THE ORESTEIA OF AESCHYLYUS
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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THE ORESTEIA
OF AESCHYLUS

AGAMEMNON, CHOEPHORI,
EUMENIDES

TRANSLATED BY
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TO
EMILY
AND
GORDON BOTTOMLEY
INTRODUCTION

The seven surviving plays of Aeschylus (B.C. 525–456) are the earliest complete dramatic works that we possess. Yet already in them the art of poetic drama has been carried to the same kind of elaborate perfection and imaginative mastery that is found in the symphonies of Beethoven. The fragments of Aeschylus's predecessors are too scanty to give us any clear idea of the debt he may have owed to them. But it seems probable that drama, as one of the supreme forms of art, was the creation of his own unique personal genius. Within the limits of a short introduction no adequate account can be given of his art, or of its relations to the plays of his rivals and successors. I must confine myself to a few remarks upon the traditional dramatic forms which he inherited and developed, and upon my own methods of translation.

The lost plays of the earlier Athenian dramatists must have been in the main lyrical. Between long stretches of choric singing and dancing, there would be interludes of dialogue, spoken in trochaic or iambic verse by a single actor and the leader of the chorus. Aeschylus is said to have introduced a second actor; yet two-thirds of the Suppliants, his first surviving play, were sung by the chorus; and even in the three plays here translated, which were written in his old age, the choruses are still of far greater length and dramatic importance than in any work of Sophocles or Euripides. In the Eumenides, indeed, the chorus is the true protagonist of the drama; while in the
Agamemnon and the Choephori they are more than a mere poetic commentary and background to the action. They are the chief interpreters of the poet's imaginative and religious ideas. Through them tragic events are foreshadowed, and they give full expression to the emotions of pity and terror aroused by tragedy when it comes. Their general imaginative significance is usually clear enough; but in detail they must often have been obscure even to a contemporary audience. Time has deepened this obscurity for us, who are unfamiliar with the ethical and religious ideas that underlie them, with the myths to which they allude, and with their highly artificial language and metrical forms. Yet, if we make the effort, we shall find in them poetry of a greatness that has never been surpassed.

My object in this translation has been to reproduce as faithfully as I can, for those who cannot read Greek, not only the meaning, but the form, phrasing and movement of the original. In the dialogue the problem is a relatively simple one. A normal English blank verse, though shorter by two syllables than a Greek iambic line, and of a different rhythmical structure, is yet not dissimilar in movement and general effect. Moreover, as English words tend to be shorter than Greek words, a close translation of an iambic line will prove, on an average, to be of about the same length as a blank verse. It ought then to be possible, without either omissions or padding, to translate the iambic dialogue into blank verse line for line. Literalness must sometimes be sacrificed, nor can crabbed rhythms and awkward phrasing be always avoided. Yet on the whole this method seems to me to convey the general effect more truly than one which is ready to disregard the relation of the Greek phrasing to the individual line.

In the lyrics and anapaests the difficulties are far greater, and no solution can be altogether satisfactory. I have tried to imitate as closely as possible the metrical pattern and phrasing, in such a way that one musical
setting would fit both the Greek and the English words. In order to do this, various compromises are necessary.

All Greek poetry was quantitative; that is to say, the metrical design was determined by the length or shortness of the syllables, and not by stress or pitch. Now the structure of English verse depends in the main upon stress. The part played by quantity or length is no doubt of great importance, but we are not generally conscious of it. If then we are to reproduce the pattern of a Greek rhythmical phrase in English, we must as it were translate quantity into stress; that is to say, English syllables of sufficient stress must be made to correspond with those Greek syllables (usually, though not always long) upon which the metrical beat falls. It is also necessary, so far as possible, to make English short syllables correspond with Greek short syllables, otherwise the structure of the verse might be obscured, and the movement become heavy and lumbering, as is the case with German hexameters. Owing however to the fact that there are fewer short or light syllables in English than in Greek, unsatisfactory compromises must often be made. I have moreover found it necessary to insert unemphatic short syllables to which there is no equivalent in the Greek. Sometimes again, when there might be some ambiguity as to the rhythm, I have taken the liberty of marking the metrical beat by accents placed over the syllables that should be made prominent.

The following passage from the Agamemnon (420–426) will illustrate the method I have used. Every bar should begin with a metrical beat; and the signs – and indicate the length and shortness of the Greek syllables. A long Greek syllable should be considered as twice the length of a short one, except where a long syllable occupies a whole bar, when it is equivalent to three shorts.

\[ \text{O-| neîrô-| phán-| toi dê| pet-| thêmôn-ës} \]
\[ \text{A-| non there| come| dream-re-vealed| semblan-ces,} \]
pær- eísi dór- aí phér- ou-
be-guiling shapes Brief the joy,
sái chár- in mā- talān.
vain the sweet de- lusion.

Mā- tán gār, ēut ān ēsthlā tis dōk- ōn hōr- ān.
For vainly, when he seems to view the phantom bliss,
pær- áll- āx- āsā dīā chér- ōn
be- tween his arms, lo! the vision is flown
bē- bākēn ōpsīs ou mēth- ūstēr- ōn
and vanish- es a- way without re- call
ptēr- oīs òp- ād- oīs hūp- noū kē- leũthoīs.
on shadowy wings down the paths of slumber.

It will be seen that in the fifth line I have inserted the extra light syllable "his"; and in the last line "on shadowy wings" does not exactly correspond with "pterois opad."

For technical reasons, which it would take too much space to explain, I have found it impossible to translate the anapaest passages in such a way that the English metre should always correspond exactly with the Greek. However a stage performance of portions of this translation by Cambridge undergraduates, in which two actors, representing the chorus, each took turns at speaking the anapaest, has convinced me that by intelligent recitation such lines can be made to sound well as an English metre.

It is not for me to say how far I have succeeded in translating these elaborate poetic forms into verse which can be read without difficulty by those who have no knowledge of the original. Greek lyrical poetry was intended to be sung, not to be spoken or read. The general design of a complex strophe, and the rhythmical phrases which composed it, were no doubt made easily comprehensible to the vocal setting, and by the accompaniment of dancing movements. Under those conditions, a more elaborately organised structure, and more daring changes of rhythm within the same strophe were possible than we are accus-
tomed to in our simpler lyrical forms, where the structure is generally delineated and emphasised by rhyme, rather than by complicated variations and changes of internal rhythm. Even where rhyme is dispensed with, as in the choruses of Samson Agonistes, the rhythm is far more uniform than in even the simplest Greek lyrical poems. For these reasons, an unaccustomed reader may well find it hard to accept, as natural and effective English verse, such adaptations of alien metrical forms. Yet I hope that the difficulty may not in all cases prove insurmountable. My own personal belief is that English poets might learn much by the study of Greek lyrical structure, and might so discover new and unexpected rhythmical possibilities in our language, that would prove of real practical value as a means of enlarging the range of poetic expression. However that may be, I shall feel that the success or failure of this experiment will depend upon the degree to which a reader who knows no Greek can feel that he is reading, a translation no doubt, but a translation into intelligible English metre and poetry.

The text of these plays has been so mangled and corrupted by ignorant copyists, that in many passages there can be no hope of certainty as to the true reading. The conjectural restorations of scholars are in general as divergent and unconvincing as are their interpretations of the numerous obscurities of language and sense. I have been compelled to form for myself the eclectic text which is here translated, but which the limited scale of this book makes it impossible to print opposite to the English, as I could have wished. However it is perhaps fortunate for me that my deficiencies of scholarship should be thus, in some degree, screened from expert criticism. I have ventured upon no emendations or interpretations of my own, but in each case have chosen what has seemed to me the most plausible among various conflicting views. But although I have thus made my translation as scholarly as I was able, it is primarily intended not for scholars or students,
but for those who cannot read Greek, and yet care for
great poetry.

I wish here to acknowledge the great debt I owe to
Mr. Austin Smyth for his kindness in allowing me to
use his unpublished notes on the Agamemnon and the
Choephoroi. I have adopted a considerable number
of his emendations and interpretations. In particular I
have accepted the whole of his bold reconstructions of
Choephoroi, lines 783-837 and 952-971, where the text
has been given up by most scholars as corrupt beyond
hope of emendation. In such cases no restoration can
be altogether convincing; but at least Mr. Smyth has
provided me with both sense and metre to translate, which
no other text does. I much regret that the scheme of the
book does not allow me to print his emendations, and
his ingeniously persuasive account of how he has arrived
at them.

The lines are numbered throughout in exact accordance
with A. Sidgwick's edition of Aeschylus in the Oxford
Classical Texts (Clarendon Press).

THE STORY

Atreus, the son of Pelops and King of Argos, banished
his brother Thyestes, who had seduced his wife and plotted
against his throne. Afterwards Atreus, pretending to be
reconciled with his brother, invited him to a feast at Argos,
and set before him the minced flesh of his two murdered
children. Thyestes ate; but soon discovering the decep-
tion, cursed the whole house of Atreus, and fled back to
exile. Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, succeeded his father
as King of Argos. During Agamemnon's absence on the ten
years' siege of Troy, Aigisthos, a surviving son of Thyestes,
seduced his wife Klytaemnestra, who had come to hate
her husband on account of his cruel sacrifice of their
daughter Iphigeneia at Aulis. When Agamemnon returned
from Troy she murdered him and his concubine, Kassandra,
with her own hands, and proclaimed Aigisthos as her husband and King of Argos. Eight years later Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Klytaemnestra, gaining entrance into the palace in the disguise of a merchant, slew his mother and the usurping Aigisthos. To this deed he had been impelled by the commands and threats of Apollo, the god of Delphi, at whose shrine he afterwards received ceremonial purification for blood-guiltiness. But the Erī nues, the avengers of kindred-murder, did not cease to hunt Orestes from land to land, until after long wanderings he came to Athens, and there sought protection at the sanctuary of Athena, who thereupon constituted the court of Areopagus, that his case might be tried by a jury of her citizens. The votes for acquittal and condemnation being equal, the goddess, rejecting the legal subtleties of the accusing Furies, gave her casting vote as president for the acquittal of Orestes, and at length, with much difficulty, conciliated the aggrieved Erī nues, persuading them to accept an abode in a cavern beneath the Acropolis, where they were thenceforth worshipped, under the changed name of the Eumenides, or Kindly Goddesses, as the friends and protectors of the Athenian people.
THE AGAMEMNON
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Agamemnon, King of Argos, son of Atreus.
Klytaemnestra, his wife.
Aigisthos, his cousin and enemy, paramour of Klytaemnestra.
Kassandra, daughter of Priam, King of Troy.
A Watchman.
A Herald.
Chorus of Twelve Argive Elders.
THE AGAMEMNON

Before the royal palace at Argos. On the roof a Watchman is seen outlined against a night sky.

WATCHMAN

The Gods have I besought for my release
This whole long year of vigil, wherein couched
On the Atreidae's roof on bent arms, dogwise,
I have learnt the nightly sessions of the stars,
Those chiefly that bring storm and heat to men,
The bright conspicuous dynasts of the sky,
And noted well their settings and their risings.
Still am I watching for the signal flame,
A beam of fire carrying news from Troy
And tidings of its capture: so dictates
A woman's sanguine heart to a man's will joined.
Now when upon my restless dew-damp couch
I have laid me down, this bed of mine where dreams
Haunt not—for fear instead of sleep stands by,
Alert lest sleep securely seal my lids—
Oft as I have a mind to sing or hum,
A tune in slumber's stead by way of salve,
Then do I weep the fortunes of this house
No more so wisely managed as of old.
But now blessed release from toil be mine,
And the fire's happy tidings shine through gloom.

His attention is drawn to something in the distance.

Oh hail, thou lamp of night, that dawnest clear
As daybreak, heralding in Argos many
A choral dance for joy at this good hap!
Ioû! Ioû!
Agamemnon's queen thus loudly do I summon
To arise from her couch and lift within
The house forthwith a shout of holy joy
To greet yon light, if verily Ilion's town
Be captured, as the announcing beacon boasts.
The dancing who should prelude if not I?
For mine too will I deem my lord's good luck,
Since sixes three this watch has thrown for me.
Well, soon may it be given me to clasp
Our returned master's friendly hand in mine.
For the rest I keep silence: on my tongue
A great ox treads: though, had it speech, this house
Might tell a plain tale. I, for folk who know,
Speak gladly: for know-nothings I forget.

Exit Watchman. Klytaemnestra's cry of triumph
is heard within. Enter Chorus of Elders.
During the following chorus the dawn gradually
breaks.

CHORUS
'Tis the tenth year now since Priam's mighty
Avenging foe,
Menelaos, and king Agamemnon too,
Twain children of Atreus dowered by Zeus
With stablished glory of sceptre and throne,
From the shores of Greece launched forth with a thousand
Argive crews
United in armed federation.
Loud rang their wrathful warcry forth,
As the scream of vultures robbed of their young,
When in mountain solitudes over their eyrie
They wheel and circle
With endless beating of oarlike wings,
Reft of the nestlings
Their watchful labour had tended.
But above there is one, be it Apollo,
Or Pan, or Zeus, who hearing the shrill
Sad cry of those birds, his suppliant wards,
Shall one day send
Retribution upon the offenders.
Thus Atreus' children against Alexander
A mightier Zeus, God of guest-right, sendeth,
That so, for a bride's sake wooed by many men,
Wrestlings as many and stubborn (when the knee
Is pressed down into the dust, and the spear
Is shivered and snapped as a prelude fit,)
Might fall to the portion of Danaan
And Trojan alike. Unsolved the event
Still waiteth: and yet to an issue is moving.
Neither by offerings burnt nor spilled,
Nor yet by fireless oblation of wealth
Shall the obdurate wrath be placated.
But we, with thews already outworn,
Left useless at home when the host set forth,
Linger supporting
Upon staves our strength that is weak as a child's.
For just as the youthful sap that swells
Warm in a boy's breast,
Is as feeble as eld and for war unfit,
So the age-worn man, now that his green leaf
Grows withered and sere, upon three slow feet
Creeps, with no whit more than a child's strength,
As he wanders a dream in the daylight.
But thou, O daughter
Of Tyndareus, Klytaemnestra, Queen,
What hath chanced? What tidings have reached thine ears,
That at every shrine
Thou commandest ritual oblations?
And of all those Gods that frequent our town,
From on high, from beneath,
Whether heavenly sublime, or of earthlier power,

1 Paris.
2 Greek.
Glowing with gifts are the altars,
And on all sides one by one bright flames
Skyward are leaping,
Medicined and nursed by the innocent spell
And soft persuasion of hallowed gums,
Rich unguent stored for a king’s use.
Hereof what can and may be revealed
Deign thou to declare,
And so be the healer of this my doubt,
Which now to an evil boding sinks,
But anon from the sacrifice Hope grown kind
Drives back from the soul those ravening thoughts,
That grief that gnaws at the heart-roots.

Strophe I

Still have I virtue to sing the auspicious sailing of heroes
Hardy in battle, (for still I inbreathe the enchantment
Which is the strength of song, Heaven’s gift to the aged,)
Telling how the twin-throned
Single-hearted chiefs of the youthful
Warriors of Hellas
Launched forth vengefully prompted and armed
For the Teucrian^ land by a glorious omen,
When the black king of the birds to the kings of the ships
was revealed, and beside him the white-tailed,
By the royal tents swooping to earth on the side of the
spear-arm,
In conspicuous quarters,
Rending the flesh of a hare and the young in the womb
of the mother,
That ne’er shall race and gambol more.
Wailfully, wailfully chant we; but may good triumph!

Antistrophe I

Then the wise seer,* regarding the valiant children of Atreus,
How they in temper were twain, in the chiefs of the host knew

^ Trojan.
* Kalchas.
Those hare-feasters: spake then, reading the omen:
"In time this armed fleet
Shall capture the fortress of Priam.
Under the ramparts
Herd by herd shall the wealth of the townsfolk
Dwindle a spoil fordoomed to the reivers.
Only let not the lowering wrath of a God foresmite the embattled avengers,
Troy's mighty curb; for grieving in ruth holy Artemis hateth
Those winged hounds of her father,
Thus immolating the brood yet unborn in the cowering creature.
Such feast of eagles she abhors.
Wailfully, wailfully chant we; but may good triumph!

Epode

Though thou, O Queen, tenderly guardest over the young brood,
Like dewdrops frail, even of ravening lions,
Yea and all suckling whelps of the beasts that roam through the wild wood,
Yet to these signs grant joyful achievement.
For help I cry unto the healer Paian,*
Lest she should hinder the Danaan fleet from its voyage, arousing
Stubborn adverse winds,
Urging a new sacrifice, an unwonted, an impious offering,
Seed of strife, and revolt from awe
Due to the husband. For haunting the home there abides a remorseless
Wrath that forgets not, a guileful vengeance schemed for a child slain."
Such was the chant of Kalchas announcing a prosperous omen

1 Artemis.  
2 Apollo.  
3 The sacrifice of Iphigeneia.
Unto the royal house from the flight of birds by the wayside,
Fortunate auguries not without flaw: wherewith in accordance
Wailfully, wailfully chant we; but may good triumph!

Zeus, whoso’er he be—if such the name
That delighteth most his ear,
Then will I invoke him so—
Naught may I conjecture else,
Pondering upon all things deep,
Save alone Zeus, if indeed from the burden of vain thought I would set my spirit free.

He, whoso’er he was, so great of yore,
Swollen with victory’s arrogance,
Even his name is now forgot.
He that next arose, hath found
His o’erthrower and is gone.¹
Only to Zeus ever chant we a paean of triumph;
So the event shall prove us wise:—

Zeus, who into wisdom’s way
Guideth mortals, stablishing
This decree: “By suffering, Truth.”
Woe’s aching memories before the mind
Ooze in sleep drop by drop:
So to men wisdom comes without their will.
How could human love be paid to violence
Deified and throned in awe?

So the elder of those twain
Chieftains of the Achaian fleet,
Loth to doubt a prophet’s skill,
Bowed low, ’neath the angry blasts of fate.
Thus when now, sore distressed,

¹ Alluding to outworn divinities, that were fabled to have preceded the rule of Zeus.
Lay the host weatherbound with dwindling store,
By the straits of Chalkis, where the shifting
Tides of Aulis suck the shore;

And when the while gales from Strymon,¹ bearing
Ill anchorage, idleness, starvation
To aimless men, and evermore wasting ships and tackle,
The slow time to half its length prolonging,
Had crushed down the flower of Greece, withering it away;
And when another cure,²
Heavier to the princes
Even than the cruel tempest,
Broke from the seer, urging the wrath
Of Artemis, yea, then on the ground
Smiting their staves, then the two kings
Wept, and unchecked the tears flowed:

And, finding voice, spake the elder king thus:  Ant. 4
“A grievous doom it were should I obey not,
And grievous should I slay my child, my proud home’s adornment,
With a maid’s life, spilt before the altar,
In red streams polluting so her own father’s hands.  210
Whate’er I choose, ’tis woe.
How can I fail my fleet now,
Faithless to our alliance?
Since with a fierce longing to crave
Such sacrifice, staying the winds
With blood of a maid, that were no sin
Surely. Oh might it end well!”

But once he had donned the harness of compulsion,
With veering mood impiously blowing
A gale unholy, unblest, he straight
Resigned his heart to utmost reckless outrage.
For men by wild, base-suggesting frenzy

¹ North winds.
² The sacrifice of Iphigeneia.
Infatuated, are soon steeled to ill deeds.
So he found heart to slay his own
Innocent child to aid a war
Waged for a stolen wife's sake,
A ritual to bless a fleet's voyage.

Ant. 5

Her prayers, appeals, pleading cries of "Father,"
Her girlish years, all were disregarded
By judges smitten with lust of war.
Then having prayed, the father bade the attendants,
As it were a kid, high above the altar
To lift her, as with her robes wrapped around her
She bowed down in agony,
Bade them restrain her lovely lips,
Sealing them up, (that no curse
Thence on his house should issue,)

Str. 6

By a cruel gag's silencing violence.
But shedding down to earth a saffron-stained robe,
She smote her slayers each in turn
Wounding them with piteous pleading eye-glance.
A painted form, as of one who fain would speak,
She seemed: for oft, where within
Her father's hall men were nobly feasting,
She sang with pure virgin voice,
Lovingly gracing so
The festal hour o'er the third libation
Poured by her loving father.

Ant. 6

The rest my eyes saw not, neither do I tell.
But Kalchas' art never lacks fulfilment.
As even-scaled Justice wills,
Those who suffer learn the truth. The future—
Though, ere it come, men may know it—let it be:
'Twere but to weep ere 'tis need.
'Twill be revealed clearly when the dawn breaks.
But now betide fair success,
Even as the moment needs,
And as desires yonder sole protecting
Shield of the land of Apia

Enter Klytaemnestra.

LEADER
I am come, Klytaemnestra, reverencing
Thy will; for it is just that we should honour
The sovereign’s wife, when the throne lacks its lord.
Now whether certified, or but in hope
Of happy news, thou makest sacrifice,
Fain would I know; yet shall not grudge thee silence.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
With happy tidings, so the proverb runs,
May the dawn issue from her mother night.
But hear now joy greater than any hope:
For the Argives have captured Priam’s town.

LEADER
How sayest thou? I scarce heard through unbelief.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
The Achaians now hold Troy. Do I speak plain?

LEADER
Joy overwhelms me, calling forth a tear.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Thine eye convicts thee of a loyal joy.

LEADER
But where’s thy warrant? Hast thou proof of this?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
I have. Why not? Unless a God deceives me.

LEADER
Dost thou respect a dream’s delusive phantoms?

1 Klytaemnestra. Apia is the Peloponnese.
KLYTAEMNESTRA
A drowsing mind’s fancy I should not heed.

LEADER
Hath some vague unwinged rumour cheered thy soul?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
My wits thou wouldst disparage like a girl’s.

LEADER
How long then is it since the town was sacked?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
This very night that gives birth to yon dawn.

LEADER
And what messenger could arrive so speedily?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Hephaistos, from Ida flinging the bright glare.
Then beacon hitherward with posting flame
Sped beacon; Ida first to Hermes’ rock
On Lemnos; from whose isle Athos, the peak
Of Zeus, was third to accept the mighty brand;
And lifted high to bridge the wide backed sea,
The pinewood, heaped to please the travelling torch,
Sustained the blaze gold-gleaming like a sun,
Passing it onward to Mākistos’ height.
He, tarrying naught, nor heedlessly by sleep
Subdued, neglected not his task as messenger;
But o’er Euripos’ streams arrived from far
His beacon’s glow signalled Messapios’ watch,
Who with an answering light passed on the sign,
Kindling a great stack of old withered heath.
Thence vigorously the light as yet undimmed
Leaping across Asopos’ plain, most like
A bright full moon, on to Kithairon’s crag,
Roused there a fresh relay of courier fire.
Nor did the watch deny the far-sped glow,

1 The Fire-god.
But raised into the skies a herald flame.
Then over lake Gorgopis the beam shot,
And having reached mount Aigiplanktos, there
Urged swift performance of the fiery rite.
Kindling they launch with generous energy
A mighty beard of flame which could o'erpass
The cliff that frowns o'er the Saronic gulf
Far flaring: then it alighted, then it reached
Arachne's sentinel peak, our city's neighbour.
And last here on the Atreidæ's roof comes home
This light, true-fathered heir of Ida's fire.
These are the stages of my torch-racers,
Thus in succession each from each fulfilled.
But he's the winner who ran from first to last.¹
Such is the proof and token that I give thee,
This message sped to me by my lord from Troy.

LEADER
Lady, the Gods hereafter would I praise.
But first would I fain satisfy my wonder
Hearing thy tale from point to point retold.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
This day do the Achaians possess Troy.
'Tis loud, I ween, with cries that blend not well.
Pour vinegar and oil in the same cruse,
And you would say they sundered without love.
Even so the cries of conquerors and captives
Sound distinct as their differing fortunes are.
These falling around the bodies of their husbands
And brothers slain, children it may be clasping
Gray-headed sires, from throats no longer free
Bewail the fate of those whom most they loved;
While these a weary night of roving sends
Hungry from battle to whatever fare
The town affords, not marshalled orderly,
Rather, as each has snatched his lot of luck,

¹ Hephaistos, the god who personifies fire.
Within the captured palaces of Troy  
They are housing now, delivered from the frosts  
And dews of the bare sky; and blessedly  
Without watch will they sleep the whole night long.  
Now, if they show due reverence to the Gods  
That guard the conquered land, and spare their shrines,  
Then may the spoilers not in turn be spoiled.  
But let no ill-timed lust assail the host  
Mastered by greed to plunder what they ought not.  
For they have need to win safe passage home  
Back o’er the last lap of their double course.  
And if the returning host escape Heaven’s wrath,  
Yet some day might the vengeance of the dead  
Prove wakeful, though no sudden ill befall.  
To such fears I, a woman, must give voice.  
Yet may good triumph manifestly past doubt;  
Of many blessings now would I taste this fruit.  

LEADER  
Lady, sober like a wise man’s is thy speech.  
Now, having heard proof so trustworthily from thee,  
I will address myself to thank the Gods.  
Their grace is recompense for all our toils.  

Exit Klytaemnestra.  

CHORUS  
O sovereign Zeus! O gracious Night,  
Who hast won so measureless a glory!  
Who over the towers of Troy didst cast  
Such a close-drawn net, that none of the great,  
Nor yet of the young should escape the immense  
Ensnaring mesh  
Of thraldom and doom universal.  
Zeus, God of guest-right, great I confess him,  
Who hath wrought this vengeance; against Alexander  
His bow did he hold long bent, that neither  

1 Paris.
Short of the mark his bolt should alight,
Nor beyond the stars speed idly.

From Zeús came the stroke that felled them: yea that
Is sure truth: clearly may we trace it.
As he determined, so they fared. The fool said,
"The Gods above heed not when the loveliness
Of sanctity is trampled down
By mortals." Oh blasphemy!
'Tis plain now and manifest
The wage paid now for reckless sin,
The doom due to insolent presumption,
Whene'er in kings' houses wealth superfluous
Beyond the mean teemeth. Yea, let there be
What contents without want
Soberly minded wisdom.

No strong fortress against fate
Hath that man who in wealth's pride
Spurns from sight as a thing of naught
The mighty altar of Justice.

Yet strong is that obstinate Temptation,
The dire child of fore-designing Ate.
Then all in vain is remedy: hidden
The mischief glows: baleful is the gleam thereof.
Like metal base, touched and rubbed
By a testing stone, even so
In him too trial reveals
A black stain. Like a child
A winged bird vainly he pursueth.
A dire taint lays he on all his people.
To prayers the Gods' ears are deaf. Whoso'er
Even consorts with such men,
Shares in their guilt and ruin.

¹ Infatuation that leads to sin and ruin.
Even so Paris, a house-guest
Honoured by the Atreidae,
Did foul wrong to his host's board
By his theft of a woman.

Bequeathing to her countrymen noise of shields
Together clashed, thronging spears, stir of vessels arming,
And bearing death instead of dower to Ilion,
With light step through the gates she is flown
On reckless venture. Sore the wailing then
Throughout the halls, doleful voices crying:
"Ah home of woe! Home and woeful princes, wail!
Ah woeful bed, printed yet with love's embrace!
Behold the spouse! Bowed with shame, there he sits apart
In silent unreviling grief.
For her beyond seas he yearns:
Pined with dreams sits he, a sceptred phantom.
Hateful now to his mood seems
The grace of loveliest statues.
Lost the light of her eyes, and lost
Now that love they enkindled.

Anon there come dream-revealed semblances,
Beguiling shapes. Brief the joy, vain the sweet delusion.
For vainly, when he seems to view the phantom bliss,
Between his arms, lo! the vision is flown
And vanishes away beyond recall
On shadowy wings down the paths of slumber."
Beside the hearth, within the royal palace, such
The grief that haunts, yea and woes transcending these.
But for the host, all who once launched from Hellas' shore,
Some woman now with suffering heart
In every house mourning sits.
Wounds enough pierce them to the soul's core.
Whom they sent to the war, them
They know: but now in the man's stead
Naught comes back to the home of each
Save an urn and some ashes.

The merchant Ares—dead men's bodies are his gold—
He whose scales weigh the poising fate of war,
From pyres beneath Ilion,
To those that loved them sendeth home
Heavy sore-lamented dust,
Stowing ash that once was man
Into the compass of a jar.
Then mourning each they tell his praise,
How one in craft of war was skilled,
How that one nobly shed his blood,—
"All for a woman, wife to another,"
So an angry whisper snarls forth;
And against the sons of Atreus
An accusing grief spreads.
Others under the wall, slain
In their beauty, possess graves
There 'neath Ilian earth, that now
Hides in hate her possessors.

A people's talk, charged with wrath, is perilous.
Oft 'tis proved potent as a public curse.
My boding heart waits to hear
Some news that night shroudeth still.
For on men of blood the Gods'
Eyes are fixed; and late or soon
Will the dark Erinues\(^1\) doom
The man who thrives unrighteously
To waste and dwindle luckless down,
Until his light be quenched: and once
Lost in the darkness, who shall help him?
In excess of glory is peril:
For on mortals overweening
Are the bolts of Zeus sped.

\(^1\) Furies.
Mine be fortune unenvied.
No walled towns would I conquer,
Nor yet live to behold my age
Slave to alien masters.

ELDER 1
The fire hath brought tidings glad;
And through the town swift report
Speeds: but hath it spoken true?
Who knoweth? 'Tis some miracle, or else 'tis false.

ELDER 2
Oh who could be so childish or so crazed of wit,
As from a flame's messaging
At once to catch fire at heart, and hazard so
Worse despair at altered news?

ELDER 3
'Tis like a woman's sanguine mood
To indulge belief, ere the fact be surely known.

ELDER 4
Feminine imaginings are plausible, and o'er the mind
Quickly domineer: but as quick to die
Is rumour oft, when 'tis voiced by woman's tongue.

LEADER
Soon shall we know of all these torch-bearings,
Watches and sequences of beacon fire,
If they be true, or as in flattering dreams
This glad light came but to beguile our sense.
Lo yonder from the shore a herald crowned
With sprays of olive: and the thirsty dust,
Sister and neighbour to the mire, assures me,
That not with voiceless signs, nor kindling flame
Of mountain timber, in smoke will he discourse,
But either in plain speech will bid rejoice—
Nay, the opposite I will not contemplate.
May glad assurance by glad truth be crowned.
Whoso against the state perverts this prayer, Himself let him reap the fruit of his own folly.

Enter a Herald.

Herald

O land of Argos, thou my native soil, To thee this tenth-born year do I return, Of many broken hopes still grasping one. Ne'er could I dream here in this Argive earth Dying to share that burial I so longed for. Now hail, my country, hail, light of the sun, And Zeus, the land's high lord, and Pytho's king.\(^1\)

At us his shafts never more shall he shoot:

Enough beside Skamander\(^2\) his wrath smote us. Now once more be our Saviour and our Healer, O king Apollo. And these assembled Gods All I invoke; him too, my patron Hermes, Herald beloved whom heralds reverence;

And the heroes who sent forth the host—now kindly May they receive back what the sword hath spared. O palace of our kings, beloved abode, Ye solemn seats, and ye, dawn-fronting Deities, If e'er of old, with radiant eyes this day Welcome with pomp our king so long time gone. For to you and to all these alike returns

Prince Agamemnon, bringing light in gloom. Come, ye must greet him joyfully, as beseems, Who with the mattock of Avenging Zeus

Hath digged down Troy and ploughed her soil to dust. Her altars and her temples are erased,

And the land's increase utterly destroyed. Having laid on Troy so fell a yoke, the elder Of Atreus' children, fortunate among princes,

Returns, of all men living worthiest praise. For neither Paris nor his accomplice city

\(^1\) Apollo. \(^2\) A river of Troy.
Can boast their crime exceeds its punishment.
Cast in a suit of theft and rapine too,
He hath lost the forfeit, and in one great ruin
Hath razed his father's house and the whole land.
Thus twofold cost the sons of Priam have paid.

LEADER
Joy to thee, herald of the Achaian host!

HERALD
Joy is mine. If the Gods will, let death come now.

LEADER
Hath longing for thy fatherland so tortured thee?

HERALD
So that for joy mine eyes weep tears upon it.

LEADER
Sweet then was the disease with which you languished.

HERALD
How so? Not yet do I understand your words.

LEADER
Not unreturned was this thy yearning love.

HERALD
Our country pined then for its pining host?

LEADER
Full oft with desolate heart we sighed for you.

HERALD
Whence came this gloom, clouding the host's return?

LEADER
Silence I have long used, as harm's best cure.

HERALD
How so? The kings being gone, didst thou fear someone?

LEADER
As thou didst say but now, it were joy to die.
HERALD
Because the event is well: though in all those years
Much may we reckon prosperously 'sped,
And much deplorably. Who save a God
May abide scathless everlastingly?
Were I to cite our hardships and ill-lodgings,
Comfortless berths on narrow decks—and what
Did we not lack by day, poor groaning wretches?
And then on land—there it was worse distress,
Bivouacked close beneath the enemy's walls.
Down from the sky, and from the fenny ground
Rained drizzling dews, a never-ceasing plague,
Making our hairy garments full of vermin.
Or should I tell of that bird-killing cold,
Unbearable winter gusts from Ida's snows,
Or of the heat, when in his noontide couch
Windless and waveless the sea sank to rest—
But what need to complain? Past is that misery:
Past is it for the dead, that nevermore
Will they take trouble even to rise again.
Why reckon up the number of the lost,
While the living grieve at fate's malignity?
Full release from ill fortune I deem best.
For us, the relics of the Argive host,
The gain prevails, the injury is outweighed;
Since yon bright blazoning sun o'er lands and seas
May wing the publication of our glory:
"Once did a fleet of Argives capture Troy.
To the Gods these spoils did they nail up on all
The shrines of Hellas, a monument of pride."
Men hearing this must praise our city and those
Who led her host, and thank the grace of Zeus
That worked this glory. There is no more to tell.

LEADER
Cheerfully I accept defeat in argument.
Old age is always young enough to learn.
But the house and Klytaemnestra this news most
Should interest, and make me too rich in joy.

Re-enter Klytaemnestra.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
I lifted up a jubilant cry long since,
When first by night came that fire-messenger
Telling of Ilion's capture and destruction.
And some rebuked me, saying: "So by beacons
Art thou persuaded that Troy now is sacked?
How like a woman's heart to soar so lightly!"
On such grounds was I proved to be deluded,
Yet did I sacrifice: and in womanish strains
Glad hymns of thankfulness throughout the town
The people lifted up in every shrine,
Where with heaped spice they nursed the fragrant flame.
But thou, why tell the full tale now to me?
Soon from the king's self shall I learn it all.
Rather, that I may best make speed to welcome
My revered husband to his home, (for what
More sweet to a wife's eyes than that day's light,
When to her spouse, whom heaven has saved from war,
She unbars the gate?) this to my lord declare:
Let him speed hither to meet his people's love;
And at home may he find a faithful wife,
Even such as he left her, a house-dog kind
To him she loves, to ill-wishers a foe,
And in all else unchanged, ne'er having yet
Broken one seal in all that length of time.
No more of dalliance (no, nor of scandal's breath)
With another man do I know, than of dipping bronze.

Exit Klytaemnestra.

AN ELDER
Big is the boast, yet weighted well with truth,
Nor unseemly for a noble wife to utter.
LEADER
Thus to thine understanding hath she spoken,
Most speciously to shrewd interpreters.
But tell me, herald, what of Menelaos?
Tell me but whether he is returning with you
Safe to his home, our land's beloved prince.

HERALD
I know not how to make a false tale fair
For friends to garner gladness from it long.

LEADER
Ah, couldst thou tell a tale both true and good!
When truth conflicts with good, words cannot hide it.

HERALD
The prince is vanished from the Achaian host,
Himself and his ship too. That is the truth.

LEADER
Did he put forth from Ilion in full sight,
Or snatched from the host by storms afflicting all?

HERALD
Like a skilled Bowman thou hast hit the mark,
And in brief phrase compressed a length of woe.

LEADER
But of himself, how, as alive or dead,
Did rumour speak among the other crews?

HERALD
That with sure knowledge may no man declare,
Save the Sun who fosters life through all the earth.

LEADER
Relate how rose this storm and how it ended,
Sent thus upon our fleet by angry powers.

HERALD
A day of joy no tongue of evil tidings
Should desecrate. Such rites offend the Gods.
When a gloom-visaged messenger brings home
The tragic tale of an army's overthrow,
One public wound dealt to the commonwealth,
And many a victim doomed from many a home
By the double-pointed weapon Ares wields,
That two-pronged horror, each fork red with gore,
If he be laden with such a pack of woes,
Well may he chant a hymn to the Avengers.
But coming with fair tidings of success
To a town rejoicing in prosperity,
How should I mingle good with ill, this tale
Of shipwreck, odious to the Achaian Gods?

A covenant did those erst most deadly foes,
Fire and sea, conclude, and proved their bond
Destroying the unhappy Argive host.
In the night fierce swelling waves rose grimly threatening,
And ship against ship by the Thracian blasts
Was dashed, till butting violently together
In hurricane storm and beating rain and spray,
They vanished, lashed by that wild shepherd's whirl.
But when the bright light of the sun shone forth,
We saw the Aegaean sea besflowered with corpses
Of drowned Achaian men and shattered ships.

We and our vessel, a hull yet unscathed,
Were stolen away or begged off by some God,
(No mortal was it) governing our helm.
But saviour Fortune deigned to ride the ship,
That neither in the roads should the surf swamp us,
Nor should we strike upon a rock-bound shore.
Thereafter, having scaped a watery death,
Beneath white dawn, scarce sure of our good hap,
We brooded darkly on the strange disaster
Befallen our fleet, so sorely bruised and broken.

And now, if any of them yet lives and breathes,
They speak of us as perished, like enough,
While we for them imagine the same fate.
Befall the best that may. For Menelaos, Let it be first presumed he will return. At worst, if any sun-ray now be finding him Alive and hale, then is there hope that Zeus, Who scarce can wish to exterminate his race, May contrive means to bring him safely home. Thus much may I relate as surely true.

Exit Herald.

CHORUS
Who was he that gave the name, Found so marvellously true? Was it some mysterious Power, One inspired By prophetic glimpse of fate Thus to guide aright his tongue, Naming the bride of spear and strife Helen? Alas a very Helen, When a Hell to hero and ship and town From those delicate curtains Of her costly bower she sailed forth, By the ruffian Zephyr wafted, And behind her sped a swarm of shielded hunters On the vanished trail of oar-blades, Towards green Simoïs’ ¹ wooded shores, Soon now to be stript bare By the avenging blood-feud.

Thus to Troy a fatal bride Came she, by vindictive Wrath Unrelentingly pursued—Wrath that bides, Till for board and hearth, in scorn Of Zeus dishonoured, it may wreak Vengeance upon those insolent Honourers of the bridal anthem, Merry groomsmen chanting a joyous song Without thought for the morrow.

¹ A river of Troy.
For an altered song the years teach  
To the ancient town of Priam,  
And in long fierce lamentation she revileth  
Paris, him, the mate of Ruin.  
Yea, consumed with lamenting sighs  
All her days for her children's  
Piteous slaughter she mourneth.

A lion's whelp from its mother's breast  
Still unweaned did a herdsman once  
Feed and rear in his household.  
First in its infancy gentle  
And tame with the children it gambolled:  
Gravity's self was enchanted.  
Many a morsel would it win  
Prettily, like a babe in arms,  
Bright-eyed gazing upon the hand,  
Taught to fawn by its belly.

But time passed, and at length it showed  
The mood it had from its sire; for now,  
Paying thanks for its nurture,  
Grimly it leapt on the sheepfold,  
Snatching a feast uninvited:  
Dabbled with blood was the homestead.  
Panic and anguish seized the hinds  
Watching the slaughterous havoc spread.  
Sent by Heaven to that house it seemed,  
A priest of doom and disaster.

No less, I ween, unto the town of Ilion  
There came first a seeming calm, windless and seductive,  
A proud pearl, languid wealth's adornment,  
Glances with gentlest arrows armed,  
Love that flowers to the heart's soft anguish.  
But a change came, and a sour end  
To the bliss the bride had promised;
For an ill neighbour, an ill guest
To the sons of Priam came she,
Thither sped by Zeus, God of guests,
A bride of wailing, a vampire.

A proverb old, framed by ancient wisdom, saith
That a man’s fortune, once ’tis grown to highest pitch of greatness,
Engendering, dies not childless ever;
For from the womb of prosperous hours
Unappeasable sorrow issueth.
But with such doctrine I hold not.
’Tis the deed of sin begetteth
In its own likeness a sequent
Generation of disaster.
None, save the house of the just,
Is ever blest in its children.

But ’tis the wont of Insolence, past and gone, to bring to birth
Soon or late in evil men
A youthful Insolence, when the appointed time is come,
A gloom-enwrapped
Demon of revenge, terrible, invincible,
Wicked and reckless Arrogance,
Dooming the house, a black curse
Like to the sin that spawned it.

But Justice shines even beneath lowly roofs, smoke-begrimed,
Honouring the righteous man;
And gold-bespangled palaces, where the hands are foul,
With averted eyes
Abandoning she seeks fellowship with Innocence
Flattering not the might of wealth,
False coin stamped with men’s praise.
All to an end she guideth.
A triumphal march. Enter Agamemnon, in a chariot, followed by Cassandra in a wagon piled with the spoils of Troy.

LEADER

Come now, O king, despoiler of Troy,
Offspring of Atreus!
How shall I hail thee? How pay thee homage,
Neither o’ershooting, nor yet scanting
Due gratulation?
For most men practising outward shows
Hide thoughts perverse and unrighteous.
Sighs prompt and apt for another’s mischance
Each hath in plenty; yet ne’er doth an unfeigned
Sting of anguish pierce to the heart-strings:
And copying the looks of those that rejoice
They compel their lips to a counterfeit smile.
Yet should the wisely discerning shepherd
Ne’er be deceived by the eyes of fawners,
That dissembling a loyal and cordial love
Flatter him with watery affection.
And of old, when thou wast levying war
For Helen’s sake, then, I deny not,
Graceless indeed was the image I formed of thee;
Ill-steered did thy wits seem, thus to be spending
The life-blood of heroes
To redeem a consenting adultress.
But now we greet thee with heart-deep love.
Happy endings make happy labours.
Thou by inquisition erelong shalt learn
Whose stewardship of thy state is now
Proved faithful, and whose unfaithful.

AGAMEMNON

First to Argos and her native Gods my prayers
Are due, since they have aided my return,
And the justice I have wreaked upon the town
Of Priam. For the Gods, when they had heard
Our voiceless plea, into the vase of blood
For Ilion’s overthrowing cast their votes
With one consent; while to the opposite urn
Hope of the hand came nigh, yet filled it not.
Her smoke still witnesseth the city’s fall.
The coils of doom yet live, and dying with them
The ashes pant forth opulent breaths of richness.
For this a memorable return we now
Must pay the Gods, since we have woven high
Our wrathful toils, and for one woman stolen
A town has been laid low by the Argive monster,
The horse’s brood, the grim shield-bearing folk,
Rousing to spring what time the Pleiads set.
Yea leaping o’er the wall like a fished lion
It lapped its fill of proud and princely blood.
This ample prelude to the Gods is due.
Now for thy hinting—I heard and bear in mind.
I say the same, and share in thy suspicions.
Few are there to whom ’tis natural to admire
And love the fortunate without envying.
The spiteful poison settling to the heart
Doubles the burden of distempered thought.
At once by his own griefs is he weighed down,
And groans at sight of others’ happiness.
I speak with knowledge, having throughly learned
How friendship is a mirror, a shadow’s ghost,
The hypocrite’s pretence to wish me well.
Odysseus only, who sailed against his will,
Once in the traces, pulled beside me loyally.
Though whether he be living now or dead
I know not. For the rest, of policy
And of religion, in general council met,
We will debate together. What is well,
We must consult how to maintain it so;
But where we find need of medicinal cure,
By wise use of the knife or cautery
We will endeavour to expel disease.
Now to my palace and domestic hearth
I pass within, there first to greet the Gods,
Who sent me forth and thus have brought me home.
May victory still bide with me to the end.

Klytaemnestra has entered during Agamemnon's last words.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Townsmen of Argos, reverend counsellors,
I blush not to confess to you my love
And woman's fondness. As years pass, timidity
Wanes in us all. No witness but my own
I need to tell what grievous life was mine
All that long while my lord lay beneath Ilion.
First for a woman 'tis a woeful trial
To sit at home forlorn, her husband far,
Her ears filled ever with persistent tales,
One close upon the other's heels with news
Each of some worse disaster than the last.
And as for wounds, if my lord had received
As many as rumour deluged us withal,
No net had been more full of holes than he.
And had he died oft as report declared,
A second Geryon with triple body
A threefold vest of earth he might have boasted,
Dying once for each several shape anew.
By reason of such persistent rumours, oft
Have others loosened from my neck perforce
The hanging noose, foiling my fond desire.
Hence too the boy Orestes, the true bond
Of confidence between us, stands not here
Beside me, as he should. Nor think it strange.
He is in safe keeping with our good ally,
Strophios the Phokian, who has warned me oft
Of double mischief, thine own peril first
Before Troy, and the fear lest turbulent anarchy
Might risk some plot against us, as men's wont
Is to spurn him the more who has been cast down.
Such were my reasons, honest and without guile.
But as for me, the fountains of my tears
Have run themselves quite dry. No drop is left.
And my late-watching eyes have suffered hurt
Weeping thy nightly pomp of torch-bearers
Neglected ever. And the wailing gnat
With faintest pulse of wing would startle me
From dreams wherein I saw thee pass through more
Than could befall within the time I slept.
Now after all these trials, with heart unpined,
I hail my husband watch-dog of the fold;
The ship's securing stay, the lofty roof's
Firm-grounded pillar, the father's sole-born child
Or as land espied by seamen beyond hope,
Daylight as it looks fairest after storm,
A fresh spring to the thirsty wayfarer.
Ah, sweet is all deliverance from distress!
Such are the terms I choose to praise him fitly.
Let envy keep afar, since woes in plenty
We endured before. Now, most dear lord, descend
From yonder car; but set not upon earth
That foot, O king, wherewith thou hast trampled Troy.
Women, delay not. Know ye not your task?
Strew ye the path he treads with tapestries.
Straight let his way be carpeted with purple,
That Justice lead him to a home scarce hoped for.
For the rest a never-slumbering vigilance
Shall order justly as fate, I trust, intends.

AGAMEMNON
Offspring of Leda, guardian of my home,
Lengthily, to the measure of my absence,
Hast thou stretched out thy speech: but seemly praise,
Such tribute should proceed from other lips.
Moreover shame not me with womanish fopperies,
Nor grovel before me with loud-mouthed clamour,
As though I were some oriental king;
Nor with strown garments make my steps the gaze
Of envy. To the Gods such pomp belongs.
To tread, a mortal, over broidered fineries,
That to my conscience were a thing of fear.
As man, not God, I bid you reverence me.
No need of foot-cloths and embroideries:
Fame’s voice rings loud enough. Heaven’s greatest gift
Is a sane mind. Happy let him be called
Whose life has ended in felicity.
Acting in all things thus, naught need I fear.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Come now, if judgment sanction, tell me this—

AGAMEMNON
My judgment, be assured, I shall not change.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Would you in peril’s hour have vowed this ritual?

AGAMEMNON
Yes, had advised authority prescribed it.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
What think you Priam had done, were his this triumph?

AGAMEMNON
On broidered robes he doubtless would have trod.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Then let not human censure make thee ashamed.

AGAMEMNON
Yet mighty is the people’s murmuring voice.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Who stirs no jealousy, neither is he envied.

AGAMEMNON
’Tis not a woman’s part to thirst for strife.
KLYTAEMNESTRA
The fortunate may yield victory with grace.

AGAMEMNON
Dost thou too deem this victory worth a contest?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Yield; victor still, since vanquished willingly.

AGAMEMNON
Well, if it please thee, quick, let one unloose
My shoes, these insolent slaves beneath my feet;
Lest, as with these I walk the sacred purples;
Some evil glance should strike me from afar.
'Tis shame enough to waste our wealth by trampling
And spoiling silver-purchased tapestries.
Of that enough. This stranger damsel now
Receive with kindness. A gentle master wins
Approving glances from God's distant eye.
None willingly endures the yoke of thraldom:
And she, the chosen flower of our rich spoil,
The army's gift, hath followed in my train.
Since then I am reduced herein to obey thee,
To the palace will I go trampling on purples.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
There is a sea, (and who shall drain it dry?)
Breeding abundant purple, costly as silver,
Forever oozing fresh to dip robes in.
And of such, Heaven be thanked, good store, my king,
Is ours. This house knows naught of penury.
Full many a robe for trampling had I vowed,
Had the oracles enjoined it, when I sought
Some means to ransom home so dear a life.
Thou art the living root whence springs the foliage
That screens our house against the dog-star's glare.
So thou returning to thy home and hearth
Betokenest warmth in winter's midst returned.
And when Zeus from the unripe grape's virginity
Matures wine, then like coolness in the house
Is the advent of the crowned and perfect lord.

(As Agamemnon goes in)

Zeus, Zeus, who crownest all, crown now my prayers!
Thereafter as thou wilt mayst thou dispose.

Exit Klytaemnestra into the palace.

CHORUS
Wherefore obstinately thus
Round my evil-boding heart
Hovereth still this haunting breath of terror?
Wherefore this chant uninvited of ominous presage?
Can I not spit it from me far
Like an unexplained dream,
So to reach firm assurance,
The mind's contented throne?
For long the time
Since furrowing down the sandy shore,
Hauled astern, came the chafed
Hawsers, when the warrior crews
Sailed to sack the towers of Troy.

And to-day mine eyes have joy
Witnessing their safe return.
None the less my soul within me unbidden
Droneth a dirge without lyre as of doom and disaster.
Fair assurance of good hope
Never thoroughly may it know.
Not for naught my inward boding.
In eddies of tempestuous fear my heart
Beats on my truth-presaging breast.
Yet, I pray, Heaven belie
My thought's dread expectancy:
Let it perish unfulfilled.

Verily Health, grown over-great, may not abide
Within narrow bounds. But a thin wall stays

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Its neighbour Disease from encroaching.
So may the ship of a man’s
Prosperous fate unawares
Strike on a reef of unseen disaster.
Yet if timely Caution fling
Overboard excess of wealth
Jettisoned from Measure’s sling,
Then the house with baleful store
Overladen shall not sink,
Foundering like a ship in storm.
Rich and plentiful still are the bounties of Zeus:
Ever yearly from furrow and garner
Famine’s plague they drive afar.

But to the earth let but the blood, red from the heart
Of a man, be spilt, and who then shall have might
To recall it with hymns of enchantment?
Once there was one who had skill
To raise from the dead: but his zeal
Zeus in his jealousy checked and slew him.
Were it not that Heaven-ordained
Fate with fate conflicting oft
Either so the other curbs,
Ere my tongue could speak, my heart
Had discharged its boding thought:
But now muttering in the gloom,
Anguished, smouldering darkly it broods, without hope,
While as yet there is time, to unravel
The tangled mysteries of doom.

Re-enter Klytaemnestra.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Thou too, get thee within, Kassandra, thou.
Since Zeus in mercy hath brought thee to a house
Where by the household altar thou mayst share
The lustral water mid the crowd of slaves,

1 Asklepios, who restored Hippolytos to life.
Descend from yon wain: be not overproud.
Alkmena's son himself, they say, was sold
And endured bondage, spite of the slave's coarse fare.
If by ill hap such fate must needs be yours,
Masters of ancient wealth are luck indeed.
Those who have heaped rich piles of wealth unhoped for,
Are ever brutal and overstrict with slaves.
From us thou shalt receive what custom bids.

LEADER
To thee she speaks, plain words, and pauses for thee.
Snared as thou art within the toils of fate,
If so thou canst, yield; or perchance thou canst not.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Nay, unless her speech be like a twittering swallow's,
Some barbarous, unintelligible tongue,
She will understand my reasoning and obey.

AN ELDER
Go with her. As things stand, she counsels best.
Come, be persuaded: quit thy wagon throne.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
I have no leisure to stand trifling here
Outside, when round the central hearth already
The victims wait the sacrifice of fire,
Thank-offerings for this unexpected joy.
So if thou wouldst take part make no delay:
Or if my words thou canst not understand,
Instead of speech signal with foreign hand.

AN ELDER
Methinks 'tis an interpreter she needs.
Her mien is like some wild new-taken creature's.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Yes, she is mad, swayed by some vicious mood.

1 Herakles, who was once sold as a slave to Omphale, queen of Lydia.
Hither a captive from a new-taken city
She comes, yet cannot learn to endure the bit
Till she has foamed away her rage in blood.
No more will I waste words to be so scorned.

*Exit Klytaemnestra.*

**LEADER**
And I, for I feel pity, will not chide.
Poor wretch, come, leave thy wagon and descend.
Yield to necessity and accept the yoke.

**KASSANDRA**
Ototototoi! O Earth! Earth!
O Apollo! O Apollo!

**ELDER 1**
Why upon Loxias callest thou thus woefully?
He is not one who needeth dirgelike litanies.

**KASSANDRA**
Ototototoi! O Earth! Earth!
O Apollo! O Apollo!

**ELDER 2**
Once more with ill-omened cries she calls that God
Whose ears by lamentations are profaned.

**KASSANDRA**
Apollo! Apollo!
God of Ways, Apollo! indeed to me!
For me thou hast this second time in truth destroyed.

**ELDER 3**
Of her own woes it seems that she will prophesy.
Heaven still inspires her mind, a slave's though it be.

**KASSANDRA**
Apollo! Apollo!

1 There is a play on words here. The name "Apollōn" suggests "apolluōn," *destroying.*
God of Ways, Apollo indeed to me!
Ah whither hast thou led me? yea, to what abode?

ELDER 4
The Atreidae's palace. If thou knowest not that,
Take my assurance: thou shalt not find it false. 1089

KASSANDRA
Nay, 'tis abhorred of Heaven: much is it privy to, Str. 3
Unnatural murders and butcheries:
A human shambles: sprinkled are the floors with blood.

ELDER 5
Keen as a hound upon the scent she seems.
This trail shall lead her soon where murder lies.

KASSANDRA
There are the witnesses—there am I certified! Ant. 3
Babes yonder bewailing their sacrifice!
Wailing their flesh by a father roasted and devoured!

ELDER 6
We were acquainted with thy mantic fame;
But of these things we seek no prophet here.

KASSANDRA
Alas! Ye Gods! What is she purposing? Str. 4
What is this new and monstrous deed,
This deed of woe she purposes within this house,
Beyond love's enduring,
Beyond cure? and aloof stands
Succouring strength afar.

ELDER 7
I know not what these prophesyings mean.
The first I guessed: with them the whole city is loud.

KASSANDRA
Oh cruel, cruel! Verily wilt thou so? Ant. 4
Him who hath shared thy nuptial bed,
When thou hast laved and cleansed him—how shall I tell the end?
Apace, see, the deed nears!
With a swift reach she shoots forth
Murderous hand upon hand.

ELDER 8
Not yet do I understand. Dark riddles first,
Dim-visioned oracles perplex me now.

KASSANDRA
Ey! Ey! Papai, papai! What is this now I see? Str. 5
Some net of death ’tis surely?
But she’s the snare, who shared the bed, who shares the crime
Of blood. Let Strife, ravening against the race,
Utter a jubilant cry
O’er the abhorred sacrifice.

ELDER 9
What fiend is this thou bidst lift o’er the house
A cry of triumph? Thy words bring me no cheer.
Back to my heart the drops, yellow and pale, have run,
As when o’er the face of one fallen in fight
Pallor of death is spread
Timed with life’s sinking rays;
And the end neareth swift.

KASSANDRA
Ant. 5
Ah! Ah! Beware, beware! From his accursèd mate
Keep far the bull. In vestments
She entangles him, and with her black and crafty horn
Gores him. He falls into the cauldron’s steam.
Treacherous murdering bath,
Thus thy dark story is told.

ELDER 10
I cannot boast to be a skilful judge
Of oracles; but ’tis woe I spell from these.
When from a prophet's mouth ever to mortal ears
Have good tidings sped? 'Tis naught else but woe
Volubly chanted forth,
Teaching fear, fear alone,
In skilled monotone.

KASSANDRA
Alas, alas! What hapless, sorrowful doom is mine!
For of my own sad fate, mingled with his, I tell.
Ah whither hast thou brought me now, the hapless one?
For naught save only to share death with thee? What else?

CHORUS
Frenzied and heaven-possessed, ever thine own despair
In wild, lawless strains
Thou art uttering, even as doth, heart-sore,
Never with wailing satiate,
Some brown nightingale.
Ityn, Ityn she sighs, mourning in anguish all
Her woe-plenished life.¹

KASSANDRA
Alas, alas! The doom of the musical nightingale! Ant. 6
For with a winged and soft-featherèd form the Gods
Arrayed her, a gentle suffering a tearless change.
But me awaits the cleaving of a two-edged blade.

CHORUS
Agony fierce and vain, passionate mantic throes,
Oh whence hast thou these,
Such a terrible chant in wild harsh cries
Fashioning forth, yet clear-voiced
In loud, rhythmic strains?
What may it be that thus guides and inspires thy word
On its ill-boding path?

KASSANDRA
Alas, the rape, the rape of Paris, a ruin for all

¹ Philomela, the jealous wife of King Tereus, slew their son Itys, and was changed into a nightingale.
His kin! Alas, Skamander, stream of my fatherland!
Was it not there that once, there on thy banks, alas,
Tenderly I was reared?
But now beside Kokytos¹ and the wailful shores
Of Acheron ¹ my prophet song will soon be sung.

CHORUS
What is this saying of thine, this presage all too plain?
A child could listen and understand.
My heart smitten bleeds, as with a deadly wound,
At woe’s shrill lament, misery’s passionate wail,
Shattering the heart to hear.

KASSANDRA
Alas, the toils, the toils of Ilion utterly thus
Destroyed! Alas, my sire’s prodigal offerings,
Many a grazing herd slain for her walls! Yet naught
Served they at all to save
The city from enduring what it now endures.
And I no less must soon draw near my misery’s bourne.

CHORUS
Still as at first thy lips presage of woe renew,
As though some tyrannous overmastering
Power maddened thee melodiously to sing
Of doom’s swift approach, lamentable shadows of death.
Dark is the end to me.

KASSANDRA
Lo now my oracle no more through a veil
Shall look forth dimly, like a bride new-wed;
But clear and strong towards the rising sun
Shall it come blowing, and before it roll
Wave-like against the light a woe than this
More huge. No longer in riddles will I monish you.
Come, follow and bear me witness, while I scent
The traces out of deeds done long ago.
This house is ever haunted by a quire

¹ Rivers of Hell.
Of hideous concord, for the song is foul.
Lo, drunken with human blood till they wax bold
And insolent, they abide within, a rout,
Hard to expel, of revelling kindred fiends.
They infest the chamber-doors chanting their chant
Of that first sin: anon they execrate
The abhorred defiler of a brother's bed,¹
Say, have I missed, or was my shaft aimed home?
Or am I a false seer, a prating vagabond?
Bear witness with an oath that well I know
The ancient tale of the sins of this house.

LEADER
How should an oath, though ne'er so truly plighted,
Bring remedy? But I much admire that thou,
Though bred beyond the sea, shouldst speak as certainly
Of a strange land as though thou hadst sojourned there.

KASSANDRA
The seer Apollo endowed me with this skill.

LEADER
Smitten with love perchance, God though he be?

KASSANDRA
Hitherto shame forbade me to confess it.

LEADER
Yes, we are all more delicate in prosperity.

KASSANDRA
Vehement and mighty was the love he breathed.

LEADER
And in due course came you to child-bearing?

KASSANDRA
I gave consent, then kept not faith with Loxias.

LEADER
Already wast thou possessed by power of prophecy?

¹ Thyestes.
KASSANDRA
Already Troy’s whole agony I foretold.

LEADER
How then! Couldst thou escape the wrath of Loxias?

KASSANDRA
None would believe my words; so was I punished.

LEADER
Yet to us thy words seem worthy of belief.

KASSANDRA
Ioû! Ioû! Oh agony! Again dire pangs of clear vision whirl
And rack my soul with awful preludings.
Behold them there, sitting before the house,
Young children, like to phantom shapes in dream!
Boys slain by their own kindred they appear.
Their hands are filled with flesh, yea ’tis their own.
The heart, the inward parts, see, they are holding,
(Oh piteous burden,) whereof their father tasted.
For this, I tell you, vengeance is devised
By a recreant lion ¹ who lurking in the bed
Keeps watch, ah me! for the returning lord;
My lord; for the slave’s yoke I must endure.
The fleet’s high captain, Ilion’s ravager,
He knows not what the abhorred she-hound’s tongue
After long-drawn fawning welcome—what accurst
Treacherous stroke she aims with deadly stealth.
O wickedness horrible! Of her lord the wife
Is murderess. By what loathsome monster’s name
Should I describe her fitly? An amphisbaena? ²
Or some cliff-lairing Skylla, ³ bane of mariners,
A raging demon mother, breathing havoc
Against her dearest? And how she cried in triumph,
The all-shameless fiend, as when a battle breaks,
Feigning to glory in his safe return!

¹ Aigisthos.
² Mythical monsters.
Herein though I gain no credence, 'tis all one. What must be, shall be; and thou beholding soon Shalt call me in pity a prophet all too true.

LEADER
Thyestes' banquet of his own children's flesh Shuddering I understood. Yea horror seized me Hearing the true tale without fabling told. But in all else I wander far astray.

KASSANDRA
Agamemnon's death I say thou shalt behold.

LEADER
Peace, wretched woman! Hush thy ill-omened lips.

KASSANDRA
This word no Healing God can remedy.

LEADER
Not if it must be so: but Heaven avert it!

KASSANDRA
While thou prayest, the slayers are making ready.

LEADER
What man is the contriver of this woe?

KASSANDRA
Wide indeed of my warning must thou have looked.

LEADER
For I perceive not how the deed is possible.

KASSANDRA
See now, I know the Greek tongue all too well.

LEADER
So doth the Pythoness: yet her words are dark.

KASSANDRA
Papai! What is this fire! It surges upon me.

1 Apollo's Delphian priestess.
Ototoi! Lykēan Apollo! Ay me, me!
Yonder two-footed lioness, who shares
The wolf's couch, while the noble lion is far,
Shall slay me, hapless woman. A vengeful charm
She is brewing, and therein will mix my recompense.
Sharpening her man-slaying sword, she vows
Bloodily to repay my bringing hither.
Why then to my own derision bear I these—
This wand, these mantic fillets round my neck?
Thee at least, ere I perish, will I destroy.
Down to the ground I cast you, and thus requite you.
Enrich some other, as ye did me, with doom.

She descends from the wagon.

But lo, Apollo, whose own hands put on me
My prophet's robe, now the spectacle grows stale
Of his victim in these vestments laughed to scorn
By friends and foes alike, and all in vain—
And like a vagabond mountebank such names
As beggar, wretch or starveling I endured—
And now this seer, being finished with my seership,
Has brought me to be murdered in this place,
Where awaiteth me no altar of my home,
But a block whereon the last blood yet is warm.
Yet not forgotten of Heaven shall we die.
There shall come one to vindicate us, born
To slay his mother and avenge his sire.
A wandering homeless outlaw shall he return
To cope the fabric of ancestral sin.
For with a mighty oath the Gods have sworn,
His father's outstretched corpse shall draw him home.
Why then do I stand thus wailing piteously?
Since I saw first the city of Ilion
Faring as it has fared, while they who conquered it
By the just Gods are brought to such an end,
I will meet my fate: I will endure to die.
These gates, as they were Hades' gates, I hail
And that the stroke be mortal is my prayer:
So swiftly and easily shall my blood gush forth,
And without struggle shall I close my eyes.

*She moves slowly towards the doors.*

**LEADER**

Woman, so hapless, yet withal so wise,
Long hast thou held us listening; yet if verily
Thou knowest thine own doom, how, as some heaven-led
victim,
Patiently to the altar canst thou move?

**KASSANDRA**, pausing.

There is no escape, friends, none, when time is full.

**LEADER**

Yes, but time's last hour still is found the best.

**KASSANDRA**

The day is come. Little were gained by flight.

**LEADER**

Truly a patient fortitude is thine.

**KASSANDRA**

Such praise none heareth to whom fate is kind.

**LEADER**

Yet is there comfort in a glorious death.

**KASSANDRA**

Alas my father! thou and thy noble children!

*She approaches the doors, but starts back shuddering.*

**LEADER**

Why dost thou start? What terror turns thee back?

**KASSANDRA**

Foul! Foul!

**LEADER**

Why criest thou foul? Is it some brainsick loathing?
KASSANDRA
Horror this house exhales from blood-dript walls.

LEADER
Why, how? 'Tis naught but odours of hearth-sacrifice.

KASSANDRA
'Tis such a reek as riseth from a sepulchre.

LEADER
No Syrian incense luxury were that.

KASSANDRA
Yet will I enter, and there bewail my fate
And Agamemnon's. I have lived long enough.
Alas, my friends!
I clamour not like a bird that dreads a bush
Idly. When I am dead confirm my words,
When another woman for my death shall die,
And for a man ill-mated a man falls.
I claim this office as at point to die.

LEADER
Poor wretch, I pity thee thy death foreknown.

KASSANDRA
Yet once more would I speak—or is not this
My own dirge rather? To the sun I pray,
This last seen by me, that when my champions come,
My foes may pay murder's price for me too,
For this poor slave's death, their inglorious prey.
Alas for man's estate! His happiness
Shows like a sketch, a shadow: but his misery—
'Tis a picture by a wet sponge dashed clean out.
And this is the more pitiable by far.

She goes in through the doors of the palace.

CHORUS
By a prosperous Fortune a quenchless thirst
Is kindled in all men. None will reject her,
Thrust from the doors of illustrious palaces,
Saying, "Here no more shalt thou enter."
So unto this king by the Gods was assigned
Priam's town for a spoil:
Heaven-exalted home he returneth.
Yet, if for blood long shed he must pay now,
If dying for the dead he must crown doom's pile
With yet other deaths in requital,
Who of mortals hearing of this would boast
To be born to a destiny unscathed?

THE VOICE OF AGAMEMNON, within the palace.
Ah me! I am smitten—to the heart, a mortal stroke!

LEADER
Silence! Who is that cries out as smitten by a mortal wound?

THE VOICE OF AGAMEMNON.
Ah me! Again! A second time, a murderous stroke!

LEADER
Done is now the deed, I fear me. That is the death-groan
of the king.
Come let us consult, if haply some safe counsel we may find.

ELDER 1
This is my counsel, that we summon hither
A rescue of the townsfolk to the palace.

ELDER 2
And I say, with all speed let us burst in,
And prove the foul deed while the sword yet drips.

ELDER 3
Thus far I share that counsel, that my vote too
Is all for action. It is no time for tarrying.

ELDER 3
'Tis manifest: this prelude gives clear warning
They are conspiring to enslave the city.
ELDER 5
Yes, for we linger; while they, trampling down
Deliberate caution's praise, sleep not, but act.

ELDER 6
I know not what advice were best to give.
Let him who acts advise thereon himself.

ELDER 7
I say so too; for it passes me to know
How by mere words we may raise up the dead.

ELDER 8
What! To prolong our lives shall we bow down
Beneath these foul defilers of the house?

ELDER 9
Nay, 'tis intolerable. Death were better.
That were a milder lot than tyranny.

ELDER 10
Are we, upon the evidence of mere groans,
To surmise lightly that the king is dead?

ELDER 11
Best know the facts ere we give vent to wrath.
To guess is not the same thing as to know.

LEADER
From all sides am I fortified in this resolve,
To have clear knowledge how it fares with Atreus' son.

As they are about to enter the palace, the scene opens
and discloses Klytaemnestra standing over
the bodies of Agamemnon and Kassandra.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
All that I spoke before to serve the time,
I shall feel no shame now to contradict.
For how by avowing open hate to enemies,
Presumed to be our friends, could we build up
Destruction's toils too high to be overleapt?
By me long since against victory long-deferred
Was planned this duel, yet at last it came.
Here stand I where I struck, my work achieved.
Even so I wrought—this too will I not deny—
That neither should he escape nor ward his doom.
A blind entanglement, like a net for fish,
I swathe around him, an evil wealth of robe.
And twice do I smite him, till at the second groan
There did his limbs sink down; and as he lies,
A third stroke do I deal him, unto Hades,
Safe-keeper of dead men, a votive gift.
Therewith he lies still, gasping out his life:
And spouting forth a vehement jet of blood
Strikes me with a dark splash of murderous dew,
No less rejoicing than in Heaven's sweet rain
The corn doth at the birth-throes of the ear.
The truth being such, ye grave elders of Argos,
Rejoice, if so ye may; but I exult.
And were thank-offerings seemly o'er a corpse,
Here justly might we pour them, and more than justly:
A bowl so full of curses did this man brim,
Who now comes home himself to drink it up.

LEADER
We marvel at thine audacity of tongue
To glory in such terms over thy lord.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Ye assail me as though I were a witless woman.
But I with heart unshaken what all know
Declare—whether thou praise me or condemn,
'Tis all one—this is Agamemnon, mine
Own husband, done to death by this right hand's
Most righteous workmanship. The case stands so.

CHORUS
Woman, what earth-engendered
Venomous herb, or what evil drug,
Scum of the restless sea, canst thou have tasted of,
Thus to incur the loud fury of a people's curse?
Away thou hast cast, away thou hast cleft, away shall the
city fling thee,
A monstrous burden of loathing.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Yes, now for me thou doonest banishment;
A city's loathing and a people's curses:
Yet once no whit didst thou withstand this man,
Who recking not, as 'twere a beast that died,
Although his woolly flocks bare sheep enough,
Sacrificed his own child, that dear delight
Born of my pangs, to charm the winds of Thrace.
Was it not he you should have exiled hence
For that polluting sin? Yet now thou seest
My deed, thou art a rigorous judge. Now hear me:
Threaten thy worst; and if on equal terms
Thou canst by force subdue me, be it so:
I yield. But if Fate otherwise ordain,
Wisdom, late though it be, shalt thou be taught.

CHORUS
Insolent is thy mood,
Thine utterance arrogant. Therefore even
As with the deed of blood frenzied is now thy soul,
So doth a gory smear fitly adorn thy brow.
With none to avenge, none to befriend, verily yet shall you
pay
Stroke for stroke in reprisal.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
This likewise shalt thou hear, my solemn oath:
By the Justice here accomplished for my child,
By the Sin and Doom, whose victim here I have slain,
Not for me doth Hope tread the halls of Fear,
While yet fire on my hearth is kindled by
Aigisthos, my kind friend as heretofore.
For yonder, no small shield for our assurance,
Lies low the man who outraged his own wife,
Darling of each Chryséis under Troy,
And by him this bond-slave and auguress,
His oracle-delivering concubine,
Who, as his faithful couch-mate, shared with him
The mariners' bench. But punished are they now.
For he fare thus: and she, now she has wailed
Swan-like her last lamenting song of death,
Lies there, his lover, adding a delicate
New seasoning to the luxury of my couch.

CHORUS
Oh for a speedy death, painless without a throe,
No lingering bedridden sickness,
A gentle death, bearing sleep eternal,
Sleep without end; for to us the kindest,
Truest of guardians is lost,
Who for a woman's sin endured toils untold;
Yea, and by a woman's hand he fell.

O thou from a fire-brand named, Helena,¹
Who alone those many lives didst destroy,
Many past all number beneath Troy!
Now it is thou who hast brought to its flowering
Thus by uncleansable blood the renowned contention
Waged once within this palace,
A woe death-fráught for many a hero.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Invoke not death for thy portion in grief
For what thou beholdest;
Nor yet upon Helena turn thy wrath,
As murderess of men, as though she alone
Many lives of Danaan men had destroyed,
And wrought unexampled affliction.

¹ "Helane" is the Greek for "a reed-torch."
CHORUS
Daemon, who o'er the house broodest, and o'er the twi-
Branching Tantalid offspring,
And through the wives, equals in destruction,
Wieldest a power, to my heart an anguish!
Now on the carcase like a loathed
Carrion crow perched he stands, and gloriously
Chanting forth, croaks his tuneless hymn.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Now thy judgment hast thou amended,
Since thou accusest
The thrice-gorged Daemon of this whole lineage.
For from him is bred this lust of the heart
For blood to be lapped—ere yet the old woe
Is over and gone, ever fresh gore.

CHORUS
Mighty against this house
And fell is the Daemon of whom thou tellest.
Woe! Woe! 'Tis an evil tale
Of deadly disaster unsated;
Ah me, alas! by will of Zeus,
Who causeth all, who worketh all.
For what to mortals e'er befalls without Zeus?
What here is not by the Gods appointed?

Ay me! Ay me! My king, my king!
How shall I weep thee?
What word shall I speak from a loyal heart?
In this spider's web to be lying thus caught,
By a foul death gasping thy soul forth!
Ah me, me! couched thus, shamefully like a slave,
Stricken down by a deadly hand
Craftily armed with a cleaving sword-blade!

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Do you dare to avouch this deed to be mine?
Nay, fancy not even
That in me Agamemnon's spouse you behold:
But disguised as the wife of the man who is slain
Yonder, the ancient wrathful Avenger
Of Atreus, that grim feaster, hath found
Yonder a full-grown
Victim for the ghosts of the children.

CHORUS
That thou of the blood here shed
Art innocent, who shall essay to witness?
No, no! Yet the Fiend avenging
The father's sin may have aided;
And swept along on floods of gore
From slaughtered kindred by the red
Deity of Strife, he comes where he must pay now
For the caked blood of the mangled infants.

Ay me! Ay me! My king, my king!
How shall I weep thee?
What word shall I speak from a loyal heart?
In this spider's web to be lying thus caught,
By a foul death gasping thy soul forth!
Ah me, me! couched thus, shamefully like a slave,
Stricken down by a deadly hand
Craftily armed with a cleaving sword-blade!

KLYTAEMNESTRA
What, did not he too wreak on his household
As crafty a crime?
Nay but the branch he grafted upon me,
My long-wept-for Iphigeneia,
Even as he dealt with her, so is he faring:
Therefore in Hades let him not boast now.
As he sinned by the sword,
So is death by the sword his atonement.
CHORUS
In blank amaze, reft of thought’s resourceful
Counselling aid, I know not
Which way to turn, now the house is falling.
I dread the fierce, crashing storm that wrecks the home,
The storm of blood. Ceased is now the small rain.
But Justice is but whetting for some other deed
Of bale her sword’s edge on other whetstones.

Ant. 2

Ay me! Earth, Earth! Would thou hadst covered me,
Or ere in the silver-sided bath
Outstretched in death I had seen him!
Who shall make his grave? Who shall sing his dirge?
Who by the tomb of the deified hero weeping
Shall chant his praise and bowed down
In unféigned grief of heart lament him?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Thee it beseems not herein to concern thee:
No, for beneath us
He bowed, he lay dead, and below shall we bury him,
Not to a mourning household’s dirges,—
’Twere a graceless return for his great good-deeds
Unworthily so to bewail his soul,—
But Iphigeneia with welcome blithe,
As a daughter should,
Shall encounter her sire at the swift-flowing strait
Of Wailing, and there
Fling around him her arms and shall kiss him.

CHORUS
Reviling thus answereth reviling.
Hard to adjudge the strife seems.
The spoiler is spoiled, the slayer pays reprisal.
While on his throne Zeus abides, abides the truth:
“Who doth the deed, suffereth”: so the law stands.
Who from the house shall cast the brood of curses forth?
The whole race is welded fast to ruin.
KLYTAEMNESTRA
When you stumbled upon this saw, 'twas truth
Led you. But I now
With the Fiend of the Pleisthenid race consent
This treaty to swear: what is done, we accept,
Hard be it to bear, if he will but quit
Henceforth this house, and afflict with kindred
Murder some other race instead.
Though mine be a small
Portion of wealth, that in full shall suffice me,
If I thus may cleanse
These halls from the frenzy of blood-feud.

Enter Aigisthos attended by a body-guard of spearmen.

AIGISTHOS
O glad dawn of the day that brings redress!
Now can I say that, from above earth, Gods
Look down to avenge the sorrows of mankind,
Now that I see this man in woven robes
Of Retribution stretched dead to my joy,
Paying in full for a father's crafty sin.
For Atreus, lord of Argos, this man's sire,
When by my sire Thyestes, his own brother,
(To make all clear) his sovereignty was questioned,
He banished him from country and from home.
Thereafter, a suppliant of the hearth returning,
Hapless Thyestes found safety so far
That his life-blood stained not his ancestral soil
Forthwith: but for welcome this man's impious father,
Atreus, with zeal scarce friendly to my father,
Feigning to hold a joyful feasting day,
Served him a banquet of his children's flesh.
The extremities, the feet and fingered hands,
He kept concealed, the rest disguised he set
Before Thyestes, where he sat apart:

1 The house of Pelops.
Who at the first unwitting took and ate
That food now proved unwholesome to his race.
Then, recognizing the unhallowed deed,
He groaned, and falls back vomiting the sacrifice,
And calls a fell doom on the sons of Pelops,
Kicking the table doom away to aid his curse:
That thus might perish all the race of Pleisthenes.
For such cause do you see this man laid low.
And justly so did I contrive this slaughter.
For me, the third heir, with my luckless father,
He drove forth too, a babe in swaddling clothes.
Now grown to manhood Justice brings me home.
While yet I dwelt abroad I reached my foe,
Weaving this dark conspiracy's whole plot.
Thus glorious were death itself to me,
Now I have seen him caught in toils of Justice.

LEADER
Aigisthos, I scorn to insult distress:
But dost thou own wilfully to have slain him,
And alone to have contrived this woeful murder?
Know thine own head, judged guilty, shall not escape
The curses of a people flung in stones.

AIGISTHOS
Thou to prate so, benched at the lowest oar,
While those of the upper tier control the ship!
Your old age shall be taught how bitter it is
To be schooled in discreetness at your years.
Bonds and the pangs of hunger are supreme
Physicians to instruct even senile minds
In wisdom. Doth not this sight make thee see?
Kick not against the pricks, lest the wound smart.

LEADER
Thou woman, in wait for returning warriors,
Lurking at home, defiling a man's bed—
For a mighty captain didst thou plot this death?
AIGISTHOS
These words likewise shall prove the source of tears.
The contrary to Orpheus' tongue is thine:
For he drew all things charmed by his voice along;
But thou, provoking us by childish howlings,
Shalt be haled off and by constraint made tame.

AN ELDER
Thou to be despot of our Argive folk,
Who durst not, when thou hadst contrived his death,
Durst not achieve the crime with thine own hand!

AIGISTHOS
The beguiling was the wife's part manifestly.
I was suspected, a foe by my birth.
Now with the dead king's treasure will I strive
To rule this people: but the mutinous man
I shall yoke sternly, not like a corn-fed colt
In traces; no, but grim starvation, lodged
With darkness, shall not leave him till he is tamed.

LEADER
Why, craven soul, didst thou not kill thy foe
Unaided, but must join with thee a woman,
Defilement of our country and its Gods,
To slay him? Oh, is Orestes living yet,
That he by fortune's grace returning home
Victoriously may put both these to death?

AIGISTHOS
Nay, if thus in word and deed you threaten, soon shall you
be taught.
Forward now, my trusty spearmen! Here is work for us
at hand.

LEADER
Forward now! His sword unsheathing, each man stand
upon his guard.
AIGISTHOS
Nay, I too, my sword unsheathing, shrink not back, though
I must die.

AN ELDER
Die, thou sayest? The word is welcome. Ours be now to
make it good.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Nay forbear, my dearest husband. Let us do no further ill.
Miseries are here to reap in plenty, a pitiable crop.
Harm enough is done already: let no blood by us be spilt.
Now 'tis time that thou and these should seek their destined
dwellings each,
Ere some rash deed bring repentance—since we have come
to such a pass.
Then if haply these afflictions prove enough, there let us
stop,
Sorely smitten thus already by the heavy heel of fate. 1660
So doth a woman's reason counsel, if so be that any heed.

AIGISTHOS
But for these to let their foolish tongues thus blossom into
speech,
Flinging out such overweening words, as though to tempt
their fate,
Reft of wisdom and discretion, braving thus the ruler's
power!

AN ELDER
Never was it Argive fashion to fawn upon a villainous man.

AIGISTHOS
Well, I'll visit this upon you soon or late in days to come.

LEADER
That thou shalt not, if but Heaven guide Orestes back to
his home.
AIGISTHOS
Yes, I know full well myself how banished men will feed on hopes.

AN ELDER
Do thy worst; wax fat, befouling righteousness, while yet thou mayest.

AIGISTHOS
Take my warning; for this folly thou shalt make amends some day.

LEADER
Brag: be valiant like a cock who crows and struts beside his hen.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Treat with the contempt they merit these vain yelpings. Thou and I,
Now the masters in this palace, will rule all things righteously.
THE CHOEPHORI, OR THE LIBATION-BEARERS
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Orestes, Son of Agamemnon.
Elektra, daughter of Agamemnon.
Pylades, son of Strophios, friend of Orestes.
Klytaemnestra.
Aigisthos.
Servant.
Nurse.
Chorus of Twelve Trojan Bondwomen.
ORESTES
Nether Hermes, guardian of paternal rights,
Preserve me and fight with me at my prayer.
For to this land an exile I return,
And o'er this grave's mound on my sire I call
To hearken, to give heed.

_This lock to Inachus _for nurture,
This second too in token of my mourning.

I was not there, father, to wail thy death,
Nor did I stretch my hand towards thy bier.

ENTER ELEKTRA AND THE CHORUS.
What is it I see? What is this troop of women
Approaching in conspicuous black robes
Of mourning? To what cause should I assign it?
Hath some new sorrow fallen upon the house?
Or should I guess they are bringing these libations
To appease my father in the world below?
Naught else? Yonder, it must be, walks Electra,
My sister. By the bitterness of her grief
I know her. O Zeus, grant me now to avenge

_The manuscript has here been mutilated, and a number of lines have been lost._
_2 A river of Argolis._
My sire's death; on my side deign thou to fight.
Pylades, stand we aside, that I may learn
More surely who these suppliant women are.

They retire.

CHORUS
"Go," said she, "from the palace bear Libations forth, with sharp resounding stroke of hand."
Behold, my cheek is newly scarred with crimson,
Rent by the bloodily furrowing nail!
At all hours feeds my heart on lamentation ceaselessly.
A scream was heard of linen torn,
As in my agony I ripped it up,
These folds o'er my breast,
Robes cruelly mangled,
Victims of my joyless task.

For thrilling Fear with lifted hair,
Prophetic to the house in dreams, and breathing wrath
From sleep, at dead of night with panic outcry
Uttered a shriek from the inner recess,
A fierce wail, bursting on the chambers where the women slept.
And they who read this dream declared,
Pledging a verity by heaven revealed,
That ghosts under ground,
Souls wrathfully plaintive,
Still against their slayers raged.

To avert such horror, the impious woman who sends me forth,
(Alas, Earth, Mother!)
Plans a vain appeasement
That can ne'er appease. But I
Fear to speak the words she bade.
For what redemption can there be for blood once spilt?
Woe for this miserable hearth!
Woe for this house to ruin doomed!
A sunless gloom, abhorred of men,
A shroud of hate broods o'er a house
Death-bereaved of its master.

That venerable, resistless, invincible majesty,
That once found a way through
The ears and hearts of all men,
Now has fallen away. 'Tis Fear
Reigns instead. Prosperity—
That among mortals is a God, and more than God.
But Justice, watching with her scale,
On some by daylight swiftly swoops,
Or in the borderland of dark
Her lingering wrath ripening bides:
Others utterly the night whelms.

Because of bloodshed drunk by Earth, its foster-nurse,
(For vengeful gore lies curded indissolvably)
Long-persisting Doom
Tarrieth till the sinner teems
With inexhaustible disease.

When once the bridal bower is opened, there can be
No remedy. So too all the waters in the world,
Into a single stream
Flowing together, strive to purge
The blood-polluted hand in vain.

But as for me, (since with cruel force the Gods
Encircling my city, led me captive
From a free home, here to endure the lot of slavery,)
Obey I must, be they righteous
Or unrighteous, those who now
Usurp the governance of my life, and must suppress
My soul's bitter loathing. Yet beneath my robes I weep
The cruel fates that have befallen
My lords, the while with hidden grief my heart is chilled.

ELEKTRA
Maidens, who serve our house and give it order,
Since you are here to attend me in these rites
Of prayer, lend me your counsel in this doubt.
As I pour forth these funeral offerings,
How must I speak, how pray, to appease my sire?
Shall I say that I bring a gift of love
From wife to loving husband—from my mother?
Nay, that I dare not. I know not what to say
As I pour this offering on my father's tomb.
Or shall I speak this customary phrase:
Do thou requite with blessing those who send
These wreaths—such recompense as their sin deserves?
Or with no word, no rite, as when my father
Died, shall I pour this forth for earth to drink,
Then go back home, like one that casts out filth,
Flinging the vessel from me without a glance?
In these doubts aid me with your counsel, friends;
For in the house one common hate is ours.
Hide naught within thy heart for fear of someone.
For destiny awaits alike the free
And those who are subject to another's hand.
If thou canst give me wiser counsel, speak.

LEADER
Revering like an altar thy father's tomb,
I will speak, as thou biddest, my heart's thought.

ELEKTRA
Speak, as in reverence for my father's grave.

LEADER
While you pour, utter blessings for the loyal.

ELEKTRA
To whom shall I give that name among our friends?
LEADER
First to thyself, and all who hate Aigisthos.

ELEKTRA
For myself must I pray then, and for thee?

LEADER
You know the truth: ’tis yours now to decide.

ELEKTRA
Whom else then to this company should I add?

LEADER
Remember Orestes, banished though he be.

ELEKTRA
’Tis well said. Wisely have you admonished me.

LEADER
Next, mindful of those guilty of that bloodshed—

ELEKTRA
Well, what? Direct me: instruct my ignorance.

LEADER
Pray that upon them come some god or mortal—

ELEKTRA
To judge or to avenge? Which do you mean?

LEADER
Say simply this: “one to take life for life.”

ELEKTRA
Is that a holy prayer for me to utter?

LEADER
Why not?—to requite foes with injury!

ELEKTRA
Mighty Herald between worlds above and under, Aid me, O nether Hermes, summoning The powers beneath the earth to hear my prayers Uttered for wrongs done to a father’s home, Earth too herself, who brings all things to birth,
Rears them, and to her womb receives them back.
Pouring this lustral water to dead men,
I call upon my sire: Have pity on me.
With dear Orestes kindle thy dark halls.
For now we are homeless vagrants, sold away,
By her that bore us, to purchase her a husband,
Aigisthos, her accomplice in thy murder;
I a mere slave, Orestes from his wealth
An exile, while they in overweening pride
Are revelling in the luxury thou didst toil for.
But hither in good hour may Orestes come:
That is my prayer to thee. Oh hear it, father.
And for me grant that I prove chaster far
Than was my mother, more innocent my hand.
For us these prayers. But for our adversaries
One to avenge thee, father, I bid rise,
And that thy slayers justly in turn be slain.
Thus do I interrupt my prayer for good,
Uttering against them this my prayer for evil.
To us do thou send blessings from below,
Sped by the Gods, and Earth, and conquering Justice.
Such are the prayers wherewith I pour these offerings.
Your due part is to crown them with flowers of wailing,
Chanting aloud a paean for the dead.

CHORUS
Shed we the tear that falls with a plash and is gone,
Gone as our lost, fallen lord,
In tune with the plash of unholy drops,
This impious offering poured to avert
Evil and good alike. Hearken, I pray thee! Hearken!
O revered master, rouse thy dark soul to hear.
Otótotótotótotoi!
Oh when, when will a man who wields the spear
Come to redeem the house, brandishing in his hand
The Scythian bow, bent in war's deadly stress,
One who will close and thrust with sword firmly gripped?
ELEKTRA
Earth now has drunk, my sire received our offerings.
But here is strange news I would have you share.

LEADER
Tell it me, though my heart with fear is dancing.

ELEKTRA
Here on the grave a severed tress I see.

LEADER
Whose is it? What man's, or deep-girdled maiden's?

ELEKTRA
So easy a riddle none should fail to guess.

LEADER
How? Let my age be instructed by thy youth.

ELEKTRA
There is no one but I who might have cut it.

LEADER
Yes, they are foes who should have mourned him thus.

ELEKTRA
Yet this to the eye seems strangely like in feather.

LEADER
To whose hair do you mean? I pray you, tell me.

ELEKTRA
Like our own, strangely similar to the eye.

LEADER
Can it then be Orestes' secret gift?

ELEKTRA
His are the ringlets it resembles most.

LEADER
But how could he have ventured to come hither?

ELEKTRA
He has sent a lock, shorn offering to his sire.
LEADER
Thy words give me more cause for tears than ever,
If ne'er again his foot shall touch this soil.

ELEKTRA
In my heart too a surge of bitter thought
Rises: I feel a dagger's piercing stab;
And from my eyes break thirstily forth and fall
Some few drops from the pent-up stormy flood,
When I behold this lock: for how suppose
That any native else might own this hair?
Nor yet was it the murderess who cut it,
My mother, she who towards her children bears
No mother's feelings in her impious heart.
But how to affirm with surety that this offering
Adorned the head of him whom most I love,
Orestes!—yet I am flattered by the hope.
Alas!
Would that it had a kindly warning voice,
That so I might not waver between two minds,
Being bidden plainly spurn this lock away,
If it were severed from a hated head;
Or else, being kin, would it might share my grief,
Gracing this tomb, and honouring my sire.
Nay, but the Gods, whom we appeal to, know
By what storms we, like mariners, are tossed
And whirled. Yet if we are destined to find safety,
From a small seed may grow a mighty stem.

But look! Tracks on the ground! a second proof!—
Tracks of feet—similar—and like my own.
Yes, here are outlines of two different footsteps,
Those of himself, and those of some companion.
The tracings of the tendons and the heels
Agree in measurement with the prints of mine.
Oh this is agony, destroying thought.
ORESTES, coming forward.
Tell the Gods that thy prayers have been fulfilled,
And pray hereafter for like good success.

ELEKTRA
Why, for what boon have I to thank them now?

ORESTES
The sight of that for which thou hast prayed so long.

ELEKTRA
Whom canst thou know that I was summoning?

ORESTES
Whom but Orestes, the idol of thy soul?

ELEKTRA
And what proof have I that my prayers are answered?

ORESTES
Here am I. Seek no nearer friend than me.

ELEKTRA
O Sir, is this some snare you are weaving round me?

ORESTES
Against myself then am I framing it.

ELEKTRA
I see you wish to mock at my afflictions.

ORESTES
Then at my own too, if indeed at thine.

ELEKTRA
As if thou wert Orestes then I bid thee....

ORESTES
Nay, 'tis himself thou seest and wilt not know.
Yet when you saw this lock of mourning hair,
Your mind took wing and deemed 'twas me you saw—
So too when you were questing in my footsteps,
Your own brother's, proportioned like yourself.
Look well: 'twas from this place I cut the tress.
And see this weaving, your own handiwork,
These batten-strokes, these beasts in the design.
Contain yourself: leave not thy wits for joy:
For those who are nearest hate us both, I know.

LEADER
O thou beloved child of thy father's house,
Thou hope of saving seed watered by tears,
Trust in thy strength, and win thy heritage back.

ELEKTRA
O thou sweet eye, glancing for me with love
Fourfold! To thee must needs be given the name
Of father: to thee falls the love I owe
To a mother—mine has merited utmost hate—
And to a sister, cruelly sacrificed.
Proved now a brother true, I reverence thee.
Only may Power and Justice, and with these
Zeus, mightiest of all, be on thy side.

ORESTES
Zeus, Zeus, look down; witness what here is done.
Behold the orphan brood of an eagle sire
That perished in the twines and writhing coils
Of a fell viper. Fatherless are they, gripped
By hungry viper, for strength is not yet theirs
To bring home to the nest their father's prey.
Like them mayst thou behold me; and her too,
Elektra, children fatherless and forlorn,
Both suffering the same exile from our home.
If thou destroy these younglings of that sire;
Who worshipped thee with bounteous gifts, where else
Wilt thou find hands so generous of rich feasts?
And as, if the eagle's brood thou shouldst destroy,
No more couldst thou send signs that men could trust,
So, if this royal stem be withered wholly,
No altars will it serve on days of sacrifice.
Save it. From lowness thou canst raise to might
A house that now seems to lie fallen indeed.

LEADER
O children, saviours of the ancestral hearth,
Silence, I pray, lest someone overhear,
And to ease a babbling tongue report all this
To those that rule. Ah, may I one day watch
Their corpses in the spluttering resinous flame!

ORESTES
Never shall Loxias' mighty oracle
Betray us. He it was who bade me endure
This peril, threatening oft with voice uplifted
Woes to make cold as winter my warm heart,
If I avenged not those that slew my sire—
Who bade me slay them even as they slew,
Scowling upon the offer of all their wealth:
Else, he said, I myself with my own life
Should pay the debt after woes long and dire.
How the powers of underground appease their wrath,
His voice proclaimed to men, citing such plagues
As leprous ulcers crawling o'er the flesh,
Eating its health away with cruel jaws:
And how upon this plague a white down grows.
Yet other onslaughts of the avenging fiends
Sprang from a father's blood, so he foretold:
For the unseen weapon of the nether powers,
Stirred by slain kinsmen calling for revenge,
Frenzy and causeless terror of the night,
(Seen clearly, while in darkness the eyebrows twitch,)
Perturb and harass; till by the brazen scourge
His marred carcase is chased forth from the town.
Nor is it for such outcasts to partake
The winebowl, nor the genial libation.
A father's wrath unseen drives him away
From altars: none receives, none lodges with him.
At last without rites, without friends, he dies,
Utterly wasted to a vile mummied corpse.
Should I not trust such oracles as these?
Though I trust them not, the deed must yet be done.
For many motives to one end concur:
The God's commands; my great grief for my father:
Besides there is my poverty that galls me:
Then shame that my world-famous countrymen,
Whose glorious valour compassed Troy's destruction,
Should thus be subject to a pair of women.
For a woman he is at heart, soon shall he learn.

CHORUS
O powerful Fates, let Zeus now send
Prosperous fortune
Unto us, whom righteousness aideth.
"Enmity of tongue for enmity of tongue
Be paid in requital," cries Justice aloud,
Exacting the debt that is owed her.
"Murderous blow for murderous blow
Let him take for his payment." "To the deed its reward!"
So speaks immemorial wisdom.

ORESTES
Father, O father of woe, what word
Am I to speak, or what do
To waft this message afar to thee,
Where in the grave thou coucest?
As darkness and light are sundered,
Loving rites cannot reach thee,
The dirge chanted of old to praise
Kings of the house of Atreus.

CHORUS
My son, the ravening jaw
Of fire subdues not wholly
The spirit of him who is dead.
Someday his mood he revealeth.
When the slain man is bewailed, then
Is the injurer discovered.
And a rightful lamentation
For a parent hunts and ranges
With wide search, till the guilt is tracked down.

ELEKTRA
Hear then, O father, as we in turn
Utter our tearful anguish.
Thy two children are we whose dirge
Wails for thee o'er thy grave-mound.
The suppliant and the exile
To thy tomb we draw near.
What here is well? What is free from woe?
Vain with our doom to wrestle.

LEADER
Yet even so God, if he will, may change
Our dirge to a chant of happier strain,
Not lamentations at a tomb, but instead
Shall a paean of joy in the royal halls
With a loving pledge welcome a friend home.

ORESTES
Would that in sight of Troy,
By some Lycian hero's spear
Thy death's wound, father, had been dealt thee.
Bequeathing so glory to us thy children,
At home praise, abroad fame,
The admired gaze of all eyes,
Thou hadst lain in a tomb piled
With alien earth: an easy
Burden for us had that been.

CHORUS
To friendship welcome there
By nobly fallen heroes,
A prince in the underworld
Famed, revered and majestic,
A companion to the highest
Who are rulers of that dark realm:
For in life thou wast a monarch
Over kings who wield the sceptre
That dooms men and commands obedience.

ELEKTRA
Nay, but beneath Troy walls,
Father, let us not wish that thou
Hadst died, nor mid héaps of slaughtered warriors
Been laid in earth, there beside Skamander.
Ah would those that slew him
By a like death had died first!
From afar had we then heard
The tale of their end, by all these
Miseries unafflicted.

LEADER
Finer than gold, dear child, yea greater
Then even Hyperbórean 1 bliss are the hopes
Thou utterest. Wishing is easy.
Yet, (for the two-fold lash of our thudding
Scourge goeth home,) your cause underground
Already finds champions. Foul with pollution
Are the crime-sullied hands of the loathly usurpers.
Victory must side with the children.

ORESTES
This will have pierced to its aim,
Sped like a shaft from the bow!
Zeus! Zeus, that from below dost send
Tardily smiting vengeance
On man's sinful and reckless ill deeds,
Sins that conceive an avenging offspring!

CHORUS
Be it mind to lift a lusty chant of joy
Over the stroke that fells

1 According to the Greeks an earthly paradise existed in the Hyperborean region, or the country behind the north wind.
The man, and the evil woman
Slain by his side. For wherefore
Hide the divine foreboding
That haunts me? A fierce wind of passion,
Breathing revenge, hatred and wrath,
Blows against my spirit's prow.

ELEKTRA
When with a stroke of his hand
Cleaving the heads of our foes,
Alas! when will Zeus put forth his might,
Granting our land assurance?
To right wrong I appeal for justice.
Hear me, O Earth, and ye powers of Hades.

CHORUS
Nay, it is law that the life of a man,
Shed in drops to the ground, should require in return
Fresh blood. The Avengeress calls upon havoc:
From the graves of the slain she will bring forth woe
Upon woe, ever newly arising.

ORESTES
How long then, Princedoms of the underworld?
Hither, ye spirits that venge the slain, hither behold!
Behold in evil plight the last remaining brood
Of Atreus' house, dispossessed,
Dishonoured! Whó now shall help us, O Zeus?

CHORUS
With violence now my heart within me throbs,
Hearing this plaintive outcry.
Now am I all despairing:
Back to my heart the blood runs
Dark as the words I hearken.
But soon hope and courage returning
Lift me and drive anguish away,
Dawning brightly on my soul.
ELEKTRA
What speech else might avail us save of those Miseries we have endured from her by whom we were born?
For all her blandishments, yet shall not they be soothed.
For like a grim wolf, the mood
Our mother gave, cannot be placated.

CHORUS
I beat my breast to an Arian dirge, and in the mode
Of Kissian wailing-women slaves,
With clutching and bespattering strokes behold my hands
In quick succession uplifted higher and higher still
To fall in battering blows, until my miserable
Belaboured head resounds beneath the cruel shock.

ELEKTRA
Oh fie! Cruel fiend!
Thou wicked mother! Cruel was that funeral.
Without his folk, him, a king,
Without lament, unbewailed,
Thou hadst the heart so to inter a husband.

ORESTES
No rites at all! Was it so then? Oh shame!
Nay verily, for my father's shaming
By help of heáven she shall pay,
By help of these hands of mine.
And then, when I have slain her, let me perish.

CHORUS
This also know, his limbs were lopped and mangled.
'Twas her design, hers who so could bury him,
To make his death such that thou
Shouldst not endure still to live.
Thou now hast heard how thy sire was outraged.

ELEKTRA
'Twas thus my father perished: and I the while was kept
Aloof, despised, of no account.

1 Persian.
Shut in and kennelled, as I had been a vicious hound,
In mood more ready for tears than laughing, I wept and poured
My miserable lamentation forth from where I lurked.
What I have told thee, grave it deep within thy soul.

CHORUS
Yea home through thine ears
Let sink the tale within a firm and tranquil mind.
For thus it was: such the deed.
Be stubborn thou to prove the event.
A temper stern as steel befits the avenger.

ORESTES
On thee I call; father, stand beside thine own.

ELEKTRA
And I to his, all in tears, would add my voice.

CHORUS
And we too all cry aloud with one accord:
Oh hearken; visit thou the light:
Aid us against our foes’ hate.

ORESTES
Let sword with sword, right encountering meet with right.

ELEKTRA
Ye Deities, judge the right with righteousness.

CHORUS
A shudder steals o’er me, as I hear such prayers.
Though destiny hath bided long,
Yet shall your prayer reveal it.

CHORUS
Alas for the inbred woe!
Bloody and harsh the discord
Struck by the hand of Ruin!
Alas, tuneless and heavy sorrows!
Alas, pain unappeased for ever!
Thus only the house may staunch
Wounds such as these. Its own sons,
None from without, shall cure it
By grim shedding of blood for blood shed.
The Gods under the earth so hymn we.

Hearken, we pray, ye netherworld Deities:
Grant our petition: with ready will send
Victorious aid to the children.

ORESTES
O father, who wast so unkingly slain,
Grant, I implore thee, lordship in thy house.

ELEKTRA
A like boon, father, do I ask of thee:
Let me escape, and let Aigisthos perish.

ORESTES
Yea so for thee would solemn funeral feasts
Be established: else, when savoury burnt offerings
Are paid to Earth, no tribute shall be thine.

ELEKTRA
I too shall bring thee offerings from my dower,
When I am wedded from a father’s house,
And will revere this tomb before all else.

ORESTES
O Earth, release my sire to guide me in fight.

ELEKTRA
O Persephassa, grant fair victory.

ORESTES
Remember the bath wherewith they slew thee, father.

ELEKTRA
Remember what strange cloak-net they devised.

ORESTES
In fetters no smith forged thou wast snared, father.

1 Persephone, goddess of the underworld.
ELEKTRA
Yes, in a wrapping plotted for thy shame.

ORESTES
Art thou not wakened by these tauntings, father?

ELEKTRA
Dost thou not lift up thy beloved head?

ORESTES
Either send Justice to fight beside thine own,
Or grant us the like grip of them in turn,
If thou by victory wouldst retrieve defeat.

ELEKTRA
Hearken once more to this last cry, father.
Behold these nestlings crouching at thy tomb,
And pity us both, thy daughter and thy son.

ORESTES
And blot not out this seed of Pelops' line:
For thus, though thou hast died, thou art not dead.

ELEKTRA
For children are voices that preserve the fame
Of one dead, and like corks buoy up the net,
Rescuing from the deep the cords below.

ORESTES
Hearken! 'Tis for thy sake we are wailing thus.
Thyself art saved, if this plea thou wilt honour.

LEADER
Come, amply have you lengthened out your dirge,
Due tribute to the tomb's unwept dishonour.
For the rest, since now thy heart is set on deeds,
Get thee to work forthwith, and test thy fortune.

ORESTES
That will I. Yet first it were well to enquire,
Wherefore she sent libations; what could move her
So late to make amends for wrongs past cure?
To a man dead and witless did she send
This paltry boon? I cannot think 'twas so.
Yet the gifts are too small for the offence.
Though a man poured forth his all to atone one deed
Of blood, 'twere labour lost, the saying goes.
Gladly, if you know it, would I learn the truth.

LEADER
I know, my son; for I was there. By dreams
And prowling terrors of the night perturbed,
The godless woman sent these offerings.

ORESTES
And did you learn the dream? Then tell it me.

LEADER
She gave birth in her dream to a snake, she says.

ORESTES
How did her story end? What was its sum?

LEADER
She couched it like a babe in swaddling bands.

ORESTES
For what food did it crave, this new-born monster?

LEADER
She offered it her own breast in her dream.

ORESTES
Surely the foul thing left not the teat unhurt?

LEADER
No, with the milk it sucked a curd of blood.

ORESTES
Be sure, such a vision cannot be for naught.

LEADER
Then she awoke from sleep shrieking for terror;
And many a lamp, whose light the dark had blinded,
Flared up throughout the house at the queen's need.
Therefore these pious offerings she sends,
In hope to lance and cure the mischief so.

ORESTES
Now to this Earth and to my father's grave
I pray that in me this dream may be fulfilled.
And it tallies, as I read it, at all points.
If the snake came from the same place as I,
And thereupon was wrapped in swaddling clothes,
And gaped about the breast that suckled me,
Mingling the kindly milk with curds of blood,
While she for terror shrieked aloud thereat,
Then surely she who nursed so dread a prodigy,
Must die by force, and I, enserpented,
Shall be her slayer, as this dream foretells.

LEADER
I accept thy divination of these signs.
So may it prove. Teach now thy friends their part,
Telling what each should do or should not do.

ORESTES
'Tis simple. Let Elektra go within.
These women I bid keep concealed my plan.
Then as by craft they slew a noble prince,
By craft they shall be caught in the same noose,
And perish, even as Loxias foretold,
Sovereign Apollo, a prophet never false.
For like a traveller, and in full disguise,
To the main gate will I come with Pylades here,
A guest to the house, aye and its spear-guest too.
And both of us will don Parnassian speech,
Copying the accent of a Phokian tongue.
But say no door-keeper gives us glad welcome,
Because the house is woe-struck by the Gods:
Then we shall wait, till, as he passes by,
Someone may thus give voice to his surmise:
"Why should Aigisthos, if he is here at home,
Knowingly shut his gate against his visitor?"
Then once I have crossed the threshold of the court,
And found him seated in my father's throne,
Or if afterwards he meet me face to face
And speak—dropping his craven eyes, be sure—
Ere he can say, "Whence comes this stranger?" dead,
Snared by my nimble weapon, will I smite him.
The Avenging Spirit, stinted ne'er of slaughter,
Shall drink in blood unmixed her third last draught.
Do thou then keep good watch within the house.
So that our plot may piece together rightly.

And you, I charge you, bear a cautious tongue
For speech or silence as the moment needs.
Last thou, friend, follow me and stand at watch
To succour me in the contest of the sword.

Exeunt Orestes, Elektra and Pylades.

CHORUS

Many woes, strange and dire,
Many terrors earth has bred;
And the sea's vast embrace far and wide
Teems with baleful monsters;
While from the interspace there flash
Fiery lightnings that destroy
The birds and the four-footed beasts: of the hurricane wrath
Of winds too, marvels might be told.

But of man's overbold
Pride of spirit none may tell,
Nor of how passion's wild, reckless power,
Fraught with human ruin,
Rules o'er woman's stubborn mind.
When perverse rebellious love
Masters the feminine heart, then destroyed is the union
Of mated lives for beast or man.

Whoso is not fledged with wings of thought,
Let him learn the tale,
How that heartless queen,¹
Thestius' daughter, slew her son, wittingly,
Urged by fire-enkindling forethought,
Consuming the red brand, coeval
With her child ² from the hour he came
Wailing forth from his mother,
Matched in years with his span of life
Till the day by the Fates doomed.

Next with loathing might we tell of her,
The daughter murderous,³
Who, by foes seduced,
Wrought the death of one she loved, when, beguiled
By the gold-forged Cretan necklace,
The bribe sent by Minos, she plundered
Nisus ⁴ of his immortal hair,
While in slumber unguarded
He breathed—ah, the dog-hearted wench!
Came then Hermes ⁵ and took him.

But since of crimes cruel and heartless I have told.

A SINGLE VOICE, interrupting.
Yet 'tis no time now to speak of that unloved
Wedlock, by the house abhorred,
Nor yet of plots schemed by a woman's cunning wits
Against a man famed in arms,
A man whose might even his foemen held in awe.
A hearth I praise where no fiery passions flame,
A woman's unaudacious spirit.

CHORUS
But among all sins, 'tis the Lemnian ⁶ stands the first

¹ Althaia. ² Meleager. ³ Skylla. ⁴ The father of Skylla. ⁵ The Messenger of Death. ⁶ The men of Lemnos, having slighted the worship of Aphrodite, were caused by her to take certain Thracian captive women as their paramours, and were consequently all murdered by their neglected wives.
In story. And when haply men bewail some foul
Horror, then they liken it
Each time anew unto the Lemnian tale of woe.
Through heaven-wrought punishment
That race is gone, perished from among mankind
Dishonoured. None reverence what the Gods abhor.
What instance have I not justly cited?

But now the sword that nears the breast
With keen stab will strike a piercing heart-wound
As Justice bids. For is not murder due
Punishment for him whose foot
Has trampled down
The sanctity of Zeus with lawless outrage?

But Justice plants her anvil firm,
Whereon Fate already a sword is forging.
A child she brings to heal the house; till thence
Purged at length is every stain
Of older blood
By that renowned, deep-designing Fury.

The scene changes to the front of the palace.
Enter Orestes and Pylades, disguised as travelling
merchants, and followed by attendants.

ORESTES
Ho, slave! open the gates! You hear me knock.
Is any there within doors?—Ho, slave, ho!
Yet a third time I call: come someone forth,
If guests are welcomed in Aigisthos' house.

SERVANT
Enough! I hear. Of what land are you? Whence?

ORESTES
Announce me to the masters of the house.
The tidings I come bringing are for them,
And make haste; for night’s dusky chariot
Comes on apace. ’Tis time we travellers found
Some public guest-house to cast anchor in.
Let someone in authority come forth;
A woman it may be: but a man were seemlier:
For speech is free then: no constraint or shame
Compels talk to be veiled. Man speaks to man
Boldly, and shows his meaning by clear proofs.

Enter Klytaemnestra.

KLYTAEMNESTRA

Friends, speak your wishes. At your service here
Are all such comforts as besem this house,
Warm baths, and to refresh your weariness,
Soft couches, and true eyes to attend your wants.
But if you have affairs of weightier counsel,
That is work for men, to whom we will impart it.

ORESTES

I am a Daulian traveller from Phokis.
As at my own risk I was carrying goods
To Argos, where now my long journey ends,
There met me a man I knew not, nor he me,
Strophios, a Phokian, so I learnt in talk.
Having asked my way and told me his, he said:
“Since anyhow you are bound for Argos, Sir,
Bear heedfully in mind to tell his parents
That Orestes is dead. Do not forget.
So whether his friends resolve to fetch him home,
Or bury him, our denizen and guest
Forever, bring me their injunctions back.
Meanwhile the curved sides of a brazen urn
Enclose his ashes, in due form bewept.”
I have told my whole message. Whether now
I am speaking to the rulers, and his kindred,
I know not; but his parent should be told.
KLYTAEMNESTRA
Ah me! we are taken ruthlessly by storm.
O thou all-conquering Curse that haunts this house,
How wide thy vision! with sure aim thy shafts
Strike even that we have hidden with care afar,
Stripping my dear ones from me, unhappy woman!
And now Orestes—for he prudently
Was keeping his foot out of the deadly mire—
But now what healing hope of fine carouse
In the house there was, thou writest down fulfilled.

ORESTES
Well, for my part, I could have hoped with guests
So princely, to commend myself, and earn
A welcome by more fortunate news. For where
Is goodwill greater than from guest to host?
But, to my thought, it were an impious fault
Not to fulfil a task like this for friends,
After my promise and your hospitality.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Nay, due reward shall none the less be thine,
Nor shall you find yourself less welcome here.
Some other would have brought this news instead.
But now ’tis the hour when guests, tired by the day’s
Long journey, should be tended as befits.
Take him and lodge him well in the men’s chambers
With these his fellow-travellers and attendants.
Let them receive there what beseems our house.
I warn you, for their comfort you must answer.
This news meanwhile we will impart to those
Who bear rule here. Having no lack of friends,
We will take counsel on this sad event.

_Exeunt all into the palace._
_The Chorus enters._

LEADER
Ah slaves of the house, loyal and faithful,
How soon shall our lips
Show proof of our zeal for Orestes?

CHORUS
O reverend Earth, O reverend Mound,
Thou that beneath thee coverest the outworn
dust of the armed fleet's kingly commander,
Deign now to hearken, deign to give succour.
Now is the hour when guileful Deceit
Must enter to aid us, and Chthonian Hermes,
Patron of stealth, stand sentinel over
This deadly encounter of sword-blades.

Enter Nurse from within.

LEADER
Our traveller, it seems, is working mischief.
Yonder I see Orestes' nurse in tears.
Where are you going, Kilissa, through the gates,
With grief to bear you company unhired?

NURSE
The mistress bids me summon Aigisthos home
As quick as may be, to meet these stranger guests,
And learn more certainly as man from man
This new-told rumour—while before her servants
Behind eyes of pretended gloom she hides
A laugh at work done excellently well
For her, but miserably for this house,
Hearing the tale these strangers told so plain.
That heart of his I warrant will be glad
When he has learnt their story. Wellaway!
How all that ancient coil of mingled miseries,
So hard to bear, betiding in this house
Of Atreus, grieved the heart within my breast!
But never have I endured a woe like this.
All other troubles patiently I bore:
But dear Orestes, the babe I spent my soul on,
Whom straight from his mother's womb I took to nurse...
And then those shrill cries summoning me by night,
And all those weary tasks, mere trouble wasted
They were: for a senseless thing one needs must nurse
Like a dumb beast—how else?—by humouring it.
The cry of a boy in swaddlings tells you nothing,
Whether hunger, thirst or wanting to make water
Grips him: a child’s young body will have its way.
These wants I would forecast; but often, it may be,
Would guess wrong, and so have to cleanse his linen,
Laundress and nurse reckoning as one office.
Aye, these two handicrafts both fell to me,
When I received Orestes from his father.
Now, woe is me! I learn that he is dead.
So I must fetch the man who has brought this house
To ruin. Glad will he be to hear my tale.

LEADER
Tell us, how does she bid him come arrayed?

NURSE
"Arrayed?" Speak plain. I understand you not.

LEADER
Whether with escort, or may be alone?

NURSE
She bids him bring a bodyguard of spearmen.

LEADER
Bear no such message then to our hated master,
But bid him come alone, that he may hear
Without alarm, at once, with cheerful heart.
A bent word by the bearer is made straight.

NURSE
Can you be looking kindly on these tidings?

LEADER
But what if Zeus should change ill winds to fair?

NURSE
How, when Orestes, hope of the house, is gone?
LEADER
Not yet. A seer of small skill might know that.

NURSE
What! Know you aught outside what has been told?

LEADER
Go, take thy message. Do as thou wert charged.
That which concerns the Gods is their concern.

NURSE
Well, I will go, following thy advice.
May it prove all for the best by the Gods' grace.

Exit Nurse.

CHORUS
Hear me now! Hear my prayer, thou, O Zeus, Father of the Olympian Gods.
Grant that fair fortune bless loyal hearts
That long to behold righteousness here prevail.
So do I pray. Justice prompts
Every word. Zeus, do thou uphold it.

Ey! Ey! Succour him, there
In the halls, him, not his foes, Zeus;
For if him thou exaltest,
Doubly and triply, if so it please thee,
Shall thank-offerings récompéne thee.

See the colt, sired by a man dear to thee,
Yoked in danger's chariot.
Rule his steps: even-paced bid him speed
With steady and swift rhythmical energy,
Till, behold, over the plain
On to the goal stride by stride he hastens.

Ye who dwell within the house,
Shrined in nooks filled with gladsome store of wealth,
Listen, O kindly Deities.
Suffer the blood of deeds done long ago
Now by fresh revenge to be redeemed.
Therefore may elder bloodshed ne’er beget
Within this house younger bloodshed any more.

God of the vast cavern and beauteous temple,\(^1\) Mesode
Grant us with flowers gaily to garland a man’s house;
Grant that our welcoming eyes
Soon may behold it emerge
Radiant out of the veil of dark gloom.

Rightly here should Maia’s son \(^2\) Ant. 2
Lend his aid. None so fairly, if so he wills,
Safe to harbour wafts a deed,
Many a time his purpose brings to light
Secrets: yet when speech he would obscure,
Darkness of night he wraps around men’s eyes;
And even by day none the plainer doth he seem.

Then, as the voyage nears its end, Str. 3
No dirge of wailers, but a glad 820
Paeon o’er the house set free
Will we launch, women’s voices
Blent in a blithe wafting song:
“ The vessel speeds,
Mine is the gain, mine that riseth here: the curse
Now departs from those I love.”

Ey! Ey! With a firm heart, Ephymnion
When the time comes for the stern deed,
Though her lips plead, “ O my child!” yet
Rush on her with the cry, “ My father!”
Nor shrink back from the cruel death-stroke.

Bearing a heart, strong as Perseus Ant. 3
Once within his bosom bore,

\(^1\) Apollo.
\(^2\) Hermes.
Of thy friends, both under earth
And above, be thou champion.
Bitter revenge claims thy zeal,
Secret crime,
Bloody and dire: yet thereby the guilt-defiled
Murderer shalt thou destroy.

Enter Aigisthos from without.

AIGISTHOS
I am come in answer to a summoning message.
A strange tale has been brought, so I am told,
By travellers, news of no pleasant sort.
Orestes' death—a horror-dripping burden
Would that prove, were it too laid on this house
Already mauled and festering with past bloodshed.
What should I think? Is it the living truth?
Or else mere talk, begotten of women's fears,
That leaps into the air to die in smoke?
Can you say aught to clear my mind of doubt?

LEADER
We heard indeed—but go in to the strangers,
And ask of them. No messenger so sure
As to enquire oneself of him who knows.

AIGISTHOS
This messenger I must see and question further,
Whether he was present at the death himself,
Or from some phantom rumour learnt his tale.
Be sure they shall not cheat a clear-eyed mind.

Exit Aigisthos into the palace.

CHORUS
Zeus, Zeus, what speech shall I find? Whence now
Shall begin my fervent prayer to thy Godhead?
How in loyal zeal
Give utterance due to my longing?
For now is the hour when either the blood-stained
Edges of cleaving man-slaying sword-blades
Must utterlywhelm in destruction the house
Of great Agamemnon for all time;
Or else he, kindling a fire and a light
For the cause of freedom and lawful rule,
Shall win the great wealth of his fathers.
Such now is the prize for which, one against two,
Our heaven-guided champion Orestes
Must wrestle. Oh yet may he conquer.

THE VOICE OF AIGISTHOS, within the palace.
Ey! Ey! Otototoi!

CHORUS
Ah! What is it?
How is it now? How doth Fate crown the event?
Stand we aside while the issue is in doubt,
That so we may seem blameless of these woes.
For 'tis by the sword the verdict must be sealed.

Enter SERVANT.

SERVANT
Woe is me! Utter woe! My lord is slain.
Woe yet once more, a third last farewell cry!
Aigisthos is no more. But open, open,
And with all speed. Unbar the women's gates.
Draw the bolts. And right lusty hands are needed—
Though not to help the dead—what use were that?

Ioû! Ioû!
I am shouting to the deaf and wasting words
On idle sleepers. Where is Klytaemnestra?
What doth she? Her own neck is like to fall
Beside the block beneath the stroke of Justice.

Enter KLYTAEMNESTRA.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
What is it now? What clamour are you raising?

SERVANT
The dead, I tell you, are murdering the living.
KLYTAEMNESTRA
Ay me! I read the purport of your riddle.
Even as by craft we slew, so must we perish.
Haste, someone, give me a man-destroying axe.
Let us know if we are conquerors or conquered.
To such a pass this woeful way has brought me.

Enter Orestes with his sword drawn, followed by Pylades.

ORESTES
'Tis thee I seek. For him, it is enough.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Ah me, beloved Aigisthos! Art thou dead?

ORESTES
Thou lovest the man? Why then in the same grave
Shalt thou lie, ne'er to abandon him in death.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Forbear, my son. Reverence this, dear child,
This breast at which thou oft, slumbering the while,
Didst suck with toothless gums the fostering milk.

ORESTES
Pylades? Shall I fear to slay my mother?

PYLADES
Who then will heed henceforth the voice of Loxias,
His Pythian oracles, aye and the faith of oaths?
Rather hold all men enemies than the Gods.

ORESTES
I approve thy sentence. Well dost thou exhort me.
Come now. I mean to slay you at yon man's side.
In his life you deemed him better than my sire;
Sleep with him then in death; since he is the man
You love, and him you should have loved, you hate.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
I reared thee, and with thee would I grow old.
ORESTES
My father's murderess, wouldst thou share my home?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Nay, child, the blame in part must lie with Fate.

ORESTES
Then this doom also Fate has brought to pass.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Hast thou no awe, child, of a parent's curse?

ORESTES
A mother's, who could cast me forth to misery.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
To a friendly house! That was no casting forth.

ORESTES
Foully was I sold, I, son of a free sire.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Where is the price then I received for thee?

ORESTES
That taunt for shame I cannot plainly utter.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Nay, but speak likewise of thy father's follies.

ORESTES
Idling at home, censure not him who toils.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
'Tis grief for a woman, child, to lack a mate.

ORESTES
Yet man's labour maintains her in idleness.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Thou meanest then, my child, to slay thy mother.

ORESTES
'Tis thou wilt be thine own slayer, not I.
KLYTAEMNESTRA
Look to it! Beware the hounds of a mother's fury.

ORESTES
How escape my father's, if I shirk this task?

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Words then are vain as a dirge to a dead tomb.

ORESTES
Vain, for my sire's fate brings this doom upon thee.

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Ay me! This is the snake I bare and suckled.

ORESTES
Yes, a true prophet was that dream-born terror.
You slew whom you ought not: suffer what you should not.

Exit Orestes, driving Klytaemnestra before him. 
Pylades follows.

LEADER
I mourn, even though it be for these, their twofold doom. 
But since sore-tried Orestes hath but reached the crown 
Of many murders, we would rather choose it so, 
Lest of this house the eye sink quenched for evermore.

CHORUS
As upon Priam's sons punishment came at last, Str. 1 
Heavily fraught with doom, 
So to the royal house of Agamemnon came 
A twofold lion, a twofold sword; 
Yea to the utmost end 
The Pytho-crowned fugitive, 940 
Sped by the voice divine, his race now has run. 
Ephymnion 1 
Utter a cry of joy, now that our master's house 
Thus hath escaped its woes, yea and the waste of wealth 
By an unclean and guilty pair— 
A hard, weary road!
Now upon him who loved treacherous fight, is come
Cunningly plotted doom.
And in the strife 'twas she guided a right his hand,
The veritable child of Zeus:
Justice the name whereby
She is called by men truthfully:
Deadly the wrath she breathes against those she hates.

Ephymnion

Utter a cry of joy, now that our master's house
Thus hath escaped its woes, yea and the waste of wealth
By an unclean and guilty pair—
A hard, weary road!

Even as Loxias without guile proclaimed
Out of the cavern vast of his Parnassian shrine,
So on the sin and the guile,
That long here have reigned, Justice hath brought revenge.
A strict fate forbids divine power itself
To serve evil ends.
Revere then the law whereby Heaven is bound.

Ephymnion

Kindled is now the light: gone is the mighty curb
Holding the house in thrall.
Up then, arise, ye halls! Grovelling on the ground
Too long have ye been lying wrapped in drear veils of gloom.

Verily soon shall Time, he that fulfilleth all,
Pass through the palace doors, when from the hearth he has
purged
Every pollution away,
With due cleansing rites driving the curses forth.
The dice now shall change with fair-falling face,
And, oh joy, the home
Shall once more behold its éxiles restored.
Kindled is now the light: gone is the mighty curb
Holding the house in thrall.
Up then, arise, ye halls! Grovelling on the ground
Too long have ye been lying wrapped in drear veils of gloom.

The scene opens, and Orestes is seen standing beside
the bodies of Clytaemnestra and Aigisthos.

ORESTES
Behold this twofold tyranny of our land,
They that slew the father and despoiled the house.
Stately they were once, seated on their thrones,
And loving even now, as from their plight
Is manifest. True to its pledge their oath still stands.
Both swore my father's murder, and to die
Together. That too has been faithfully kept.
Behold too, ye that judge these deeds of woe,
The snare wherewith my unhappy sire was bound,
For his hands a fetter, for his feet a trap.
Open it out, and standing round, display
This man-enwrapping sheet, that so the Father,
Not mine, but he whose eye sees all things here,
The Sun, may behold my mother's unclean work,
And some day at my trial may appear
To witness that I wrought this slaying justly,
My mother's—for Aigisthos' death I count not:
His the seducer's penalty by law:
But she who planned this horror against her lord,
Whose children she had borne beneath her girdle,
That once dear burden, proved now a deadly foe,
What think you of her? Were she sea-snake or viper,
Her touch would rot another's flesh unbitten,
If cruelty and wicked will could do it.
What can I name it, speak I ne'er so mildly?
A trap for a beast? or else a coffin-cloth
To wrap the feet of a corpse? Nay, 'tis a net:
Toils you might say, or long foot-trammelling robes;
Just such a thing some cozener might contrive,
One who tricks travellers, practising the trade
Of robbery. Many with this knavish snare
Might he destroy, and his heart often glow.
With such a woman never may I share
My home. Sooner let heaven slay me, childless.

CHORUS
Ah me! Ah me! 'Twas a wicked deed.
By a terrible death thou art laid low.
Alas!
Woe is flowering too for the living.

ORESTES
Did she the deed, or did she not? I call
This robe to witness, dyed by Aigisthos' sword.
'Tis gushing blood that here hath aided time
In spoiling the embroidery's many hues.
Now can I praise, now wail him where he fell:
And as I address this web that slew my sire,
I grieve for the crime, the penance, the whole race.
Such victory wins not envy, but pollution.

CHORUS
No mortal man may pass through his life
Without scathe, if he pay not in sorrow.
Alas!
Woe must be, to-day or hereafter.

ORESTES
Now hear me, for I know not how it will end—
Yea, like a driver mastered by his steeds,
My restive wits are whirling me astray
Far from the course; while Terror fain would sing
To my heart, and set her dancing to his tune.
So while I am sane, proclaiming to my friends,
I say, with justice did I slay my mother,
My sire's foul murderess, abhorred of heaven.
And for the spells that nerved me to this deed,
I cite the Pythian oracle of Loxias,
That should I act thus, I were clear of blame,
But if I failed to act—how name the penalty?
For ne'er could bow-cast reach such height of woe.
So now behold me: furnished with this bough
Enwreathed with wool, a suppliant will I go
To the mid-navel shrine, the home of Loxias,
And to that fire-light, famed imperishable,
Exiled for kindred bloodshed. To no hearth
Save his did Loxias bid me turn for refuge.
And let all men of Argos in time to come
Bear witness how these woes were brought to pass.
A wandering, homeless fugitive, I leave
Behind me, in life or death, such fame as this.

LEADER
Nay, thou hast done well. Yoke not then thy lips
To ill-omened speech, nor utter boding words,
Since the whole realm of Argos thou hast freed,
Thus lightly lopping the heads from those two snakes.

ORESTES
Ah! Ah!
Bondwomen, see them yonder, Gorgon-like,
In dusky raiment, twined about with coils
Of swarming snakes! I cannot stay here more.

LEADER
What fantasies toss thee, dearest of all sons
To a father? Stay: fear nothing. Thou hast vanquished.

ORESTES
To me these horrors are no fantasies,
But indeed the sleuth-hounds of my mother's wrath.

LEADER
Because the blood is yet fresh on thy hands.
Hence the confusion that invades thy soul.
ORESTES
Sovereign Apollo, yonder they come now thronging!
And from their eyes is dripping a loathsome gore.

LEADER
One only purge awaits thee: Loxias
Shall free thee from these horrors by his touch. 1060

ORESTES
Ye do not see these beings, but I see them.
I am hunted by them. I can stay no more.

LEADER
Blessings go with thee, and may gracious Gods
Watch over and keep thee safe with happy chance.

Exit Orestes.

CHORUS
Thus again for a third time, risen from the race,
Hath a storm swept over
The house of our kings and subsided.
First was the cruel doom of the children
Slain at the banquet.
Next was the anguish of a man, of a king,
When the Achaians' warrior chieftain
In the bath fell slain.
Now comes yet a third, a deliverer, nay,
Rather destroyer.
What end shall there be? When shall the fury
Of revenge sink lulled into slumber?
THE EUMENIDES, OR THE KINDLY GODDESSES
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Pythian Prophetess.
Orestes.
Apollo.
Hermes.
Ghost of Klytaemnestra.
Athena.
Chorus of Twelve Furies.
Athenian Jurors.
Chorus of the Escort.
THE EUMENIDES

Before the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Enter the Pythian Prophetess.

THE PROPHETESS

First of all Gods I worship in my prayer
The first diviner Earth; after her Themis,
The second, legend saith, to take her seat
Here in her mother's shrine. Third in succession,
With her consent, no violence done to any,
Another Titan child of Earth took seat,
Phoibe: who as a birthday gift bestowed it
On Phoibos, bearing a name from her derived.
He, voyaging from the pool and ridge of Delos,
And landing upon Pallas' harbouring shores,
Came to this country, his Parnassian seat,
Escorted with great worship on his way
By the road-paving children of Hephaistus,
Who tamed the wilderness of an untamed land.
There did the people and their governor,
King Delphos, with high honour welcome him.
His mind with divine art did Zeus inspire,
And seated him, fourth prophet, on this throne,
As Loxias, spokesman of his father Zeus.
These Gods I worship in my opening prayer.
Pallas our neighbour too I name with reverence.
I adore the Nymphs who haunt the caverned rock
Korūkis, loved by birds, by Gods frequented.
And Bromios,¹ I forget not, dwells here too,

¹ Bacchus.
Since, marshalling as a God his Bacchant host,
A torn hare's death for Pentheus he contrived.
The springs of Pleistos and Poseidon's might
I invoke, and Zeus supreme, the crown of all,
Then seat myself as prophetess on my throne.
May they now bless my entrance more than ever
In past days. Let all Hellenes present here
Approach, as custom bids, by fall of lot.
As the God leads me, so do I give response.

The Prophetess enters the shrine, but quickly returns.

Things terrible to speak, terrible to see,
Have driven me forth again from Loxias' house,
With no strength left me even to walk erect.
I speed with hands to steady tottering feet.
An aged woman scared is naught—a mere child.
When I drew near the wreath-decked inmost cell,
Upon the navel-stone I saw a man
Polluted, in a suppliant attitude.
With blood his hands were dripping, and he held
A drawn sword and a high-grown branch of olive,
Decently wreathed around with a broad fillet
Of white wool: that I can avouch with truth.
Between me and this man a fearful troop
Of women slumbered, seated upon chairs.
Yet not women: Gorgons call them rather.
Nor yet to Gorgon shapes do I liken them.
Such fiends I once saw pictured, snatching away
The banquet of Phineus. Yet of wingless form
Are these, dusky and loathsome altogether.
They snore with such blasts none may venture near;
And from their eyes a foul rheum oozes forth.
Their garb is neither fit to approach the statues
Of deities, nor to enter homes of men.
The race whence this tribe sprang ne'er have I seen,
Nor know what land may boast to have reared such offspring.
Unharmed, without repenting her travail.
For what may ensue, let mightiest Loxias,
Who is master of this house, himself provide.
He is healing seer and judge of prodigies,
And can purge houses other than his own.

Exit Prophetess. The interior of the shrine is dis-
closed. Orestes is seen kneeling and clasping
the navel-stone for sanctuary, surrounded by the
sleeping Furies. Apollo and Hermes are
standing over him.

APOLLO
I shall not fail. To the end will I protect thee.
Near shall I be, even though far away:
Nor will I prove soft to thy enemies.
Awhile thou seest yon raveners subdued.
Lo, sunken in sleep the loathly virgins lie,
These hoary ancient maidens, with whom never
Hath any God mingled, nor man, nor beast.
Evil was cause of their creation; evil
The murky pit of Tartarus where they dwell
Abhorred by men and by the Olympian Gods.
Yet do not thou grow faint, but fly far hence:
For they will chase thee across the long mainland,
Ever new soil beneath thy wandering tread,
And beyond seas and past wave-girded towns.
Let not thy heart faint brooding on thy penance,
Till thou take refuge in the city of Pallas
And clasp her ancient image in thy arms.
There before judges of thy cause, with speech
Of soothing power, we will discover means
To set thee free forever from these woes.
For I did counsel thee to slay thy mother.

ORESTES
Sovereign Apollo, what is just thou knowest:
Now therefore study to neglect it not.
Thy power to succour needs no warranty.
APOLLO
Remember: let not fear subdue thy soul.
And thou, born of one father, my own brother,
Hermes, protect him: prove thy title true
As Guide, by shepherding my suppliant here.
The sanctity of an outlaw Zeus respects,
When thus with prosperous escort he is sped.

Apollo vanishes. Orestes leaves the temple, guided by Hermes. The Ghost of Klytaemnestra appears.

GHOST OF KLYTAEMNESTRA
Sleep, would you? Shame! What need of sleepers here?
And I by you thus held in slight regard
Among the other dead, and followed still
By the reproach of murder among the shades,
Wandering shamed—to you do I declare,
By them I am most grievously accused.
Yet wronged so foully by my nearest kin,
No spirit power shows wrath on my behalf,
Though slaughtered by the hands of a matricide.
Look now upon these wounds; look with thy soul.
For while it sleeps, the mind is lit with eyes;
But by day mortal fate is not foreseen.
Oft indeed of my offerings have you lapped:
Wineless libations, sober soothing draughts,
Dread midnight banquets, when no God but you
Is worshipped, on the altar would I sacrifice.
All this, I see, is spurned beneath your feet.
The man is gone, escaping like a fawn,
Aye, from the very snare’s midst has he sprung
Lightly, making great mouths at you in scorn.
Hear me. ’Tis for my very soul I plead.
Awake, O Goddesses of the nether world.
In dream now do I, Klytaemnestra, call you.

CHORUS
(Mutterings.)
KLYTAEMNESTRA
Yes, whimper! But the man is gone, fled far:
For he has friends far different from mine.

CHORUS
(Mutterings.)

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Too deep you drowse, and pity not my wrong.
Fled is Orestes, who slew me, his mother.

CHORUS
(Moanings.)

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Whining and drowsing! Come, rise up forthwith.
What hast thou yet done save to work me harm?

CHORUS
(Moanings.)

KLYTAEMNESTRA
Sleep and fatigue, puissant conspirators,
Have spoiled the dreadful dragoness of her might.

CHORUS
(Mutterings redoubled and louder.)
Follow, follow, follow, follow! Mark there!

KLYTAEMNESTRA
In dream you hunt your prey, and give tongue like
A hound, whose fancy never quits the chase.
What dost thou? Arise! Let not fatigue defeat thee.
Made soft by sleep, lose not all sense of injury.
Let thy heart wince at merited rebuke,
Which to the righteous is a very goad.
Waft thou thy blood-hot breath upon the man:
Shrivel him with thy belly's fiery blast.
Follow him; wither him with a fresh pursuit.

The Ghost of Klytaemnestra disappears.
LEADER
Awake!—Do thou wake her—while I wake thee.
Dost thou sleep? Rise; and spurning sleep afar,
Let us see if this warning dream prove false.

CHORUS (outbursts by separate Furies.)
Behold! Behold! Oh shame! See, we have suffered wrong!
Much painful toil have I endured, and all in vain.—
Bitter indeed the wrong done to us. Oh the shame!
Defeat hard to bear!—
Our game has slipped right through the meshes, and is gone.
By sleep subdued, lo! I have lost, lost the prey.—

APOLLO reappears.
Aha, son of Zeus! Thou art a thief, a knave.
Thy youth rides trampling over elder deities.
What is thy suppliant? What but a godless man,
A cruel son? Yet him,
This matricide, thou hast stolen from us, thou, a God.
Who dares pretend—none!—that such deeds are just?

But unto me, a dream-heard voice, there came Reproach,
That struck, (like a charioteer who smites
Gripping his mid-goad firm,)
Struck under the ribs to the heart.
I feel it now: sore the smart
Which the fell scourge has wrought.
Oh agony, agony not to be borne!

Such are the doings of those younger Gods, who grasp
Beyond right the lordship over all.
Dripping from head to foot
With blood you may see it, the throne
That is the Earth's navel-stone.
Lo the foul stain of gore
That clings to it horribly thus evermore!

A prophet deity, he hath brought pollution home
To his own holy shrine, self-bidden, self-invited.
Heavenly law he spurns, honouring human crime;
And elder dooms of Fate he destroys.

Ant. 3

He hath my hate; nor shall he set yon murderer loose.
Though beneath earth he flee, ne'er shall he win deliverance.
Never from guilt absolved, still an avenger there
To haunt his head accurst he shall find.

APOLLO
Out, I command you, from these precincts! Hence
With speed! Begone from my prophetic shrine;
Lest smitten by a wingèd glistening snake
Sped from my gold-wrought bow-string, thou in anguish
Shouldst spit forth foam darkened with human blood,
Vomiting clots of gore which thou hast sucked.
This is no dwelling fit for your approach.
Go rather where doomed heads are lopped, eyes gouged,
Throats cut; where by destruction of the seed
The virile strength of boys is maimed, where men
Are sliced or stoned, or wail in long-drawn moans
Impaled beneath the spine. Do you not hear me?
Such is the feast that charms you, and so makes
The Gods abhor you. Your whole form and fashion
Betrays you. In some blood-gorged lion's cave
Such as you should inhabit, not in this place
Of prophecy, infecting all you touch.
Vile flock without a shepherd, get you hence!
For such a herd no God has love to give.

LEADER
Sovereign Apollo, hear now our reply.
Thou thyself art not guilty of this in part:
Thou alone didst all; the whole guilt is thine.

APOLLO
How? - Make that clear. I grant thee speech so far.

LEADER
Thy voice enjoined this man to slay his mother.
APOLLO
I enjoined him to avenge his sire. What then?
LEADER
And next didst promise shelter to blood new-spilt.
APOLLO
And bade him seek purgation in this temple.
LEADER
Us then, who sped him hither, dost thou revile?
APOLLO
Because you are not fit to approach this house.
LEADER
But thus to act is our appointed office.
APOLLO
What is this office, this proud privilege?
LEADER
We hunt forth mother-slayers from all homes.
APOLLO
How deal you then with wives who slay their lords?
LEADER
That were no true murder of kindred blood.
APOLLO
Then of slight honour and no worth you make
The troth-plight between Zeus and crowning Hera.
By this plea too you cast into contempt
Love's Goddess, from whom come man's dearest joys.
The fate-sealed marriage bed of man and wife,
Fenced with its rights, is mightier than all oaths.
If then to those who slay their mates you are lenient,
So as not even to cast them a look of wrath,
I say without right you pursue Orestes.
For while your passion in one case is roused,
In another I perceive you judge more calmly.
But Pallas at this trial shall arbitrate.
LEADER
Yonder man never, never will I let go.

APOLLO
Pursue him then and multiply thy toil.

LEADER
Seek not to abridge my rights by argument.

APOLLO
I would not take them as a gift, thy rights.

LEADER
Where Zeus sits throned thou art great enough already. But I, drawn by a mother's blood, pursue This man with vengeance, till I hunt him down.

APOLLO
And I will aid my suppliant and protect him. For dreaded among men and gods alike Is the appealer's wrath, should I forsake him.

The scene changes to the temple of Athena at Athens.
Enter Orestes, who takes sanctuary at the image of the Goddess.

ORESTES
Goddess Athena, by command of Loxias I come. Receive this outcast graciously, No suppliant unabsoved with hand unpurged; Long since the stain is dimmed and worn away By sojournings and journeyings among men. Wandering over land and sea alike, Obedient still to Loxias' oracles I approach thy dwelling and thine image, Goddess. Here clinging, will I wait my trial's end.

Enter the Furies.

LEADER
Good!—Here is a clear trace of the man. Come, follow where the dumb informer guides.
For as a hound pursues a wounded fawn,
So by the dropping blood we track him down.
Broken by many killing toils my breast
Pants; for through every land my search has ranged,
And speeding over seas with wingless flight
Have I pursued, swift as a ship can sail.
But now he must be cowering somewhere near.
The smell of human blood smiles sweetly upon me.

CHORUS (outbursts by separate Furies.)
Again, search again!
Spy into every nook,
For fear the matricide
Stealthily slip from our wrath.—
Yes, there again safe he lurks,
Clinging around the image of the deathless God:
Trial he now would claim for his foul handiwork.—
But it may not be: a mother's blood, once spilt, is hard
To gather up; hard indeed.
That which on earth is shed, vanishes and is gone.—
Now thou in turn must yield me from thy living self,
Ruddy and rich from the heart, liquor to lap: and on thee
I mean to thrive well, evil draught though it be.—
I'll wither thee alive and drag thee down below,
There to atone, pang for pang, thy mother's agony.—
There shalt thou see all impious mortals else who sinned
Be it against a God,
Be it against guest,
Or dear parent's life,
Receiving each the penance that is justly theirs.
For Hades there, the mighty doomster of mankind,
Beneath earth enthroned,
Watcheth and judgeth all with mind truth-inscribed.

ORESTES
Schooled by my miseries, I have experience
In purifying rites. Where speech befits
I know, where silence too. But in this case
A wise instructor charges me to speak.
For the blood sleeps and is fading from my hand:
The stain of matricide is washed away.
While yet fresh, at divine Apollo's hearth
It was expelled by purging blood of swine.
A long tale were it to recount all those
I have visited with harmless intercourse.
Now with pure lips, religiously, I call
On this land's Queen, Athena, that she come
Hither to aid me, and so without strife win
Myself, my country and the Argive people
As true allies, faithful for evermore.
So whether in some Libyan region now,
Beside her natal river Triton's stream,
She plant an upright or a covered foot,
Succouring her friends, or else, like marshal bold
And manly, she be watching Phlegra's plain,
Oh let her haste—a God hears even from far—
And bring to me deliverance from these woes.

LEADER
Ne'er shall Apollo nor Athena's might
Protect thee, but abandoned shalt thou perish,
Finding no place for gladness in thy soul.
Thou bloodless meat of spirits, thou mere shadow,
Wilt thou not answer, wilt thou scorn my words,
Though for me thou art bred and consecrated?
Alive, slain at no altar, shalt thou feed me.
Now shalt thou hear a hymn to bind thee fast.

CHORUS
Come now, our choric dance form we, for now
'Tis time to reveal
The destroying charm of our music,
Expounding the functions of this our band
To administer destiny among men.
Righteous and just we deem is our justice.
That man who displays hands pure without stain,
Ne'er do we launch our anger against him:
Unscathed his days he fulfilleth.
But when having sinned, like unto this man,
He hides from us hands that are guilt-stained,
Then for the slain true witnesses are we,
And in wrath we arise, stern, unappeasable,
To exact a revenge for the blood spilt.

Mother who didst bear me (O Mother Night) to be judge of those who see and who see not,
Hear: for he, Leto's whelp, from my rights fain would oust me,
Stealing yon cowering Creature, mine though he be,
Sealed thus by a mother's blood.

Over his death-dedicate head
Sing we the spell, madding the brain,
Scattering sense and bewildering,
Our Erinuan litany,
Binding fast the will, a chant
Lyreless, withering men away.

This the eternal function which changeless
Fate as she span decreed should be our own: all men,
Whoso incurs wantonly guilt of foul kindred bloodshed,
Such we haunt, till beneath
Earth he pass. Nay, in death
He shall still be none too free.

Over his death-dedicate head
Sing we the spell, madding the brain,
Scattering sense and bewildering,
Our Erinuan litany,
Binding fast the will, a chant
Lyreless, withering men away.

Such, when we rose into being, the functions assigned us.
Let no Immortal encroach on our rights; for of them there is
None shall share in our banquets.
In white festival robes neither portion nor lot is allowed me.
For destruction is my joy,

Ruin and wreck, when in the home
Denizen Strife slayeth a friend.
Then in his track thus do we speed:
Strong though he be, we wear him down,
Ere on his hands the blood be dried.

Eager to lighten the Gods of this burdensome office, Ant. 2
Therefore we pray that herein they should hold them exempted,
Nor claim such jurisdiction.
Zeus deigns not to converse with a tribe that provokes his abhorrence,
Blood-bedabbled like our own.

Man's proud glories, yea though they mount to the heavens,
Shrink to the earth and dissolve in contempt and dishonour,
Swept by the funeral black of our robes, trodden under
Our malignant dancing feet.

For with a leap, nimble and strong,
Down from on high, heavily down,
With cruel foot crush we his crown.
Swift though he run, yet shall he sprawl,
Tripped and snared to destruction.

Though he falls, yet blind in his madness he knows not;
Such is the murk of pollution that hovers around him.
Misty and black is the gloom that envelops the house,
As rumour tells with many a groan.

For so it stands. Skilled in craft
And sure to act, ne'er forgetting
Evil deeds, dread Powers
Inexorable to prayers of men,
We claim an office dishonoured and scorned
By Gods above. A sunless murk
Divideth them and us,
Shadowy, pathless and rugged, alike
For seeing and for sightless eyes.

What mortal then quaileth not
In awe and dread, when he hears
Our ordinance, stablished
By Fate, and by the Gods assigned
In perpetuity? Yea from of old
This privilege hath been ours. No lack
Of honour do we meet,
Though beneath earth is our dwelling appointed,
And in sun-forsaken gloom.

Enter Athena.

ATHENA
I heard a suppliant cry from far away,
Where by Skamander's stream I was occupying
A land which the Achaian chiefs assigned
In full possession and entire to me
A mighty portion of their spear-won wealth,
A chosen gift unto the sons of Theseus.
Thence came I speeding with unwearied foot,
To the wingless rustling of my bellying aegis:
This was the car my lusty steeds were yoked to.
Beholding these strange visitants in my land,
The sight dismays me not, though it astounds.

Who are you? I would question all alike,
Both him who sits a suppliant at my image,
And you, so unlike aught begotten of seed,

SEEN never among Goddesses by Gods,
Nor yet resembling shapes of mortal men.

Yet to speak ill of others unprovoked
The just like not, and righteousness abhors.

LEADER
Thou shalt hear all in brief, daughter of Zeus.
We are Night's eternal children. In our homes
Below the earth, the Curses are we called.

ATHENA
Your birth I know now, and the name you bear.

LEADER
Aye, and my office thou shalt learn forthwith.

ATHENA
I shall understand you, if your words are plainer.

LEADER
Slayers of men we hunt forth from all homes.

ATHENA
And the slayer's flight—where is the end of it?

LEADER
Where happiness is no more to be found.

ATHENA
Is the flight such whereon you hound this man?

LEADER
Yes, for he dared to be his mother's murderer.

ATHENA
Was there no other power, whose wrath he feared?

LEADER
What goad so strong as to compel matricide?

ATHENA
There are two parties here, and but one plea.

LEADER
But the oath, he will not take nor tender it.

ATHENA
Thou wouldst be called just rather than act justly.

LEADER
How so? Explain. Thou art not poor in subtlety.
ATHENA
I say that wrong must not prevail by oaths.

LEADER
Well, question him, then judge with equity.

ATHENA
Will you entrust the cause to my decision?

LEADER
How else? Thy noble fame and birth we reverence.

ATHENA
What reply, stranger, wouldst thou make to this?
But tell me first thy country and thy lineage,
And thy misfortunes, then repel this charge;
If in truth with right assured thou sittest here
Clasping this holy image near my altar,
A sacred suppliant like Ixion 1 once.
To all these questions give me a plain reply.

ORESTES
Sovereign Athena, first of a grave scruple,
Answering thy last words, will I relieve thee.
I seek no absolution, nor with hand
Polluted to thine image do I cling.
And of this, weighty proof shall I allege.
By law the slayer is debarred from speech,
Till one who has power to purify from murder
Sprinkle him with a suckling victim's blood.
Long ago have I thus been duly purged
Elsewhere, with victim and with lustral stream.
With these words do I set at rest thy doubt.
Hear now my race. In Argos was I born.
My sire, to whom thy question fitly leads,
Was Agamemnon, chieftain of warrior seamen,
With whose aid thou didst make the city of Troy

1 Fabled to be the first murderer of a kinsman, but purified from blood-guilt by the Gods.
No more a city. He returning home
Died shamefully, by my black-souled mother slain,
Enveloped in a cunning snare, that still
Remained as witness of that murderous bath.
And I, till then an exile, coming home
Slew her who bare me, I deny it not,
Requiting thus my beloved father's blood.
And for this deed must Loxias share the guilt,
Since he, to goad my heart, foretold dire pains.
If I dealt not with those who first were guilty.
Whether I did right or no, be thou the judge.
Whate'er my fate, from thee will I accept it.

ATHENA
The matter is too grave for any mortal
To presume to try it: nor may I myself
Lawfully judge a case of passionate murder.
Moreover to my house thou art come a humbled
Suppliant, pure and innocent, whom, as one
Guiltless towards my people, I respect.
But these are hard to soften and placate;
And if they win not victory in this cause,
The poison of their pride, rained on the soil,
Will prove a fearful devastating blight.
Thus is it, both ways—whether I bid them stay
Or go—a sore perplexity for me.
But since this case has lighted on our city,
I will appoint judges of murder, bound
By oath, to be an ordinance for all time.
You are to summon hither witnesses
And proof, the sworn supports of a just plea.
When I have chosen the best among my citizens,
I will return to sift this matter truly.

Exeunt Athena and Orestes.

CHORUS
Now shall ancient law by new
Be destroyed, if perchance
Yonder mother-murderer's
Wrongful plea here prevail.
All men now
Shall be taught by such a crime
How 'tis easy and safe to sin.
Yea, and many a time hereafter,
Cruefully stricken by his own
Children, shall a parent fall.

Stern and jealous once we watched
Human sin: now no more
Shall we visit them with wrath.
Death at large will we launch.
Men shall ask
One another, (while they sigh
O'er a neighbour's evil fate,)
How to minish or end their miseries.
Remedy there is none, alas!
Every counsel is in vain.

Nor let him on whom the stroke
Of calamity shall fall,
Thus invoke us, wailing loud:
"Justice, hear!
Hear, ye throned Erínues!"
Such perchance the piteous plaint
Of some father or mother's soul,
Anguish-smitten, since o'erthrown
Is the house of Justice now.

There are times when Fear is well.
As the heart's inquisitor
Ever must it bide enthroned.
Suffering oft
Teacheth wisdom best to men.
Yet who never in the light
Freely recreates his soul,
Be it city or be it man,
Can he reverence Justice still?

Neither uncontrolled, nor yet
Despot-ridden, such the life
Thou shouldst praise.
God to the mean giveth ever the victory,
Though his rule vary in all else.
Even so the proverb saith:
Pride is the offspring engendered of impious thought:
But from the soul's health
There cometh forth happiness
Prayed for and loved by all men.

Never then, forget thou this:
Reverence the throne of Right.
Let not gain
Tempt thee to spurn and abase it with impious foot;
Else punishment follows,
Biding till its time be ripe.
Therefore let each honour those who have given him birth;
Next, to the stranger
Within thy halls see thou pay
Reverence and respect due.

Whoso is just willingly without constraint,
Shall not fail to prosper,
Nor ever sink,whelmed in utter ruin.
But he who dares, bold in sin, to carry freight
Of wealth unjustly swept together from all sides,
In due time perforce shall haul his sail down,
When on the labouring boat the storm
Bursts, and the yard is breaking.

Then loud he cries unto ears that will not hear
Mid the wrestling whirlpool.
The daemon power laughs to see the rash fool
Who once defied fate, but by disaster now
Is broken, helpless to override the whelming wave.
With his once proud wealth he sinks for ever,
Dashed on the reef of Justice, lost,
Vanishing un lamented.

The scene changes to the Areopagus. Enter Athena with twelve Athenian citizens, as jurors, followed by Orestes and the Chorus.

ATHENA
Proclaim now, Herald: bid the folk be still.
And let the Tyrrhene trumpet, with shrill note
Piercing the heavens, filled with breath of man,
Utter its high-pitched message to the throng.

A trumpet sounds.

Let there be silence while this place of council
Is filling, that my ordinance may be heard
By this whole city for all time to come,
And by these, that the suit be rightly judged.

Enter Apollo.

LEADER
Sovereign Apollo, rule what is thine own.
How in this business, pray, art thou concerned?

APOLLO
I come, first to give witness,—for my house,
My hearth received this man as suppliant,
And it was I who purged him of this murder,—
To plead too for myself, for I was cause
Of his mother's slaying. Open thou the case
In such form as thy wisdom may think best.

ATHENA
The word is now with you. The case is opened.
Let the pursuer, as is right, speak first,
And so lay information of the cause.
LEADER
Many we are, but briefly will we speak.
Sentence for sentence do thou make reply.
Say first, art thou thy mother’s murderer?
ORESTES
I slew her. That fact there is no denying.

LEADER
Of the three falls already here is one.

ORESTES
You make that boast too soon: I am not yet thrown.

LEADER
But how it was you slew her, you must say.

ORESTES
I will. With a sword I stabbed her in the throat.

LEADER
And who suggested, who advised the deed?

ORESTES
The oracle of this God. He bears me witness.

LEADER
Did he, the seer, prompt you to matricide?

ORESTES
Yes: nor do I blame him for my lot so far.

LEADER
If sentence grips thee, soon thou’lt change thy tune.

ORESTES
I trust: my father sends help from the grave.

LEADER
In the dead then put thy trust, thou mother-slayer.

ORESTES
She was attainted by a twofold guilt.
LEADER
How so? Explain thy meaning to these jurors.
ORESTES
She slew my father when she slew her husband.
LEADER
So she is quit by death, while you still live.
ORESTES
Why did you not pursue her while she lived?
LEADER
She was not of one blood with the man she slew.
ORESTES
Am I then kindred to my mother's blood?
LEADER
How else beneath her girdle did she breed thee,
Wretch? Thine own mother's blood dost thou disdain?
ORESTES
Apollo, be thou witness now: pronounce
Whether it was with justice that I slew her.
For that I did the deed I have confessed.
But whether justly or no this blood was shed,
Declare thy thought, that I may answer these.

APOLLO
To you, the High Court of Athena, honest
Shall be my words. A prophet may not lie.
Never from mantic throne have I said aught,
Whether concerning man, woman, or people,
Save by command of Zeus, the Olympian Father.
What force is in this plea, I bid you note,
And be obedient to my Father's will:
For an oath has no more potency than Zeus.

LEADER
So Zeus gave thee this oracle, that bade
This Orestes to avenge his father's blood
Regardless of a mother's claim to awe?

I40
APOLLO
Nay, it was far worse shame that a noble man,
Endowed with god-given royalty, should die,
And that by a woman’s hand, not slain by shafts
As from some Amazon’s fierce far-shooting bow,
But in such wise as you are now to hear,
Pallas, and ye whose votes decide this case.

Returning from the war, where in the main
He had traded prosperously, with kindly words
She greeted him; then, as he reached the end
Of his ablutions in the bath, she flung
The tented cloak, and trapped in the cunning robe’s
Inextricable maze, smote down her lord.
Such is the tale of how that hero died,
The all-reverenced, the admiral of the fleet.
Such too have I shown her to prick your hearts,
All ye whose charge it is to judge this plea.

LEADER
So a father’s fate, you say, wins more respect
From Zeus, who himself enchained his old sire Kronos.
How reconcile thine argument with this?
You judges, I invite you to take note.

APOLLO
O loathly, brutish monsters, heaven-abhorred!
Fetters he might undo: there is cure for that;
Yea many the means to loosen what is bound.
But when the dust hath swallowed a man’s blood,
Once dead, there is no raising of him then.
No healing charm hath Zeus my father made
For that: all else now high now low he shifts
And turns about with no least breath of toil.

LEADER
See what it means, thy plea in his defence.
His mother’s kindred blood he spilt on the earth.
Shall his father’s house in Argos yet be his?
What altar of public worship shall he use?
What brotherhood will admit him to its rites?

APOLLO
This too will I expound; and mark how justly.
The mother of her so-called child is not
Parent, but nurse of the young life sown in her.
The male is parent: she, but a stranger to him,
Keeps safe his growing plant, unless fate blight it.
Of this truth I will show you evidence.
A sire may beget without a mother. Here
My witness stands, child of Olympian Zeus,
Who grew not in the darkness of a womb,
Yet plant so fair no goddess could bring forth.
As in all else, Pallas, it shall be my aim
To make thy city and people great, so now
I sent this man as suppliant to thy house,
For all time to become thy faithful friend.
So mayst thou, Goddess, find allies in him
And his hereafter; while eternally
This people shall maintain their stablished bond.

ATHENA
Has enough now been said; and may I bid
These judges give their true and honest vote?

LEADER
For our part, all our shafts have now been shot.
I wait to hear how the issue shall be judged.

ATHENA
And you? Are you content I order so?

APOLLO
You have heard what you have heard. Friends, give your
votes;
And let your hearts pay reverence to your oath.

ATHENA
Hear now my ordinance, people of Athens,
Judges of the first trial for shed blood.
Here for all time to come shall Aigeus’ folk
Meet as a jurors’ council on this hill
Of Ares, where the Amazons pitched their tents,
When once to humble Theseus’ might they came
Hither in their hosts, and here raised up a new
Lofty-towered citadel to rival his,
Sacrificing to Ares on this rock,
Thence called the Hill of Ares. Thereon Reverence
And Fear, its kinsman, among my citizens
Shall check wrong-doing night and day alike,
So but my citizens alter not the laws.
If with foul miry influx thou pollute
Bright water, thou wilt never win a draught.
Neither ungoverned nor tyrannical,
Such rule I bid you venerate and maintain.
Nor wholly from the city banish dread;
For what mortal is righteous who fears naught?
Such be your reverence and your righteous awe,
And you shall have, to guard your land and town,
A bulwark such as none elsewhere possess,
Not ’mid the Scythians, nor in Pelops’ isle.
Pure from corruption, reverend, quick to wrath,
Such the tribunal I establish here,
A vigilant guardian of the land’s repose.
To exhort my citizens for times to come,
At such length have I spoken. Now let each rise
And take his ballot, and decide the cause
With reverence for his oath. My words are ended.

FURY
Dangerous visitants are we to your land.
Do not affront us then, I counsel you.

APOLLO
And I say, dread my oracles, wherein
Zeus also speaks his will. Foil not their fruit.

1 The Areopagus.
FURY 2
Maintain not a bloody cause: 'tis not thine office.
No longer pure will be thy shrines and oracles.

APOLLO
Is my sire no more wise, because he purged
Suppliant Ixion, that first murderer?

FURY 3
You talk! But I, if I gain not my cause,
Will soon revisit and chastise this land.

APOLLO
Among the young Gods and the elder too
You are despised. The victory shall be mine.

FURY 4
Such a part did you play in Pheres' house,
When you beguiled the Fates to make men deathless.¹

APOLLO
Is it not just to befriend a worshipper,
And more than ever when his need is sore?

FURY 5
Thou, thou, abolishing ancient ordinance,
Didst cozen those primaeval powers with wine.

APOLLO
Thou, thou, defeated in thy suit, shalt soon
Spit forth thy venom vainly on thy foes.

LEADER
Since thy young violence overrides our age,
I wait to hear the verdict, still in doubt
Whether to wreak my wrath against the town.

ATHENA
Mine shall this task be, to give judgment last;
And this my vote to Orestes will I reckon.
For of no mother was I born: in all,

¹ Persuading them to accept a substitute for Admetus the son of Pheres.
Save to be wedded, with whole heart I approve
The male. I am strongly of the father's side.
Therefore a wife's fate shall I less esteem,
Who slew her husband, the master of her house. 740
Orestes wins, even with equal votes.
Forthwith turn out the ballots from the urns,
You judges to whom that function is assigned.

ORESTES
O bright Apollo, how will the judgment go?

LEADER
O Night, dark Mother, dost thou behold these things?

ORESTES
For me 'tis now the noose, or life's light still.

LEADER
For us, ruin, or worship without end.

APOLLO
Number aright the votes cast out, my friends.
As you divide them, reverence honesty.
If a vote fail, great mischief may ensue;
And a single pebble's cast lifts up a house. 750

ATHENA
This man is acquitted of blood-guiltiness;
For equal is the number of the lots.

ORESTES
O Pallas! O thou saviour of my house!
Yea, thus to my lost fatherland hast thou
Restored me: and through Hellas men shall say,
"He is again an Argive, and may dwell
In his sire's heritage, by help of Pallas,
And Loxias, last of Him who ordaineth all,
The Saviour." Pitying my sire's fate, he looked
On these, my mother's advocates, and saved me.
I now unto this land and to thy folk,
Ere to my home I go, will swear this oath
That shall be valid for all time to come:
Never let Argive captain hither march
With spears in order ranked to do you wrong.
For we ourselves, from the grave where we shall lie,
Will plague those who transgress these oaths of ours
With desperate misadventures, till beset
By evil omens as they march, their hearts
Fail them, and they repent their enterprise.
But while there is no default, while still they honour
This city of Pallas with confederate spear,
Towards them the greater will be our good-will.
Farewell. May thou and this thy city's people
Grapple your foes in a resistless grip,
Till safety and victorious arms be yours.

Exeunt Orestes and Apollo.

CHORUS
Oh shame, ye younger Deities! The old, holy laws Str. 1
Ye have ridden down, and stolen from our hands the prey.
But I, dishonoured, grief-afflicted, heavily wroth,
On this land accurst
Poison, poison, woe for woe, drops of sterile influence
Will I drip down to earth, hot from my heart; and thence
Birth-killing blight, bud-withering, (Oh revenge!)
Scattering over the ground,
Shall sow the soil with man-destroying blots of plague.
Oh wail! wail!—How act now?
I am mocked, mocked.—A sore grief
To Athens be my wrongs!
Alas, heavy the wrongs
We bear, Maids of Night,
Mourning our loss of honour.

ATHENA
I pray you, do not grieve thus bitterly,
You are not vanquished; but in equal votes
The cause ends, fairly, not to your dishonour.
No, but from Zeus came shining testimony;
Given by the very God who gave the oracle,
That Orestes by this deed should take no harm.
Then be not passionate; hurl no wrathful threats
Against this land, nor cause sterility
By shedding venomous drops of magic dew,
With fierce corrosion to devour the seed.
For here I promise you most faithfully
A cavern for your shrine in sacred ground,
Where on bright altars you shall sit enthroned,
Adored and worshipped by my citizens.

CHORUS
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We bear, Maids of Night,
Mourning our loss of honour.

ATHENA
Ye are not dishonoured: then restrain your wrath.
Being Gods, plague not with spells a land of mortals.
I put my trust in Zeus: what need to say it?
Alone of Gods I know the keys that open
The chamber where the thunder is sealed up.
But of that there is no need. Be counselled by me:
Sow not the earth with fruit of a wild tongue,
Fraught with the seeds of ruin for all life.
Calm the black billowing wave's fierce violence:
Become the revered partner of my home.
When the prime offerings of this spacious land
For offspring and for marriage rite, are thine
For ever, thou wilt yet commend this offer.

CHORUS
We to endure such a shame!  
We the primaevally wise! thus domiciled, thus housed!
Dishonouring, shameful thought!
I breathe forth my rage, my soul's passionate wrath. 840
Oh! Oh! Shame! Foul!
What is this agony—this, that assails my breast?
Hear my fury, O Mother
Night: for the Gods have robbed me, by vile, crafty tricks,
Stolen my ancient honours, brought low my pride.

ATHENA
I will indulge thy moods, for thou art elder.
And yet, though thou art wiser far than I,
To me too Zeus hath given no foolish wit. 850
But if you pass to a land of other folk,
You will regret our Athens, I forewarn you.
For to her citizens time's stream shall flow
With larger honour; whilst thou, honourably
Enshrined by Erechtheus' temple, 1 shalt receive
From adoring troops of men and women, more
Than thou couldst hope in the wide world besides.
And thou within my bounds must never plant
Whetstones of bloodshed, such as mar the breast
Of youth, maddening with worse rage than wine; 860
Nor take, to graft it in my citizens,
The heart of fighting cocks, a spirit of war
Domestic, valiant only against kin.
Let them seek war abroad, not hard to find
For men swayed by a mighty lust for glory.
Farm-yard fowls and their battles I despise.

1 The shrine of an ancient mythical king.
Such then the choice that now I offer thee:
Blessing, and blest, and worshipped blessedly,
To share in this most heaven-favoured land.

CHORUS
We to endure such a shame!
We the primaevally wise! thus domiciled, thus housed!
Dishonouring, shameful thought!
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Oh! Oh! Shame! Foul!
What is this agony—this, that assails my breast?
Hear my fury, O Mother
Night: for the Gods have robbed me, by vile, crafty tricks,
Stolen my ancient honours, brought low my pride.

ATHENA
I will not weary of speaking thee fair words.
Ne'er shalt thou say that thou, an ancient Goddess,
By me, thy younger, and these mortal citizens
Wert thrust forth hence inhospitably scorned.
No, if divine Persuasion, the soothing charm
And magic of my tongue, be sacred to thee,
Then here abide: but if thou wouldst not stay,
Thou canst not justly afflict this city's folk
With wrath or hate, or do them any hurt.
For thou mayst claim thy portion in her soil
Rightfully, with all honourable worship.

LEADER
Athena, what is this home thou offerest me?

ATHENA
One from all sorrow free. Accept it now.

LEADER
Say I accept: what privilege shall be mine?

ATHENA
That without thee no household shall have increase.

LEADER
Canst thou endow me with such power as that?
ATHENA
Aye, we will bless thy votaries with good fortune.

LEADER
And wilt thou give me warrant for all time?

ATHENA
No need to promise what I would not do.

LEADER
I feel thy soothing charm: my wrath abates.

ATHENA
Abide then here, and thou shalt win thee friends.

LEADER
But what strains must I chant to bless your land?

ATHENA
Such as prefigure victory without flaw:
Blessings from earth, and from the watery deep,
And from the sky: let every wind that blows
Pass in fair sun-lit breezes o'er the fields:
Let fruits of earth and cattle for our folk
Increase in streaming plenty never-tired:
And for the seed of men be safe deliverance.
Yet favour more the birth of righteous offspring:
For even as one who nurseth plants, I love
The sort that from the just hath taken graft.
Such is thy part: while I, in the renowned
Trials of war, will ne'er forego my claim
To glorify my town with public victory.

CHORUS
We accept. Here with Pallas let us dwell.
Scorn we not her citadel
By almighty Zeus and Ares cherished
As the fortress of the Gods,
Crown of Hellas, guarding
The altars of her deities.
Now for her I make my prayer
With benignant auguries,
That every blessing fraught with life's felicity
From her soil should teem forth
'Neath the bright rays of the sun.

ATHENA
Love for my city and people hath urged me
Thus to invite to a home in our midst
These powerful, stern, implacable deities.
Theirs is the office to govern all things
That concern mankind.
But whoe'er meets with them in wrathful mood,
Knows not whence falls the stroke on his life:
For the sins of his ancestors hale him before
Their throne to be judged; and silently Death,
Loud though his boasts be,
In cruel wrath smites and destroys him.

CHORUS
Evil breath never blow to hurt her trees:
Such to Athens be my grace.
Never trespass hither scorching wind
To nip the budding eyes of plants.
May no blast of sterile
Blighting plague assail her fields.
And with double births let Pan
At the appointed season bless
The mothers of the thriving flock; and may rich Earth
Teem with abundant offspring,
Gifts to thank the bounteous Gods.

ATHENA
Hear, O ye warders of Athens, what blessings
Her promise assures you: for great is the power
Of the holy Erīnus both with immortal
And underworld spirits; and among mankind
Visibly sovereign governors are they,
Bestowing on one man gladness and song,  
And a life tear-dimmed on his neighbour.

CHORUS  
Let not death's sudden stroke  
On her sons untimely fall.  
To every young and lovely maid  
Grant that a mate be assigned, O ye powers hymeneal,  
And ye, O divine Fates,  
Daughters of Night who bare us,  
Deities truthful and just,  
Partners in every household,  
Powerful over all seasons,  
Righteous visitants of man,  
In all lands first in honour mid the Gods!

ATHENA  
With a joyful heart I hear their assurance  
Of kindness and zeal  
To my land. And thankful am I to Persuasion,  
That her eyes kept watch over my lips,  
When in such savage wrath they rejected our plea.  
But might was with Zeus who is patron of wise speech.  
Though victory is mine,  
'Tis in blessing alone we are rivals.

CHORUS  
Let not fierce Faction's moan,  
Hungering after evil deeds,  
In this city e'er be heard.  
Nor may the dust that has drunk the red blood of the townsmen  
In wrath grow vengeful,  
Lusting for fresh bloodshed,  
Payment for citizens slain.  
Rather in loving-kindness  
May they rejoice one another,  
And with one soul let them hate.  
In such wise many human ills are cured.
ATHENA
Hear with what wise speech into the pathway
Of blessing they enter.
Stern and terrible though they appear, yet
Great gain shall they bring you, people of Athens.
If you repay them for kindness with kindness
And reverent worship, this shall your fame be,
To guide both your land
And city in the straight path of justice.

CHORUS
Joy to you, joy in the wealth that is each man's portion!
Joy be to this city's folk!
Lovers are you, and beloved,
Of the Virgin throned by Zeus.
Timely wisdom now is yours,
Sheltered under Pallas' wings,
Sacred in the Father's eyes.

ATHENA
Joy to you also! But before you I go;
For now will I show you your cavern shrines
By the sacred light of these your conductors.
With solemn sacrifice now let us speed you
To your homes in the earth. What will hurt this city,
Imprison it there; but whate'er bringeth gain,
Send forth to increase her with glory.
Lead now these newcomers on their way,
You my citizens, children of Kranaos:
And still in your hearts
For a kind deed let there be kind thoughts.

CHORUS
Joy to you, joy yet again with a double blessing,
All ye dwellers in this land
Deities and mortal men!
While in Pallas' town ye live,
And our rights as denizens
Reverence still, you shall not find
In your life's lot aught unkind.

ATHENA
Your prayers of benediction I commend,
And by bright-gleaming torch-light will conduct you
Unto your nether subterraneous homes,
Escorted by these ministrants, who guard
My image, (and with right; for 'tis the eye
Of Theseus' land) a fair-famed company
Of maidens and of wives and aged dames.
Drape now our guests in honourable robes
Of crimson. Let the lights move on before.
Erelong shall these new residents show their love
By prospering the manhood of our land.

CHORUS OF THE ESCORT
Pass on your way in the pride of your worship,
Night's dread Children, with glad-hearted escort.
(Silence, friends, for our sacred song!)

There within Earth's immemorial caverns
Ritual worship and offerings await you.
(Silence all for our sacred song!)

Kind and loyal of heart to our land,
Come, ye revered ones, pleased with the festive
Flame-devoured torch, as you pass to your home.
(Cry aloud a refrain to our chorus!)

Let Peace follow with flaring of torches.
Burghers of Pallas, unto this ending
Zeus the all-seeing and Fate have conspired.
(Cry aloud a refrain to our chorus!)

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