

# *Orestes*

*for three female voices*

**Anthony Stevens**

## The Voices:

**Kassandra**

**Elektra**

**Klytaimestra**

each in her own time and place:

**Kassandra**, prophetess and daughter of Priam, late king of Troy, brought to Argos as slave and concubine of Agamemnon; addresses a group of impotent old men, statesmen of Argos.

**Elektra**, daughter of Agamemnon and Klytaimestra; talks to a peasant, the husband chosen for her by Klytaimestra and Aigisthus.

**Klytaimestra**, dead, murdered by her son Orestes to avenge the assassination, at her hand, of Agamemnon; calls upon the sleeping Erinyes (Furies, Curses).

The three correspond respectively to the three phases of the story of Orestes as dramatised by Aeschylus in *The Oresteia*, but Elektra's situation is taken from Euripides' *Elektra*, not *Choephoroi*.

**Kassandra** is present and absent, elsewhere and here, strangely 'above' her pointless fate. High, in a suspended bird cage or on a swing, dressed fantastically, with many necklaces, bracelets, anklets, waistlaces, etc.

**Elektra** is in rags, hair cropped, thin, pale, unconsciously hot with deferred desire. She carries a large earthenware pot on her head.

**Klytaimestra** is buried in the earth, face down, refusing to pass out of existence.

*Kassandra, Elektra, Klytaimestra together, separately....*

**KASSANDRA**

No need to tell me what I know already, my silence was not wishful thinking. Your backs are bent, near double, but answer the remaining ambitions of your thin legs. But mine? But mine?

**ELEKTRA**

I am going to the well – again.

**KASSANDRA**

Something of the river in all things that live – and something of the ant. But only warm blood can run cold.

**ELEKTRA**

I said: I am going to the well – again.

**KASSANDRA**

Did you mistake me for the daughter of a king? That was yesterday, the sun has swords to cut things off. Look! Over there are trees to climb...

**ELEKTRA**

*Laughs – very briefly – ironically but not bitterly – for her other-audience (the one, unlike her husband, that fails to exist).*

**KASSANDRA**

... but they grow in a strange country, your old age with which you will never be so familiar. You also are exiles.

**ELEKTRA**

I know – I'm as thin as when I was thirteen.

**KASSANDRA**

It is true though, my back is straight, like midday, a fish jumping. But not like an inheritance.

### **ELEKTRA**

I know – Elektra wasn’t made for hard work. Friend, this is my lot in life, my portion, no less than yours. If you don’t work, then we don’t eat, and I share this hut with you. I know – I used to have three nursemaids. Elektra knows she is the daughter of a king. She really doesn’t need reminding. Yet here she is, as thin as when she was thirteen with a large jar on her head. Why? Great or small, a husband is a husband. *That bitch!*

### **KASSANDRA**

Kassandra is kindly called, come down, by her own name, but now it has a different sound. I cannot say *I am Kassandra* unless my lord and master asks me who I am. But he already knows.

### **ELEKTRA**

That bitch always on heat!

### **KASSANDRA**

I cannot now take my name with me to the hole in the ground.

### **ELEKTRA**

If he had been my husband I’d have knelt to wash his feet *and* I’d have fetched the water myself! Willingly!

### **KASSANDRA**

To be a slave is this: to know in advance what it is not to be – but only with half of yourself. There is no need to tell me I must get down from the cart, for my left side and my right side are like passing strangers, each indifferent to where the other goes.

Yet the very pale children around your feet appall me. Why are they crying? Why are they crying as though no one knows they are there, without a sound? They smell too sweet.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

*utters a cry like beginning, slow, out of a great distance, or depth.*

### **KASSANDRA**

Ha! Ah! Apollo! I see now – on old men’s faces, ruins of masks, where dead white shock is catching quick red shame – I see now your game! But why must you wrench my soul from its frame, manhandled out with rude god’s hands to make me stand beside myself and see? Pull, rather, my arm from its socket, I could love you more.

### **ELEKTRA**

Yes, my dear husband, we *both* know Elektra isn’t made for hard work. We both know she has to get her hands dirty. Why do ask me where I’m going when you can see the large jar on my head? Surely you don’t expect me to sit at home like a queen – *here!*

### **KASSANDRA**

It’s in the house, all in the house, like a book. I turn back the pages....

### **ELEKTRA**

Be a husband! Be a man and *tell* your wife what to do. Honestly, I wouldn’t mind if you used your tongue like a whip across my back. Then perhaps the gods might finally sit up and take some notice.

### **KASSANDRA**

The past comes back, house vomits, spews out its insides, like.... But what does that undo? A father ate his children. And these men, standing echoes, would like to forget, so it sits on their bent backs and catches at their stately clothes, no past to tell us we grow – merely – old. How speechlessly they understand!

You’ve had your way with me too many times, yet, a god, Apollo – you again, I think you’ve only just begun. What’s time to you? A tightly-woven carpet where you lie and laze? Yet I drown in it, at your will. When all I asked was air to breathe, my own, a little longer, before I could say... yes. Was I a flute?

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

*utters a cry like nothing, from out of a great distance, or depth. Stirs, but barely.*

## **ELEKTRA**

Ah ha! I know what's in your mind. In two years I've learned, people with thick hands also have a cautious way of counting chickens before they're hatched. Let's see.... I have a brother. He's not here. *But...* one day he'll come, spill a little rotten blood, free me and... be *your* king. Then the humble peasant who treated his noble wife with such humble respect will be nobly rewarded. You people have a keen sense of smell!

I'm sorry. Really, I believe you're sincere when you behave as though you're not worthy of me. I'll tell my brother that. How terrified I was that first night when you came to my bed. But in fact you had come to tell me you were not going to come to my bed. The next day I could have kissed you for that – just on the cheek. Then, when you finally stopped coming to my bed, to the side of my bed, to tell me... that, I missed it. It's true. I missed the way you would say, "Sleep peacefully, Elektra, my peasant's hand cannot imagine how to open – or to close – upon your soft, royal breast – although *I* can." You see, I remember. Or, "A peasant knows well that the earth must agree to bring forth its crop, no king in the world can command it – so sleep." By the way, I've been meaning to tell you, there's no need for you to go on sleeping outside. The winter is coming again. If you'll wait till I'm in bed then you could use that corner.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

*Sleep!*

## **ELEKTRA**

Of course he'll come!

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

*How – can – you – sleep?* And I am dead, this stone on my tongue, face down in flesh-undressing earth. Where nothing is secret! You *will* hear! With the ears no sleep-stupidity stops. *My* – Furies. Hard-labouring snores in dry river beds, then not a sound – silence so undefined – here nothing even drips. For how long do you stop breathing before you splutter back? And I am dead, but not yet outside time, too unsatisfied.

## **ELEKTRA**

He will come.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

*My – Furies! I poured you honey in the nights, but now I see you almost wake to lick the blooms of salt from your own lips. You *almost* wake, to graze upon your own decay. Is the earth so old it can no longer stretch, only scratch? It is *my* sleep you are sleeping!*

## **KASSANDRA**

Kassandra is called, come down, by her own name, again, but now it has a different sound. Not so patient. Less.... I cannot – yet. Behind the door the woman only lives to lavish her man's blood upon the floor.

## **ELEKTRA**

He'll come, and at first... at first he won't recognize me.

## **KASSANDRA**

Listen! Soon, you will hear him shout, hear his own voice, yet nothing like – voice of the voice-root pulled from the body, filled with mud and weeds – framed by no last word. Why do you look as though you don't know what I'm talking about?

I am telling you that a murder is about to take place, first one... then another, less explicable but no less sure, first a king, then... a slave.

## **ELEKTRA**

At first, he'll see a plain girl in rags with close-cropped hair and, indifferent, he'll turn away. But something about me will make him look twice. Of their own strange will his eyes will turn towards me, like a plant towards the sun. Then he will see the eternal sadness in me – the kind no peasant could keep up for more than half a minute.

## **KASSANDRA**

Tortoise brains that sniff the wind, then try to follow, old men who hold their candles

to the day – you will catch up, you will hear my words when I lie tight-lipped in the ditch.

### **ELEKTRA**

He'll think: "How thin and pale she is, like a bride to sorrow. This is no peasant, no slave; her wrists and ankles are too finely turned, made for fine and precious chains, not this bondage to the rock-strewn earth. Can this be my sister?"

### **KASSANDRA**

Your limbs limp as proverbs, still have their uses, but not for days like this. Wise old men! You peer into the gloom of my words, thinking, "she is still beautiful, dark hair and dark eyes stray only to the edge of craziness – not yet across." The more beautiful, then? Am I not shameless, to be taken in public by a god? Does it make you want to know, as if for the first time, something you're too old to remember?

### **ELEKTRA**

And then he'll find my flesh is warm, so strangely unpredictably – so... very very very warm, in a long embrace, and then he'll weep hot tears of shame for me, for this, to mingle on our cheeks and lips with mine, with his, but mine will be of shaking joy, at last! at last! Of course he'll come! Be careful, friend, we're not discussing a peasant's love for his sister.

### **KASSANDRA**

You may have heard that I can see the past and future.

### **ELEKTRA**

What was I just going to do? Oh yes, that's why the large jar is on my head. You see how used to it I'm becoming?

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

Listen to me! *My* – Furies! I am your coherence.

### **KASSANDRA**

But who can tell me why a god should choose a mortal?

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

I am your cockerel and your dawn.

### **KASSANDRA**

Was there something fresher, more to be desired, in my doomed youth?

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

Listen! A man whips his horse as though he would prefer a dog to ride upon. *You* make it rear. *You* break his back on rocks *you* carefully arranged an age before, your youth, for that sweet moment. Something to wake you. Then you forget, everything, who you are, in mind-curdling sleep, muttering again about each other's faults. Only what wakes you is a crime. All else obeys another law, in which the earth with neither thought nor dream turns over, to lie upon its other side. What does it matter if the rains fail and a few villages die? A great city is pillaged and burnt, all the women are raped but no statue of you gets knocked over. You are content to be ugly. Only what wakes you is a crime and is a crime because it wakes you.

### **KASSANDRA**

But I was wise, so wise. Oh yes, and all along, I knew why he, Apollo, came to coach me in that art, that as he coached he also coaxed me, step by step, towards the strange throat noises of the body's visitation by the god. I saw the design before it was revealed; became, therefore, also the designer.

### **ELEKTRA**

What do you mean am I coming back to wash *your* feet? I wouldn't stoop to that if you took a whip to me!

### **KASSANDRA**

Then why did I delay? In fear of being carried out of time, or in refinement of desire?

### **ELEKTRA**

Yes, I did say a husband is a husband. So?

**KASSANDRA**

I should have said to him, then, then – Wait, you saw me as I was, I am, those times I let my eye drop loosed from yours, only to lift it up again in instant search of yours – I am, I shall be, yours.

**ELEKTRA**

No, I don't "get it".

**KASSANDRA**

Apollo, did you want to be a *man*?

**ELEKTRA**

No, I've not managed to get one of your jokes yet. Perhaps that's because I was brought up to close the toilet door. All right, have it your way, I was brought up with a toilet. Did you have to remind me? That bitch! That bitch always on heat! And that man she now calls husband, that worm who lives inside her skirts! And I'm the one who has to live like an animal! I try not to relieve myself all through the day. When I was a child, I thought it must be lonely up there in the mountains. But in fact there's no privacy. No privacy at all. I thought it was a wild, romantic place where you might just meet a wandering god. Why are there so many peasants anyway?

That is true. We shall not add to them.

**KASSANDRA**

Did you want to lie among the flowers on the hillside, to lie among my surrendered limbs and think the day so beautiful you would not mind to die? Just for a moment to know you had lived, as a man can? To escape the deep dissatisfactions of your immortality? Since then you take my body by storm, time after time, in your god form – truth they call it – cramps, some kind of soul fever, which hurts – but I feel sorry for you locked out like that, insisting on your omniscience, all outside the coming, fading moment. Over, now.

**ELEKTRA**

That is true. We shall not add to them. You are a good man, after all, and I thank you

for saying this again. I'll tell my brother – when he comes.

### **KASSANDRA**

Over now, the past – past now – uncomplicated by the fact that I was wrong.

### **ELEKTRA**

How terrified I was that first night when you came to my bed. But in fact you had come to tell me you were not going to come to my bed. The next day I could have kissed you for that – just on the cheek. When you finally stopped coming to my bed, to the side of my bed, to tell me... that, I missed it. It's true. I missed the way you would kneel by my bed, just one hand touching it, just the very edge, and I pulled the sheet up – high – and lay back and closed my eyes and you would say – this is what I missed – "Sleep peacefully, Elektra. After the fierce heat of the body's toil the cool of simple rest is best – isn't it?" You see, I remember. Or, "Soft earth was once hard stone. But not yesterday. Nor even last year."

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

I will not let you lie! Wake! *My* – Furies. Dishonour of death eats me, even now. Worms munch through my ears. I cannot move. Warm bony fingers of the sun do not reach here, nor the whispers that surround the wandering moon. And yet, I *was* alive! The wind would fling his arms around me, take away my breath. Palms of my hands lifted cool water, like birdsong, to my face. And yes, I craved a different seed inside, some other life to fuse and swim in me – my husband gone, to war, at first he was the shadow of the unlit lamp, he sat in every other room. I thought – when he comes back he'll only know to pitch his camp, lay siege – should I preserve myself a temple for him?

### **ELEKTRA**

I too have a body of course, but most of the time I don't notice it. So thin and frail, but I think I prefer it like that. A branch in winter, not a trace of fruit. Un... Un... un-something.

### **KASSANDRA**

Old age is good at this, it looks before it leaps, so does not leap. One says: if she is wrong, nothing need be done. Another says: if she is right, nothing can be done.

### **ELEKTRA**

For example, if you compare it with this large jar on my head, which looks so much more... *full*, even though I haven't been to the well yet.

But not 'unfull'.

### **KASSANDRA**

First one, then another, less explicable but no less sure; first a king, then a slave.

### **ELEKTRA**

The women round here remind me of meat.

### **KASSANDRA**

It is all as you prefer, to be the audience at a play. When your king is dead you will denounce the villain and so become involved, cry shame! barbarity! treason! but in your hearts you'll know that this is as you too have chosen it. You have already accepted it.

I do not grieve.

### **ELEKTRA**

I admit some peasant girls are quite attractive when they laugh – it's not the kind of beauty that's revealed in modest behaviour – but they too have thick elbows.

### **KASSANDRA**

I do not grieve, why, this king of yours whose hobbled arrogance you'll mourn has trodden on the palms of my hands, his muddy footprints track across my soul. Was he a god? to stand upon my land wearing feathers and unable to fly?

### **ELEKTRA**

You may think I'm too thin and too pale and that my hair is too short, but if you could see me wearing all those lovely things my father brought me back from Troy you would realise, true beauty never hitches up its skirt just to scratch a knee, however soft the skin displayed. Now *that bitch* has them!

### **KASSANDRA**

No god, he sits in his bath and his wife insists on pouring the water herself – he dare not tell her he would feel more at home with a slave. She wakes the infant in him.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

He knew. I saw.

### **KASSANDRA**

He knows and vaguely likes her game, all that machinery of manhood in his soul gone limp, and in a strange unworldly heart knows he is out of his depth, simple after all, unable to resist when death comes without a trumpet. It is not how *you* will remember him.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

In a lovely intimacy after ten years, he saw he was deposed, looked tired yet roused, he heard the lies but caught the truth inside each one. The life that might have been. No sign of jealousy.

### **KASSANDRA**

Not the king you'll say was barbarously murdered. By a woman! Then set his statue in your heads. But leave Kassandra out of it.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

“People of Argos! I have been as true to this man as he has been to Greece!”

Now – the past begins to take me, speaks – forget the unlived future, I am here; death lingers at his work, like a craftsman, whispers, do you remember how you cut him down to size? With words of welcome, not yet steel. Yes! “People of Argos! While he

walked ten years deep in blood I was left to remember what, remembered, becomes the opposite of itself.”

### **ELEKTRA**

She doesn’t even seem to grow any older. That bitch my mother has the nerve to look younger! No, not than me (I don’t look old, do I – just worn and very sad?); I mean than... then. Her body has become a barefaced lie, just like that speech she made. “People of Argos, is love to be a secret when it’s been so stretched but held?” she said. Out loud. “I am not ashamed to tell this venerable, masculine assembly why this man is still my husband – I have had no adventures, seen no new shores. A wife asks no praise when her poor victory was only over herself.” I was at an upstairs window but still didn’t know where to put my face. The old men studied the small stones on the ground. My father went peach red. She knew what they’d all think, a woman making a speech *in public* to tell everyone how faithful she had been. She might as well have had her lover standing there beside her.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

When he comes back, he’ll only know to pitch his camp, lay siege – shall I preserve myself a temple for him? Palms of my hands lifting cold water, to my face. Like birdsong. Like last year’s birdsong. And I crave, still crave, a different seed inside, some other (dying) life to fuse and swim in me – grass.

### **ELEKTRA**

Why was I born a woman? These bones of a bird. I must wait for my brother to become a man. Breast of rough wood, his will fierce in his nostrils. His sword also him. His father’s avenger like his father’s resurrection! But I’ll help, at his shoulder like a voice inside. What more can a mere woman do? True, that bitch my mother killed her husband, Agamemnon, commander of all the Greeks, with a net and an axe. True.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

I sent that Trojan whore to keep him company, let her hang around his neck to read his palm in hell, tell him his future there – I’ll recite his past.

### **ELEKTRA**

Do you think they'd have married me off to a peasant, if I had been a man? So my children could have no claim upon the throne? Oh, how easily the word slips out, my children – never to be born! I cannot accept that insult. Please understand. It's nothing personal.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

But I am dead, face down in flesh-undressing earth.

### **ELEKTRA**

How terrified I was that first night when you came to my bed. But in fact you had come to tell me you were not going to come to my bed. The next day I could have kissed you for that – just on the cheek. When you finally stopped coming to my bed, to tell me... that, I missed it. It's true. I missed the way you would kneel, and hesitate, and grip the sheet, which I'd pulled up, and I could feel your grip upon the sheet so strong yet not to pull it down, to hold what I too held. A flimsy shield. And you would say – this is what I missed – "Elektra, your nakedness is my horizon; if I walk towards it, will it not remain afar off?" You see, I remember. Or, "The golden fields are beautiful, also to sweat in. Should I be sad when a pale mist covers them? For it too is beautiful... but in a colder, thinking way."

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

And I am dead, but not yet outside time, too unsatisfied. How – can – you – sleep! *My* – Furies! Do you think I have started talking to myself, still the woman left alone at home? Is my voice growing weak, now no more than breath on a cold window and a finger trying to remember the shapes of letters? But my nails grow.

Listen to me! I am your coherence. I am your cockerel and your dawn. A great city is pillaged and burnt. All the women are raped but no statue of you gets knocked over. You are content to have no statues. Only what wakes you is a crime and is a crime because it wakes you. Listen to me!

### **KASSANDRA**

This house is wretched. Yet my house is down. This house consumes itself, and I am... nowhere else. You see how I fail to take my eyes from the shut door? Say of Kassandra, she could see the future but not why she was born. To die? Yes, within the hour. But my hour stretches out, like your year or two, so full, still, of time. Still inconceivable – that day to come only for others.

I don't need this necklace to prophesy my own death! Let it lie in the dirt! Oh yes, I told them not to bring the wooden horse within the gate, how I raved – I couldn't help myself. But no one ever takes my prophecies as true, though true, absurdly, they must be – as you once said. You! Apollo! You! You brought me here! What's time to you, something to waste on me, something to waste and I happened to be there? So what was it I had? Oh, I could believe, yes, you would have been a sensitive lover, longing to feel *my* feelings flush and course through me! Isn't that why, now, you 'take your pleasure' looking on my misery, as evidence that I'm beneath you? That is *not* indifference!

Kassandra is called, come down, by her own name, but now it has a foreign sound. Thank you. You remind me – only a man, presuming as a god, could have enslaved Kassandra, brought her here. She will step down, she has no choice, she knows it, knows the rest. This story is not yet over. It's in the house, all in the house – what's done and still to come. Shall I try your patience more?

### **ELEKTRA**

Well, I can't stand around all day talking. There's a large jar on my head and it's not there for aesthetic reasons. I'm not afraid of hard work. All I'm afraid of is starting to look like a peasant. Has my neck become any thicker, do you think?

### **KASSANDRA**

There is a mother, just now gone in. She kills her husband – a mere man, a smudge of flesh upon the glittering day, just now gone in. Her son, therefore, kills her.

### **ELEKTRA**

Women who carry jars come to look like jars, bigger ones and the other way up.

**KASSANDRA**

And so your king may take his ease beneath this blood rich earth, revenged. You will be dead. Your sons will like what they see.

**ELEKTRA**

It leaves their hands free to brush away flies.

**KASSANDRA**

While your old blood falters in your faces, at mere words. *Revenge*.

**ELEKTRA**

They walk slow and straight with big hips that swing from side to side like scales in which traders are weighing vegetables.

**KASSANDRA**

Soon you will hear his voice, yet nothing like, full of mud and weeds, erasing king, husband, even man. *Revenge*.

**ELEKTRA**

I may have no hips, but they would look ridiculous with a string of pearls in their hair. It would never make you think of stars in the night sky, only of corn in the mud.

**KASSANDRA**

The house records each detail and the past.... *This* past, intent upon tomorrow, claims each dawn. Her son and his son will have no choice, a child now, doomed to win his manhood at his mother's blood-decked breast. No part of this, all the slit throats in Troy are... history.

**ELEKTRA**

Perhaps in your opinion I am not woman enough?

**KASSANDRA**

For the packs of dogs.

## **ELEKTRA**

But that, my peasant friend, is the opinion of someone who appreciates the femininity of a sheep.

That is quite true, you are my husband. But how dare you tell me to go to the well like that! How dare you use your tongue like a whip across my back! I used to have three nursemaids! Yes, it's true, I did tell you to be a man. Does a man have to be told to be a man? My father was a man. A kind of mortal god! So tall – his eyes and nose were like an eagle's in the sky, surveying all. Taller than a tree, its great thick trunk inviting no caress, providing shade for cities, nations, continents – but breeding thunderstorms among its leaves, for the evildoers. You didn't even go to Troy – yes, you were too young, but I'm quite sure you would have whined about someone having to stay behind to grow the food. He was a conqueror – women of Troy trembled years upon their battlements, *his* gripped audience, barely noticing their own husbands until they were corpses, time to cry. A great man – whom I insult like this, by even making such comparison. How low I am sunk! Orestes, why don't you come? You're sixteen now. Deliver me from living death! Lift me from the dirt! We'll be so happy!

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

Only what wakes you is a crime and is a crime because it wakes you. A sword went through my breast. Then he forgot himself, clung to me, sucked...

## **ELEKTRA**

I'm sorry. Truly, I'm sorry.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

... there, where he had struck, remembering who he was, who he *was* – and was again my son, but motherless! Babe in my failing arms, blubbering. Red sunsets all over his wide open face, his howl strangling itself.

## **ELEKTRA**

Your birth should not be held against you.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

That was *your* time, to pluck the last feathers of his sanity.

## **ELEKTRA**

A blanket of the coarsest wool is also warm. I'll tell him that. If he comes.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

Oh, you were fast, fast in sleep, to let him tell himself: 'mother' – ??<sup>1</sup> – wives (women), betray – my (one's) duty – father a king. Father-king. Father/king. To let him start to weave with words that lie, become a citizen, pious, even a little sad (why me?), proud in a crawling way, uniquely doomed and justified.

## **ELEKTRA**

If he comes, I'll tell him you were gentle with me. So please forgive me. It is, in any case, all the fault of that bitch.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

Yes, *you* left him the sense of words, with which what's done is always as it should have been. *You* let him keep, so easy in his mouth, that 'I' with which to open his defence – and the trial's half won!

## **ELEKTRA**

Pity me. My father lies mocked by those he killed, in war, for he was merely murdered. My brother is a shadow in my pillow. And you are half a husband.

## **KASSANDRA**

I grew up beside a river.

## **ELEKTRA**

Perhaps there are no gods.

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<sup>1</sup> Whatever inarticulate sound means ??.

**KASSANDRA**

But an uninvited king came there to pitch his tent and the river sickened – fish turned dull and rolled upon their sides.

**ELEKTRA**

Perhaps I too was born to honest toil. The fact is, I have a large jar on my head.

**KASSANDRA**

He knelt, and washed his face. When he looked up, the sky had no birds left.

**ELEKTRA**

Great or small, a husband is a husband.

**KASSANDRA**

Did he think he could escape this house, by crossing a sea? Now I too... belong here, my name is my name in his mouth.

**ELEKTRA**

I am going to the well – again. I recognize my duty.

**KASSANDRA**

Then shall I say *my* king is calling me, when he calls? But namelessly, through mud and weeds – it might be anyone who has to follow him...

**ELEKTRA**

My... duties.

**KASSANDRA**

... but I am here.

**ELEKTRA**

How terrified I was.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

What does a woman dread, what's worst for her? That death should take her child before her – winter to follow spring/disease in the garden/the closing of windows. Yet – men's crafty passion, war, trades in sons. What woman having known her womb grow round would raise a flag upon a pole?

### **ELEKTRA**

Absolutely terrified. I should not have been.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

But this is not the worst.

### **KASSANDRA**

And shall I say *my* king will be revenged?

### **ELEKTRA**

You are a good man.

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

I did not lose my son to death. He climbed the mountain of his youth to find a stream and there insanely slashed the running water with his sword – as though the orchards in the valley were a torture to him.

### **KASSANDRA**

*My* king?

### **KLYTAIMESTRA**

But so young – walking among crowds, he stopped, stood there, forgetting how to walk, how to breathe. Became his father's ghost, a pale house for a spiteful king. Dead while alive, hating the warm air. And told himself: I – am my father's son – not forged in her womb – she simply wrapped me up, his... mighty leap that conquered time, his... immortality.

## **KASSANDRA**

*My king? Yes!*

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

The poor boy. He never knew his father. So he too had to become a hero.

## **KASSANDRA**

Yes, I'll say it, in one last riddle!

## **ELEKTRA**

How terrified I was that first night. I should not have been. Tonight... may it be as a first night, I, in my bed... and you, also there.

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

A true hero! Was I not a more terrifying enemy for one man than an army, my weakness might have undermined him!

## **ELEKTRA**

How many times have I told you not to mumble? Why not *what* now?

## **KLYTAIMESTRA**

The smallest lapse of concentration and he'd have killed himself by mistake! That was *your* time – to roll over in a sleep-drenched bed.

## **ELEKTRA**

Fool, at *side* of my bed, I meant at the side of my bed! It's what I missed.

## **KASSANDRA**

I was.... I have often been... 'interrupted' by strange shudders of time when it becomes – too full of itself. I was... a prophetess. But

## **ELEKTRA**

I missed the way you would kneel, and hesitate, and grip my sheet, and say....

What? What was that about my bother? Mumble, mumble. What do you mean *pretend to be my brother* if I keep my eyes closed? No!

**KASSANDRA**

But now

**ELEKTRA**

No! There'd be something (I can't think of the right word) about it. Illegal?

**KASSANDRA**

Now I *choose* to be a slave!

**ELEKTRA**

Un-

**KASSANDRA**

To go to death without a trace of past.

**ELEKTRA**

Im-

**KASSANDRA**

(Comes down) No father bestowed my name on me. No name was bestowed on me by my father.

**ELEKTRA**

In-

**KASSANDRA**

Now I welcome foreign earth for a grave.

And when a son runs his mother to ground, and hesitates, he will not call on the memory of a mere slave's murder in order to.... My king, no god to me, *will* be

revenged. But I ask this – to be remembered as a slave. To take no name with me. And yet... to be revenged... but in another age. By no mere motherkiller, no sickness trying to cure sickness. A sword must then be raised for all/I among them/nothing more, our names stolen from our mouths. *Their* names! *Their* mouths!

**Like food!**

*KASSANDRA walks very slowly towards the palace door.*

*(She must not arrive there.)*

**ELEKTRA**

I am going to the well.

Again.

*ELEKTRA does not move.*

Again.

*Ditto.*

**KLYTAIMESTRA**

I cannot scream to wake you. My voice was consumed, burnt out; as he stabbed, blindly, I swallowed the sun. Everything went deep blue, or sheer white, I could not tell – but then I knew, darkness is the lovely bride of light, always at his side, death *could* not be so beautiful. A thin milk of light that crawls. My voice now is muddy, not made of... I forget. I hear, more clearly than my... own... words, these... silences... between. What do they say? The sea... cannot become... perfectly still. Dead... I only know... what death is not.

Is it then our dearest wish, to sacrifice ourselves?

Silences, like memories, for I am here. Cool night. Hot day. Dogs barking, on the far side of the horizon, or the humming of a bee like someone standing close, made all of breath, beside you! Here nothing even drips.

But not stillness, not... yet... sleep. Here nothing is secret. Death's slow thrust sows last year's grass in me, on which I stepped. But I will not return.

Wake! *My* – Furies! Shall we go on a hunt? Try your baying. We'll carry sleep on our backs, like a fat child – till we catch that smell. His excuses.

My son, I know, expected you – I saw it in his frozen face, I saw his eye turn slowly inside out, to wait for you, almost-invited guests, *my* – Furies, to unpeg the thoughts from his brain, to rip them up – old clothes washed too many times.

Sleep on then. The fox hunches in the moonless patch, but you, called daughters of the night, twist, sprawl, throw out an arm. The owl glides low like a fatal caress, but you, called curses, hiss, slobber, grind tooth on tooth.

Only what wakes you is a crime – and is a crime because it wakes you.

***END***