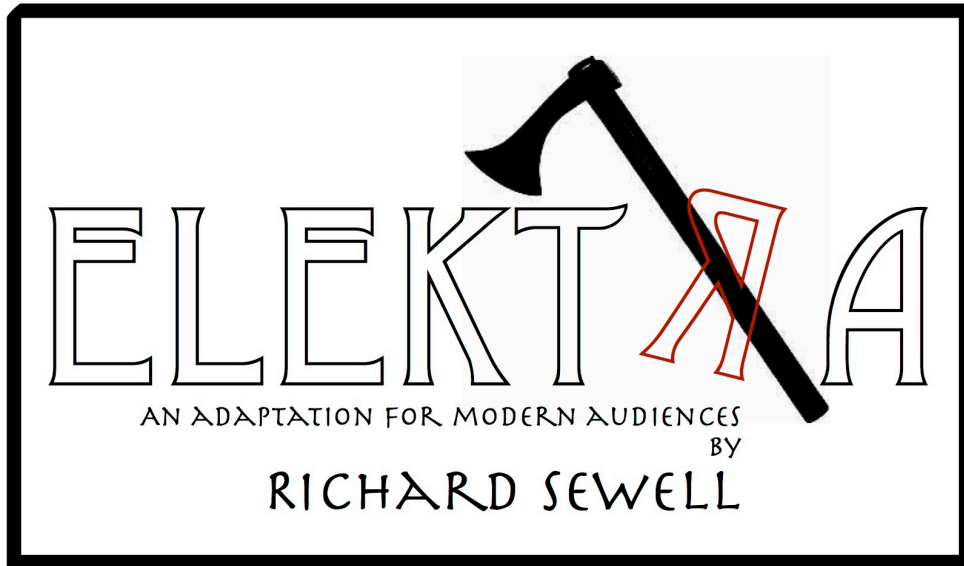


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Newport, Maine

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## **ELEKTRA**

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# ELEKTRA

An Adaptation from Sophocles

by Richard Sewell

(in order of appearance)

4m 2F + Chorus (1 or 2 of the male characters could be played as women)

ORESTES, son of the slain King Agamemnon

PEDAGOGOS, Orestes' tutor (or Nurse)

PYLADES, Orestes' friend.

GUARDSMAN, (or GUARDSMEN) Aegisthos' guard

AGISTHOS, usurping King,

ELEKTRA, Agamemnon's daughter

CHRYSOTHEMIS, her sister

KLYTEMNESTRA. Agamemnon's widow, now Agisthos' wife.

KALCHAS an old prophet. (or prophetess)

CHORUS, servants of the palace, loyal to the memory of Agamemnon. (Three or four of these double as Soldiers, Agisthos' bodyguards)



The goal of this script is to give actors (high school, college age, or older) a feel of the shape and mood of a Greek tragedy and yet to be a play that a modern audience, without preparation, can follow and be drawn into.

We forget that in many of the Greek tragedies the central characters survive their difficulties and move on with life. A “tragedy” in old Athens did not mean a fatal, bloody catastrophe, it meant a serious retelling and re-imagining of some significant event from the community's collective past. The event was often grim, it challenged those who lived through it. Three Athenian playwrights wrote about Elektra's story, the tale of how a feud passes like a disease from generation to generation. Aeschylus' telling is cosmic, it is about the long transmission of that disease. Sophocles' telling is psychological, focused on the passions of Elektra herself and those around her. Euripides' version is brutal, it deliberately points up ironies in the two earlier tellings and in the basic situation. This *Elektra* follows the outline of Sophocles' version, with several hints from Aeschylus's three-part *Oresteia* and one or two lines from Euripides.

In all Greek tragedies a challenge for an audience is that a great deal of community knowledge is assumed in them. The plays are steeped in often-told myths, accepted social ideas and familiar landscapes. Known plots did not need clear background exposition for their audience in Athens. This play is adapted, not just condensed, because it gives much of the background Athenians would not have needed. It is not pretending to be Sophocles' play, but it tries to be like a Greek play; to serve as a doorway to what theater felt like in Athens 2,400 years ago. Three different times I've had the excitement of staging this and combing this text.

In modern times, the playwrights Jean Giraudoux, Eugene O'Neil, Robinson Jeffers and Jean Paul Sartre all wrote plays on Elektra and Orestes – each for his own purposes deviated from the original telling. Richard Straus wrote a fierce opera *Elektra*. T.S. Eliot touches the myth in his play *The Cocktail Party*.

Writers have circled back to the story because it deals with a basic, deeply ingrained human error – the intense and useless conviction that revenge rights wrongs or at least soothes griefs.

Brackets [ ] offer rephrasing if either the Pedagogus (Greek for “child-minder”) or Kalchas is played as a woman. For a shorter version of this play, use just the passages in black print. For a filler version, use them all – or cherry-pick at will among the light-faced lines. Often, less is more. I directed the longer version with juniors and seniors at the Coburn Classical Institute, at the High Mowing School and then at Colby College. The shorter version was used again later at High Mowing with a remarkable class of sophomores.

Since Greek authors staged their own plays, there are no authors’ stage directions; only spoken words were written out. It has been up to editors, translators and directors over the years to work out what happens on stage. The directions here in block print can be taken as certain; they make sense of events. Directions in parentheses are suggestions. A given actor might discover something quite different. Further hints on a production are at the end of the script.

**RICHARD C. SEWELL** grew up among artists in rural Maine. After Bard College and the Army Language School (Russian), he taught high school, directed, acted, wrote, wandered... The production of his dance-play, *Winter Crane*, at the University of Wisconsin, 1968, led to the co-founding (with Robert Joyce) of The Theater At Monmouth, a union classical rep company in 1970. It also led, indirectly, to a professorship at Colby College, beginning 1974. TAM and Colby, into this century, continued to be his main workplaces, as actor, director, and teaching theater generalist.

His *Wat Tyler* was produced by Nathan LeGrand at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in SC, 1988. *Winter Crane*’s professional premier was at the Fountain Theater in Los Angeles, 1990, and his adaptation of Lessing’s *Nathan The Wise* opened at NYC’s fine Pearl Theater in 2002 and was revived there 2008-09. His playful verse adaptation of Calderon’s *Phantom Lady* had a staged reading at The National Shakespeare Theater in DC in 2007 as part of their Re-Discovery Series. *The Ruckus at Machias*, *Correro’s Masks*, *In Divisiblunder*, *A Day With Darkness* and numerous one-acts have won awards. His political one-act, *The Antigone In Warsaw*, is available from Baker’s.

He and actress Kim Gordon have been married almost 40 busy years and live in Portland, Maine, where the theater scene thrives.

**ELEKTRA** adapted from Sophocles by Richard Sewell 4m 2F + Chorus (1 or 2 of the male characters could be played as women) Single playing space, modern or classical costumes About 1 hour. (**Perfect for High School, College/University, Community, and Youth Theatre actors.**) The goal of this adaptation is to give actors (high school, college age, or older) a feel of the shape and mood of a Greek tragedy and yet to be a play that a modern audience, without preparation, can follow and be drawn into. The classic story of revenge-gone-on-too-long (a feud) is faithfully and clearly presented, some may say as an appeal to reason—both political, familial, and personal—to stop the ‘bloodshed’, for revenge may come in many guises. A challenging script to all ages both in the performance of it and in the viewing of it. Both the timeliness of the message, and its actual timelessness, point to a solid story of worth to everyone in the human experience. **ORDER#3325**

  
**ELEKTRA**

**DAWN BEFORE THE HOUSE OF ATREUS IN ARGOS.  
A CENTRAL DOOR WITH A RAISED BLOCK BESIDE IT.  
IN THE FOREGROUND A BLOCK MARKS THE GRAVE OF AGAMEMNON. ENTER  
THE PEDAGOGOS, PYLADES AND ORESTES WHO CARRIES AN URN.**

**ORESTES:** Is this it?

**PEDAGO:** Yes, King Atreus' house. These are the old stones themselves, hewn to stand earthquake.

**ORESTES:** I remember the door-rings, high out of helpless reach.

**PYLADES:** Can you have kept them so long in you?

**PEDAGO:** You weighed no more than a hound half-grown, and were half head, as children are, sleeping a child's stone sleep. I carried you off by night. Your sister, Elektra plucked her fourteen years together into a grim little womanhood: bundled you into my arms, said "Go!" – and I went.

**ORESTES:** Childhood memories lie piecemeal, scattered.

**PEDAGO:** I remember well enough... This foundation was dug by King Pelops, as tales tell; Zeus granted him fortress. Those big stones could not shut out a bad end. The lintel Atreus raised, and died there behind it, stabbed by a nephew, a seven-year child. I was young then, too, a spearman [a house slave] – to think the evils time can see! King Agamemnon ordered the horns on the cornice, to crown the house when he brought Klytemnestra, a bride, from Sparta, before the long war. It was raining, the sky wept, spoiling her wedding veil.

**PYLADES** All this is far from the point, and painful. Not what we came for, old [wo]man.

**ORESTES** Pylades, no, let him[her] tell it. Let me feel, from the ground up, the weight of my kinship with bloodshed. That's what I came for! The rootless will wither, so let me take root here; the soil is deep, and mine. I grope the dark hole of my family past for a voice to say to this moldering pile "Look, it is I, Prince Orestes, home to inherit my share of ill fortune."

**PEDAGO:** One thing is new: that barren grave-mound.

**ORESTES:** I guess whose it may be. And ache to guess.

**PYLADES: Surely not so poor a heap of rock?**

**THE GUARDSMAN COMES OUT OF THE HOUSE.**

**PEDAGO: I will ask. I see a face I knew, before time frosted him – and me as well. Stand back. Hail, friend: if folk here are kind to footsore travelers, you will tell who governs the great hall here; at what prince's hearth may wanderers beg shelter?**

**GUARD: If you need ask, you've wandered far. It is Queen Klytemnestra's house. Agisthus is Lord in it and of this land.**

**PEDAGO: Agisthus? That was Agamemnon's bastard cousin?**

**GUARD: A wiser beggar would not call him that. He is our king.**

PEDAGO: With Agamemnon dead, did no son rise to fill the gap that downfall made in royalty?

GUARD: You're sniffing at affairs long lain to rest. Only a fool pries into the acts of great ones. Accept them living and revere them dead.

**PYLADES: Whose gravemound lies so starkly meager there?**

**GUARD: The tomb is Agamemnon's. No more asking.**

**PEDAGO: Curb your anger if we over-pry. It is to Klytemnestra I have come, with double-edged news. She may well pay dearly to learn it. I hope to know what grounds I walk on when I speak with her.**

**GUARD: Day has hardly stirred upon the hills: Agisthos and the Queen lie still in bed; so keep your news.**

*(He is about to leave.)*

PEDAGO: Urgent news may send mean messengers.

GUARD: *(pauses)* Perhaps ... I should go in and have them wakened?

**PEDAGO: Our news will keep. I'll tell you very coolly something I must weep to utter to the Queen: young Orestes now is with his father.**

**GUARD: This is truth?**

**PEDAGO: You see his funeral urn.**

**GUARD:** Our Queen will shed dry tears for him! Her fear has tethered to his coming home too long. Now, I'll do myself and you a friendship, fellow [woman]. I'll whisper this to the Queen. Later, when the morning fires smolder and she has put some face upon her mingled grief and joy, you enter to the hearth and tell it all as though she did not know. A queen hates surprises; they unveil the thoughts discretion hides to common eyes. She will thank me for this, and favor you.

**PEDAGO:** Do as you judge shrewdest. I begin to see this place is thick with artful webs.

**AGISTHOS AND SOLDIERS ENTER FROM THE HOUSE.**

**GUARD:** Stand from the door. It is the king! My lord, a word...

**AGISTHOS:** Another time, old dog! I am in haste. Go in. The Queen has had an evil dream and set the house astir. I'm on the trail of that old wandering seer, Kalchas. [Kalcha] He [She] has looked on ninety years, yet sees still more of the future than of his[her] long past.

**GUARD:** Dire dreams they must be, that can trouble great Agisthos!

**AGISTHOS:** Dolt, no! Never think I cringe at visions! Long ago I learned to smile sleep's terrors back into the dark they kennel in. The whole world whispers my boyhood's orphaned story: how King Atreus reared me and at seven years sent me to slay a prisoner chained in the cellar. Shuddering I went down and raised the sword. The pale wretch knew that sword and so knew me. It was Thyestes there, my own wronged father! I'd been told that he was dead. He sent me back to seek the King again and kill. I did... There came worse evils yet. Horror raised me. Now Atreus' son lies there  
*(He points to the grave mound)*  
and I sleep under the roof! I am going out now, for Kytmenstra's ease, not mine. No braver woman lives, but still, she is a woman and can fear. Have you heard where Kalchas[Kalcha] keeps himself[herself]?

**GUARD:** Each night with some new bondsfolk in the hills. The commons shelter him[her] because, they say, no evil strike the eaves he [she] lodges under.

**AGISTHOS:** Good. He'll [She'll] lodge with us, and read the riddle of our Lady's nightmares.  
**AGISTHOS LEAVES WITH HIS SOLDIERS.**

**GUARD:** I think your news will quiet the Queen's bad dreams.  
*(He starts off, then pauses and turns back.)*  
It comes to me I ought to know your face... but I do not.  
**THE GUARD GOES IN.**

**ORESTES:** *(staring where Agisthos went out)* There is Agisthos then.

**PYLADES:** The lion is from the cave.

**PEDAGO:** The lioness will drowse in her false confidence. The God that vowed you should not need armed men to win your own spoke well, is here, guides all...

**ORESTES APPROACHES THE GRAVE MOUND.**

**ORESTES:** Hermes, death-herd, guardian of my father's realm and of the dead, to you and to father! With exile's feet I walk again the land that once was yours to rule and now is mine. By the mounded bank, father, I invoke you; here is the lock of my hair, the over-due token of mourning, for hands not stretched in grief when first they brought you graveward, these twenty years ago. Sir, we were strangers. For that alone my grief were endless though I lacked a sharper cause. **But I have motive that would whet blunt lead to slicing sharpness for revenge. Grant me the birthright courage that I never learned beside you in the blaze of war. Grant me the council never heard, yield me, out of time and of the shades, a heartwhole heritage from you!**

**PEDAGO:** Well prayed. Neither Hades or Olympos is so remote that a voice that cries for justice cannot carry there.

**PYLADES:** We'll do what we must and go far by tomorrow. The sun is elsewhere.

**ORESTES:** Here I am with my kin. No man ever had a better friend, Pylades, than you, a shield against the arrows life lets fly. Since you are my friend, now say goodbye. It's best you quit me; I am about to kill. It makes a stranger of me.

**PYLADES:** I stay with a stranger, then. Trust a little the friendship that you praise, hammer it on the anvil; it will sharpen under blows, not break.

**ORESTES:** Do you think my Mother will still look young?

**PYLADES:** I think you must not think how she will look.

**ORESTES:** If she should know my face before I speak...

**PYLADES:** Then that will mean that fathers shape their sons.

**ORESTES:** I hope she will not speak...

**PEDAGO:** Why then, strike quick  
and let the Furies deal with her in this.

**ELEKTRA CRIES OUT IN THE HOUSE.**

**ELEKTRA:** My grief!



**ORESTES:** Listen there! A woman's bitter cry.

**PEDAGO:** The house has stood to hear much lamentation.

**ORESTES:** Could that have been the Queen my mother's voice?

**PYLADES:** It may have been some slave, struck for neglect.

**ELEKTRA:** (*offstage*) Woe to me! Woe!

**ORESTES:** My mother hears news of my death! She mourns for me!

**PEDAGO:** If so, the deeper her hypocrisy!

**ELEKTRA:** (*off stage*) My sorrow splits...!

**ORESTES:** Ah, Gods, the voice!

**PEDAGO:** Are you unmanned? A prince just now prayed at his murdered father's grave!

**ORESTES:** I know what you will think of me. I know myself as well. **I must not meet her in her tears for me!**

**PEDAGO:** Listen boy, and listen well. I know the false tears and the wiles of people here! Let no show of grief, no friendly words from any here lure you to name yourself or show your purpose, till that purpose has been won!

**PYLADES:** This is good council.

**ELEKTRA:** (*off stage*) Woe to me...!

**PEDAGO:** That voice is not the Queen's.

**ORESTES:** Get me away from here!

**ORESTES, PYLADES AND THE PEDAGOGOS GO.**

**ELEKTRA IN RAGGED BLACK ENTERS FROM THE HOUSE.**

*(She pants and shields her eyes, coming from dark into glaring sunlight.)*

**ELEKTRA:** Oh, holy light and air

**That hold the bend of earth for your domain,**

**How many a bitter wail**

**And painful blow to the breast that blots out pain  
Have I rendered you witness to  
As dark of night withdrew?**

**I weep for a luckless man  
My father whom the blood-mad war-god spared  
In battle in alien land  
And sent him home to us again unscarred.  
My mother and her bedmate with an axe  
Felled him like an oak.**

**None other mourns for this,  
But Father, I choke heaven with my cries**  
And I will never cease  
While I have eyes to see with or spill tears.  
Here at the doors of my father's house  
I howl my sorrows for the world to hear!

**THE CHORUS HAS BEEN GATHERING TIMIDLY AS ELEKTRA SPEAKS.**

House of the Death god, House of the Underworld  
Hermes, holy with curses,  
**Furies, you dread one, the Gods' direst daughters,  
Send me my brother to aid me,  
I cannot hold up the huge house of my heartbreak alone,  
The weight of it crushes me.**

**CHORUS:** It will little avail you,  
Child of the most wretched mother, to mourn;  
**Outcry has worn you pale,  
It is best when the wholly unmendable worst is bourn  
With a mute prayer that evil befall  
The doers of evil at the end of all.**

**ELEKTRA:** Slave friends, true hearted,  
**I know you seek to console me, I hear, I grasp  
The words. But I will not be parted  
From outrage, and outcry, the very last gasp  
Of my life - if it must be a madness of grief  
Bear with me. Forgive.**

**CHORUS:** You cannot haul him from the lake  
**Of death, nor raise him again with groan or with prayer.  
It is yourself you break.**

**Turn from this desperate love of despair,  
What kind of self-hating creature  
Chooses itself a life of unreachable torture?**

**ELEKTRA: Simple they are  
Whose minds can forget parents pitifully dead,  
Even the sparrows will cry  
For the smashed nest. Have I lesser need?**

**CHORUS: If nothing else will appease your heart,  
Hear this: recall how many times  
Vengeance has stalked this ancient court,  
Hunting down crimes.  
Those dire named, deathless goddesses who  
Love to make guilt ache  
And render torment where torment is due,  
The Furies, cruel for a kin's kind and sake  
Will come anew,  
Vengeance from the ground  
Turning, mesh on mesh!**

**In every generation  
The huge net is drawn.  
If only the hope of ill  
Falling on those you hate  
Can comfort your despair,  
Remember that soon or late  
Reckoning has come and will  
Tumble again from the air.  
I call such comfort bitter,  
But know you find it sweet.**

**ELEKTRA: You show me my madness plainly, friends, but I ask you, what can I do with my bitter heart? What natural measure of sorrow should I hew to? You know what days I pass here, watching Agisthos perch on my father's throne, wear his robes, offering up up his wine to the Gods beside the same hearth where ten years gone his plotting slew my father! At night I lie stark with sweat at the loathsome knowing, the final insult, that he lies and snores by my mother, if mother I should call that creature there who monthly sets up bleating sacrifice in household festival, "to the just Gods who saved her." This woman, noble in words, bends on me the scathing and abuse that filth of guilt breeds thickly in her heart! She will hiss at me "Are you the only one whose father ever died?" That is her insult, unless she hears some rumor of Orestes coming home. The she grows wild and comes shrieking: "Is this too your doing? You who stole Orestes from me and conveyed him off to those who must stuff his young ears with vileness against me? You will pay for it." Oh, let me rave in**

**uselessness no more.**

**Father, hear me underground, I wait  
And wait,  
and drop by drop  
I die.**

**CHORUS:** Torn between pity and wonder  
I feel your grief my own.  
But say, may we speak unwarily?  
Is Agisthos gone from home?

**ELEKTRA:** Would I pace out here, at my little liberty  
If he were not?

**CHORUS:** Tell truly then:  
Does your brother send you word of himself?  
Is he turning home? Or of two minds?

**ELEKTRA:** He says he'll come; does nothing that he says.

**CHORUS:** One may well hesitate at such an undertaking.

**ELEKTRA:** Did I hesitate, the night I rescued him?

**CHORUS:** Be easy, he is noble, he will come.

**ELEKTRA:** I do believe in him. If not, I'd be dead.  
*(at the grave mound)*  
Ah, my people! Look here at this.

**CHORUS:** What is it that you cry at, lady? Speak?

**ELEKTRA:** A lock of hair lies here on the stone!  
Is this some mockery that fate has flung me?

**CHORUS:** Someone who mourns more secretly than you  
Has laid it here.

**ELEKTRA:** If things that are impossible could be  
I would know this lock was from Agamemnon's brows,  
A likeness unearthly, to sight and touch!

**CHORUS** Longing may lure us to see or feel a hope

**Dear girl, that will as often wound as cure.**

**ELEKTRA: Look, there's a print, where the ball of the foot  
Sank deeper than the heel. Someone knelt down.  
Shape and span of arch just like my own!  
I step where he had stepped. It does not change  
The print! I might run mad with doubt, or joy?  
Can you dare think as I think... it is he?**

**CHORUS: He, past question! Elektra, our lady, be glad!**  
If I, as I feel, have skill  
As a prophet, pour full to the brim  
A cup of sparkling hope for him  
Who now is returned.  
A glad wine, may he drink as you will  
To justice that comes swift flood!  
Aged in the cellars of time,  
It springs, it wells up wide  
The cleansing freshet whose hour you have yearned!

**ELEKTRA: Orestes here? Where is he then? What caution  
Keeps him from these arms that ache to hold him?  
Hope hurts worse than hopelessness!**

**CHORUS: Out of the smoldering ground  
I hear a shaking tread  
That can exchange all sorrows,  
Making good from bad.  
The stones of Atreus' house  
Cemented with blood of the dead  
Shall ring with a new sound  
Exulting, redoubling dread:  
Orestes moves in Argos!**

**ELEKTRA: And yet, as you say, there is nothing so cruel as hope  
To the hungry heart that breaks at the jolt of it.  
I dare neither doubt nor believe  
I stand here and wait in a frenzy of patience.**

**CHRYSOTHEMIS COMES OUT WITH OFFERINGS.**

**CHORUS : Lady, hush! Your sister comes from the house,  
Burial gifts in her hands. Gifts that appease  
And curry favor of Gods below the ground.**

**CHRYSO:** What have you strayed out here to say at the door, dear sister? Surely you have learned by now how futile empty anger is? I too have suffered evils, but I learn to bend in the unfriendly wind that blows against us in this bitter house.

*(Elektra walks away; Chrysothemis follows.)*

I too, if I had strength, would show the world and those we live – or we should say exist - among, that I too can remember wrongs! But since I have no strength, I hold my tongue. And so, for this good sense, I know, I creep between your scorn, Elektra, and their indifference.

**ELEKTRA:** Strange, our father bred you, so they say. I see our mother molds your pliant soul in her quick fist and makes her creature of you, childish to forget whose child you are.

**CHRYSO:** I only council caution...

**ELEKTRA:** Very virtuous! I tell you, courage is a virtue too, one without which all the rest are trash.

*(Elektra touches Chrysothemis' necklace.)*

They bribe your smiles with gifts, these links of gold you rustle in. If they should crawl to me with gifts like these I would not change for gaudy shame my mourning black!

*(Elektra holds out her ragged black cloak.)*

This is so bitter in their guilty eyes they heap on you the goods that they would grudge in hope to break me with your flourishing. And still you stand there, wheedling the heart from me, so that I'll let that pair forget what they have done? The shame upon this house is fast becoming yours too, Chrysothemis! Ponder that when next you choose to tell me to beware of what I do.

**CHORUS:** No anger, we implore. The lies

Truth in both your words.

Listen. Compromise.

Align your separate roads.

**CHRYSO:** People, I am used to her and her words. I never would have tried to speak, but I have heard, Elektra, of a horror dangling over you that no one can avert but you. By choice or force now your long mourning ends.

**ELEKTRA:** What is your bugbear? Anything more vile than my condition now?

**CHRYSO:** It is! Agisthos has determined – I heard him – you shall be, unless you'll give up all your shows of grief...

**ELEKTRA:** My shows! Yes, he would think it was a cloak.

**CHRYSO:** He means to have you carried off from here: there is a cell dug, underground, out of this land, a hole where none will hear your outcries – and they will wall you in! Oh, think, my dear,

**before it is too late for any thinking.**

**ELEKTRA: So. They have decided to do this to me?**

CHRYSO: **This, yes, this!** When Agisthos comes.

ELEKTRA: Why then, for that, God, send him homeward soon!

CHRYSO: Are you stark mad, to pray this evil on?

ELEKTRA: To know my life for what it is is madness.

**CHRYSO: Don't throw life away for an idle malice.**

**ELEKTRA: Malice is my life: my father's vengeance.**

**CHRYSO: What vengeance will you gain, entombed alive?**

**ELEKTRA: At least I shall be far from all of you!**

**CHRYSO: (*almost as angry as her sister*) Don't dare name me with those I hate as you do! Don't dare!**  
*(A pause; she grows gentle again.)*

Sweet Elektra, yield up every hope, and cease to hate me because I have done so. I know what dreams you cling to, I have shared them. **We have imagined Orestes coming home, our mother humbled Agisthos driven out, the hearth made clean and green years come again. Surrender those sweet visions to the dead. I have one thing to say, and break your heart.**

**ELEKTRA: Tell it then. My heart broke long ago.**

**CHRYSO: News, a rumor, flies about the house, circling to reach our mother last. Word comes that Orestes, far away is dead. There, I have spoken it.** Now see how futile all our cravings are. Expectation ends, and with it, striving.

**ELEKTRA: You are a fool, a breakable and fruitless bough that rumor's breezes shake. Orestes lives!**

**CHRYSO: What hope have you that the tale's not true?**

ELEKTRA: I have the hope that it is that, a tale.

CHRYSO: His very absence speaks the truth of it.

**ELEKTRA: Tell me no more. I know the things I know.  
What is that vine-wreathed bowl you carry there?**

**CHRYSO:** Thickened wine, our mother sends me with,  
To pour in offering there on Father's tomb.

**ELEKTRA:** She sends him drink, and not transformed to gall!

Her shamelessness grows admirably huge.

**I wonder that she did not come herself!**

**“My murdered sweetest, rise to this and lap!”**

The gods spy down upon her insolence

And are preparing thunderstones for her.

**CHRYSO:** Be quiet! **Listen. She had a fearful vision in the night.** Our father came, and planted at the hearth the scepter that was his and that Agisthos holds. It shot out writhing roots and bulging limbs among the rafters and stood forth, a tree all green and shining. Then she dreamed again – **I heard her tell the house-priest - that she nursed a serpent! - and it coiled and poisoned as it fed with hungry fangs. I saw the terror smolder in her eyes and I confess, for once I pitied her.**

*(She moves to the grave.)*

**ELEKTRA:** *(seizing Chrysothemis' bowl)* **The scourings of our mother's conscience shall not foul the holy ground where father lies!** - nor shall your lispings intercessions render his great ghost less angry in the grave!

*(She flings the bowl away)*

**Go in, and tell this Queen what I have done – or not as you loved caution teaches you!**

**CHRYSO:** You wrong me, sister! Wrong me with a cruel and unreasoned wrong to think that I would add the weight of my smallest breath to your great burden! You are a fool, insensible to love and pity both. I'll leave you with your wrath!

**ELEKTRA:** I want your spite! It honors me! I want it!

**CHRYSO THEMIS GOES IN. ELEKTRA HUDDLES.  
THE CHORUS SPEAKS QUIETLY.**

**CHORUS:** When I observe  
The wise, small care of birds  
For fledglings that cry in the nest,  
How feeding and tending  
The hover and give,  
I ask why is it hard  
For us who have understanding  
To serve our kin in love?

Voice that sinks to the dead,



Carry a bitter word  
To Atreus' son in the underworld  
Of wrongs new made.  
Tell him how sick his house,  
Tell him his own two children,  
Bickering, rancorous, sullen,  
As flickering heart-aches rouse them,  
Make strife with one another,  
Old harmony forgotten.  
Tell him Elektra, forsaken  
Is down in the waves, and stricken,  
Ready to leave the light.

Voice that sinks to the dead,  
Carry bitter tidings  
To Agamemnon ill-buried,  
Tell of wrong abiding.

**The land is dark with its evil,  
Day scarcely breaks up the night,  
Old, though its children are young,  
The landscape darkens; the level  
Plain waits for life-giving sun.  
We pray: as birds hymn the morning  
May this day be a turning  
A quake in the soil, an upheaval  
To root out injustice and ill.  
Let one stroke fall  
And let that be the last.**

**KLYTEMNESTRA COMES OUT. CHRYSOTHEMIS FOLLOWS.**

*The chorus recoils.*

**KLYTEM:** So. You are loose again, wandering out? Agisthos is off, and you make free with foot and tongue. Once he's away you pay no heed to me, though there is many a one you tell at length how brutally and how unjustly I lord it over you, insulting you and yours. It is you who wrong me, not I you, and may the liberty you use to give me an ill name abroad confirm as much.

**ELEKTRA:** Did you sleep well, my mother, in the night?

**KLYTEM:** Hear her mock my trouble! Exult then: no! I sleep nailed on a restless injury that you will never once let me forget!

**ELEKTRA:** Perhaps the long past wrongs of Pelops pain you, – or is it the hideous supper Thyestes sat to, feeding on his own sons unbeknownst?

(A story Agisthos loves to recount.)

Do sounds cry out in the feast-hall still at night? Or is it Thyestes settling scores with Atreus: Agisthos' child-murder of Atreus in his turn. Which of many fine deeds done in our house generation after generation, most troubles you when you sleep unsound?

**KLYTEM:** This house was never mine, nor do I care what cries stir in the blood of wicked Atreus' line. I came here happy at my bridal, hoped to sweep the foul old dust from bed and floor. What had I to do with moldy blood-feuds then? I bore four lovely children of my own and thought to put the dark where it belonged, behind us! Then there broke a morning – oh, let the sun blot out that hateful day! Your father, bound for war with all his ships, found the wind against him! He commanded our eldest daughter to him, our Iphigenia, for a wedding, so he claimed, with great Achilles. I, taken by surprise, naively thought a marriage on the eve of battle is often sudden; unsuspectingly, I wafted her in open joy to him – who led her to an altarstone and killed her – killed her like a goat, to change a wind!

Tell me of no ancestral, crime-bred crimes! Talk of no Furies. I've seen in my own life a horror done that cost me aching days till I believed. In what chain of evils was your father bound when he, gratuitously, slew my child? No feud's grindstone turned, it was himself, loving war and violence above his own... Apollo witness it, the loveliest... a girl the sun grew brighter smiling on! This was the brave deed of Agamemnon, the man you claim to honor. He whose name you clamor was not so solicitous to his own. Had you been older it might have well been you whose throat his bronze had glibly razored through, your blood he fed the breeze to fill a sail!

**ELEKTRA:** I wish that ending had been mine, O Zeus.

**KLYTEM:** Then so do I, my dear, if you can say so!

**ELEKTRA:** My sister Iphigenia was a heroine, her death, opening our people's way to Troy, was a beginning and a glory not an ending: she died to serve and understood as much, and all men understand and praise her for it. You have no right to claim her as your cause!

**KLYTEM:** No right! You are no mother and cannot know how fierce a motive there must be in mother love.

**ELEKTRA:** Love! I grant I am ill-schooled in mother love! And you, I'm sure, know much! My father's kinsman, Agisthos has instructed you in love. You say that Agamemnon cared too little for his kin? The gods know well how you love your relations! - all the tender care for them when father was at war! Especially his cousin, this Agisthos! There's the motive you will not admit. Before my father crossed back home from Troy that cringing hound stole in and licked his plate, and was your all-but-husband here in Argos! Mother, if you ever loved my sister...

**KLYTEM:** Oh, Zeus!

**ELEKTRA:** Do not shame her before the dead, laying the burden on her for your sins! She is well out of all our suffering, leave her shade to wander unashamed. I do not beg you this, no, I command it, on your peril with the gods, beware! I tell you that you walk beneath the wraths of high Olympos and the Underworld...

**KLYTEM:** I will not hear this!

**ELEKTRA:** But you will!  
The ground prepares to cave beneath your feet.  
The daily sink of crime you wallow in  
With mongrel Agisthos has begun to stink  
Up to a sky grown sick with it that soon  
Will vomit down fire upon your upturned head!

**KLYTEM:** Elektra! (*strikes her*) Do not pluck my wits from me.

**CHORUS :** Lady, forbear!  
We beg you!  
Violence becomes neither opponent in this strife.

**KLYTEM:** I know what empty hope has made you bold.

**ELEKTRA:** I know what cause you have to think it empty.

**KLYTEM:** If you speak riddles I will turn my back. Apollo, hear a righteous woman's prayer! I will confess before the world, I grow old, and like the old have little left to pray for; my children all are dead or else estranged. I have one simple prayer, not hard to grant: a quiet ending. I may not unfold my whole prayer while this girl stands here beside me, but you, as son of Zeus, will see my heart. This dream of doubled meaning I have had, confirm it's good drift and avert its evil to those enemies who wish us ill. So let me live my life to its close, uninjured, controlling the house of Atreus and the throne, with good days on our side, as I live now.

**ELEKTRA:** Orestes is the enemy you name. I know what rumor swells your heart with daring, and know, in spite of rumor and wicked prayers, he, in good time, will come.

**KLYTEM:** You too have heard the talk then of his death? Ill news crawls swiftly. I am spared the pain of telling you. It is a pain, though you will not believe it hurts me. I tell you there is no joy for me in it, but only to be at rest. I wait for one who will testify to this, and, ah, I trust I see him coming.

### **THE PEDAGOGUE ENTERS.**

**ELEKTRA:** Oh, you lie. (*glancing at the grave*) I too have witness and I mock your trust.

**PEDAGO:** Friends, is this the palace of King Agisthus?

**CHORUS:** Sir, [Woman,] it is; you stand before its Queen.

**PEDAGO:** I have toiled far and heavy with grave news which I was told would be acceptable to you and to Agisthos and your friends.

**KLYTEM:** What is it then. Speak plain, for good or ill.

**PEDAGO:** May you not grieve to learn, Orestes is dead.

**ELEKTRA:** What is this you say? What tangling lie?

**PEDAGO:** I say what I must say: that Orestes is dead.

**ELEKTRA:** Oh God. God! This is the day I die.  
*(She drops to the ground.)*

**KLYTEM:** *(as the Pedagogos starts to stoop to Elektra)*  
Leave her to herself. Sir, [Woman,] will you tell me  
In what way it was he met his death?

**PEDAGO:** I cannot say the manner of his death in honesty, but I have with companions, brought his urn. They, like witnesses can tell of a chariot race, and how Orestes, tangled in the reins of horses maddened with the lash, was dragged between dust and stones and bounding wheels. If you press them, they will tell enough to split your heart.

**KLYTEM:** Zeus, what shall I cry? “Good luck” or “terrible but for the best”? My state is terrible if I must save my life by the misfortunes of my own.

**PEDAGO:** Then perhaps our coming here was to no purpose.

**KLYTEM:** Not to no purpose if you have brought proofs. This day casts down a prison of my dread about my ears, and I go bleakly free – free from fear of him, yes, and of her.  
*(Looks down at Elektra)*

She was the greater evil, lived with me, constantly draining the sap of life. Now I’ll have peace from her. The light of day shall come again. Will you now not stop your endless insults? You are stopped indeed, you and Orestes. Your coming will be worth much, sir, [woman] if you will bring us this companion that you mention, with the urn I must give decorous burial.

**PEDAGO:** *(stooping to Elektra)* Lady, to your black grief I can say nothing now that might ease pain.

**KLYTEM:** Grief is a condition of her choice, and pity poured to her is wasted, for the vessel of her woe is bottomless. Bring me your companion witnesses,  
**KLYTEMNESTRA GOES IN, CHRYSOTHEMIS FOLLOWS. THE PEDAGOGUE LEAVES. ELEKTRA REMAINS ON THE GROUND.**

**ELEKTRA:** Orestes.

**CHORUS:** Fearful are the blows  
That batter upon this head  
Fearful the fall of the house,  
Over her that bows  
In grief unstayed.

**ELEKTRA:** Orestes.

**CHORUS:** Hope is here at end,  
Only a deep, fierce silence  
Wells from the heart of the land  
Drowning numb complaint  
Stilling violence.

**ELEKTRA:** Orestes. Stay on the steep road, look back  
And teach me how to die.

**CHORUS:** A stone thus topples from giddy height,  
Massive, takes to itself when it strikes  
The shock of its weight.  
Sudden the impact. It breaks.  
A high hurtling hope has met  
The ground: it shatters to bits.

**ELEKTRA:** All things blacken in my sight. From what  
Do I draw breath? Does my heart still beat?

**CHORUS:** We see the awesome mightiness of Zeus,  
God snaps a life like thread, yes life is weak  
To him, yet to us a wrought iron yoke, a noose  
That hot torture hardly can slack.  
Life is God's, it is his to let loose  
Or tighten the knot.

**Listen, lady, if your heart can hear,  
And I will sing.**

**There stood a tree, an oak, a marvelous  
Goodly thing, birds built, and rain and sun  
Conspired to build it strong.  
There came a blight. It rotted and a year  
Saw it withering  
A hollow peril. This was Atreus' house  
Its falling limbs might kill. At last, undone  
The trunk toppled length-long.**

Think that now, at last,  
In the stillness after the crash  
All things are at rest.  
Of comforts this is the least,  
But think it, you have past  
Misfortunes ultimate outpost.

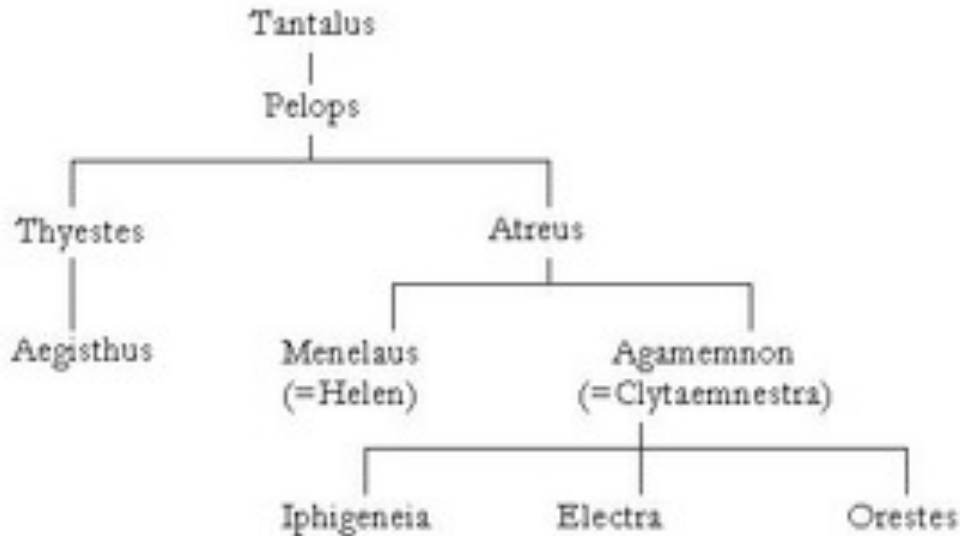
**The curse that would have bred  
Though countless ages yet,  
The wound that still would bleed  
Is closed. Orestes dead,  
Escapes it may be some terrible share in that fate.**

**ELEKTRA: Teach me nothing. Mine is a grief  
That craves no comfort; it is in itself enough.**

**15 MORE PAGES TO THE END OF THE SCRIPT**



### Family Tree (Simplified)



### A CAST BREAKDOWN

The PEDAGOGOS (OR PEDAGOGA) carried off Orestes as a baby to be safely brought up in a nearby kingdom, a man in the original but just as logically a woman. His or her clan loyalty to the House of Atreus (the royal family clan of Argos) is very strong. In the script variants in square brackets, [ ], are used if a woman plays the role.

PŸLADES The son of the king at whose court Orestes grew up. There was a folk saying about loyalty: “Want a friend like Orestes? Then be a Pylades.” In a further myth, after many years Pylades married Elektra.

ORÉSTES The son of the war-king, Agamemnon. When King Agamemnon returned from the ten year Trojan War with a Trojan captive-mistress, Queen Klytemnestra killed him. Princess Elektra contrived to send the child Orestes away to safety. (How did the King have a child that age in Argos? Orestes’ paternity is undoubted; one assumes that Agamemnon made at least one visit home while the war dragged on. In some versions Orestes is already ten or more when his father is murdered.) Orestes has grown up with a terrible duty of vengeance hanging over him and he is not sure he is equal to it.

A GUARD He has been a trusted member of the palace defense long enough to have known the Pedagogos, though time has changed and grayed them both.

**AGÍSTHOS** Agamemnon's cousin and Queen Klytemnestra's lover. His father and Agamemnon's father, treacherous rival brothers for the throne of Argos, committed horrible crimes against one another. When Agamemnon left for war Agisthos returned from hiding and won Klytemnestra's heart. He is an angry, uneasy man but devoted to Klytemnestra. The letter G was always hard in Greek but a soft G (a "J") is traditional for Agisthos name in English, so either pronunciation is correct as long as it is consistent.

**SOLDIERS** Agisthos' armed bodyguard of at least three men seem a brutal unit until, near the end of the play, they realize they must switch allegiance. Perhaps they are glad of the change.

**ELÉKTRA** A woman who has thrown her whole life into keeping the crime against her father vivid and unforgotten by gods and humans. Because of the "laws" of blood-feud (sons must avenge fathers) she is determined that vengeance must be done by Orestes.

The **CHORUS** Servants and house-slaves loyal to Elektra and to the memory of the dead King. Anywhere from three to fifteen men and women. They are at moments individuals, at moments two halves or a unit animated by a single spirit. Their lines can be spoken individually, by groups, at times of stress by all at once.

**CHRYSOTHÉMIS** Elektra's gentler sister. She sees both sides of the family feud and understands that her mother too has been horribly wronged. She is at heart a peace-maker; she finds Elektra frightening and is divided in her sympathies. In Greek names CH always stands for a K sound, or else a German or Hebrew CH.)

**KLYTEMNÉSTRA** A woman of great pride, loyal to her husband Agamemnon until, when his war-fleet was becalmed, he sacrificed their first-born daughter on the advice of priests. She believes that all she has done is just, yet nightmares haunt her. She clings for support to her lover. She feels that she is a passing victim of a long curse upon the House of Atreus (the family of her dead husband, not of her own ancestry). In her view Elektra and even Orestes are parts of that curse. (The Greek alphabet has a K and an S but nothing like our C. It has a vowel that serves for both our U and Y. Her name can be spelled "Clytemnestra," even, occasionally "Klutemnestra.")

**KÁLCHAS** (or **KALCHA**) The prophet-priests of Greece had their gift from some god, usually Apollo. They often paid a painful price for that gift, some were blind, others might be shunned by the community which both needed and feared them. If their foretelling proved false, one could never be sure whether the prophets had lied or whether the gods had been deceptive for their own secret purposes. In this version the prophet (or prophetess) Kalchas tells the next part of the story, one the original audience would have known: that Orestes suffered long for having killed his own kin. Pursued by the Furies, the spirits of vengeance, he was at last driven to Athens where, finally, the gods substituted trial-at-law for the old notion of obligatory vengeance. In *The Oresteia* that trial is the culminating scene, the gods themselves change the rules to allow an end to bloodshed and the nature of the Furies themselves is altered.



### PRODUCTION HINTS

The set need not be elaborate or literal. A wide central doorway is needed, (at least eight feet, ten is better), wide and elevated enough to reveal two bodies and five standing figures at the climax. Panels that slide left and right work as well as hinged doors on a confined stage, even a stylized curtain that can be drawn aside will work. If the performance space is flat-floored, when the bodies are revealed, they must lie on something raised where all the audience can see them.

Remember, this is not the stately Athens of the Acropolis. The Greek playwrights lived in that world, but they were recalling a rougher, more savage time. Look at the picture of the Lion Gate from Mycenae and at the so-called “Mask of Agamemnon”.





The chorus should be very active. Gymnasts, martial arts movers or modern dancers in the troupe will help. Staves, or found-object woodblocks, rattles or a drum to set up rhythms could be powerful. Be bold. Canned music is risky; it may make the performance less about the performers. Leggings or blue-jeans and tee shirts can work; moving well in Greek tunics may absorb rehearsal time that could be better spent in other tasks. Assign your decisions early about which choral speeches are done by pairs, groups or the whole chorus, and which by individuals. Group choral speech that neither drones or blurs needs a lot of committed, excited yet patient work, so letting individuals speak parts of a chorus can be a wise choice.

None of my productions used masks, but that is a possibility. Masks may undercut your effect unless they are comfortable, well made and used throughout most rehearsals. If you consider using masks only to fulfill a stereotype, perhaps you should think about other choices. However, masks can embolden young performers. If you take that plunge, good luck to you!

Whatever else a director reads and presents about how Greek theater was done in its own time, don't

miss the essay on the chorus from Edith Hamilton's *The Ever Present Past*. Her balance of deep scholarship and honest skepticism about scholarship is a fine antidote to any insistence on exactly how the plays were staged. In my own book, *In The Theater of Dionysos*, (McFarland, 2007) chapter IV and then the "Three Electras" section of chapter V describe in detail my own guesses about how the three playwrights' handled Electra's story.

Although I've said this is a script intelligible without much background, a program note or better yet a lobby display about the curse on the House of Atreus is a good addition – and a great project for student's working on the play. The cast should certainly know those myths. In Robert Graves' *Greek Myths (vol. 2)* the story gets traced from Tantalus to his son Pelops, from Pelops' fierce sons Atreus and Thyestes to their sons, the cousins Agamemnon and Agisthos. The worst thing about wrongdoing is that it breeds more wrongdoing; a feud has no natural end without extraordinary moral intervention. That truth is as relevant now in the halls of governments (and in the corridors of schools) as it was in Greece in 400 B.C!



### **HOW THIS ADAPTATION HAPPENED TO HAPPEN**

Life long, I've worked simultaneously in professional theater and in theater as a form of teaching. At first, my work was with high school students, then in union theaters, then at college level. Even with people as young as thirteen or fourteen I feel that when I ask them to memorize words and enter emotionally into imagined situations, the words and situations should push limits, enlarge, and draw out curiosity and wonder. Doesn't it insult them a bit to assume they should always do plays best about their own immediate school environment (or the repertoire of Broadway musicals, our commercial pseudo-environment)? That strikes me as a wasteful expense of spirit. In staging a *Mother Courage* (a bit shortened, I admit), or a *Madwoman of Chailot* or a *Julius Caesar* with casts that included eager 14-year-olds, I've watched young minds reach beyond themselves and, in that reach, discover.

Good theater is a double-visioned, paradoxical experience. We simultaneously find out how like us other people and times are—yet we sense, as well—how different, how wide human possibility is, how *other!* The insight of likeness deepens our generosity; the second insight of difference hints to us that how things are in present day life is not how things always have to be. We discover the width of possibility.

Also, theater is one gateway into a sense of history. Youngsters encountering theater can grow curious about how this odd kind of imitation, "acting," emerged among humans. What we call theater got its free-wheeling rules by trying out various ways of story-telling. To understand its evolution is an education in itself.

For about a hundred years in old Athens a kind of story-telling "played" by rules that are parallel to those of sports competition. Teams competed in a contest. Hundreds of writers submitted tragedies to the Athenian festival competitions. We now have plays by just three of them, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. In the span of about one century those three and their many fellow competitors invented theater for us, changing a tradition of public dance-chants into a new, active way to show ancestral deeds, struggles and sufferings.

What do students gain especially from staging a Greek tragedy? At some point adventurous young hearts wish to grapple on stage with the grimmer human feelings and to explore the mysterious. I'd often tell my casts that work on a Greek tragedy is a bit like slipping at night into a huge, dark museum: we freely ghost about among the shadows of mummies, statues of gods and the necklaces of queens. It is eerie, mind-

expanding, heart-expanding. It is to step onto a swaying bridge of imagination between this world and one far off.

Those plays were originally for an audience who knew the landscape of the stories first-hand. When, in Sophocles, slave friends tell Elektra that, “the one living by Krissa’s cattle-grazing shore will not forget,” the hearers not only knew that Elektra’s brother had been brought up over by the Krissa river; many might have worked in those pastures or hunted or picnicked there. The dreamscape, the inner life of the characters, was also familiar. There is much talk in the plays of local place-spirits and godly clan-ancestors that were part of everybody’s mind-fill. The whole Athenian life-style blows strongly through the plays. Translation can only go so far in anchoring a bridge in that wind.

Those plays were not written in an everyday speech of the streets. Athenian theater uses a mix of poetic styles from many Greek cities, it echoes formulas of prayers and folk spells and phrases from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Though everybody had heard *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, those chant-stories were as far off from contemporary Athenian speech as Shakespeare or older translations of the Bible, Torah, or Quran are from us. The plays spoke a language of awe and of magic. They were entertainment but also rites. Gods themselves were invited to judge the festival competitions: among votes cast by human judges for or against a play, some were dice rolls, left to chance and the will of the watching spirits. The dice of history, too, have played a part in which of these scripts survived. That sense of the magical should be part of the experience.

