

CLYTEMNESTRA.

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

AGAMEMNON.
ÆGISTHUS.
ORESTES.
PHOCIAN.
HERALD.

CLYTEMNESTRA.
ELECTRA.
CASSANDRA.
CHORUS.

SCENE. — *Before the Palace of Agamemnon in Argos. Trophies, amongst which the shield of Agamemnon, on the wall.*

TIME. — *Morning. The action continues till Sunset.*

I. CLYTEMNESTRA.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

MORNING at last! at last the lingering day
Creeps o'er the dewy side of yon dark world.
O dawning light already on the hills!
O universal earth, and air, and thou,
First freshness of the east, which art a breath
Breathed from the rapture of the gods,
who bless
Almost all other prayers on earth but mine!
Wherefore to me is solacing sleep denied?
And honorable rest, the right of all?
So that no medicine of the slumbrous shell,
Brimmed with divinest draughts of melody,
Nor silence under dreamful canopies,
Nor purple cushions of the lofty couch
May lull this fever for a little while.
Wherefore to me, — to me, of all mankind,
This retribution for a deed undone?
For many men outlive their sum of crimes,
And eat, and drink, and lift up thankful hands,
And take their rest securely in the dark.
Am I not innocent, — or more than these?
There is no blot of murder on my brow,
Nor any taint of blood upon my robe.

— It is the thought! it is the thought!
... and men
Judge us by acts!... as though one thunder-clap
Let all Olympus out. Unquiet heart,
Ill fares it with thee since, ten sad years past,
In one wild hour of unacquainted joy,
Thou didst set wide thy lonely bridal doors
For a forbidden guest to enter in!
Last night, methought pale Helen, with a frown,
Swept by me, murmuring, "I — such as thou —
A Queen in Greece — weak-hearted, (woe is me!)
Allured by love — did, in an evil hour,
Fall off from duty. Sorrow came. Beware!"
And then, in sleep, there passed a baleful band, —
The ghosts of all the slaughtered under Troy,
From this side Styx, who cried, "For such a crime
We fell from our fair palaces on earth,
And wander, starless, here. For such a crime
A thousand ships were launched, and tumbled down
The topless towers of Ilion, though they rose
To magic music, in the time of Gods!"
With such fierce thoughts forevermore at war,

CLYTEMNESTRA.

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Next not alone by hankering wild regrets,
But fears, yet worse, of that which soon must come,
My heart waits armed, and from the citadel
Of its high sorrow, sees far off dark shapes,
And hears the footsteps of Necessity
Tread near, and nearer, hand in hand with Woe.
Last night the flaming Herald warning urged
Up all the hills, — small time to pause and plan!
Counsel is weak: and much remains to do,
That Agamemnon, and, if else remain
Of that enduring band who sailed for Troy
Ten years ago (and some sailed Letheward),
Find us not unprepared for their return.

But — hark! I hear the tread of nimble feet
That sound this way. The rising town is poured
About the festive altars of the Gods,
And from the heart of the great Agora,
Lets out its gladness for this last night's news.
— Ah, so it is! Insidious, sly Report,
Sounding oblique, like Loxian oracles,
Tells double-tongued (and with the self-same voice!)
To some new gladness, new despair to some.

II. CHORUS AND CLYTEMNESTRA.

CHORUS.

O dearest Lady, daughter of Tyndarus!
With purple flowers we come, and offerings —
Oil, and wine; and cakes of honey,
Soothing, unadulterate; tapestries
Woven by white Argive maidens,
God-descended (woven only
For the homeward feet of Heroes)
To celebrate this glad intelligence
Which last night the fiery courier
Brought us, posting up from Ilion,
Wheeled above the dusky circle
Of the hills from lighted Ida.
For now (Troy lying extinguishd

Underneath a mighty Woe)
Our King and chief of men,
Agamemnon, returning
(And with him the hope of Argos),
Shall worship at the Tutelary Altars
Of their dear native land:
In the fane of ancient Herë,
Or the great Lycæan God;
Immortally crowned with reverend honor!
But tell us wherefore, O godlike woman,
Having a lofty trouble in your eye,
You walk alone with loosened tresses?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Shall the ship toss, and yet the helm not heave?
Shall they drowse sitting at the lower oars,
When those that hold the middle benches wake?
He that is yet sole eye of all our state
Shining not here, shall ours be shut in dreams?
But haply you (thrice happy!) prove not this,
The curse of Queens, and worse than widowed wives —
To wake, and hear, all night, the wandering gnat
Sing through the silent chambers, while Alarm,
In place of Slumber, by the haunted couch
Stands sentinel; or when from coast to coast
Wails the night-wandering wind, or when o'er heaven
Boötes hath unleashed his fiery hounds,
And Night her glittering camps hath set, and lit
Her watch-fires through the silence of the skies,
— To count ill chances in the dark, and feel
Deserted pillows wet with tears, not kisses,
Where kisses once fell.
But now Expectation
Stirs up such restless motions of the blood
As suffer not my lids to harbor sleep.
Wherefore, O beloved companions,
I wake betimes, and wander up and down,
Looking toward the distant hill-tops,
From whence shall issue fair fulfilment
Of all our ten-years' hoping. For, behold!

Troy being captived, we shall see once
more
Those whom we loved in days of old.
Yet some will come not from the Phry-
gian shore,
But there lie weltering to the surf and
wind;
Exiled from day, in darkness blind,
Or having crost unhappy Styx.
And some who left us full of vigorous
youth
Shall greet us now gray-headed men.
But if our eyes behold again
Our long-expected chief, in truth,
Fortune for us hath thrown the Treble
Six.

CHORUS.

By us, indeed, these things are also
wisht.
Wherefore, if now to this great son of
Atreus
(Having survived the woful walls of
Troy),
With us, once more, the Gods permit to
stand
A glad man by the pillars of his hearth,
Let his dear life henceforth be such
wherein
The Third Libation often shall be poured.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And let his place be numbered with the
Gods,
Who overlook the world's eternal walls,
Out of all reach of sad calamities.

CHORUS

It is not well, I think, that men should
set
Too near the Gods any of mortal kind:
But brave men are as Gods upon the
earth.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And whom Death daunts not, these are
truly brave.

CHORUS.

But more than all I reckon that man
blest,
Who, having sought Death nobly, finds
it not.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Except he find it where he does not seek.

CHORUS.

You speak in riddles.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

For so Wisdom speaks.
But now do you with garlands wreath
the altars,
While I, within, the House prepare.
That so our King, at his returning,
With his golden armament,
Find us not unaware
Of the greatness of the event.

CHORUS.

Soon shall we see the faces that we loved.
Brother once more clasping brother,
As in the forgotten days:
And heroes, meeting one another
(Men by glorious toils approved)
Where once they roved,
Shall rove again the old familiar ways.
And they that from the distance come
Shall feed their hearts with tales of
home;
And tell the famous story of the war,
Rumored sometime from afar.
Now shall these again behold
The ancient Argos; and the grove
Long since trod
By the frenzied child of Inachus;
And the Forum, famed of old,
Of the wolf-destroying God;
And the opulent Mycenæ,
Home of the Pelopidae,
While they rove with those they love,
Holding pleasant talk with us.
O how gloriously they went,
That avenging armament!
As though Olympus in her womb
No longer did entomb
The greatness of a bygone world —
Gods and godlike men —
But cast them forth again
To frighten Troy: such storm was hurled
On her devoted towers
By the retributive Deity,
Whosoe'er he be
Of the Immortal Powers —
Or maddening Pan, if he chastise
His Shepherd's Phrygian treacheries:
Or vengeful Loxias; or Zeus,
Angered for the shame and abuse
Of a great man's hospitality.

As wide as is Olympus' span
Is the power of the high Gods;

Who, in their golden blest abodes
See all things, looking from the sky;
And Heaven is hard to pacify
For the wickedness of man.
My heart is filled with vague forebodings,
And oppress by unknown terrors
Lest, in the light of so much gladness,
Rise the shadow of ancient wrong.
O Dæmon of the double lineage
Of Tantalus; and the Pleisthenidæ,
Inexorable in thy mood,
On the venerable threshold
Of the ancient House of Pelops
Surely is enough of blood!
Wherefore does my heart misgive me?
Wherefore comes this doubt to grieve me?
O, may no Divine Envy
Follow home the Argive army,
Being vexed for things ill-done
In wilful pride of stubborn war,
Long since, in the distant lands!
May no Immortal wrath pursue
Our dear King, the Light of Argos,
For the unhappy sacrifice
Of a daughter; working evil
In the dark heart of a woman;
Or some household treachery,
And a curse from kindred hands!

III. CLYTEMNESTRA.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

[Re-entering from the house.]

To-morrow . . . ay, what if to-day? . . .
Well — then?
Why, if those tongues of flame, with
which last night
The land was eloquent, spoke certain
truth,
By this perchance through green Saronic
rocks
Those black ships glide . . . perchance . . .
well, what's to fear?
'T were well to dare the worst — to know
the end —
Die soon, or live secure. What's left to
add
To years of nights like those which I
have known?
Shall I shrink now to meet one little hour
Which I have dared to contemplate for
years?
By all the Gods, not so! The end
crowns all,
Which if we fail to seize, that's also lost

Which went before: as who would lead
a host
Through desolate dry places, yet return
In sight of kingdoms, when the Gods are
roused
To mark the issue? . . . And yet, yet —
I think
Three nights ago there must have been
sea-storms.
The wind was wild among the Palace
towers:
Far off upon the hideous Element
I know it huddled up the petulant waves,
Whose shapeless and bewildering preci-
pices
Led to the belly of Orcus . . . O, to slip
Into dark Lethe from a dizzy plank,
When even the Gods are reeling on the
poop!
To drown at night, and have no sepul-
chre! —
That were too horrible! . . . yet it may
be
Some easy chance, that comes with little
pain,
Might rid me of the haunting of those
eyes,
And these wild thoughts . . . To know
he roved among
His old companions in the Happy Fields,
And ranged with heroes — I still inno-
cent!
Sleep would be natural then.
Yet will the old time
Never return! never those peaceful
hours!
Never that careless heart! and never-
more,
Ah, nevermore that laughter without
pain!
But I, that languish for repose, must
fly it,
Nor, save in daring, doing, taste of rest.
O, to have lost all these! To have bar-
tered calm,
And all the irrevocable wealth of youth,
And gained . . . what? But this change
had surely come,
Even were all things other than they are.
I blame myself o'ermuch, who should
blame time,
And life's inevitable loss, and fate,
And days grown lovelier in the retro-
spect.
We change: wherefore look back? The
path to safety
Lies forward . . . forward ever.

(In passing toward the house she recognizes the shield of Agamemnon, and pauses before it.)

Ha! old shield,
Hide up for shame that honest face of
thine.
Stare not so bluntly at us . . . O, this
man!
Why sticks the thought of him so in my
heart?
If I had loved him once — if for one
hour —
Then were there treason in this falling
off.
But never did I feel this wretched heart
Until it leaped beneath Ægisthus' eyes.
Who could have so forecounted all from
first?
From that flusht moment when his hand
in mine
Rested a thought too long, a touch too
kind,
To leave its pulse unwarmed . . . but I
remember
I dreamed sweet dreams that night, and
slept till dawn,
And woke with flutterings of a happy
thought,
And felt, not worse, but better . . . and
now . . . now?
When first a strange and novel tenderness
Quivered in these salt eyes, had one said
then
"A bead of dew may drag a deluge
down": —
In that first pensive pause, through
which I watched
Unwonted sadness on Ægisthus' brows,
Had some one whispered, "Ay, the
summer-cloud
Comes first: the tempest follows." —
Well, what's past
Is past. Perchance the worst's to follow
yet.
How thou art hackt, and hewn, and
bruised, old shield!
Was the whole edge of the war against
one man?
But one thrust more upon this dexter
ridge
Had quite cut through the double inmost
hide.
He must have stood to it well! O, he
was cast
I' the mould of Titans: a magnificent
man,
With head and shoulders like a God's.
He seemed

Too brimful of this merry vigorous life
To spill it all out at one stab o' the sword.
Yet that had helped much ill . . . O
Destiny
Makes cowards or makes culprits of us
all!
Ah, had some Trojan weapon . . . Fool!
fool! fool!
Surely sometimes the unseen Eumenides
Do prompt our musing moods with
wicked hints,
And lash us for our crimes ere we com-
mit them.
Here, round this silver boss, he cut my
name,
Once — long ago: he cut it as he lay
Tired out with brawling pastimes —
prone — his limbs
At length diffused — his head droopt in
my lap —
His spear flung by: Electra by the hearth
Sat with the young Orestes on her knee;
While he, with an old broken sword,
hacked out
These crooked characters, and laughed
to see
(Sprawled from the unused strength of
his large hands)
The marks make CLYTEMNESTRA.
How he laughed!
Ægisthus' hands are smaller.
Yet I know
That matrons envied me my husband's
strength.
And I remember when he strode among
The Argive crowd he topped them by a
head,
And tall men stood wide-eyed to look at
him,
Where his great plumes went tossing up
and down
The brazen prores drawn out upon the
sand.
War on his front was graved, as on thy
disk,
Shield! which he left to keep his mem-
ory
Grand in men's mouths: that some re-
vered old man,
Winning to this the eyes of our hot
youth,
Might say, "T was here, and here —
this dent, and that —
On such, and such a field (which we re-
member)
That Agamemnon, in the great old time,
Held up the battle."

Now lie there, and rust!
Thy uses all have end. Thy master's
home
Should harbor none but friends.
O triple brass,
Iron, and oak! the blows of blundering
men
Clang idly on you: what fool's strength
is yours!
For, surely, not the adamantine tunic
Of Ares, nor whole shells of blazing
plates,
Nor ashen spear, nor all the cumbrous
coil
Of seven bulls' hides may guard the
strongest king
From one defenceless woman's quiet hate.
What noise was that? Where can
Ægisthus be?
Ægisthus! — my Ægisthus! . . . There
again!
Louder, and longer — from the Agora —
A mighty shout: and now I see i' the
air
A rolling dust the wind blows near.
Ægisthus!
O much I fear . . . this wild-willed race
of ours
Doth ever, like a young unbroken colt,
Chafe at the straightened bridle of our
state —
If they should find him lone, irresolute,
As is his wont . . . I know he lacks the
eye
And forehead wherewith crowned Ca-
pacity
Awes rash Rebellion back.
Again that shout!
Gods keep Ægisthus safe! myself will
front
This novel storm. How my heart leaps
to danger!
I have been so long a pilot on rough
seas,
And almost rudderless!
O yet 't is much
To feel a power, self-centred, self-assured,
Bridling a glorious danger! as when one
That knows the nature of the elements
Guides some frail plank with sublime
skill that wins
Progress from all obstruction; and, erect,
Looks bold and free down all the drip-
ping stars,
Hearing the hungry storm boom baffled,
by.

Ægisthus! . . . hark! . . . Ægisthus! . . .
there . . . Ægisthus!
I would to all the Gods I knew him safe!
Who comes this way, guiding his racing
feet
Safe to us, like a nimble charioteer?

IV. CLYTEMNESTRA. HERALD.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Now, gloom-bird! are there prodigies
about?
What new ill-thing sent thee before?

HERALD.

O Queen —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Speak, if thou hast a voice! I listen.

HERALD.

O Queen —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Hath an ox trodden on thy tongue? . . .
Speak then!

HERALD.

O Queen (for haste hath caught away my
breath),
The King is coming.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Say again — the King

Is coming —

HERALD.

Even now, the broad sea-fields
Grow white with flocks of sails, and
toward the west
The sloped horizon teems with rising
beaks.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

The people know this?

HERALD.

Heard you not the noise?
For soon as this winged news had toucht
the gate
The whole land shouted in the sun.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

So soon!
The thought's outsped by the reality,
And halts agape . . . the King —

HERALD.
How she is moved.
A noble woman!

CLYTEMNESTRA.
Wherefore beat so fast,
Thou foolish heart? 'tis not thy master—

HERALD.
Truly
She looks all over Agamemnon's mate.

CLYTEMNESTRA.
Destiny, Destiny! The deed's half done.

HERALD.
She will not speak, save by that brooding eye
Whose light is language. Some great thought, I see,
Mounts up the royal chambers of her blood,
As a king mounts his palace; holds high pomp
In her Olympian bosom; gains her face,
Possesses all her noble glowing cheek
With sudden state; and gathers grandly up
Its slow majestic meanings in her eyes!

CLYTEMNESTRA.
So quick this sudden joy hath taken us,
I scarce can realize the sum of it.
You say the King comes here,—the King, my husband,
Whom we have waited for ten years,—
O joy!
Pardon our seeming roughness at the first.
Hope, that will often fawn upon despair
And flatter desperate chances, when the event
Falls at our feet, soon takes a querulous tone,
And jealous of that perfect joy she guards
(Lest the ambrosial fruit by some rude hand
Be stol'n away from her, and never tasted),
Barks like a lean watch-dog at all who come.
But now do you, with what good speed you may,
Make known this glad intelligence to all.

Ourselves, within, as best befits a wife
And woman, will prepare my husband's house.
Also, I pray you, summon to our side
Our cousin, Egisthus. We would speak with him.
We would that our own lips should be the first
To break these tidings to him; so obtaining
New joy by sharing his. And, for yourself,
Receive our gratitude. For this great news
Henceforth you hold our royal love in fee.
Our fairest fortunes from this day I date,
And to the House of Tantalus new honor.

HERALD.
She's gone! With what a majesty she filled
The whole of space! The statues of the Gods
Are not so godlike. She has Herë's eyes,
And looks immortal!

V. CLYTEMNESTRA. CHORUS.

CLYTEMNESTRA (*as she ascends the steps of the Palace*).

So . . . while on the verge
Of some wild purpose we hang dizzily,
Weighing the danger of the leap below
Against the danger of retreating steps,
Upon a sudden, some forecast event,
Issuing full-armed from Councils of the Gods,
Strides to us, plucks us by the hair, and hurls
Headlong pale conscience, to the abyss of crime.
Well—I shrink not. 'Tis but a leap in life.
There's fate in this. Why is he here so soon?
The sight of whose abhorred eyes will add
Whatever lacks of strength to this resolve.
Away with shame! I have had enough of it.
What's here for shame? . . . the weak against the strong?
And if the weak be victor? . . . what of that?

Tush! . . . there,—my soul is set to it.
What need
Of argument to justify an act
Necessity compels, and must absolve?
I have been at play with scruples—like a girl.
Now they are all flung by. I have talked with Crime
Too long to play the prude. These thoughts have been
Wild guests by night. Now I shall dare to do
That which I did not dare to think . . .
O, now
I know myself! Crime's easier than we dream.

CHORUS.

Upon the everlasting hills
Thronéd Justice works, and waits.
Between the shooting of a star,
That falls unseen on summer nights
Out of the bosom of the dark,
And the magnificent march of War,
Rolled from angry lands afar
Round some doomed city-gates,
Nothing is to her unknown;

Nothing unseen.
Upon her hills she sits alone,
And in the balance of Eternity
Poises against the What-has-been
The weight of What-shall-be.
She sums the account of human ills.
The great world's hoarded wrongs and rights
Are in her treasures. She will mark,
With inward-searching eyes sublime,
The frauds of Time.
The empty future years she fills
Out of the past. All human wills
Sway to her on her reachless heights.

Wisdom she teaches men, with tears,
In the toilful school of years:
Climbing from event to event.
And, being patient, is content
To stretch her sightless arms about,
And find some human instrument,
From many sorrows to work out
Her doubtful, far accomplishment.

She the two Atridæ sent
Upon Ilion: being intent
The heapt-up wrath of Heaven to move
Against the faithless Phrygian crime.
Them the Thunder-bird of Jove,

Swooping sudden from above,
Summoned to fates sublime.

She, being injured, for the sake
Of her, the often-wedded wife,
(Too loved, and too adoring!)
Many a brazen band did break
In many a breathless battle-strife;
Many a noble life did take;
Many a headlong agony,
Frenzied shout, and frantic cry,
For Greek and Trojan storing.
When, the spear in the onset being shivered,
The reeling ranks were rolled together
Like mad waves mingling in windy weather,
Dasht fearfully over and over each other.
And the plumes of Princes were tossed and thrust,
And dragged about in the shameful dust;
And the painful, panting breath
Came and went in the tug of death:
And the sinews were loosened, and the strong knees stricken:
And the eyes began to darken and thicken:
And the arm of the mighty and terrible quivered.

O Love! Love! Love! How terrible art thou!
How terrible!
O, what hast thou to do
With men of mortal years,
Who toil below,
And have enough of griefs for tears to flow?
O, range in higher spheres!
Hast thou, O hast thou, no diviner hues
To paint thy wings, but must transfuse
An Iris-light from tears?
For human hearts are all too weak to hold thee.
And how, O Love, shall human arms in-fold thee?
There is a seal of sorrow on thy brow.
There is a deadly fire in thy breath.
With life thou lurest, yet thou givest death.
O Love, the Gods are weak by reason of thee;
And many wars have been upon the earth.
Thou art the sweetest source of saltiest sorrows.

Thy blest to-days bring such unblest to-morrows;
Thy softest hope makes saddest memory.
Thou hadst destruction in thee from the birth;
Incomprehensible!

O Love, thy brightest bridal garments
Are poisoned, like that robe of agonies
Which Deianira wove for Hercules,
And, being put on, turn presently to
cerements!

Thou art unconquered in the fight.
Thou rangest over land and sea.
O let the foolish nations be!
Keep thy divine desire
To upheave mountains or to kindle
fire

From the frore frost, and set the world
alight.

Why make thy red couch in the damask
cheek?

Or light thy torch at languid eyes?
Or lie entangled in soft sighs
On pensive lips that will not speak?
To sow the seeds of evil things
In the hearts of headstrong kings?
Preparing many a kindred strife
For the fearful future hour?
O leave the wretched race of man,
Whose days are but the dying seasons'
span;

Vex not his painful life!
Make thy immortal sport
In Heaven's high court,
And cope with Gods that are of equal
power.

VI. ELECTRA. CHORUS. CLYTEMNESTRA.

ELECTRA.

Now is at hand the hour of retribution.
For my father, at last returning,
In great power, being greatly injured,
Will destroy the base adulterer,
And efface the shameful Past.

CHORUS.

O child of the Godlike Agamemnon!
Leave vengeance to the power of Heaven;
Nor forestall with impious footsteps
The brazen tread of black Erinnys.

ELECTRA.

Is it, besotted with the adulterous sin,
Or, as with flattery pleasing present
power,
Or, being intimidate, you speak these
words?

CHORUS.

Nay, but desiring justice, like yourself.

ELECTRA.

Yet Justice oftentimes uses mortal means.

CHORUS.

But flings aside her tools when work is
done.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

O dearest friends, inform me, went this
way
Ægisthus?

CHORUS.

Even now, hurrying hitherward
I see him walk, with irritated eyes.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

A reed may show which way the tem-
pest blows.
That face is pale, — those brows are dark
... ah!

VII. ÆGISTHUS. CLYTEMNESTRA.

ÆGISTHUS.

Agamemnon —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

My husband ... well?

ÆGISTHUS.

(Whom may the great Gods curse!)
Is scarce an hour hence.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Then that hour's yet saved
From sorrow. Smile, Ægisthus —

ÆGISTHUS.

Hear me speak.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Not as your later wont has been to
smile —

Quick, fierce, as though you scarce could
hurry out
The wild thing fast enough; for smil-
ing's sake,
As if to show you could smile, though
in fear
Of what might follow, — but as first
you smiled
Years, years ago, when some slow loving
thought
Stole down your face, and settled on your
lips,
As though a sunbeam halted on a rose,
And mixed with fragrance, light. Can
you smile still
Just so, Ægisthus?

ÆGISTHUS.

These are idle words,
And like the wanderings of some fevered
brain:
Extravagant phrases, void of import,
wild.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Ah, no! you cannot smile so, more.
Nor I!

ÆGISTHUS.

Hark! in an hour the King —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Hush! listen now, —
I hear, far down yon vale, a shepherd
piping
Hard by his milk-white flock. The
lazy things!
How quietly they sleep or feed among
The dry grass and the acanthus there!
... and he,
He hath flung his faun-skin by, and
white-ash stick,
You hear his hymn? Something of
Dryope.
Faunus, and Pan ... an old wood tale,
no doubt!

It makes me think of songs when I was
young
I used to sing between the valleys there,
Or higher up among the red ash-berries,
Where the goats climb, and gaze. Do
you remember

That evening when we lingered all alone,
Below the city, and one yellow star
Shook o'er yon temple? ... ah, and you
said then,

"Sweet, should this evening never
change to night,
But pause, and pause, and stay just so,
— yon star
Still steadfast, and the moon behind the
hill,
Still rising, never risen, — would this
seem strange?
Or should we say, 'why halts the day
so late?'"
Do you remember?

ÆGISTHUS.

Woman! woman! this
Surpasses frenzy! Not a breath of time
Between us and the clutch of Destiny, —
Already sound there footsteps at our
heels,
Already comes a heat against our cheek,
Already fingers cold among our hair,
And you speak lightly thus, as though
the day
Lingered toward nuptial hours! ...
awake! arouse!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

I do wake ... well, the King —

ÆGISTHUS.

Even while we speak
Draws near. And we —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Must meet him.

ÆGISTHUS.

Meet? ay ... how?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

As mortals should meet fortune — calmly.

ÆGISTHUS.

Quick!
Consult! consult! Yet there is time to
choose
The path to follow.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

I have chosen it
Long since.

ÆGISTHUS.

How? —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

O, have we not had ten years
To ripen counsel, and mature resolve?
What's to add now?

ÆGISTHUS.

I comprehend you not.
The time is plucking at our sleeve.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

There shall be time for deeds, and soon enough,
Let that come when it may. And it may be
Deeds must be done shall shut and shrivel up
All quiet thoughts, and quite preclude repose
To the end of time. Upon this awful strait
And promontory of our mortal life
We stand between what was, and is not yet.
The Gods allot to us a little space,
Before the contests which must soon begin,
For calmer breathing. All before lies dark,
And difficult, and perilous, and strange;
And all behind . . . What if we take one look,
One last long lingering look (before Despair,
The shadow of failure, or remorse, which often
Waits on success, can come 'twixt us and it,
And darken all) at that which yet must seem
Undimmed in the long retrospect of years, —
The beautiful imperishable Past!
Were this not natural, being innocent now
— At least of that which is the greater crime?
To-night we shall not be so.

ÆGISTHUS.

Ah, to-night!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

All will be done which now the Gods foresee.
The sun shines still.

ÆGISTHUS.

I oft have marked some day
Begin all gold in its flusht orient,
With splendid promise to the waiting world,

And turn to blackness ere the sun ran down.
So draws our love to its dark close.
To-night —

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Shall bring our bridal, my Beloved!
For, either
Upon the melancholy shores of Death
(One shadow near the doors of Pluto)
greeted
By pale Proserpina, our steps shall be,
Or else, secure, in the great empty palace
We shall sleep crowned — no noise to startle us —
And Argos silent round us — all our own!

ÆGISTHUS.

In truth I do not dare to think this thing.
For all the Greeks will hate us.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

What of that?

If that they do not harm us, — as who shall?

ÆGISTHUS.

Moreover, though we triumph in the act
(And we may fail, and fall) we shall go down
Covered with this reproach into the tomb,
Hunted by all the red Eumenides;
And, in the end, the ghost of him we slew,
Being beforehand there, will come between
Us and the awful Judges of the dead!
And no one on this earth will pray for us;
And no hand will hang garlands on our urns,
Either of man, or maid, or little child;
But we shall be dishonored.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

O faint heart!

When this poor life of ours is done with — all
Its foolish days put by — its bright and dark —
Its praise and blame — rolled quite away
— gone o'er

Like some brief pageant — will it stir us more,
Where we are gone, how men may hoot or shout
After our footsteps, than the dust and garlands
A few mad boys and girls fling in the air
When a great host is passed, can cheer or vex
The minds of men already out of sight
Toward other lands, with pean and with pomp
Arrayed near vaster forces? For the future,
We will smoke hecatombs, and build new fanes,
And be you sure the gods deal leniently
With those who grapple for their life, and pluck it
From the closed grip of Fate, albeit perchance
Some ugly smutch, some drop of blood or so,
A spot here, there a streak, or stain of gore,
Should in the contest fall to them, and mar
That life's original whiteness.

ÆGISTHUS.

Tombs have tongues
That talk in Hades. Think it! Dare we hope,
This done, to be more happy?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

My Beloved,

We are not happy, — we may never be,
Perchance, again. Yet it is much to think
We have been so: and even though we must weep,
We have enjoyed.

The roses and the thorns
We have plucked together. We have proved both. Say,
Was it not worth the bleeding hands they left us
To have won such flowers? And if 't were possible
To keep them still, — keep even the withered leaves,
Even the withered leaves are worth our care.
We will not tamely give up life, — such life!

What though the years before, like those behind,
Be dark as clouds the thunder sits among,
Tipt only here and there with a wan gold
More bright for rains between? — 'tis much, — 'tis more,
For we shall ever think "the sun's behind.
The sun must shine before the day goes down!"
Anything better than the long, long night,
And that perpetual silence of the tomb!
'Tis not for happier hours, but life itself
Which may bring happier hours, we strike at Fate.
Why, though from all the treasury of the Past
'Tis but one solitary gem we save —
One kiss more such as we have kist, one smile,
One more embrace, one night more such as those
Which we have shared, how costly were the prize,
How richly worth the attempt! Indeed, I know,
When yet a child, in those dim pleasant dreams
A girl will dream, perchance in twilight hours,
Or under eve's first star (when we are young
Happiness seems so possible, — so near!
One says, "it must go hard, but I shall find it!")
Ofttimes I mused, — "My life shall be my own,
To make it what I will." It is their fault
(I thought) who miss the true delights.
I thought
Men might have saved themselves: they flung away,
Too easily abasht, life's opening promise:
But all things will be different for me.
For I felt life so strong in me! indeed
I was so sure of my own power to love
And to enjoy, — I had so much to give,
I said, "be sure it must win something back!"
Youth is so confident! And though I saw
All women sad, — not only those I knew,

As Helen (whom from youth I knew,
nor ever
Divined that sad impenetrable smile
Which oft would darken through her
lustrous eyes,
As drawing slowly down o'er her cold
cheek
The yellow braids of odorous hair, she
turned
From Menelaus praising her, and
sighed,—
That was before he, flinging bitterly
down
The trampled parsley-crown and un-
drained goblet,
Cursed before all the Gods his sudden
shame
And young Hermione's deserted youth!)
Not only her,—but all whose lives I
learned,
Medea, Deianira, Ariadne,
And many others,—all weak, wronged,
opprest,
Or sick and sorrowful, as I am now,—
Yet in their fate I would not see my
own,
Nor grant allegiance to that general
law
From which a few, I knew a very few,
With whom it seemed I also might be
numbered,
Had yet escaped securely:—so exempt-
ing
From this world's desolation everywhere
One fate—my own!
Well, that was foolish!—Now
I am not so exacting. As we move
Further and further down the path of
fate
To the sure tomb, we yield up, one by
one,
Our claims on Fortune, till with each
new year
We seek less and go further to obtain it.
'Tis the old tale,—aye, all of us must
learn it!
But yet I would not empty-handed
stand
Before the House of Hades. Still there's
life,
And hope with life; and much that may
be done.
Look up, O thou most dear and cherisht
head!
We'll strive still, conquering; or, if
falling, fall
In sight of grand results.

ÆGISTHUS.

May these things be!
I know not. All is vague. I should be
strong
Even were you weak. 'Tis otherwise,—
I see
No path to safety sure. We have done
ill things.
Best let the past be past, lest new griefs
come.
Best we part now.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Part! what, to part from thee!
Never till death,—not in death even,
part!

ÆGISTHUS.

But one course now is left.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And that is—

ÆGISTHUS.

Flight.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Coward!

ÆGISTHUS.

I care not.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Flight! I am a Queen.

A goddess once you said,—and why not
goddess?
Seeing the Gods are mightier than we
By so much more of courage. O, not I,
But you, are mad.

ÆGISTHUS.

Nay, wiser than I was.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And you will leave me?

ÆGISTHUS.

Not if you will come.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

This was the Atlas of the world I built!

ÆGISTHUS.

Flight!... yes, I know not... some-
where... anywhere.
You come?... you come not?... well?
... no time to pause!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And this is he—this he, the man I
loved!
And this is retribution! O my heart!
O Agamemnon, how art thou avenged!
And I have done so much for him!...
would do
So much!... a universe lies ruined
here.

Now by Apollo, be a man for once!
Be for once strong, or be forever weak!
If shame be dead, and honor be no more,
No more true faith, nor that which in
old time

Made us like Gods, sublime in our high
place,
Yet all surviving instincts warn from
flight.

Flight!—O, impossible! Even now
the steps
Of fate are at the threshold. Which
way fly?

For every avenue is barred by death.
Will these not scout your flying heels?
If now

They hate us powerful, will they love us
weak?

No land is safe; nor any neighboring
king

Will harbor Agamemnon's enemy.
Reflect on Troy; her ashes smoulder yet.

ÆGISTHUS.

Her words compel me with their awful
truth.
For so would vengeance hound and earth
us down.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

If I am weak to move you by that love
You swore long since—and sealed it
with false lips!—
Yet lives there nothing of the ambitious
will?

Of those proud plots, and dexterous
policy,
On which you builded such high hopes,
and swore

To rule this people Agamemnon rules;
Supplant him eminent on his own throne,
And push our power through Greece?

ÆGISTHUS.

The dream was great.
It was a dream. We dreamt it like a
king.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Ay, and shall so fulfil it—like a King!
Who talks of flight? For now, bethink
you well,

If to live on, the byword of a world,
Be any gain, even such flight offers not.
Will long-armed Vengeance never find
you out

When you have left the weapon in her
hands?

Be bold, and meet her! Who forestall
the bolts

Of heaven, the Gods deem worthy of the
Gods.

Success is made the measure of our acts.
And, think, Ægisthus, there has been
one thought

Before us in the intervals of years,
Between us ever in the long dark nights,
When, lying all awake, we heard the
wind.

Did you shrink then? or, only closer
drawing

Your lips to mine, your arms about my
neck,

Say, "Who would fear such chances,
when he saw

Behind them such a prize for him as
this?"

Do you shrink now? Dare you put all
this from you?

Revoke the promise of those years, and
say

This prospect meets you unprepared at
last?

Our motives are so mixt in their begin-
nings

And so confused, we recognize them not
Till they are grown to acts; but ne'er
were ours

So blindly wov'n, but what we both un-
tangled

Out of the intricacies of the heart
One purpose:—being found, best grap-
ple to it.

For to conceive ill deeds yet dare not do
them,

This is not virtue, but a twofold shame.
Between the culprit and the demigod

There's but one difference men regard—
success.

The weakly-wicked shall be doubly
damned!

ÆGISTHUS.

I am not weak... what will you?...
O, too weak