

Euripides' *Electra*, with Michael Walton (Nick Hern Books)

MESSENGER

When we left here, we took the road
wide enough for wagons
until we found the new king of Mycenae.
Standing in the cultivated gardens,
he was weaving pliant myrtle for a wreath.
When he saw us, he greeted us:
'Welcome, strangers, where have you come from
and what's your country?'
'We're Thessalians,' answered Orestes.
'We're on our way to the Alpheus
to make a sacrifice to Olympian Zeus.'
Hearing this, Aegisthus responded,
'You really must join us for our feast.
I'm sacrificing a bull to the Nymphs.
Rise early tomorrow: you'll still get there on time.
Let's go indoors.' He took him by the hand,
and said, 'Come, now, I insist.'

When we got inside, he told the slaves,
'Go quickly and get water for our guests
so that they can stand near the sacred basins.'
Orestes said, 'We've just purified ourselves
in running river water. If it is appropriate
for strangers to sacrifice with citizens,
Lord Aegisthus, we are ready and won't refuse.'
That's what they both said as they stood there.

The slaves laid down their spears
and busied themselves with their work:
they brought bowls for sacrifice,
and baskets; some lit the fire;
others set up cauldrons around the altar.
The whole room rang with the din they made.
Your mother's bedmate took the grain
and threw it on the altar, saying:
'Nymphs of the rocks, may I and my wife at home
sacrifice often to you like this; may we prosper;
and our enemies (he meant you and Orestes) fail.'
But my master prayed under his breath for the opposite,
that he regain his father's house.

Aegisthus took a straight-bladed knife from the basket,
cut the calf's hair and with his right hand
put it in the holy fire.

As the servants lifted the calf on their shoulders,
he slit its throat, then said to your brother:
'Thessalians boast they can do two things well,
cut up a bull, and break a horse. Take this knife
and show us if this is true or not.'

Orestes picked up the well-made Doric knife.

He threw off the fine cloak from his shoulders,
chose Pylades to help him in his work,
and pushed aside the slaves.

Taking the calf by the hoof, he stretched out his hand
and stripped away the skin to reveal the white flesh.
In less time than it takes a runner to complete a double lap,
he flayed the hide and cut through the flanks.

Aegisthus reached in and lifted up the holy pieces,
but the liver's lobe was missing;
the appearance of the portal vein and gall bladder
meant trouble for whoever looked closely at them.

Aegisthus frowned, and my master asked,

'What's wrong?' He replied, 'Stranger,

I fear foreign treachery. My worst enemy is
Agamemnon's son: he threatens my house.'

But Orestes answered, 'A threat from an exile?

You're afraid, you who are lord of the city?

Can someone bring me a proper cleaver
instead of this Doric knife to split the rib cage,
so we can feast on the innards?'

The moment he got it, he cut through the bone.

Aegisthus took the entrails, parting them
so he could get a good look. As he was bending over,
your brother stood up high and struck his backbone,
smashing his spine. Aegisthus shuddered,
convulsing in his final ghastly death throes.

The slaves ran for their weapons when they saw this,
Many men against just the two.

But Pylades and Orestes were brave,
standing their ground,

weapons at the ready, until Orestes cried out:

'It's me, Orestes, the wronged Orestes.

You served my father! Don't kill me!

I am no enemy to this city, nor to you, my servants.

I have avenged the death of my father.'

As soon as they heard this, they lowered their spears,
and one old servant recognised Orestes.
Then, shouting and cheering, they wreathed
your brother's brow. He's on his way here now
with a head to show you - no Gorgon's,
but that of the hated Aegisthus,
a bitter reckoning, blood for blood.

CHORUS

Dance, beloved, dance!
Leap like a light-stepping fawn,
In joy approaching heaven.
Your brother has won a greater victory
Than in any Olympics.
Sing a song of victory
To accompany my dance.