

INTRODUCTION.

Orestes, in company with Pylades and his tutor, returns from Phocis¹⁾, where he had been brought up under the care of Strophius since the murder of his father, to Mycenæ, in order to exact retribution from the murderer of his father and her paramour²⁾. Here he is at length recognized by his sorrowing sister Electra, and measures are concerted which result in the murder of the guilty couple. "At length Orestes reveals himself, and has the plot drawn to its catastrophe. Clytemnestra is alone in her house, preparing a caldron for the burial; Electra and the Chorus are on the stage; the son — the avenger, is within. Suddenly the cries of Clytemnestra are heard. Again — again! Orestes re-enters a parricide!³⁾ He retires as Ægisthus is seen approaching; and the adulterous usurper is now presented to us for the first and last time — the crowning victim of the sacrifice. He comes flushed with joy and triumph. He has heard that the dreaded Orestes is no more. Electra entertains him a few moments with words darkly and exultingly ambiguous. He orders the doors to be thrown open, that all Argos and Mycenæ may see the remains of his sole rival for the throne. The scene opens. — On the threshold (where with the Greeks the corpse of the dead was usually set out to view) lies a body covered with a veil or pall. Orestes (the supposed Phocian) stands beside. Ægisthus lifts the pall, and beholds the body of Clytemnestra! He knows his fate at once; he knows that Orestes is before him; he attempts to speak. The fierce Electra cuts him short, and Orestes with stern solemnity conducts him from the stage to the spot on which Ægisthus had

¹⁾ Homer does not specify the place where Orestes lay concealed in his early years (Od. κ'. 457 f.); nor does he make any mention either of Strophius or Pylades. As for the reading ἄψ ἀπὸ Φωκίων in Zenodotus' edition of Homer (Od. γ'. 307.), it was no doubt due to some critic, who wished to harmonize the narrative of Homer with that usually given by the Tragedians.

²⁾ The gods had warned Ægisthus by Mercury that Orestes, though then far removed, would at an early age (ὅπποτ' ἂν ἠβήσῃ) return to his home and avenge the murder of his father (Hom. Od. α'. 35. 41. λ'. 458). In Homer the chief part in the murder of Agamemnon is attributed to Ægisthus; but in the Tragedians Clytemnestra is the chief agent.

³⁾ "Sophocles skilfully avoids treading the ground consecrated to Æschylus. He does not bring the murder before us with the struggles and resolve of Orestes." (Bulwer.)