hades,
 450 While the just and the good are sent straight there.
 So what do I make of this? Is this the way of the gods?
 How can I praise the gods when their ways are so evil?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Son of an Oetean father, from now on
 I will take care to view Troy
 455 And the sons of Atreus only from afar.
 Where corruption overpowers virtue
 And honor is stifled, letting duplicity rule,
 I will never offer men my loyalty.
 No, rocky Skyros will do for me.
 460 I'll be quite content to stay at home.
 So, to my ship. Good-bye, son of Poetas,
 Good-bye. May the gods restore your health—
 I know you want that more than anything.

442: Thersites—a reviled figure whose name means something like “Bruiser.” He was put down by Odysseus in the Greek chiefs’ assembly in Book 2 of the *Iliad*. In most versions of the myth, he is killed by Achilles; here Sophocles has him survive.

453: “Oetean”—Mt. Oeta was where Heracles died and ascended to heaven. It stands in the region of Malis, Philoctetes’ homeland.

We must go and make ready to sail
For the god to speed us on our way.

465

PHILOCTETES:

Are you meaning to go now, my son?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Yes, we must watch the weather from the ship
So we can seize the moment and sail.

PHILOCTETES:

Then, my son, by your father and your mother,
By everything you hold dear in your home,
I beg you as a suppliant, do not leave me alone,
Forsaken, living in the utter misery
You have seen and heard for yourself.
Take me with you! It is repulsive,
I know it, to have to carry such a cargo,
But steel yourself to it, as befits your family.
Shun disgrace and find glory in honor.
If you ignore this, you'll degrade your good name.
Do it, my lad! Think of the honors you'll receive
If I make it back to Oetean land alive!
Come on, it's not even a full day's work.
Dare to do it: Have me aboard and stow me
Where you like—in the hold, the prow, the stern,
Wherever I'll least distress my shipmates.
Say yes, my son: By Zeus the god of suppliants,
Be persuaded. I'll get down on my knees
In spite of my injuries, hobbled and lame.
Don't abandon me here in total isolation.
Take me to your land or just to Euboea,
The kingdom of Chalcodon. It's not too far
To Oeta from there; I could make it.
I'd cross the highlands of Trachis

470

475

480

485

490

488–9: “Euboea . . . Chalcodon”—Euboea is a long, narrow island just off the coast of eastern Greece, where Chalcodon was king; he was the father of Elephenor, who served at Troy.

491: Trachis—the hilly region to the south of Malis and the final home of Heracles and his wife Deíaneira. Their marriage ended in the suicide of Deíaneira and the death of the mortal Heracles. Sophocles tells this story in *Women of Trachis*.

And ford the streams of Spercheius and appear
 Before my dear father. It's been so long;
 I fear he's passed away. So many times
 495 I sent word to him by those who came here,
 Praying that he would dispatch a ship
 And fetch me back home. Either he died,
 Or these messengers couldn't have cared less
 For me and hurried on to their homes instead.
 500 But now I have my escort and my messenger.
 You can save me; you can be compassionate.
 Human fortune is fraught with danger,
 And life is nothing if not uncertain.
 To avoid risk is to court disaster.
 505 The complacent should look to their lives,
 Else they be taken by surprise and ruined.

[Antistrophe]

CHORUS:

Have a heart, sir. He's told of such suffering,
 An ordeal I'd wish on no friend of mine.
 510 Sir, if you're against those despised sons of Atreus,
 You should turn their mistreatment of you
 515 To this man's gain and take him where he wants to go.
 Put him aboard your good, swift ship;
 Take him home;
 Avoid reprisal from the gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Be careful: You're just unaffected onlookers now,
 520 But once you grow weary of living with his sickness,
 You may not find it so easy to stick to your word.

CHORUS:

Not me. You would never have a reason
 To reprimand me for such a thing.

492: Spercheius—a river that runs through the plain of Malis and empties out to the Malian gulf.

507–18: A passage in lyric meter written to be sung by the chorus leader while the chorus dance. This antistrophe is matched by lines 391–402. Together they form what is known as a *hyporchema*.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

It would be shameful for me to seem less
 Considerate than you in helping a stranger in need. 525
 If that is what you think, let us sail!
 Help him aboard; our ship will not deny him passage.
 May the gods carry us safely from this island
 And speed us on to wherever we wish to sail.

PHILOCTETES:

O blessed day! You kind, sweet man! 530
 My fellow shipmates, if only I could
 Show you what your friendship means to me.
 Let's be under way, my boy, once I've bid farewell
 To my inhospitable home. Come in, I'll teach you
 How I survived and what I had to endure. 535
 Just the sight of such a place would have crushed
 Most other men, but necessity slowly
 Taught me to tolerate these troubles.

(Neoptolemus and Philoctetes head toward the skene door.)

CHORUS:

Wait! You should know—two men are coming,
 One of them looks like a sailor; the other, a stranger. 540
 You should find out what they want before you go in.

(Enter the Trader and a warrior through the stage right wing.)

TRADER:

Son of Achilles, I asked my fellow voyager here,
 Who was posted at your ship with his two mates,
 To tell me where I might find you.
 I came across them quite by chance, you see, 545
 As I happened to weigh anchor off the same coast.
 I am a trader, sailing in my humble vessel,

Enter the Trader and a warrior: Odysseus told Neoptolemus that he would send a member of his crew in disguise if things took too long (lines 126–8). The actor available to play the Trader would have been the same actor who played Odysseus. Did Sophocles intend Odysseus to assume this role? If so, it would certainly add an important dynamic to the scene because Neoptolemus would know that the Trader was Odysseus in disguise.

From Troy, bound for the vineyards of Peparethos.
 When I learned that these seafarers were your crew,
 550 I felt that I could not simply go on my way
 Without first informing you of the news.
 I knew you would be obliged. I take it you
 Know nothing about your predicament
 And what the Greeks have in store for you.
 555 They're wasting no time
 Setting their plans in motion.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Sir, I appreciate you thinking of me, and if I
 Am a worthy man, I will not forget your kindness.
 Tell me what you know; I need to learn
 560 What new plots the Greeks have against me.

TRADER:

Old Phoenix and the sons of Theseus
 Have taken ship and sail in search of you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

To persuade me to come back or to force me?

TRADER:

I'm not sure. I can only tell you what I heard.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

565 Are Phoenix and his accomplices so desperate
 To please the sons of Atreus that they run their errands?

TRADER:

The errand is being run, I know that, and without delay.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Then why did Odysseus not come in person?
 Perhaps he was too scared to deliver his own message.

548: Peparethos—a tiny island off the coast of Thessaly in northwestern Greece. The island of Skyros, Philoctetes' home, is only forty miles to the southeast. Peparethos was known in antiquity for its fine wine.

561: "The sons of Theseus"—Demophon, the king of Athens, and his brother Acamas. According to one mythic tradition, Theseus was murdered on Skyros by Lycomedes, the guardian of Neoptolemus.

TRADER:

Just as I put out from the harbor I saw him sailing 570
 With Tydeus' son, seeking another man.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

And who was this man that Odysseus sailed after?

TRADER:

I heard there was a man . . .

(Whispering to Neoptolemus.)

But first of all, tell me
 Who that is, and whatever you do, keep it quiet.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Stranger, this is the famous Philoctetes. 575

TRADER:

No more questions! Just pack up
 And get away from here as fast as you can!

PHILOCTETES:

What's he saying, son? Why is he whispering?
 Is this merchant making some secret deal over me?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I'm not sure what he means yet, but anything 580
 He has to say he must say it to us all, loud and clear.

TRADER:

Son of Achilles, don't accuse me of slandering the army.
 That was not my intention. I am just a poor man,
 And the army has always rewarded my services.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I am an enemy to the sons of Atreus, and this man 585
 Is my most loyal friend because he hates them, too.
 And if, as you say, you have come in friendship,
 You are obligated to disclose everything you know.

TRADER:

Watch what you are doing, boy.

571: "Tydeus' son"—Diomedes. See note on line 416.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I can see well enough.

TRADER:

I will hold you responsible for this.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

590

Then do, but speak.

TRADER:

I'll speak. Those two men I told you of are sailing
 After *him*. The strong son of Tydeus and mighty
 Odysseus have sworn an oath to bring him back,
 Either by conciliation or by the power of force.
 595 All the Greeks heard Odysseus announce this;
 He has every confidence he will be successful,
 Even more than the man he sails with.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

600 But why all of a sudden have the sons of Atreus
 Turned their attention toward a man
 They exiled such a long time ago?
 What could have compelled them? A god?
 The fear of divine retribution
 Seeking revenge for past evils?

TRADER:

605 I can tell you everything, since you've not heard.
 There was a Trojan prophet, a royal son of Priam,
 Who went by the name of Helenus.
 Cunning Odysseus, who it is said is brazen
 And shameless, captured him in the night
 And brought him back in chains, publicly
 610 Exhibiting his fine prize to the Greeks.
 Helenus then foretold all he was asked and said
 They would never take his city unless Philoctetes
 Could be persuaded to leave his island to come to Troy.

605: Priam—the king of Troy and father to fifty sons, including Hector and Paris, and many daughters, including Cassandra and Polyxena.

606: Helenus—a son of Priam and Hecuba, a seer of Apollo, and an important Trojan warrior in the *Iliad*. After the death of Paris, he and one of his brothers, Deiphobus, became rival suitors for Helen. Helenus was rejected and went over to the Greeks.

When Odysseus heard the prophet say this,
 He instantly promised to fetch this man 615
 And bring him back to the Greeks.
 He thought it most likely that he would be willing
 To come, but if he refused, then he would use force.
 He said they could have his head if he failed.
 You have heard everything, boy. I suggest that you 620
 And anyone else you care about leave now.

PHILOCTETES:

I am a wretched man! That total fraud
 Has sworn to persuade me to go back to the Greeks!
 He'd find it easier to persuade me to come back to life
 After I am dead and buried deep down in Hades
 And, like *his* father, to try to cheat death! 625

TRADER:

I know nothing about that. I must get aboard my ship.
 May the gods be with you, and may it be for the best.

(Exit the Trader through the stage right wing.)

PHILOCTETES:

Isn't it amazing, my lad, that the son of Laertes
 Could possibly hope to soften me with words, lead me 630
 To his ship, and deliver me into the midst of the Greeks!
 I would rather listen to my most lethal enemy,
 The snake that crippled me, than to him!
 He would dare do anything to get what he wants;
 At least now I know that he's on his way.
 So, my son, we need to get under way and put 635
 As much sea as possible between Odysseus and us.
 Let's go now; good speed with good sailing
 Gives good sleep once the work is done.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

We'll sail as soon as the headwind dies down.
 It's far too fierce to put out at the moment. 640

PHILOCTETES:

It's always fair sailing when fleeing from evil.

625: "His father"—See note on line 384 for Sisyphus, the alleged father of Odysseus.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Not always. The weather is also against them.

PHILOCTETES:

No wind has ever averted a pirate
When there's an opportunity to ransack and steal.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

645 Then we'll go now, just as soon as you collect
Everything you need from inside.

PHILOCTETES:

There are a few things. Not much.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Can they not be found onboard my ship?

PHILOCTETES:

650 I need a particular herb that I keep to soothe
My wound and help manage the pain.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Fetch it. Is there anything else?

PHILOCTETES:

I need to find any arrows that might have missed
And fallen; no one else can ever have them.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Then is that your famous bow?

PHILOCTETES:

655 I'm holding the one and only.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Could I see it? I mean, even handle it?
To be so near to the power of a divinity!

PHILOCTETES:

For you, my son, I will grant your wish.
There's nothing I wouldn't do for you.

652–3: “Arrows . . . ever have them”—These were once Heracles' arrows and were dipped in poison from the blood of the Hydra, a many-headed serpent vanquished by Heracles as one of his labors.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I want to take it—I really do—but I feel I should
Be cautious. Is it allowed? If not, I will relent. 660

PHILOCTETES:

You speak respectfully, my son. Yes, it is allowed.
You have opened my eyes to the light of life,
To see the land of Oeta, my old father, my friends.
You have lifted me from beneath the feet 665
Of my enemies and placed me beyond their grasp.
Don't worry, the bow will be yours to hold
And then hand back to the hand that gave it.
You'll be able to boast; because of your compassion,
You were the only other mortal to hold this bow, 670
And I had it because I also performed a kindness.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I am fortunate to know you and earn your friendship.
One who knows how to give and take a kindness
Will always gain a priceless friend.
Please, go in.

PHILOCTETES:

I will, but come with me.
I'm weak. I need your help. 675

(Exit Neoptolemus and Philoctetes through the skene door.)

Stasimon

CHORUS:

[Strophe *a*]

I once heard a story, though I never saw it myself,
Of one who dared to try to bed the wife of Zeus.

671: "A kindness"—when the young Philoctetes lit the funeral pyre of Heracles.

673: "A priceless friend"—In the Greek, Neoptolemus' choice of words here reflects both the sound and the meaning of the name *Philoctetes*, which translates as something like "he who gains a friend" or "friend of gain."

679: "One who dared . . . wife of Zeus"—Ixion, a Thessalian king who was the first man to murder his own kin when he invited his father-in-

680 He was caught by Cronus' mighty son
 And lashed to the rim of an ever-running wheel.
 But I have never seen or heard of any mortal
 Suffering a more hateful fate than this man.
 685 No crime was committed; nobody was wronged;
 He treated others as they treated him.
 Did he deserve to come to this?
 How could he stand to listen alone
 To the rush of the surrounding seas
 690 And keep a grip on a life so steeped in grief?

[Antistrophe *a*]

He was his own neighbor, lame and alone.
 No one was near to help him bear his torment.
 No one heard the shrieks and cries, his answer
 695 To the agony of the putrefying flesh and blood.
 No one dressed the searing streams that leached
 From his maggot-infested, mutilated foot.
 And when he was consumed in pain,
 700 No one tended him with soothing herbal balms.
 Once his debilitating agony had waned,
 He would try to crawl, but only so far,
 A helpless infant reaching out,
 705 Scavenging to meet his meager needs.

[Strophe *b*]

He could never harvest
 The fruits of the blessed earth
 Nor reap the bounty
 That men work from the land.
 710 The only way to feed the pangs of hunger
 Was with the swift flights shot
 From his deadly bow.
 Poor soul, for ten years
 715 He never enjoyed the taste of wine.
 Instead he had to scrape his way

law Eioneus into his house and had Eioneus killed. Zeus pardoned Ixion and brought him to Olympus, where Ixion tried to seduce Hera. Ixion was punished by being bound to an eternally turning wheel in Hades.

In search of any stagnant pool
That could quench his thirst.

[Antistrophe *b*]

But now he has met a noble son.
He will be happy and strong again. 720
All his troubles now lie behind him.
After all this time he will sail away,
Slicing the sea on our swift ship,
Carried home, to the Malian nymphs,
The river banks of Spercheius, 725
And the peak of Mt. Oeta,
Where Heracles himself, Lord
Of the Shining Shield, rose to the gods
In a blaze of his father's heavenly fire.

(Enter Neoptolemus and Philoctetes through the skene door.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Please, come on. Why won't you speak? 730
You've frozen. What's wrong?

PHILOCTETES:
A, A, A, A!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What is it?

PHILOCTETES:
Nothing to worry about. You go ahead, son.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Are you in pain? Is it your wound again?

PHILOCTETES:
No, definitely not, not that, I'm fine— 735
O GODS!

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then why call on the gods?

PHILOCTETES:
So they'll keep us safe and protect us . . .
A, A, A, A!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

740 What is wrong with you? Why won't you tell me?
Stop this silence; it's obvious that something's wrong.

PHILOCTETES:

O my son, I'm finished! I can't hide my torment
From you . . . ATATAI! It's shooting through me!
Shooting through me! NO! Not again! NO!
745 I'm finished, my boy; it's eating away at me! PAPA!
APAPPAPAI! PAPAPPAPAPPAPAPPAPAI!
By all the gods, if you are carrying a sword, son,
Grab it and strike right at my heel!
Hack it off, clean through—don't worry about me!
750 Do it quickly, son, quickly!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What is this? Suddenly, out of nowhere,
What is making you scream like this?

PHILOCTETES:

You know, my son.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What?

PHILOCTETES:

Boy, you know!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I know nothing. What is wrong?

PHILOCTETES:

How could you not know? PAPPAPAPPAPAI!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

755 Your sickness is truly unbearable.

PHILOCTETES:

More than you know. Have pity!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What can I do?

PHILOCTETES:

Don't be scared away. Don't leave me!
It comes on me every so often. It will pass
760 Once she has satisfied her hunger.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You poor man, every sorrow has struck you.
Give me your hand; let me help you.

PHILOCTETES:

NO! No, don't touch me. But take my bow:
You wanted to hold it; now keep it safe for me
Just until the pain subsides.

765

If I slip into sleep, it slows the sickness.
Please let me rest quietly, but swear to me:
If those men should come here looking for me,
By all the gods, you swear to me that for any
Reason whatsoever, willingly or unwillingly,
You will never ever give them my bow.
If you do, you will not only condemn yourself,
But you will condemn me—your suppliant.

770

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Don't worry. No one else but you and I
Will hold this bow. Give it to me in good faith.

775

PHILOCTETES:

Here, take it, my son. But pray to the envious gods
That it will not bring you the sorrows
It showed to its former owner and me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Gods, grant both our wishes:
Swift smooth sailing to wherever heaven wills,
To wherever our destiny may lie.

780

PHILOCTETES:

Oh, my son, you're wasting your breath.
I can feel the black blood boiling up again,
Bursting from my wound. There's worse to come . . .

773: "Your suppliant"—Philoctetes has made himself a suppliant of Neoptolemus; Neoptolemus is honor bound to protect him because suppliants were sacred to the gods.

777–8: "The sorrows . . . former owner"—Heracles' use of the bow and poisoned arrows led indirectly to his own agonizing death after a Centaur he killed arranged for the poison to be recycled against its owner. For the story, see *Women of Trachis* 555–87.

785 PAPAI! FFFFF!
 PAPAI! Foot! What more can you do to me?
 It's coming again,
 Breaking over me! Coming! No! No!

(Neoptolemus recoils.)

Don't leave me! You know what this is!
 790 ATTATAI!
 Odysseus! If only you could feel this pain,
 Feel your frame split in two and your guts
 Wrench in your chest! FFFFFFF! PAPA!
 You two commanders: Agamemnon!
 795 Menelaus! Why did you not suffer
 These torments as long as I?
 Why me? Me!
 Death! Death! Every day I call to you—
 Why do you never come?
 O my son, noble child, take hold of me,
 800 And call upon the fires of Lemnos to engulf me.
 Once I saw fit to do the same
 To a son of Zeus in return for the weapon
 That you now keep safe for me.
 Say something, boy, say something!
 805 Why are you quiet? What are you thinking?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

My heart is bursting with grief for your pain.

PHILOCTETES:

Be bold, my son. It stabs sharply
 But passes quickly. I beg you:
 Don't leave me here alone.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

We will stay, don't worry.

800: "The fires of Lemnos"—No trace of the legendary Lemnian volcano called Mosychlus has ever been found, though Pausanias reports that at some point Chryse Island disappeared into the sea. "The fires of Lemnos" is probably an allusion to the myth of Hephaestus and the fumarole fields of the island that produced steam and vapor. Red Lemnian earth was considered a curative, and purging fire rituals were known to have been practiced on the island (see note on line 927).

PHILOCTETES:

You'll stay?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You can be sure of that.

810

PHILOCTETES:

I shouldn't need to remind you of your oath, my son.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I am not allowed to leave without you.

PHILOCTETES:

I want your hand on it.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I'll give it, to stay.

(Philoctetes gazes up at the sky.)

PHILOCTETES:

Now take me there, take me there.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Where?

PHILOCTETES:

Up there!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What madness is this? Why are you gazing up at the sky?

815

PHILOCTETES:

Let me go! Let me go!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Go where?

PHILOCTETES:

Let me go, I'm telling you!

814–6: "Take me there . . . Go where?"—Philoctetes may be indicating his cave home, but this could also be another reference to the Lemnian fire ritual (see note on line 927). Philoctetes may believe that he will transcend his pain by sacred fire just as Heracles did when Philoctetes lit Heracles' pyre.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I will not.

PHILOCTETES:

If you touch me, you will kill me!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Stay calm. I'll let you go.

PHILOCTETES:

Earth, let me die now; take me under.

820 I cannot take this pain!

(Philoctetes starts to drift off to sleep.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I think he'll soon be asleep.

He can hardly hold his head up.

His whole body is drenched in sweat,

And a stream of black blood has burst

825 From his heel. Friends, let's leave

Him in peace and let him rest.

CHORUS:

[Strophe]

Sleep with no torment, sleep with no pain,

Come to our gentle prayers;

Bring your blessing, blessed lord.

830 Keep his eyes shrouded serenely

With the mist that clouds his sleep.

Come, come, our lord of healing powers.

(The chorus address Neoptolemus.)

Young man, where do you stand?

What to think? How to take the next step?

835 He sleeps; our time is now.

What are we waiting for?

827–64: First Kommos—a passage in lyric meter taking the place of the second stasimon, written to be sung by the chorus.

832: “Lord of healing powers”—Apollo was a god of sickness and healing and is also linked to Chryse Island in Book 1 of the *Iliad*.

Opportunity is everything,
And victories are made in a moment.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Though he hears nothing, I can see that the bow
Is worthless if we sail away without him. 840
God willing he will also be crowned with the victory.
The shame would be on us if we succeeded through treachery.

CHORUS:

[Antistrophe]

But, my boy, won't the gods see to that?
Speak softly now, son;
Whisper. 845
A sick man is easily woken
From restless sleep.
You should explore the limits
Of all you can do by stealth,
To do what you have to do. 850
If you continue this attitude toward him—
And you know exactly what I mean—
I can foresee only trouble ahead.

[Epode]

The wind is with you, lad, the wind is with you. 855
He won't see; he's helpless,
Splayed out in his darkness
(Sleep in the sun is the soundest),
Immobilized,
As good as dead in Hades. 860
Look, see for yourself.
Are you sure of what you're saying?
As I understand it, boy,
The strongest plan has no fear.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Keep quiet and keep your wits about you. 865
He's opening his eyes and lifting his head.

(Philoctetes wakes.)

858: The text is doubtful here; this line may be a gloss.

PHILOCTETES:

Ah, sunlight, sleep's successor, I never dreamed
 That strangers would ever watch over me.
 I could never have hoped, my son,
 That you would tend me with patient care,
 870 Staying by my side and easing my pain.
 Those "brave" sons of Atreus certainly
 Couldn't stomach their responsibility to me,
 But your nature is noble, from noble blood,
 And you were never burdened
 875 By the foul stench or my anguished cries.
 The plague has passed for a while,
 A breathing space, forgetfulness,
 A little bit of welcome rest.
 Help me up on my feet, my son,
 880 So as soon as I regain my strength,
 We'll make for the ship straightaway.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I am so glad to see you free from pain,
 Alive and well. I can't quite believe it;
 You went through such intense agony;
 885 I thought you were surely going to die.
 Let's get you up, or if you like,
 My men can lift you; it's no trouble.
 They will help; we're all in this together.

PHILOCTETES:

Thank you, my boy. Help me up, like you said.
 890 But leave them out of it; no need to unsettle them
 With the foul smell before we need to.
 It will be hard enough on them once I'm aboard.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

All right, then hold on to me and stand yourself up.

PHILOCTETES:

Not to worry, I'm used to this. I'll get up.

(Philoctetes struggles up on his feet.)

875: "The foul stench"—The wound gives off a terrible gangrenous smell (see note on line 927).

NEOPTOLEMUS: (*Aside.*)

What should I do now?

895

PHILOCTETES:

What is it, lad? What are you muttering about?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I'm confused; it's difficult to know what to say.

PHILOCTETES:

Difficult? Don't say that, my son.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

But it is true.

PHILOCTETES:

Do I disgust you? Now that you've seen my sickness,
Have you changed your mind about bringing me onboard?

900

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What is disgusting is when a man abandons
His own true nature and acts shamefully.

PHILOCTETES:

There's nothing you are saying or doing that could disgrace
The memory of your father; you're helping a decent man.

905

NEOPTOLEMUS:

It will look as if I have no shame, and I am tormented by this.

PHILOCTETES:

Not by your actions, but what I am hearing worries me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Zeus! What should I do? Must I be twice treacherous?
Both hide the truth and speak such barefaced lies?

PHILOCTETES:

There's no mistaking: This *man* is out to betray me;
He wants to sail away and abandon me!

910

910: "This *man*"—the first time Philoctetes refers to Neoptolemus as a man. The term is impersonal and an indication that Philoctetes is prepared to no longer accept him as an impressionable young *epebe*. Just four lines later Neoptolemus is again "my son," as Philoctetes sees him wavering.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Not abandon you, but carry you on a harsh crossing,
And this has been tormenting me.

PHILOCTETES:

What are you saying, my son? I don't understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

915 I can't hide it: You are to sail to Troy,
To the Greeks, as an instrument of the sons of Atreus.

PHILOCTETES:

No! Don't say that!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Don't bemoan until you learn . . .

PHILOCTETES:

Learn what? What are you trying to do to me?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

920 Rescue you from this misery and then together
We will lay waste to the plains of Troy.

PHILOCTETES:

So this is the truth. This is what you want.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

We are compelled by necessity. Don't be angry.

PHILOCTETES:

I am finished! Betrayed! You Stranger!
What have you done? Give me back my bow!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

925 I cannot. It is my duty and in my interest
To obey the orders of my commanders.

PHILOCTETES:

Firebrand! Demon! Conniving monster!

923: "Stranger"—Philoctetes has not used this term since his first wary greeting at line 219. He is placing Neoptolemus outside his circle of *philoî* (friends) and asserting that the bond between them has been broken.

927: "Firebrand"—The arrival of Neoptolemus symbolically reenacts the Lemnian fire ritual in which for nine days all fires of Lemnos were extinguished and the sexes lived apart in a replaying of the myth of the

What have you done to me?
 You have deceived me. Are you not ashamed
 To look at me? Bastard! I was your suppliant— 930
 I pleaded for your help. By stealing my bow,
 You take away my means to survive.
 Give it back, I beg you. Give it back,
 I beseech you. Boy, by the gods of your ancestors,
 Do not rob me of my life! 935

(Neoptolemus turns away.)

He won't speak; he turns his back on me.
 He is not going to give it back!
 You bays, you sea cliffs, wild creatures of the rocks,
 Jagged coastline—my home, hear me!
 No one else will hear me speak. Hear how 940
 The son of Achilles has treated me.
 He swore to carry me home but takes me to Troy.
 He gave me his hand but took my bow,
 The sacred bow of Heracles, the son of Zeus.
 He means to claim it in the name of the Greeks. 945
 He drags me off as if he had captured a fierce enemy,
 But he is only killing a corpse, a ghost of a man.
 In my prime he would never had taken me,
 And even now he had to resort to deception.
 I have been taken in, poor fool. What can I do?
 Give it back! Be true to yourself. You can do it! 950
 Speak to me. You've nothing to say? Then all is lost.
 Twin caves carved in the rock, once again I return,
 But unarmed, with no means to survive.
 Here in this hovel my desolate life will wither away.
 I'll not fell any more birds on the wing 955
 Or wild beasts of the field with my bow.
 Instead my broken body will feed the animals

Lemnian women who had slain their husbands; a ship bearing new fire arrived from the sacred island of Delos and reignited the hearth and forge fires, bringing new life. The nine days of the festival may relate to the nine years Hephaestus spent on the island. Philoctetes also spends nine years on Lemnos. Some versions of the myth also mention the foul smell of the Lemnian women, which drove their husbands away.

That once fed me; my prey will prey on me,
 Life for life, my blood in recompense for theirs.
 960 I've fallen victim to one who seemed so innocent.
 I hope you die! No, not yet, one last attempt:
 You may yet change your mind. If not, then die!

CHORUS:

What do you want us to do, sir?
 Should we set sail or do what he wants?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

965 I feel so sorry for him; I can't help it.
 My sympathy keeps growing.

PHILOCTETES:

Have mercy, my son, for the sake of the gods.
 Don't let it be said in scorn that you tricked me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

970 What should I do? I wish I had never left Skyros
 And had to face this unbearable pain.

PHILOCTETES:

You're not a bad lad, but I think you've been trained
 By bad men to come here and act ruthlessly.
 Better to leave that to those best suited to it.
 Sail on from here, but give me back my bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What should we do, men?

*(Enter Odysseus, accompanied by his men, through the stage
 right wing.)*

ODYSSEUS:

975 Traitor! What do you think you are doing?
 Get away from him and give me that bow.

PHILOCTETES:

What's this? Do I hear . . . Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS:

Odysseus, for sure, standing before you.

PHILOCTETES:

I am betrayed! Finished! It was him?
 He set this trap and stole my bow.

ODYSSEUS:

Yes, this was my work. I admit it.

980

PHILOCTETES:

Give me back my bow, boy, give it back!

ODYSSEUS:

That he will not do, though he might want to.

And you must come too—even if we have to drag you.

PHILOCTETES:

You shameless bastard, you would use force?

There's nothing you wouldn't sink to.

ODYSSEUS:

If you won't come of your own free will.

985

PHILOCTETES:

Land of Lemnos, almighty fires

Ignited by Hephaestus, how could this be tolerated?

How can you let him tear me from your soil?

ODYSSEUS:

It is Zeus. Know that it is Zeus who reigns here.

Zeus decides all. I am merely his servant.

990

PHILOCTETES:

Detestable man, there is no end to your contrivances—

Hiding behind heaven, making the gods out to be liars!

ODYSSEUS:

This was decreed—you must follow this path.

PHILOCTETES:

No, I say, no!

ODYSSEUS:

And I say yes—you have no choice.

PHILOCTETES:

I am cursed! My father raised a slave!

I'm not fit to be called a free man!

995

987: Hephaestus—god of the forge.

989–90: “It is Zeus . . . decides all”—Odysseus tries to trump Philoctetes by invoking the name of Zeus, the highest deity.

ODYSSEUS:

No, return with us to Troy and stand with the bravest
Of men; together you will grind the city to dust.

PHILOCTETES:

1000 Never! I'll not suffer that, not while I stand
Over the steep cliffs of this island.

ODYSSEUS:

And what could you do?

PHILOCTETES:

I'll throw myself against the rocks and shatter
My head into a thousand pieces.

ODYSSEUS:

Get hold of him! Don't let him do it.

(Odysseus' men grab Philoctetes.)

PHILOCTETES:

1005 If only my hands could draw my beloved bow—
But they have fallen prey to Odysseus.
You, with your sick, unfeeling mind
Creep in again and snare me in your trap.
You hid behind this boy, who I never knew,
Far too good for you, but well worthy of me.
1010 His only thought was to obey his orders;
Now he agonizes over his mistake
And the wrong he's done to me.
Your sly-eyed sordid soul has schooled
Him in the evil arts of espionage,
1015 Against his will and his very nature.
Now you want to tie me up and take me
Away from the coast where you condemned me
To a living death—no friend, no home, no hope.
Oh!
1020 Why won't you die? I have prayed for your death
So many times, but I get nothing good from the gods.
You're happy to be alive while I live in misery,
Ridiculed by you and those sons of Atreus,
The twin commanders you now serve so well.
1025 Yet you had to be yoked to their expedition
By fraud and force, whereas I, the total wretch,

Freely sailed my seven ships into dishonor
 And disgrace, banished here by *them!*
 You said it was them; they'd say it was you.

Why now? Why me? Why take me away? What for? 1030
 I am nothing and have long been dead to you.
 How can it be, accursed man, that you no longer
 Find me a repellent cripple? If I sailed with you,
 How could you sacrifice or pour libations to the gods?
 Wasn't that how you justified marooning me here? 1035
 I hope you suffer! And if there is any justice in heaven,
 Then you will suffer for what you did to me.
 I know there is, because you would never
 Have sailed all the way here for such a wretch
 Unless the gods had ordained that you need me.

Land of my ancestors, omnipotent gods! 1040
 After all this time, avenge me! Avenge me!
 If you have any pity, punish them all!
 I've led the most pitiful life, but if I lived
 To see them annihilated, that would be my cure.

CHORUS:

An embittered man, he's indignant, Odysseus. 1045
 His suffering has not softened his resolve.

ODYSSEUS:

I could answer him at length if time allowed,
 But the way things stand, I will say one thing:
 I am whatever kind of man I have to be.
 As for deciding matters of morality, 1050
 There is no man more virtuous.
 It is in my nature to always want to win—
 Except, in your case, I will gladly give way.
 Take your hands off him and let him go.
 He can stay here; we've no more need of him 1055
 Now that we have his bow in our possession.
 Teucer is skilled in such things, and I dare say

1057: Teucer—the half-brother of Ajax and a famous archer. In *Ajax* (1223–1415), Teucer is at odds with the sons of Atreus over the burial of Ajax until Odysseus steps in and resolves a potentially deadly situation.

That I could shoot this bow just as well as you
 And aim as true. So we don't need you at all.
 1060 Enjoy your long walks on Lemnos. We must go.
 This prize might bring me the honors
 That rightfully should have been yours.

PHILOCTETES:

Oh, misery! What can I do? Do you mean
 To go before the Greeks with my bow?

ODYSSEUS:

1065 I've heard quite enough. I'm leaving.

PHILOCTETES:

Son of Achilles, have you nothing to say?
 Are you just going to leave?

ODYSSEUS:

Come on! And don't look at him.
 Your generosity will ruin everything.

(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing.)

PHILOCTETES:

1070 Friends? You, too? Are you abandoning me?
 Have you no pity?

(The chorus prepare to leave.)

CHORUS:

The boy is our commander. Whatever he says
 To you, we say the same.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

1075 I will be told that I am too compassionate,
 But wait here, if that's what he wants,
 At least until the crew has prepared for sea
 And we have said our prayers to the gods.
 He may well change his mind about us.
 1080 We must leave; come quickly when we send word.

(Exit Neoptolemus through the stage right wing.)

[Strophe *a*]

PHILOCTETES:

Hollow cave carved in the rock,
 Sun baked and ice blasted,
 It was my cruel destiny to never leave.
 Now you will be the only witness
 To my lonely death. 1085
 Ah me, me, me.
 My sad shelter
 That echoed with my pain,
 How will I survive these days?
 What hope have I of sustenance? 1090
 High above me, in the whistling breeze,
 The birds will flutter by.
 I cannot catch them now.

CHORUS:

It was you. You cursed yourself,
 You poor, deluded man; 1095
 This fate is not forced on you
 Or beyond the bounds of your control.
 You had your chance
 To make the prudent choice.
 There was a better way;
 You had to choose the worse. 1100

[Antistrophe *a*]

PHILOCTETES:

I am cursed! Cursed!
 Abused in my agony,
 Abandoned,
 Alone, for the rest of time.
 Dead. 1105
 Aiai! Aiai!
 I have no way to live:
 The winged weapon
 I held in my strong hands

1081–1217: Second Kommos—a passage in lyric meter taking the place of the third stasimon.

1110 Will provide for me no more.
 The unforeseen treachery
 Of a duplicitous mind tricked me.
 Oh, to see him,
 The mastermind of this ambush,
 1115 Suffer for as long as I have.

CHORUS:

It is destiny, heaven-sent destiny,
 Not a trick.
 I had no hand in it.
 Send your spite
 1120 At others; don't curse me.
 Don't throw away my friendship.

[Strophe *b*]

PHILOCTETES:

Why me? Me? He's out there
 Sitting by the surging gray sea,
 1125 Laughing at me, flaunting my bow,
 Which no other mortal man has owned.
 Oh, beloved bow, my friend,
 Ripped from my loving hands,
 If you could only feel,
 1130 You'd look with pity
 On this follower of Heracles
 Who'll never hold you again.
 You have passed into the hands
 Of a new master now;
 1135 A tactician manipulates you.
 And you'll see such blatant deceit
 In the face of my most hated enemy
 And infinite lies devised against me.
 O Zeus!

CHORUS:

1140 A man should say what he thinks is right,
 But once said, he must restrain himself
 From firing off this kind of insult.
 Odysseus is one acting for many;
 He serves the common will
 1145 As a duty to his fellow men.

[Antistrophe *b*]

PHILOCTETES:

My soaring prey, bright-eyed
 Beasts roaming the high pasture,
 Fly no more from your lairs.
 I no longer hold any power;
 My arrows are gone. 1150
 I am cursed!
 Roam free—you have
 Nothing to fear from me.
 Nothing.
 Now is your time. 1155
 Take blood for blood
 And feast on my tainted flesh.
 Soon I will be dead,
 For how can I now live?
 Can any man live on air
 When he has no means 1160
 To harvest the abundant earth?

CHORUS:

By the gods, if you have any respect for a stranger
 Who wishes you nothing but goodwill, listen.
 Consider this and consider it well:
 You can avoid this end; 1165
 It feeds on your self-pity
 And will never subside as long
 As it coexists with self-inflicted hardship.

PHILOCTETES:

Again and again you make me remember my pain. 1170
 You have been the kindest of any who came.
 Why do you destroy me? What have you done to me?

CHORUS:

What do you mean?

PHILOCTETES:

Was it always your plan
 To take me to Troy, the place that I hate? 1175

CHORUS:

It is for the best.

PHILOCTETES:

Go then! Leave me here!

CHORUS:

1180 We'd be grateful to, very grateful, happy to oblige.
Come on then!
Back to the ship! Man your stations!

PHILOCTETES:

No! By Zeus who hears curses, don't go! I beg you!

CHORUS:

Calm yourself.

PHILOCTETES:

Friends! For gods' sake, stay!

CHORUS:

1185 What do you want?

(Philoctetes' pain rises up.)

PHILOCTETES:

Aiai! Aiai!
Goddess! Goddess! I am finished!
Foot! Foot! What will I do with you
For the rest of my miserable life?
1190 Friends! Come back again, please!

CHORUS:

Come back and do what?
Have you changed your mind?

PHILOCTETES:

Don't be angry with me.
When the pain strikes
1195 I can't control my words.

CHORUS:

Then come with us, you poor man.

1187: "Goddess"—*daimon*, perhaps meant as a reference to Chryse, a local earth goddess. It was at her sanctuary that Philoctetes was bitten by the snake (see note on line 194).

PHILOCTETES:

Never! Never! You can be sure of that!
 Not even if the god of burning thunder
 Threatened to blast me with lightning!
 Death to Troy and all those men 1200
 Beneath her walls who cast this cripple out!
 But, my friends, do one thing for me?

CHORUS:

What are you asking?

PHILOCTETES:

A sword, if you can spare one,
 Or an axe, any weapon you can bring me. 1205

CHORUS:

What do you mean to do?

PHILOCTETES:

Hack up this body, limb by limb!
 Death is what I mean! Death!

CHORUS:

But why?

PHILOCTETES:

I go to find my father. 1210

CHORUS:

Where?

PHILOCTETES:

In Hades.
 He no longer sees the light.
 O my city, ancestral land,
 If only I could lay eyes on you.
 Why did I leave that holy river? 1215
 To fight for the Greeks, my enemies?
 Now I am nothing! Nothing!

CHORUS:

I should have been long gone by now
 And on my way back to the ship,
 But I see Odysseus approaching 1220
 And the son of Achilles.

(Enter Neoptolemus through the stage right wing holding the bow and closely followed by Odysseus.)

ODYSSEUS:

Will you please just tell me what has made you
Turn around and return here in such a hurry?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I need to put right what I did wrong.

ODYSSEUS:

1225 What is this? What did you do wrong?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I obeyed you and the Greeks!

ODYSSEUS:

And why would that disturb you?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Because I cheated a man using trickery and deceit.

ODYSSEUS:

Who? I hope this isn't some thoughtless new scheme.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

1230 Thoughtless? No, not for the son of Poëas . . .

ODYSSEUS:

I'm afraid to hear what you're going to do.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

. . . Whose bow I stole and will return . . .

ODYSSEUS:

Zeus! What are you saying—you're giving it back?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Yes, I had no right to take it. I acted shamefully.

ODYSSEUS:

1235 By all the gods! Are you trying to mock me?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

If it's mockery for me to speak the truth.

ODYSSEUS:

Son of Achilles, what have you said?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Must I repeat myself over and over?

ODYSSEUS:

I wish I hadn't heard it the first time.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Then don't worry. There's nothing more to say.

1240

ODYSSEUS:

There is something, something that will stop this.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What do you mean? Who could stand in my way?

ODYSSEUS:

The entire Greek army that I represent.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You're supposed to be wise, yet you don't speak wisely.

ODYSSEUS:

Nothing you are doing could be called "wise."

1245

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I'd rather be just than wise.

ODYSSEUS:

How is it just to surrender what you gained
By following my strategy?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I was wrong. I acted shamefully,
And now I must try to set things right.

ODYSSEUS:

Are you not afraid of what the Greek army will do?

1250

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I have nothing to fear with justice at my side.

ODYSSEUS:

And what if I should choose to use force?

1252: We follow Jebb in the addition of a line here; the Greek text suggests that one may have been lost.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

You cannot force me to obey you.

ODYSSEUS:

Then we will fight not only the Trojans but you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

1255 What will be, will be.

ODYSSEUS:

Watch me
Reach for my sword. My hand is on the hilt.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Watch me reach for mine, only quicker.

ODYSSEUS:

I want no more of this. I will inform
The army of this, and they will deal with you.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

1260 At last, wisdom! Stay wise, Odysseus;
It might keep you out of trouble.

(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing.)

You there! Son of Poeas! Philoctetes!
Come out of your cave! Come out!

(Enter Philoctetes through the skene door.)

PHILOCTETES:

What is all this shouting out here?
Why are you calling me?
What do you want with me now?

(He sees Neoptolemus.)

1265 Ah me! This can be nothing good. More bleak news?
Have you come to make my misery worse?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Don't be afraid, but listen to what I have to say.

PHILOCTETES:

Oh, I am afraid. I believed your promises once,
But fair words from you proved foul for me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Is there no room for remorse? 1270

PHILOCTETES:

You spoke just like this when you stole my bow,
A "faithful friend" with a poisoned heart.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

No, not anymore. Just tell me whether you've decided
To stay here in distress or sail away with us.

PHILOCTETES:

Stop! 1275
Don't say any more. You're wasting your breath.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Have you decided?

PHILOCTETES:

More than words can say.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I wish I could persuade you to change your mind,
But I don't have the words.
I will stop.

PHILOCTETES:

It would have been futile.
You'll never earn my trust or win my heart. 1280
You stole the one thing that sustained my life,
Using treachery and deceit, and now
You come here to offer up advice!
Your great father spawned a wretched son!
I want you dead, all of you—the sons of Atreus, 1285
The son of Laertes, and you!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Put an end to your curses
And take your bow from my open hand.

(Neoptolemus offers Philoctetes the bow.)

PHILOCTETES:

This is another trick.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

No, I swear it, by the highest power of sacred Zeus.

PHILOCTETES:

1290 Oh, welcome, welcome words . . . if they're true.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

My actions will prove my words. Hold out your hand
And take possession of your bow.

(He hands the bow to Philoctetes. Enter Odysseus through the stage right wing.)

ODYSSEUS:

I will not allow this—as the gods are my witnesses,
In the name of the sons of Atreus and the entire army!

PHILOCTETES:

1295 My son, who was that? Did I hear Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS:

Indeed you did, and here I am,
The same Odysseus who will take you to Troy
By force, whether the son of Achilles likes it or not.

PHILOCTETES:

Then you'll pay for it if this arrow flies right.

(Philoctetes takes aim at Odysseus.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:

1300 No! By all the gods, don't shoot that arrow!

(Neoptolemus grabs Philoctetes.)

PHILOCTETES:

Let me shoot, by the gods! Unhand me, my lad!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Don't shoot!

He hands . . . Enter Odysseus: The sudden entrance of Odysseus would suggest that he did not return to this ship at line 1260 but hid himself to watch Neoptolemus and Philoctetes. Odysseus may have lingered in the stage right wing entrance, where he would have been visible to most of the audience.

PHILOCTETES:

Why are you doing this to me?
I have my bow; I can kill him, my most hated enemy!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Because it would not be honorable for either of us.

(Exit Odysseus through the stage right wing, fleeing for his life.)

PHILOCTETES:

Well, this I now know: The Greek commanders 1305
Who say they speak for the army are nothing but liars.
They talk well but bolt at the first sign of a fight. Cowards!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Good. You have your bow. Now there's no reason
For any anger or resentment against me.

PHILOCTETES:

Fair enough. You have shown your true nature, my boy, 1310
What you're made of. Sisyphus was not your father;
You are the son of Achilles. What a glorious
Life he led, famous still, even in death.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Thank you for speaking so well of my father and me, 1315
But hear what I have to say: It's for your own good.
Mortals must accept whatever the gods give;
But when they steep themselves in self-inflicted misery,
As you do, no one will ever feel remorse or pity.
Your wildness has made you immovable; 1320
You won't take advice, and if anyone does offer
Kind advice, you hate him for it, decide he's
Against you, and declare him your sworn enemy.
But I will speak, and may Zeus, god of oaths, witness,
Mark my words, inscribe them on your heart: 1325
This hideous wound was sent down by the gods
Because you disturbed the guardian of Chryse,
The snake that stealthily protected her open shrine.
As long as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west,

1311: Sisyphus—See note on line 384.

1327: "The guardian of Chryse"—See note on line 194.

- 1330 You will never be free of this searing pain
 Unless you go willingly to the plain of Troy
 To see the sons of Asclepius, our allies,
 Who will treat you and administer a cure.
 Then together we will take this bow
 And tear down Troy.
- 1335 Let me tell how I know this:
 We are holding a Trojan prisoner,
 Helenus, the best of all the prophets.
 He has seen clearly what will come to pass
 And has pronounced that this summer
 1340 Will see the fall of Troy.
 He has staked his life on this.
 Now you know, so be generous and give way.
 The rewards will only be of benefit to you;
 You'll be hailed as the bravest of all the Greeks
 1345 Once the healing hands have cured you
 And you have won unparalleled fame at Troy,
 The city that caused endless grief.

PHILOCTETES:

- Oh, spiteful life! Why me? Why do I still live
 In the light? Let me sink into the depths of Hades!
- 1350 Ah, me! What should I do? Doubt his words
 When he has given me such kind counsel?
 Then do I give way? If I do, how can I stand
 In the sight of men in such a sorry state?
 Who would even speak to me?
- 1355 My eyes have witnessed all my sufferings,
 But how could they bear to see

1332: "The sons of Asclepius"—Machaon and Podalirius. They are named in Book 2 of the *Iliad* immediately after a reference to Philoctetes (2.731). Asclepius was a healing god and the son of Apollo. In 420 B.C.E., his cult was invited to Athens. Sophocles was said to have personally housed the cult (and perhaps the snake that represented it) at his home prior to an Athenian shrine being built near the Theatre of Dionysus. Sophocles was given the title *Dexion* ("Receiver") for performing this religious service on behalf of the state.

1337: Helenus—See note on line 606.

The sons of Atreus or foul Odysseus,
The men who tried to destroy me?

It's not the hurt of past indignities that smarts,
But a vision of the corruption that is to come. 1360

One who nurtures evil thoughts
Will forever be schooled in evil.

I wonder then about your motives:

You should not be going back to Troy;

You should be keeping me from going.

It was an outrage that they prevented 1365

You from inheriting your father's arms!

Now you fight at their side and want me to do the same?

Do not do this, my son. You swore to take me home.

Come to Skyros and stay awhile; leave wicked men

To wicked ends. You'll be twice blessed, 1370

By me and my father, and by not abetting

Evil men, your nature will never appear evil.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

There's a lot of sense in what you are saying,

But I need you to trust in the gods, take my word,

And sail away from this land as my friend. 1375

PHILOCTETES:

To the Trojan plain and the despicable

Sons of Atreus—with this crippled foot?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

No, to those who will free you from your pain,

Heal your wound, and save you from this sickness.

PHILOCTETES:

What kind of advice is this? What do you mean? 1380

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I see what will be best for both of us.

PHILOCTETES:

You should be ashamed to say such things before the gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Should one feel shame when helping friends?

PHILOCTETES:

Does this help me or the sons of Atreus?

NEOPTOLEMUS:

1385 You. I am your friend and speak in friendship.

PHILOCTETES:

But you want to hand me over to my enemies!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

Please, learn not to be so defiant when in trouble.

PHILOCTETES:

You will destroy me with your words, I know it!

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I will not; you just refuse to understand.

PHILOCTETES:

1390 I know that the sons of Atreus abandoned me.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

They abandoned you, but now they want to rescue you.

PHILOCTETES:

Never—if it means that I must agree to go to Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

What else can I do if I cannot persuade you
Or make you believe anything I say?

1395 It would be easier to stop trying and let you
Suffer on with no hope of ever being saved.

PHILOCTETES:

Let me suffer what I need to suffer! But you,
You promised. You gave me your hand on it,
My son. You said you'd take me home. Fulfill your oath.

1400 Now, no more delays nor talk of Troy.
I've had my fill of misery and grief.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

If that is what you want, we will go.

PHILOCTETES:

What noble words!

(Neoptolemus helps Philoctetes up.)

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Step carefully, with me.

PHILOCTETES:
With all my strength.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
How will I escape being condemned by the Greeks?

PHILOCTETES:
Ignore them.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What if they invade my country?

PHILOCTETES:
I'll be there. 1405

NEOPTOLEMUS:
But what could you do?

PHILOCTETES:
I have the bow of Heracles.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
What are you saying?

PHILOCTETES:
I will drive them away.

NEOPTOLEMUS:
Then say good-bye to this place, and let's go.

(Enter Heracles on the roof of the skene.)

HERACLES:
Not yet, son of Poeas,
Until you have heard my words. 1410
Hear the voice of Heracles;
Look upon his form.

Enter Heracles . . . skene: Heracles may have entered suspended on the *mechane*, the stage crane often used for the entrances of gods. He may have then been placed on the roof of the *skene*, where he delivered the speech. The only actor available to play Heracles would have been the same one who played Odysseus and the Trader, suggesting that this is perhaps one last trick of Odysseus, who has disguised himself as the god.

For your sake, have I left
 The heights of heaven
 1415 To reveal the plan of Zeus.
 Stop this present journey;
 Listen to the word.
 First, know of my fortunes:
 Once I had endured my many labors,
 1420 I won the immortal excellence you see
 Before you. And for you too
 It has been ordained that your suffering
 Will be repaid with a life of glory.
 Go with this man to Troy;
 1425 Be cured of this vicious wound.
 Then as the army's champion,
 Kill Paris, cause of the harm, with my bow.
 Take Troy, and the army will honor you.
 Carry the spoils to the Oetian heights
 1430 As a joy to your father, Poeas.
 From this rich war-prize dedicate
 A portion to me; make an offering
 At my pyre in recompense for my bow.
 Son of Achilles, I say the same to you:
 1435 You will not take Troy without him,
 Nor he without you. Twin lions,
 You must protect each other.
 Asclepius, the healer, I will send to Troy.
 The city must fall twice to my bow.
 1440 Be warned: When you lay waste to the land,
 Show true respect for the things of the gods.

1424: "Man"—Heracles names Neoptolemus as a "man," indicating that his initiation is complete. In cult practice Heracles presides over the martial instruction of male initiates (*ephebes*), and gymnasiums were often named for him.

1436: "Twin lions"—Philoctetes is destined to shoot Paris, and Neoptolemus will kill Priam.

1438: Asclepius—See note on line 1332.

1439: Heracles had sacked Troy one generation earlier, when the city was ruled by King Laomedon.

1441-2: "Show true respect . . . Zeus"—The audience would know that Neoptolemus savagely and irreverently killed Priam while he was

This is paramount to my father, Zeus.
 Reverence does not die when men do;
 In life as in death it is immortal.

PHILOCTETES:

I have longed to hear that voice, 1445
 Waited so long for you to come!
 I will not go against your word.

NEOPTOLEMUS:

I also consent.

HERACLES:

Delay no longer.
 The time is right. 1450
 The winds are fair for sailing.

(Exit Heracles from the roof of the skene.)

PHILOCTETES:

Let me bid farewell to this land.
 Farewell, cavern that shared my watch
 And you spirits of field and stream,
 The deep thunder of the rolling sea, 1455
 Dashing the cliffs and spraying me
 With sea wash blasted by the southern wind.
 You, Rock of Hermes, that echoed
 To the sound of my anguished cries,
 The storm of all my sorrows. 1460
 Now fresh springs and Lycian waterfall,
 I am leaving you, leaving you for good,
 Just when I had given up on hope.
 Farewell, isle of Lemnos,

suppliant at the altar. Images of Neoptolemus committing acts of violent sacrilege at Troy were common and predate Sophocles' play.

1458: "Rock of Hermes"—a peak on the northwest of the island, near Cape Plaka.

1461: "Lycian"—a cult title of Apollo meaning "light" or "wolf," both terms connected to initiation rites. The reference here may be to Apollo as a healer. Excavations at Hephaistia, Lemnos' ancient city, have unearthed archaic terra-cotta models of fountains, one with healing nymphs. This may suggest that Lemnos was known for its therapeutic waters.

1465 Steer me on a fair and fortunate course
To wherever mighty Fate should send me.
A friend's good thoughts and the invincible
Demigod brought fulfillment.

(Exit Philoctetes and Neoptolemus through the stage right wing.)

CHORUS:

We will all set sail together.
1470 Pray to the spirits of the deep
To send us safely on this voyage.

(Exit the chorus through the stage right wing.)

—END—

Endnotes

A. Ajax

Line 15: "I can't see you, but I know it's you." Greek plays were not staged to re-create realistic scenarios, and it would not have been a stretch for the Athenian audience to accept that Athena would be invisible to Odysseus. Moreover, the actors wore masks and had to face the audience when speaking to be heard and to properly engage the audience. In this scene Odysseus would be speaking out front with Athena behind him on the upper level of the *skene*.

Line 333: "Why me? Why me?" There is no suitable contemporary English translation for Greek cries of pain such as *io moi moi!* (Ah me, me!). Greek masked acting used a whole range of utterances to articulate pain, suffering, and sorrow. Such language was often formalized as part of funerary lamentation, when loud expressions of grief were normal. The actor today might choose to groan or cry out, but this does miss the formulaic recitative quality of such expressions.

Lines 346–55: "Then look, I will open the doors. . . . There's no doubt now: He's out of his mind!" We cannot be certain about how this scene was staged. Some have assumed that only the chorus see the horror inside the doors, but the *ekkyklêma* was an established piece of stage machinery in tragedy and seems most likely here, especially considering the chorus' order to "open up!" Tecmessa's repetition of the order to open the doors also indicates an *ekkyklêma* entrance. This would provide a scenic contrast to the furious entrance of Ajax at line 91. Now the audience sees a static fallen hero. The sight of Ajax surrounded by slaughter would have been compelling and reminiscent of Orestes surrounded by the Furies in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* of 458 B.C.E. (*The Furies* 64–93)—a scene that may have also used the *ekkyklêma*.

Lines 545–64: "Lift him up. . . . He will devote himself to your care." We cannot know the exact age of Eurysaces; he can be no more than nine, as the play takes place in the tenth year of the Trojan War. But the fact that Ajax says "Lift him up" (545) would suggest a smaller child of perhaps three to six years of age. This would certainly create a poignant stage image of the helpless young boy at the mercy of the Greeks. This scene invokes Hector's interaction with his son Astyanax in the *Iliad*, when the young boy shrinks from the sight of Hector's plumed helmet (6.466–84).

Ajax wants his son to boldly face him, despite the blood and gore. After the fall of Troy, Astyanax was murdered by the Greeks. Ajax knows he needs to appoint Teucer as protector and guardian of his son.

Lines 565–76: “My shield-bearing warriors . . . you must grasp its sturdy strap.” Is the shield onstage? If Ajax entered on the *ekkyklêma*, then it is entirely plausible that the shield is part of the tableaux and visible onstage. Although Eurysaces is clearly too small to even lift the strap, the text is clear in that Ajax offers it to his son to hold (576). The small boy holding the strap of his father’s famous shield would make for an irresistibly poignant stage image and provide a clear visual indication that Ajax intends to do something drastic.

Lines 579–82: “Shut my house. Do not mourn outside the tent; / This is no time for women’s wailings. / Hurry! Close the doors. A good surgeon does not / Chant spells when the wound needs a knife.” These lines are the strongest evidence for the use of the *ekkyklêma*. Ajax needs Tecmessa to initiate his exit, and he orders her to “shut my house” (*paktou*) and “close the doors” (*pukaze*), two terms that can be found in tragedy and comedy to indicate the *skene*. (See Aristophanes, *Wasps* 127 and *Lysistrata* 259, and Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1524). *Pukaze* also carries the sense of “cover,” “conceal,” and “mask.” Furthermore, at line 579 Sophocles uses the term *episkenous* (“before the *skene*”) in what Stanford describes as “almost a pun” (1981, pp. 133–4): a metatheatrical moment in which stage set and stage action seamlessly merge. It is not hard to imagine the *ekkyklêma* wheeling back into the *skene* through lines 585–95, adding a sense of unstoppable desperation to this moment.

After line 645: (*Enter Ajax and Tecmessa through the skene door.*) This entrance was probably on foot from the central door of the *skene*. The doors would open, and the chorus and audience might expect to see the corpse of Ajax rolled out on the *ekkyklêma*. But Sophocles surprises us again, producing a composed Ajax united with Tecmessa followed by Ajax’s famous and much debated dissembling speech (646–92). Ajax seems, at first sight, to repudiate his former resolve to end his life, but he is really preparing the way for a solitary death away from his friends and family.

Lines 841–3: “As they see me brought down by suicide; / So might it be suicide for them when they / Are destroyed by their nearest and dearest.” These lines have long been suspected as an interpolation. Jebb translates them so: “Even as they behold me fall self-slain, so, slain by kinfolk, may those men perish at the hand of their best-loved offspring” (1893/2004). We agree with Stanford that these lines should be retained.

The skillful double use of the Greek term for “suicide” or “self-killing” applied to both Ajax’s situation and the destructive actions of the sons of Atreus seems apt here. Agamemnon was killed by his wife Clytemnestra in revenge for the killing of his daughter Iphigenia, both events that could be said to fulfill Ajax’s curse. But Menelaus returns safely to Sparta with Helen. It should also be noted that these lines represent a curse and not a prediction. For a good discussion supporting their deletion, see Garvie’s note on *Ajax* 839–42 (1998, pp. 206–7).

B. *Women of Trachis*

Line 179: “He’s wearing a wreath, and that means good news.” So Jebb. Lloyd-Jones and some other recent scholars contend that the wreath simply means he is a messenger; but he is not a professional messenger, and reputable manuscripts clearly imply good news here.

Lines 661–2: “Stained by the ointment of Persuasion, / Melted in beguilement by the beast.” Editors have tried various readings here. Segal translates, “melted in persuasion through the all-anointed beguiling of the beast,” and explains, “If this very uncertain text is right, Sophocles identifies the literal persuasion of Deianeira by deceptive speech with the erotic ‘persuasion’ of the robe” (1995b, p. 35). Lloyd-Jones, reading a slightly different text, translates: “May he come from there, deeply desired, united in love through the monster’s beguilement of persuasion” (1994). The word “melted” is a conjecture, and Lloyd-Jones rejects it, but the tragic irony it conveys is marvelously Sophoclean.

Line 837: “By the dreadful power of the Hydra”—The manuscripts show a word meaning “apparition” in place of “power,” but both ancient and modern scholars have thought that this word must have displaced something meaning “venom” or “power.” Lloyd-Jones prefers to make the adjective comparative and keep the noun—“an apparition deadlier than the Hydra” (1994)—a reading approved by Davies (1991).

Lines 1172–4: Ezra Pound wrote of the passage: “This is the key phrase, for which the play exists” (1957, p. 50, n. 1). He translated it as follows:

It means that I die.
For amidst the dead there is no work in service.
Come at it that way, my boy, what

SPLENDOUR,
IT ALL COHERES.

C. *Electra*

Lines 35–8: “Apollo answered my questions along these lines: / By myself, without mustering an armed force, / To trick them, sneak in, and, with my own hand, do / The slaughter they deserve.” The text is unclear about whether the god himself endorses the action that Orestes will take. Orestes has not asked whether he should kill the guilty pair but rather how he can make them pay the price, and Orestes here has rephrased the oracle’s answer in his own words. See Introduction, p. xxviii.

Lines 226–7: “Dear friends, noble as you are, no one now / Can tell me anything that helps.” The line, literally a question, has been read in several ways. The main alternatives are: (1) “For from whom, noble friends, could I hear a word that would be helpful, in the judgment of anyone who thinks right?” (from the Greek in Kells 1973); (2) “For who that thinks right would judge that any word would help me?” (from the Greek in Jebb 1893/2004, Lloyd-Jones 1994). We have adopted a simplified version of the first alternative.

Line 610: “I see she is huffing with anger.” Perhaps the chorus leader is referring to Electra and telling Clytemnestra that Electra’s anger has drowned her attempt at rational argument. That is Jebb’s view, supported by his comparison with *Antigone* 471. Other scholars think the anger is Clytemnestra’s and indicated by a gesture. In that case, the chorus leader would be talking to Electra and referring to Clytemnestra, whose appearance, behind the mask, would need to be made explicit by a speaker. On the one hand, the chorus in such a context usually comments on the preceding speech; on the other, Clytemnestra takes the comment of the chorus as directed toward her, as we see from the following line. So either interpretation may be defended.

Lines 686–7: “He completed the course / As well as he began it.” The translation follows an emendation, as interpreted by Kells. The manuscripts read: “He made the end-points of the course equal to his nature,” which might mean, “He ran as well as he looked.”

Line 790: “Could this be good?” Lloyd-Jones follows an emendation that means, “Am I not well off?” (1994).

Lines 1074–5: “The girl who weeps alone / Endlessly for her father’s death.” This translation is based on an emendation accepted by most modern editors.

Lines 1251–2: “But wait till their arrival / Prompts us.” This line refers to the arrival of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The word translated as “arrival”

often means “presence”; an ancient commentary tells us that in this context it means “right time” (*kairos*, as in line 1259), which we have supplied in 1254 for the combination of two verbs meaning “is present” and “is fitting.” So interpreted, Orestes’ lines here would be another warning to Electra to tone down her rhetoric until they have had their revenge. Taken in the more usual way, however, this is a double warning, as if Orestes were to say: “Be quiet until they are here, then remember what they did—not by speaking or wailing, but by killing them.”

Line 1478: “Although you’re alive, you’ve been matching words with the dead.” The line has perplexed many scholars. This translation follows the original Greek text, with Lloyd-Jones (1994), a text that implies a threat against Aegisthus’ life. Jebb and Kells follow a widely admired emendation that leads to one result or another that would be less frightening to Aegisthus: “that you have for some time now been addressing living men as though they were dead” (Kells 1973); “that the dead, as thou miscallest them, are living” (Jebb 1893/2004).

D. *Philoctetes*

Lines 1–2: “The peninsula of sea-washed Lemnos, / Deserted: no one sets foot here.” In Homer’s *Iliad*, Lemnos is not deserted. A consignment of fine sweet Lemnian wine arrives at the Greek camp sent by Euneus, the Lemnian king (*Iliad* 7.467). Making Lemnos uninhabited may have been an invention of Sophocles; two previous versions of the story staged by Aeschylus and Euripides, now lost, both have a chorus of Lemnians. Odysseus mentions that it is the rocky peninsula that is deserted, and we cannot assume that the whole island is unpopulated. Philoctetes’ injuries make it impossible for him to stray far from his rocky home. In any event, this is a desolate and desperate place.

Line 28: “Above or below you? I cannot see.” We must consider the mask in imagining how this scene might have been staged. To have been heard, Odysseus would have faced the audience when speaking, and Neoptolemus would have been behind him, up on the stage. This “split focus” facilitated by the mask allows Sophocles a greater range in establishing his staging. Odysseus looking up and Neoptolemus calling down would have been enough to suggest the scene that the text describes.

After line 135: (*Enter the chorus . . . stage right wing.*) The chorus enter via the stage right wing entrance into the orchestra. Alternatively, they may have entered earlier with Neoptolemus and Odysseus and been silent until now. In Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ versions of *Philoctetes*, which have only come down to us in fragments, the chorus consist of local

Lemnian men. Sophocles' chorus consist of Greek sailors, but who are they? The text is unclear, except they do seem very loyal to Neoptolemus. They could be warriors from Skyros or perhaps veteran soldiers who had served under Achilles. This would put additional pressure on Neoptolemus to perform correctly and make the right choices. The chorus of *Philoctetes* is more actively involved in the plot than most tragic choruses, not only advising Neoptolemus but also participating in deceiving Philoctetes.

Lines 194–5: “Savage Chryse sent this lonely, / Solitary suffering.” The myth that Philoctetes was bitten by a snake that guarded the shrine of Chryse may belong to a corpus of much older “treasure dragon” stories that also includes Jason and the Golden Fleece. Sophocles is vague about the background to Philoctetes' wound, but contemporary vase paintings and the lost *Philoctetes* of Euripides indicate that the young Philoctetes first visited Chryse (or, Golden) Island with Heracles on an earlier expedition against Troy. He was bitten by the snake either because he dared to show the way to the secret buried shrine of Chryse, thereby revealing her treasure, or because he accidentally trespassed on sacred ground. Chryse Island also features prominently in Book 1 of the *Iliad* as a place sacred to Apollo. When Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis to her father, who is named Chryses, Apollo sends a plague down on the Greeks. Agamemnon then gives back Chryseis but takes Achilles' war-prize, Briseis, in recompense, thus sparking the wrath of Achilles and the events of the *Iliad*.

Lines 296–7: “At first I had no heat, but by rubbing stone on stone, / I found the hidden sparks that keep me alive.” In Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Hephaestus tells how he was thrown off Olympus, became lame, and was nursed back to health by the Sintians, the ancient inhabitants of Lemnos. In return he showed them how to use fire and forge metal. Sophocles may be evoking the primeval Sintians in his portrayal of Philoctetes, standing in direct opposition to the sophisticated and urbane Odysseus.

Hephaestus seems to have originally been a non-Greek god, and on Lemnos a non-Greek population called the Tyrsenoi inhabited the island until the sixth century. Philoctetes is reminiscent of an ancient precivilization hunter-gatherer, and his simple and direct moral position proves compelling to the impressionable Neoptolemus.

Line 987: “Ignited by Hephaestus . . .”—This is the only time Hephaestus is named in the play. In some ways, the myth of Philoctetes mirrors that of Hephaestus. Both are marooned for nine years on Lemnos; both are lame and considered ugly. In the myth of the return of Hephaestus,

Dionysus persuades the god to return to Olympus; here Neoptolemus must persuade Philoctetes to go to Troy. In the fifth century, Lemnos remained sacred to Hephaestus; its main city was even named Hephaestia. The Athenians also venerated Hephaestus, dedicating a temple in the Agora to him in 450 B.C.E.

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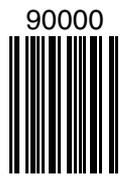
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