

Aeschylus
AGAMEMNON

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Translator's Note

Note that in the following text the line numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text and that the line numbers without brackets refer to the English text. Partial indented lines are included with the previous partial lines in the reckoning. The stage directions and footnotes have been added by the translator. Note that Aeschylus assumes his audience is thoroughly familiar with the legendary story of the House of Atreus. Thus, readers who have little familiarity with this story might like to read the summary account provided in the last few pages of this text before reading the play.

In this translation, possessives of names ending in -s are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding -'s (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus's*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound -iz). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, the English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Calchas* and *Calchas'* are both two-syllable words).

Agamemnon is the first play in a trilogy (the *Oresteia*) by Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC), one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. The *Oresteia* was first performed in 458 BC in Athens, where it won first prize in the Dionysia festival. The other two plays of the trilogy are the *Libation Bearers* and the *Eumenides*.

The brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus, are both kings of Argos and leaders of the expedition against Troy, launched ten years before the action of the play begins. Agamemnon is the senior of the two. The allied forces under Agamemnon are called the *Argives*, *Achaean*s, or *Danaans* (as in Homer's *Iliad*)—not *Greeks*. Priam's city is called *Troy* or *Ilion* interchangeably.

AGAMEMNON

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

WATCHMAN: servant of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.

CHORUS: old men, citizens of Argos.

CLYTAEMNESTRA: wife of Agamemnon, daughter of Leda, sister of Helen.

HERALD: soldier serving with Agamemnon.

AGAMEMNON: king of Argos, leader of the Greek expedition to Troy.

MESSENGER: a servant in the palace.

CASSANDRA: daughter of Priam (king of Troy), a priestess of Apollo.

AEGISTHUS: son of Thyestes, cousin of Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra's lover.

SOLDIERS and SERVANTS attending on Agamemnon and on Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus.

[The scene is in Argos immediately in front of the steps leading up to the main doors of the royal palace. In front of the palace there are statues of gods. At the start of the play, the Watchman is prone on the roof of the palace resting his head on his arms. It is just before dawn.]

WATCHMAN

I pray the gods will give me some relief
and end this weary job. One long full year
I've been lying here, on this rooftop,
the palace of the sons of Atreus,
resting on my arms, just like a dog.
I've come to know the night sky, every star,
the powers we see glittering in the sky,
bringing winter and summer to us all,
as the constellations rise and sink.
I'm still looking for that signal flare, 10
the fiery blaze from Troy, announcing
it's been taken. These are my instructions [10]
from the queen. She has a fiery heart,
the determined resolution of a man.
When I set my damp, restless bed up here,
I never dream, for I don't fall asleep.
No. Fear comes instead and stands beside me,
so I can't shut my eyes and get some rest.
If I try to sing or hum a tune,
something to do instead of trying to sleep, 20
since I'm always awake, I start to weep,
as I lament what's happened to this house,
where things are not being governed well,
not like they used to be. How I wish

AGAMEMNON

my watching could end happily tonight, [20]
with good news brought by fire blazing
through this darkness.

[The signal fire the Watchman has been waiting for suddenly appears. The Watchman springs to his feet.]

Fire gleaming in the night!
What a welcome sight! Light of a new day—
you'll bring on many dancing choruses
right here in Argos, celebrations 30
of this joyful news.

[Shouting]

It's over! It's over!
I must call out to wake the queen,
Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife,
to get her out of bed, so she can raise
a shout of joy as soon as possible
inside the palace, welcoming this fire—
if indeed the city of Troy's fallen,
as this signal fire seems to indicate. [30]
For my part, I'll start things off by dancing,
treating my king's good fortune as my own. 40
I've had a lucky dice roll, triple six,
thanks to this fiery signal

[His mood suddenly changes to something much more hesitant and reserved.]

But I hope
the master of this house may come home soon,
so I can grasp his welcome hand in mine.
As for all the rest, I'm saying nothing.
A great ox stands on my tongue. But this house,
if it could speak, might tell some stories.
I speak to those who know about these things.
For those who don't, there's nothing I remember.

[The Watchman goes down into the house. Enter the Chorus of Argive elders, very old men who carry staves to help them stand up. As they speak, servants come out of the palace and light oil lamps in offerings to the statues of the gods outside the palace doors.]

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS¹

It's now ten years since Menelaus, 50 [40]
Priam's great adversary,
and lord Agamemnon,
two mighty sons of Atreus,
joined by Zeus in double honours—
twin thrones and royal sceptres—
left this country with that fleet,
a thousand Argive ships,
to back their warrior cause with force,
hearts screaming in their battle fury,
two eagles overwhelmed by grief, 60
crying for their young—wings beating [50]
like oars, they wheel aloft,
high above their home, distressed
because they've lost their work—
their fledglings in the nest are gone!²

Then one of the supreme powers—
Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus—
hears the shrill wailing cry,
hears those screaming birds,
who live within his realm, 70
and sends a late-avenging Fury
to take revenge on the transgressors.
In just that way, mighty Zeus, [60]
god of hospitality,
sends those sons of Atreus
against Alexander, son of Priam—
for that woman's sake, Helen,
the one who's had so many men,
condemning Trojans and Danaans
to many heartfelt struggles, both alike, 80
knees splintering as the fighting starts.³

Now things stand as they stand.
What's destined to come will be fulfilled,
and no libation, sacrifice, or human tears

¹Speeches assigned to the Chorus may be spoken by the full chorus, or by a Chorus Leader, or by individual chorus members, or by small groups, as the director of a production of the play will determine.

²Priam was king of Troy, father of Paris (the man who abducted Helen). Agamemnon and Menelaus were the commanders of the expedition against Troy (with Agamemnon in the senior position).

³Alexander is an alternative name for Paris, son of Priam.

AGAMEMNON

will mitigate the gods' unbending wrath
of sacrifice not blessed by fire.

But as for us, whose old bodies
confer no honours, who were left behind
when the army sailed so long ago, 90
we wait here, using up our strength
to support ourselves with canes,
like children, whose power,
though growing in their chests,
is not yet fit for Ares, god of war.
And so it is with old men, too,
who, when they reach extreme old age,
wither like leaves, and go their way
three-footed, no better than a child, [80]
as they wander like a daydream. 100

But you, daughter of Tyndareus,
queen Clytaemnestra,
what's going on? What news?
What reports have you received
that lead you to send your servants out
commanding all this sacrifice?
For every god our city worships—
all-powerful gods above the earth,
and those below, and those in heaven, [90]
and those in the marketplace— 110
their altars are ablaze with offerings.
Fires rise here and there and everywhere,
right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils
brought from the palace—sweet and holy,
their purity sustains those flames.
Tell us what you can,
tell us what's right for us to hear.
Cure our anxious thoughts.
For now, at one particular moment, [100]
things look grim, but then our hopes, 120
rising from these sacrificial fires,
make things seem better, soothing
corrosive pains that eat my heart.

I have the power to proclaim
that prophecy made to our kings,
as they were setting on their way,

AGAMEMNON

a happy outcome for their expedition.
My age inspires in me Persuasion still,
the power of song sent from the gods,
to sing how two kings of Achaea's troops, 130
united in a joint command, led off [110]
the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears,
marching against Troy, land of Teucer.
They got a happy omen—two eagles,
kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships.
One bird was black, the other's tail was white,
here, close to the palace, on the right,
in a place where everyone could see.
The eagles were gorging themselves,
devouring a pregnant hare 140
and all its unborn offspring,
struggling in their death throes still. [120]

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

Then the army's prophet, Calchas,
observing the twin purposes
in the two warlike sons of Atreus,
saw the twin leaders of the army
in those birds devouring the hare.
He then interpreted the omen, saying, 150

“In due course this expedition
will capture Priam's city, Troy—
before its towers a violent Fate
will annihilate all public goods. [130]
But may no anger from the gods
cast its dark shadow on our troops,
our great bit forged to curb Troy's mouth.
For goddess Artemis is full of anger
at her father's flying hounds—she pities
the cowering sacrificial creature in distress, 160
she pities its young, slaughtered
before she's brought them into life.
Artemis abominates the eagles' feast.”

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

AGAMEMNON

“And lovely Artemis— [140]
though you’re gentle with the tender cubs
of vicious lions and take special joy
in the suckling young of all wild living beasts,
promise things will work out well, 170
as this omen of the eagles indicates,
an auspicious sign, but ominous.
And I call Apollo, god of healing,
to stop Artemis delaying the fleet,
by sending hostile winds
to keep the ships from sailing, [150]
in her demand for another sacrifice,
one which violates all human law,
which no feast celebrates—
it shatters families and makes the wife 180
lose all respect and hate her husband.
For in the home a dreadful anger waits.
It does not forget and cannot be appeased.
Its treachery controls the house,
waiting to avenge a slaughtered child.”

Calchas prophesied that fatal destiny,
read from those birds, as the army marched,
speaking by this palace of the kings.

And to confirm all this
sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief, 190
but let the good prevail.

O Zeus, whoever he may be, [160]
if this name please him as invocation,
then that’s the name I’ll use to call him.
As I try to think all these things through,
I have no words to shape my thoughts,
other than Zeus—if I truly can succeed
in easing my heart of this heavy grief,
this self-defeating weight of sorrow.

As for Uranus, who was once so great, 200
bursting with arrogance for every fight,
people will talk about that god
as if he’d never even lived. [170]
And his son, Cronos, who came after,
has met his match and is no more.

AGAMEMNON

But whoever with a willing heart
cries his triumphal song to Zeus
will come to understand all things.⁴

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,
has established his fixed law— 210
wisdom comes through suffering.
Trouble, with its memories of pain,
drips in our hearts as we try to sleep, [180]
so men against their will
learn to practice moderation.
Favours come to us from gods
seated on their solemn thrones—
such grace is harsh and violent.

So then the leader of Achaean ships,
the elder brother, Agamemnon, 220
did not blame or fault the prophet,
but gave in to fortune's sudden blows.
For Achaea's army, stranded there,
on the shores across from Calchas, [190]
was held up by opposing winds at Aulis,
where tides ebb and flow.
Troops grew weary, as supplies ran low.
Winds blew from the Strymon river,
keeping ships at anchor, harming men
with too much leisure. Troops grew hungry. 230
They wandered discontent and restless.
The winds corroded ships and cables.
The delay seemed endless, on and on, until
the men, the flower of Argos, began to wilt.
Then Calchas proclaimed the cause of this—
it was Artemis. And he proposed [200]
a further remedy, but something harsh,
even worse than the opposing winds,
so painful that the sons of Atreus
struck their canes on the ground and wept.⁵ 240

Then Agamemnon, the older king, spoke up:

⁴Uranus was the original god, who was overthrown by his son Cronos. Then Cronos, in turn, was overthrown by his son Zeus.

⁵Calchas tells Agamemnon he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to appease Artemis and stop the hostile winds.

AGAMEMNON

“It’s harsh not to obey this fate—
but to go through with it is harsh as well,
to kill my child, the glory of my house,
to stain a father’s hands before the altar [210]
with streams of virgin’s blood.
Which of my options is not evil?
How can I just leave this fleet,
and let my fellow warriors down?
Their passionate demand for sacrifice 250
to calm the winds lies within their rights—
even the sacrifice of virgin blood.
So be it. All may be well.”

But when Agamemnon strapped on
the harsh yoke of necessity,
his spirits changed, and his intentions
became profane, unholy, unsanctified. [220]
He undertook an act beyond all daring.
Troubles come, above all, from delusions
inciting men to rash designs, to evil. 260
So Agamemnon steeled his heart
to make his own daughter the sacrifice,
an offering for the Achaean fleet,
so he could prosecute the war
waged to avenge that woman Helen.

In their eagerness for war, those leaders [230]
paid no attention to the girl,
her pleas for help, her cries of “Father!”—
any more than to her virgin youth.
Her father offered up a prayer, 270
then ordered men to seize her
and lift her up—she’d fallen forward
and just lay there in her robes—to raise her
high above the altar, like a goat,
urging them to keep their spirits up.
They gagged her lovely mouth
with force, just like a horse’s bit,
to keep her speechless, to stifle any curse
which she might cry against her family.

As she threw her saffron robe onto the ground, 280
she glanced at the men, each of them, [240]
those carrying out the sacrifice,

AGAMEMNON

her eyes imploring pity. She looked
just like a painting dying to speak.
She'd often sung before her father's table,
when, as host, he'd entertained his guests,
a virgin using her flawless voice
to honour her dear father with her love,
as he prayed for blessing
at the third libation. 290

What happened next I did not see.
And I won't say. What Calchas's skill
had prophesied did come to pass. [250]
The scales of Justice move to show
that wisdom comes through suffering.
As for what's to come—you'll know that
when it comes. So let it be.
To know would be to grieve ahead of time.
It's clear whatever is to happen
will happen, like tomorrow's dawn. 300

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the palace doors.]

But I hope whatever follows will be good,
according to the wishes of our queen,
who governs here, our closest guard,
keeping watch all by herself,
protecting Peloponnesian lands.

CHORUS LEADER

Queen Clytaemnestra, we've come here
in deference to your royal authority.
With our king far away, the man's throne [260]
is empty—so it's appropriate for us
to pay allegiance to his wife, the queen. 310
I'd really like to hear your news,
whether what you've heard is good or not.
Your sacrificial offerings give us hope.
But we won't object if you stay silent.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

It's a welcome message. As the proverb says,
"May Dawn be born from mother Night."
You'll hear great news, greater than all your hopes—
the Argives have captured Priam's city!

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

What's that you say? I misheard your words—
what you've just said—it defies belief!

320

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I say Troy is now in Achaean hands.
Is that clear enough?

CHORUS LEADER

That fills me with joy.
So much so I can't stop crying.

[270]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Then your eyes reveal your faithful loyalty.

CHORUS LEADER

Is this report reliable? Is there proof?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Of course there is. Unless some god deceives me.

CHORUS LEADER

Has some vision persuaded you of this,
something in a dream, perhaps?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Not at all.
As if I'd listen to some dozing brain.

CHORUS LEADER:

Perhaps some unfledged rumour raised your hopes?

330

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're insulting my intelligence,
as if I were a youngster, just a child.

CHORUS LEADER

When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I'll tell you. It was the very night
that gave birth to this glorious day.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

How could a messenger get here so fast? [280]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Hephaestos, god of fire, sent his bright blaze
speeding here from Ida, his messenger,
flames racing from one beacon to the next—
from Ida to Hermes' rock in Lemnos. 340

From that island the great flames sped
to the third fire, on the crest of Athos,
sacred to Zeus, and then, arcing high,
the beacon light sprang across the sea,
exulting in its golden fiery power,
rushing on, like another sun, passing
the message to the look-out towers
at Macistus. The man there was not sleeping, [290]

like some fool. Without a moment's pause,
he relayed the message, so the blazing news 350
sped on, leaping across Euripus's stream,
to pass the signal to the next watchmen,
at Messapion. Those men, in their turn,
torched a pile of dried-out heather, firing
the message onward. The flaming light
was not diminished—its strength kept growing.

Like a glowing moon, it jumped across
the plain of Asopus, up to the ridges
on mount Cithaeron, where it set alight
the next stage of the relay race of fire. 360

Those watching there did not neglect their work—
that light which came to them from far away [300]
they passed on with an even greater blaze,
which dashed across the shores of Gorgopus,
to reach mount Aegiplanctus, with orders
for those there to keep the beacon moving.

They lit a fire, a huge flaming pillar,
with unchecked force, speeding the message on—
its light visible even at the headland
by the Saronic Gulf. It swooped down, 370

once it reached the crest of Arachnaeus,
that look-out near our city—and from there
jumped down onto the roof of Atreus' sons, [310]
flames directly linked to blazing Troy.

I organized these messengers of fire,
setting them up in sequence, one by one.

AGAMEMNON

In that race the first and last both triumph,
the ones who sent the message and received it.
That's the evidence I set before you,
a message from my husband, dispatched 380
all the way from burning Troy to me.

CHORUS

My queen, I'll offer up to all the gods
my prayers of thanks, but now I'd like to hear
the details of your wonderful report.
Can you tell me the news once more?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

On this very day Achaea's army [320]
has taken Troy. Inside that town, I think,
voices cry out in mass confusion.
If you place oil and vinegar together,
in the same container, you'll observe 390
they never mix, but separate themselves,
like enemies—well, in Troy the shouting
of conquerors and conquered is like that,
matching their very different situations.
Trojans fall upon their family corpses,
husbands, brothers. The children scream
over dead old men who gave them life.
As captives now, they keep lamenting
all their slaughtered loved ones. But the Argives,
famished after a long night's roaming, 400 [330]
and weary after battle, are set to eat,
to gorge themselves on what the town affords.
They're quartered now in captured Trojan homes,
sheltered from the night sky's frost and dew,
but not according to official rank,
rather as luck determines each man's lot.
They're happy. They'll sleep straight through the night,
without posting a guard. Now, if these troops
fully and piously respect Troy's gods,
a captured country's divinities and shrines, 410
those who've conquered may not, in their turn, [340]
be conquered. But let no frenzied greed,
no overpowering lust for plunder,
fall upon the army from the start,
so they ravage what they should leave alone.
For to get safely home, the army needs

AGAMEMNON

to make that long journey back again.
But even if the soldiers do reach home
without offending any god, harsh sorrow
for the dead may still be watching for them, 420
unless some new disaster intervenes.
Well, I've let you hear my woman's words.
May good things now prevail for all to see.
I take this news as cause for common joy. [350]

CHORUS LEADER

You speak wisely, like a prudent man.
But now I've heard that I can trust your news,
we must prepare ourselves to thank the gods,
who've given a blessing worthy of our toil.

[Clytaemnestra goes back into the palace.]

CHORUS

O Zeus, my king, and friendly Night,
you've handed us great glories 430
to keep as our possession.
You cast upon the towers of Troy
your all-encompassing hunting net,
and no one, young or old, escaped
its enslaving fatal mesh [360]
that overpowered them all.

I worship mighty Zeus,
god of hospitality,
who made this happen.
For a long time now 440
he's aimed his bow at Paris,
making sure his arrow
would not fall short or fly
above the stars and miss.

Men will say it's a blow from Zeus
and trace his presence in all this.
He acts on what he himself decides.
Some people claim that gods [370]
don't really care about those men
who trample underfoot 450
favours from the pure in heart.
Such people are profane.

AGAMEMNON

For we now clearly see
destruction is the penalty
for those with reckless pride,
who breathe a boastful spirit
greater than is just,
because their homes are full,
stuffed with riches to excess,
beyond what's best for them. 460
Let men have sufficient wealth
to match good sense, not so much [380]
it piles up their misfortunes.
There's no security in riches
for the insolent man who kicks aside
and pushes from his sight
great altars of righteousness.

Such a man is overpowered
by perverse Persuasion,
insufferable child of scheming Folly. 470
And there's no remedy.
His evil's not concealed—
it stands out, a lurid glitter,
like false bronze when rubbed. [390]

All men can judge his darkness,
once he's tested by events.
He's like a child chasing a flying bird.
He brands his city with disgrace
which cannot be removed,
for no god hears his prayers. 480
The man who lives this way,
doing wrong, the gods destroy.
Such a man was Paris. He came
to the home of the sons of Atreus, [400]
and then abused their hospitality,
running off with his host's wife.

But she left her people
the smash of shield and spear,
a fleet well-armed for war.
To Troy she carried with her 490
no dowry but destruction.
Daring what should not be dared,
she glided through Troy's gates.

AGAMEMNON

The prophets in this house cried out,
“Alas, alas for house and home, [410]
and for the royal leaders here.⁶
Alas, for the marriage bed,
still holding traces of her body,
the one who loved her husband.”
As for him, he sits apart, 500
in pain, silent and dishonoured.

He does not blame her—
no, he aches to be with her,
the woman far across the sea.
Her image seems to rule the house.
Her husband finds no beauty now
in graceful statues, for to his blank eyes
all sexual loveliness has gone.

In his dreams he sees sad images, [420]
with memories of earlier joy— 510
a vain relief, for when the man
thinks he sees such beauty there,
all at once it's gone, slipping
through his hands, flying away
along the paths of sleep.

These are the sorrows in the house,
around the hearth, and pain
much worse than this. For everywhere,
throughout the land of Greece,
in every home where men set out 520 [430]
to gather in that army
there is insufferable grief.
Many disasters pierce the heart.
People know the ones who leave,
but every house gets back
weapons and ash, not living men.

For Ares, god of war, pays gold
for soldier's bodies. In spear fights
he tips the scales, then back from Troy [440]
he ships a heavy freight of ash, 530
cremated bodies of the dead,

⁶ The lines following describe Menelaus's reaction to Helen's disappearance.

AGAMEMNON

sent home for loved ones to lament.
He trades funeral dust for men,
shiploads of urns filled up with ashes.
Back home the people weep,
praising one man for his battle skill,
another for courageous death.
Some complain about that woman,
how she's to blame for all of this—
but do so quietly. Nonetheless, 540 [450]
this sorrow spreads resentment
against the leaders of the war,
the sons of Atreus. Meanwhile,
over there, across the seas in Troy,
around the city walls, the hostile ground
swallows our beautiful young men,
now hidden in the earth they conquered.

The people's voice, once angered,
can create dissent, ratifying a curse
which now must have its way. 550
And so, in my anxiety, I wait,
listening for something murky,
something emerging from the gloom. [460]
For gods aren't blind to men who kill.
In time, black agents of revenge,
the Furies, wear down and bring to nothing
the fortunes of a man who prospers
in unjust ways. They wear him out,
reverse his luck, and bring him at last
among the dead. There's no remedy. 560
To boast too much of one's success
is dangerous—the high mountain peak
is struck by Zeus's lightning bolt. [470]
I'd choose wealth no one could envy.
May I never be the sort of man
who puts whole cities to the sword.
Let me never see myself enslaved,
my life in someone else's power.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

This welcome fiery message has spread fast;
it's gone throughout the town. But is it true? 570
Sent from the gods or false? Who knows?

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

What man is such a senseless child
he lets his heart catch fire at this news, [480]
and then is shattered by some fresh report?

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

That's just the nature of a woman—
to give thanks before the truth appears.

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR

Yes, they're far too trusting.
The proper order in a woman's mind
is easily upset. Rumours women start
soon die out, soon come to nothing. 580

CHORUS LEADER

We'll quickly know about these signal fires,
flaming beacons passed from place to place. [490]
We'll find out if that really did occur
or if, just like a dream, this joyful light
has come in order to deceive our hopes.
For I see a herald coming from the shore—
an olive bough of triumph shades his face.
The dry dust on him, all those muddy clothes,
tell me he'll report the facts. Nor will he
light some flaming pile of mountain wood 590
to pass a signal on with smoke. No—
he'll shout out to us what he has to say,
and we can then rejoice still more,
or else . . . but I won't think of that. Let's have
good news to add to what we know already. [500]
If anyone is praying for something else
to happen to our city, let him reap
the harvest of his own misguided heart.

[Enter Herald.]

HERALD

Greetings to this Argive soil, my father's land.
On this day, ten years later, I've come back. 600
I've seen many hopes of mine destroyed,
and only one fulfilled—I've made it home.
I never dreamed I'd die here in Argos,
with a burial plot in this land I love.

AGAMEMNON

I bless the land, the bright light of this sun—
and I give thanks to Zeus, our highest god,
and to Apollo, lord of Pytho.

May you never fire your arrows at us [510]
any more. We had enough of those,

my lord, beside Scamander's banks, 610
when you took your stand against us. But now,
Apollo, may you preserve and heal us.⁷

And I greet all gods assembled here,
including Hermes, whom I honour,
the well-loved herald god, worshipped
as the herald's patron. And next I pray
the heroic spirits who sent us off

will welcome back the remnants of our army,
those spared being slaughtered by the spear.

O you hall of kings, you roof I cherish, 620
you sacred seats and gods who face the sun,

if your shining eyes in days gone by [520]
have welcomed our king home, then do so now,

after his long absence. He's coming here,
carrying light into this darkness, for you
and all assembled here—our mighty king,
lord Agamemnon. Greet him with full respect.

For he's uprooted Troy—with the pick axe
of avenging Zeus he's reduced her soil.

The altars of the gods and all their shrines 630
he has obliterated, laying waste
all that country's rich fertility.

Around Troy's neck he's fixed destruction's yoke.

Now he's coming home, king Agamemnon,
the fortunate elder son of Atreus, [530]
among all men he merits the most honour.

For neither Paris nor his accomplice,
the Trojan city, can ever boast again
their deeds were greater than their suffering.

Guilty of rape and theft, he's lost his loot. 640

He's utterly destroyed his father's house,
the land, too, which sustained his people.

So Priam's sons have paid the price twice over.

⁷Apollo supported the Trojans in the war and occasionally intervened on their behalf. The Scamander was a river close to Troy.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

All joyful greetings to you, herald,
as you come back from our army.

HERALD

I, too, rejoice.
Now I don't fear death—it's as the gods decide.

CHORUS LEADER

Did your love of this land cause you distress? [540]

HERALD

Yes. That's why my eyes are filled with tears.

CHORUS LEADER

It's as if you had some pleasing sickness.

HERALD

How so? Tell me exactly what you mean. 650

CHORUS LEADER

You suffered from love for those who loved you.

HERALD

You mean the country and the army
both missed each other?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, so much so,
often my anxious heart cried out aloud.

HERALD

What caused this gnawing trouble in your heart?

CHORUS LEADER

Long ago I learned to keep my silence—
the best antidote against more trouble.

HERALD

Why's that? Were you afraid of someone,
once the kings were gone?

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

Indeed I was.

In fact, as you have said, there'd be great joy
in dying now.

660 [550]

HERALD

It's true we have done well.

As for what happened long ago, you could say
some worked out happily, and some was bad.
But who except the gods avoids all pain
throughout his life? If I told what we went through—
the hardships, wretched quarters, narrow berths,
the harsh conditions—was there anything
we did not complain about? We had our share
of trouble every day. And then on shore
things were even worse. We had to camp
right by the enemy wall. It was wet—
dew from the sky and marshes soaked us.

670

[560]

Our clothes rotted. Our hair grew full of lice.
And it was freezing. The winters there,
beyond endurance, when snows from Ida
froze birds to death. And then the heat,
so hot at noon, the sea, without a ripple,
sank to sleep. . . . But why complain about it?

Our work is done. It's over for the dead,
who aren't about to spring to life again.
Why should the living call to mind the dead?
There's no need to relive those blows of fate.

680

[570]

I think it's time to bid a long farewell
to our misfortune. For those still living,
the soldiers left alive, our luck's won out.
No loss can change that now. We've a right,
as we cross land and sea, to boast aloud,
and cry out to the sun, "Argive forces once,
having captured Troy, took their spoils of war
and nailed them up in gods' holy shrines,
all through Greece, glorious tribute from the past!"

690

So whoever hears the story of these things
must praise our generals—our city, too.
Full honour and thanks to Zeus who did the work.
That's my full report.

[580]

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

What you say is true.
I was in the wrong—I won't deny that.
But the old can always learn from younger men,
and what you've said enriches all of us.

[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace.]

But your news will have a special interest
for Clytaemnestra and her household. 700

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Some time ago I cried out in triumph,
rejoicing when that first messenger arrived,
the fiery herald in the night, who told me
Troy was captured and was being destroyed.
Some people criticized me then, saying, [590]
“How come you're so easily persuaded
by signal fires Troy's being demolished?
Isn't that just like a woman's heart,
to get so jubilant?” Insults like these
made it appear as if I'd lost my wits. 710
But I continued with my sacrifice,
and everywhere throughout the city
women kept up their joyful shouting,
as they traditionally do, echoing
their exultation through all holy shrines,
tending sweet-smelling spicy flames,
as they consumed their victims. So now,
why do I need you to go on and on
about all this? I'll hear it from the king.
But, so I can give my honoured husband 720 [600]
the finest welcome home, and with all speed—
for what light gives a woman greater pleasure
than to unbar the gates to her own husband
as he comes home from battle, once the gods
have spared his life in war?—tell him this,
and give him the message to come home
as soon as possible. The citizens
will love to see him, and when he gets back,
in this house he'll find his wife as faithful
as when he left, a watch dog of the home, 730
loyal to him, hostile to his enemies,
and, for the rest, the same in every way.

AGAMEMNON

In this long time, I've not betrayed our bond— [610]
I've known no pleasure with another man,
no breath of scandal. About such things
I understand as much as tempering bronze.
I'm proud to state this, for it's all true—
nothing a noble lady should feel shame to say.

[Clytaemnestra exits back into the palace.]

CHORUS LEADER

She seems to speak as if she really wants
to tell you something, but, in fact, 740
to those who can interpret her words well
she's only saying what she ought to say.
But tell me, herald, can I learn something
of Menelaus, this country's well-loved king—
did he make it back safe and sound with you?

HERALD

I can't lie with false good news of Menelaus, [620]
so his friends can enjoy themselves for long.

CHORUS LEADER

I wish your news of him was true and good.
It's hard when both of these don't go together.

HERALD

Menelaus disappeared—the army 750
lost sight of him and his ship. That's the truth.

CHORUS LEADER

Did you see him sail off from Ilion,
or did some storm attack the entire fleet
and cut him off from you?

HERALD

Like a master archer, you hit the mark—
your last question briefly tells the story.

CHORUS LEADER

According to the others in the fleet [630]
what happened? Is he alive or dead?

AGAMEMNON

HERALD

No one knows for certain, except the sun,
moving around the earth sustaining life. 760

CHORUS LEADER

Tell me how that storm struck the soldiers' ships.
How did the anger of the gods come to an end?

HERALD

It's not right I talk of our misfortunes,
and spoil such an auspicious day as this.
We ought to keep such matters separate
in deference to the gods. When a messenger
arrives distraught, bringing dreadful news
about some slaughtered army, that's one wound [640]
inflicted on the city. Beyond that,
from many houses many men are driven 770
to their destruction by the double whip
which Ares, god of war, so loves—
disaster with two prongs, a bloody pair.
A messenger weighed down with news like this
should report the Furies' song of triumph.
But when he brings good news of men being saved
to a city full of joyful celebrations . . .
How can I mix the good news and the bad,
telling of the storm which hit Achaeans,
a storm linked to the anger of the gods? 780
For fire and sea, before now enemies, [650]
swore a common oath and then proclaimed it
by destroying Achaea's helpless forces.
At night malevolent seas rose up,
as winds from Thrace smashed ships together.
Pushed round by the power of that storm,
and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships
scattered, then disappeared, blown apart
by the evil shepherd's whirlwind. Later,
when the sun's bright light appeared again, 790
we witnessed the Aegean sea in bloom
with corpses of Achaean troops and ships. [660]
As for us, some god saved us in secret
or interceded for us—our boat survived,
its hull intact. That was no human feat.
Some divine hand was on our steering oar,
some stroke of Fortune wanted our ship saved,

AGAMEMNON

not swamped by surf as we rode at anchor
or smashed upon the rocky coast. And then,
once we'd avoided Hades on those seas, 800
we couldn't believe our luck, as we brooded,
in the bright light of day, on all our troubles,
this new disaster which destroyed our fleet, [670]
dispersing it so badly. So on those ships
if anyone's still breathing, he'll now say
we're the ones who've been destroyed. Why not,
when we say much the same of them?
But let's hope things all turn out for the best.
As for Menelaus, wait for his return—
that should be your first priority. 810
If some ray of sunlight finds him still alive,
his vision still intact, thanks to Zeus,
whose crafty plans at this point don't include
destruction of the entire race, there's hope
he'll soon come home again. Now you've heard this,
you've listened to the truth. [680]

[Exit Herald.]

CHORUS

Whoever came up with that name,
a name so altogether true—
was there some power we can't see
telling that tongue what to say, 820
the tongue which prophesied our fate—
I mean the man who called her Helen,
that woman wed for warfare,
the object of our strife?
For she's lived up to that name—
a hell for ships, a hell for men,
a hell for cities, too.
From her delicately curtained room [690]
she sailed away, transported
by West Wind, an earth-born giant. 830
A horde of warriors with shields
went after her, huntsmen
following the vanished track
her oars had left, all the way
to where she'd beached her ship,

AGAMEMNON

on leafy shores of Simois.⁸
Then came bloody war.

And so Troy's destiny's fulfilled— [700]
wrath brings a dreadful wedding day,
late retribution for dishonour 840
to hospitality and Zeus,
god of guest and host,
on those who celebrated with the bride,
who, on that day, sang aloud
the joyful wedding hymns.
Now Priam's city, in old age, [710]
has learned a different song.
I think I hear loud funeral chants,
lamenting as an evil fate
the marriage Paris brought. 850
The city's filled with songs of grief.
It must endure all sorrows,
the brutal slaughter of its sons.

So a man once raised a lion cub
in his own home. The beast
lacked milk but craved its mother's teat.
In early life the cub was gentle. [720]
Children loved it, and it brought
the old men great delight.
They gave it many things 860
and clasped it in their arms,
as if it were a nursing child.
Its fiery eyes fixed on the hands
that fed it, the creature fawned,
a slave to appetite.

But with time the creature grew
and its true nature showed—
the one its parents gave it.
So it paid back those who reared it,
preparing a meal in gratitude, 870
an unholy slaughter of the flocks, [730]
house awash with blood,
while those who lived inside the home
were powerless against the pain,

⁸Simois is a river near Troy.

AGAMEMNON

against the massive carnage.
By god's will they'd brought up
a priest of doom in their own house.

I'd say she first arrived in Troy
a gentle spirit, like a calming breeze,
a delicate, expensive ornament—
her soft darting eyes a flower
which stings the heart with love.
Then, changing her direction,
she took her marriage to its bitter end,
destroying all those she lived with.
With evil in her train and led by Zeus,
god of guest and host, she turned into
a bride of tears, a Fury.

880 [740]

Among men there's a saying,
an old one, from times long past:
A man's prosperity, once fully grown,
has offspring—it never dies
without producing children.
From that man's good fortune
spring up voracious pains
for all his race. But on this
I don't agree with other men.
I stand alone and say
it's the unholy act that breeds
more acts of the same kind.
A truly righteous house is blessed,
its children always fair and good.

[750]

890

900 [760]

Old violent aggression
loves to generate new troubles
among evil men—soon or late,
when it's fated to be born,
new violence springs forth,
a spirit no one can resist or conquer,
unholy recklessness,
dark ruin on the home,
like the destructiveness
from which it sprang.

910 [770]

But Righteousness shines out
from grimy dwellings, honouring

AGAMEMNON

the man who lives in virtue.
She turns her eyes away
from gold-encrusted mansions
where men's hands are black,
and moves towards integrity,
rejecting power and wealth, 920
which, though praised, are counterfeit. [780]
Righteousness leads all things
to well-deserved fulfillment.

[Enter Agamemnon in a chariot with Cassandra and a large military escort.]

CHORUS LEADER

Welcome, son of Atreus, my king,
Troy's destroyer. How shall I address you?
How honour you without extravagance,
without failing to say what's suitable?
For many men value appearances
more than reality—thus they violate
what's right. Everyone's prepared to sigh 930 [790]
over some suffering man, though no sorrow
really eats their hearts, or they can pretend
to join another person's happiness,
forcing their faces into smiling masks.
But a good man discerns true character—
he's not fooled by eyes feigning loyalty,
favouring him with watered-down respect.
Back when you were gathering the army
in Helen's cause—I won't deny the fact— [800]
I saw you in an unflattering light, 940
an unfit mind steering our ship astray,
trying through that sacrifice to boost the spirits
of dying soldiers. But now, with love,
with a full heart, I welcome your return.
For those who've won final success, the joy
is worth the toil. If you enquire, in time
you'll learn about the men who stayed at home,
those who with justice stood guard for the city
and those who failed to carry out what's right.

AGAMEMNON

First I salute Argos and my native gods, 950 [810]
as is right, the ones who worked with me
for my safe return and for the justice

AGAMEMNON

I brought down on Priam's city. The gods
 refused to listen to their urgent pleas,
 then cast their ballots—there was no dissent—
 into the urn of blood—to kill their men,
 to wipe out Ilion. The other urn,
 the one for clemency, stood there empty—
 only Hope took up her stand beside it.
 Even now smoke from the burning city, 960
 an auspicious sign, tells of its capture.
 The storms from its destruction still live on.
 As fiery embers cool, their dying breaths
 give off ripe smells of wealth. For all this, [820]
 we must give the gods eternal thanks.
 Around Troy we've cast a savage net.
 For a woman's sake, the beast from Argos,
 born from the belly of that wooden horse,
 in the night, as the Pleiades went down,
 jumped out with their shields and razed the city. 970
 Leaping over walls, the ravenous lion
 gorged itself on blood of royalty.
 So much for my long prelude to the gods.
 As for your concerns, I've heard your words,
 and I'll keep them in mind. I agree with you—
 we'll work together. By nature few men
 possess the inborn talent to admire
 a friend's good fortune without envy.
 Poisonous malice seeps into the heart,
 doubling the pain of the infected man, 980
 weighing him down with his own misfortunes,
 while he groans to see another's wealth.
 I understand too well companionship
 no more substantial than pictures in a glass.
 From my experience, I'd say those men
 who seemed so loyal to me are shadows,
 no more than images of true companions. [840]
 All except Odysseus—he sailed with me
 much against his will, but once in harness,
 he was prepared to pull his weight for me. 990
 I say this whether he's alive or dead.
 For other issues of the city and our gods,
 we'll set up a general assembly,
 all of us discussing things together.
 We must make sure what's working well
 remains that way in future. By contrast,

AGAMEMNON

where we need some healing medicine,
we'll make a well-intentioned effort
to root out all infectious evil,
burning the sores or slicing them away. 1000 [850]

[Enter Clytaemnestra with attendants carrying the purple carpet.]

Now I'll go inside my palace, my hearth and home,
first, to greet the gods who sent me off
and today bring me back. May victory,
which has been mine, stay with me forever.

[Agamemnon moves to climb out of the chariot but is held up by Clytaemnestra's speech.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Citizens, you senior men of Argos here,
I'm not ashamed to speak before you all,
to state how much I love my husband. With time,
men's fears diminish. So I'll speak out now.
I don't talk as one who has been taught
by others, so I'll just describe my life, 1010
my oppressive life, all the many years
my husband's been away at Ilion. [860]
First, it's unmitigated trouble
for a woman to sit at home alone,
far from her man. She has to listen to
all sorts of painful rumours. Messengers
arrive, hard on each other's heels, bearing
news of some disaster—and everyone
tells of troubles worse than those before,
shouted throughout the house. If my husband 1020
had had as many wounds as I heard rumours
coming to this house, he'd have more holes in him
than any net. If he'd died as many times
as rumour killed him, he could claim to be
a second Geryon, that triple-bodied beast, [870]
and boast of being covered up with earth
three times, one death for every separate shape.
Because of all these spiteful messages,
others have often had to cut me loose,
a high-hung noose strung tight around my neck. 1030
That's why our son, Orestes, is not standing here,
the most trusted bond linking you and me.
He should be, but there's no cause to worry.

AGAMEMNON

He's being cared for by a friendly ally, [880]
 Strophius of Phocis, who warned me twice—
 first, of your own danger under Ilion's walls,
 second, of people here, how they could rebel,
 cry out against being governed, then overthrow
 the Council. For it's natural to men,
 once someone's down, to trample on him 1040
 all the more. That's how I explain myself.
 And it's all true. As for me, my eyes are dry—
 the welling sources of my tears are parched,
 no drop remains. Many long nights I wept
 until my eyes were sore, as I kept watching
 for that beacon light I'd set up for you, [890]
 but always it kept disappointing me.
 The faint whirring of a buzzing fly
 would often wake me up from dreams of you,
 dreams where I saw you endure more suffering 1050
 than the hours in which I slept had time for.
 But now, after going through all this, my heart
 is free of worry. So I would salute my lord—
 the watch dog who protects our household,
 the mainstay which saves our ship of state,
 the lofty pillar which holds our roof beams high,
 his father's truly begotten son, for men at sea
 a land they glimpse beyond their wildest hopes,
 the fairest dawn after a night of storms, [900]
 a flowing stream to thirsty travellers. 1060
 What joy it is to escape necessity!
 In my opinion, these words of greeting
 are worthy of him. So let there be no envy,
 since in days past we've suffered many ills.
 And now, my beloved lord, come to me here,
 climb down from that chariot. But, my king,
 don't place upon the common ground the foot
 which stamped out Troy.

[Clytaemnestra turns to the women attending on her who, on her orders, begin to spread out at Agamemnon's feet the tapestries they have brought out from the house, making a path from the chariot to the palace doors. The tapestries are all a deep red-purple, the colour of blood.]

You women, don't just stand there.
 I've told you what to do. Spread out those tapestries,
 here on the ground, directly in his path. Quickly! 1070

AGAMEMNON

Let his path be covered all in red, so Justice [910]
can lead him back into his home, a place
he never hoped to see. As for the rest,
my unsleeping vigilance will sort it out,
with the help of gods, as fate decrees.

AGAMEMNON

Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,
your speech was, like my absence, far too long.
Praise that's due to us should come from others.
Then it's worthwhile. All those things you said—
don't puff me up with such female honours, 1080
or grovel there before me babbling tributes,
like some barbarian. Don't invite envy [920]
to cross my path by strewing it with cloth.
That's how we honour gods, not human beings.
For a mortal man to place his foot like this
on rich embroidery is, in my view,
not without some risk. So I'm telling you
honour me as a man, not as a god.
My fame proclaims itself. It does not need
foot mats made out of such embroideries. 1090
Not even to think of doing something bad
is god's greatest gift. When a man's life ends
in great prosperity, only then can we declare
that he's a happy man. Thus, if I act,
in every circumstance, as I ought to now,
there's nothing I need fear. [930]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't say that just to flout what I've arranged.

AGAMEMNON

You should know I'll not go back on what I've said.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You must fear something, then, to act this way.
You've made some promise to the gods. 1100

AGAMEMNON

I've said my final word. I fully understand,
as well as any man, just what I'm doing.

AGAMEMNON

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What do you think Priam would have done,
if he'd had your success?

AGAMEMNON

That's clear—
he'd have walked across these tapestries.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So then why be ashamed by what men say?

AGAMEMNON

But what people say can have great power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

True, but the man whom people do not envy
is not worth their envy.

AGAMEMNON

It's not like a woman
to be so keen on competition.

1110 [940]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

It's fitting that the happy conqueror
should let himself be swayed.

AGAMEMNON

And in this contest
that's the sort of victory you value?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Why not agree? Be strong and yield to me,
of your own consent.

AGAMEMNON

Well, if it's what you want . . .
Quick, someone get these sandals off—
they've served my feet so well. As I now walk
on these red tapestries dyed in the sea,
may no distant god catch sight of me,
and, for envy, strike me down. There's much shame
when my feet squander assets of my house,
wasting wealth and costly woven finery.

1120

AGAMEMNON

O Zeus, Zeus, who accomplishes all things,
answer my prayers. Take care to bring about
all things that reach fulfillment through your will.

[Exit Clytaemnestra into the palace. The doors close behind her.]

CHORUS

Why does this sense of dread
hover so unceasingly
around my heart
with such foreboding?
My song of prophecy goes on
unbidden and unpaid.
Why can't some calming confidence
sit on my mind and spurn
my fears as enigmatic dreams?
It was so long ago—
Time has long since buried
deep in sand the mooring cables
cast when the army sailed to Troy.

1160 [980]

My own eyes tell me
Agamemnon has returned.
For that I need no further witness.
But still, here, deep in my heart,
the spontaneous song
keeps up its tuneless dirge,
as the avenging Furies chant.
It kills my confidence, my hope.
Everything inside me
beats against my chest,
surging back and forth
in tides of grim foreboding—
something's moving to fulfillment.
But I pray my premonitions
prove false and never come to light.

1170

[990]

1180

[1000]

For, as we know, boundaries
of vigorous health break down—
disease is always pressing hard
the common wall between them.
So with the fate of men.
It holds to a straight course,
then, all at once, can crash

AGAMEMNON

upon a hidden rock of grief.
 But if, as a precaution, 1190
 men toss overboard
 some part of their rich cargo,
 and time their throw just right, [1010]
 the house, though grieving,
 will not completely founder,
 nor will its hull be swamped.
 And Zeus's bountiful rich gifts
 reaped from the furrows every year
 hold off the plague of famine.

But once a murdered man's dark blood 1200
 has soaked the ground, who then [1020]
 can bring him back through song?
 Even Aesculapius, whose skill
 could raise men from the dead,
 was stopped by Zeus's thunderbolt.
 Was that not warning to us all?
 If one fate settled by the gods
 did not prevent another fate
 securing an advantage,
 my heart would then outrace my tongue— 1210
 I'd speak out loud and clear,
 I'd cry out my forebodings.
 But now it mutters in the dark, [1030]
 uneasy, holding little hope
 for any resolution.
 And still my spirit smoulders.

[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace. She addresses Cassandra, who is still in the chariot.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You should go in, too—I mean you up there,
 Cassandra. Zeus, in his mercy to you,
 has made you member of our household,
 one who shares its purification rites. 1220
 So you can take your place before the altar
 of the god protecting all our wealth,
 along with other slaves. So come down.
 Leave the chariot. And leave your pride behind.
 Men say even Hercules, Alcmena's son, [1040]
 once long ago was sold in slavery
 and had to eat its bitter bread. If Fate

AGAMEMNON

has brought you to the same condition,
be very grateful you serve masters here
who've been rich forever. Certain men, 1230
those who've reaped a harvest of rich goods
beyond their dreams, maltreat their slaves.
They go too far. But here, with us, you'll get
the treatment our traditions say is right.

CHORUS LEADER [*addressing Cassandra*]
Our queen is talking to you. Her meaning's clear.
Fate has caught you in its nets—you'd best obey,
unless such action is beyond your power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
If she's not like a swallow, with a song 1050
all her own, something barbarously obscure,
I'll speak so she can understand. She must obey. 1240

CHORUS LEADER [*to Cassandra*]
Go with the queen. Of all your options now
what she says is best. Do as she says.
Step down from your chariot seat.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
Come down now.
I don't have time to waste on this girl here.
Inside, by our central hearth, our victims
are already waiting for the sacrifice,
a joyful time beyond our fondest hopes.
So if you want to play your part in this,
you'd better come at once. If what I say
means nothing to you, if you can't understand, 1250 [1060]
at least use your foreign hand to make a sign.

CHORUS LEADER
An interpreter is what this stranger needs.
She's like some wild thing, freshly trapped.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
She's mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart.
She's just left her newly captured city,
then come here, without sufficient time
to learn to stomach the controlling bit.
She will, once her anger's been dissolved

AGAMEMNON

in foaming blood. But I'll waste no more time,
dealing with her contempt outside the house. 1260

[Clytaemnestra turns and exits into the palace. The members of the Chorus gather around Cassandra.]

CHORUS LEADER

I'll not lose my temper. I pity her.
You unhappy creature, why not come down? [1070]
Leave the chariot. Why not accept fate's yoke
of your own free will?

CASSANDRA *[searching the sky for a sign of Apollo and screaming]*

Aiiiee . . . earth . . . sky . . .
Apollo . . . Apollo . . .⁹

CHORUS MEMBER

Why cry out your distress in Apollo's name?
He's not a god who pays attention
to those who mourn like this.

CASSANDRA

Aieeee . . . earth . . . sky . . . 1270
Apollo . . . my destroyer . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

She cried out again. Such ominous words—
and to a god who's not the one
to have around at times of grieving.

CASSANDRA

Apollo! Apollo! God of the road . . . [1080]
You're destroying me. Why leave me here
beyond all hope a second time?

CHORUS MEMBER

It looks as if she's going to prophesy,
to say something of her unhappiness.
She may be a slave, but inside her 1280
the god's voice still remains.

⁹Cassandra was a daughter of Priam, king of Troy, and a prophetess-priest of Apollo. As we learn later on in this passage, Apollo loved her, but she refused to give him a child. So the god punished her by making sure no one ever believed her prophecies.

AGAMEMNON

CASSANDRA

Apollo!

O Apollo! God of the road . . .
You're obliterating me! Where am I now?
Where have you led me? What house is this?

CHORUS MEMBER

If you don't know where you are, I'll tell you—
you're at the house of the sons of Atreus.
That's the truth.

CASSANDRA

No . . . no . . . a house [1090]
that hates the gods . . . house full of death,
kinsmen butchered . . . heads chopped off . . .
a human slaughterhouse awash in blood . . . 1290

CHORUS MEMBER

This stranger's like a keen hound on the scent.
She's on the trail of blood.

CASSANDRA

. . . I see evidence I trust—young children
screaming as they're butchered—then their father
eating his own infants' roasted flesh . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

We've heard about your fame in prophecy.
But here in Argos no one wants a prophet.

CASSANDRA

O god what's this she has in mind? [1100]
What new agony inside the house
is she preparing? Something monstrous, 1300
barbaric, evil . . . beyond all love,
all remedy. And help is far away.

CHORUS MEMBER

I don't understand what she's saying now.
What she first said, that I understood—
the whole city talks about it.

AGAMEMNON

CASSANDRA

O evil woman, you're going to do it.
Your own husband, the man who shares your bed—
once you've washed him clean . . . there in the bath . . .
How shall I describe how all this ends?
It's coming soon. She's stretching out her hand . . . 1310 [1110]
and now her other hand is reaching for him . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

I still don't understand. What she's saying
is just too confused. Her dark prophecies
leave me bewildered.

CASSANDRA

Look! Look over there!
What's that apparition? Is that death's net?
No, she's the net, the one who sleeps with him,
that woman, murder's willing agent.
Let those Furies insatiably at work
against this clan rise up and scream for joy—
they have another victim fit for stoning. 1320

CHORUS MEMBER

What Fury do you now invoke to shriek
throughout this house? What you've just said
makes me afraid. [1120]

CHORUS

Drop by drop the dark blood flows
around my heart—like mortal wounds
when life's sunset comes,
when death is near.

CASSANDRA

Look over there! Look now!
Keep the great bull from his mate.
She's caught him in her robes— 1330
now she gores him with her black horn.
A trap! He's collapsing in the bath!
I'm telling you what's going on—
he's being murdered in there,
while bathing—a plot to kill him!

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER

I can't boast of any skill with prophecies, [1030]
but these strike me as pointing to disaster.

CHORUS

What good ever comes to men
from prophecies? They talk of evil.
All those skillful words encourage men 1340
to be afraid of what the prophet chants.

CASSANDRA

Alas for me! Alas for my unwelcome fate!
I'm crying out for my own suffering—
my cup of grief is full, brim full . . .
Why have you brought me here,
so wretched, if not to die,
the second victim? Why else?

CHORUS MEMBER

Your mind's possessed—some god is in control. [1140]
And so you wail aloud about your death,
just like some shrill nightingale that sings, 1350
without a pause, of her heart's distress,
lamenting all her life for her dead son,
life rich in sorrow.

CASSANDRA

O to have that—
the fate of the singing nightingale!
Gods gave her body wings and a sweet life.
She does not weep. But murder waits for me—
a two-edged sword hacks me to death.

CHORUS MEMBER

These vain prophetic cries of woe you chant, [1150]
where do they start? Why introduce
such horrific fear into your songs? 1360
How do you set some limit to the path
where what you see so ominously leads?

CASSANDRA

Alas for that wedding . . . Paris and his bride . . .
how it destroyed his loved ones . . .
Alas for the Scamander, river of my home!

AGAMEMNON

By your banks I was raised so long ago,
brought up to all this misery . . . And now it seems
I must soon chant my prophecies
by Cocytus and banks of Acheron, [1160]
twin rivers of the dead. 1370

CHORUS MEMBER

What's that? The words seem clear enough—
any child could understand. Your cruel fate
strikes at me like a bloody fang. It hurts.
My heart breaks to hear you chant your sorrows.

CASSANDRA

Alas for my city's fate—
totally destroyed . . .
Alas for my father's sacrifices,
all those grazing herds . . .
offerings to save our walls!
In vain . . . the city was not spared . . . [1170]
all that misery it's endured. 1380
Now I, on fire too, must go to ground.

CHORUS MEMBER

You keep repeating what you said before.
Some evil-minded demon, swooping down,
has fallen on you, forcing you to sing,
to chant your songs of death.
Where does this end?
That's what I can't see.

CASSANDRA

Then my prophecy will veil itself no more,
like some new bride half-concealed from view. 1390
Let it now rise as clear as a fresh wind
blowing toward the rising sun, a wave [1180]
cresting through the dawn and bringing on
a tide of woe far greater than my own.
I'll teach you no more in cryptic riddles.
And you bear witness—run the trail with me,
as I sniff out the track of ancient crimes.
Up there on that roof there sits a chorus—
it never leaves. They sing in harmony,
but the song is harsh, predicting doom. 1400
Drinking human blood has made them bold—

AGAMEMNON

they dance in celebration through the house.
The family's Furies cannot be dislodged. [1190]
Sitting in the home, they chant their song,
the madness that began all this, each in turn
cursing that man who defiled his brother's bed.
Have I missed the mark? Or like a fine archer
have I hit the beast? Or am I selling lies,
a fortune-teller babbling door to door?
Tell me on your oath how well I know 1410
these old stories of this family's crimes.

CHORUS LEADER

How could an oath of ours be any help,
no matter how sincere, to heal your grief?
But I'm amazed that you, born overseas,
can say so much about a foreign city, [1200]
as if you'd lived here.

CASSANDRA

It was Apollo,
god of prophecy, who made me what I am.

CHORUS MEMBER

Surely the god was not in love with you?

CASSANDRA

I used to be ashamed to talk of this . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

When we're doing well, we all have scruples. 1420

CASSANDRA

Apollo was like a mighty wrestler,
panting all over me, in love.

CHORUS MEMBER

Did you go through with it—
bear him a child?

CASSANDRA

I promised to,
but then I broke my word.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER

Did you already have prophetic skill,
inspired by the god?

CASSANDRA

At that time
I used to prophesy to all my countrymen. [1210]
I'd foretell disasters.

CHORUS MEMBER

How did you escape Apollo's anger? 1430

CASSANDRA

Since I resisted him, no one believes me.

CHORUS MEMBER

But to us, at least, what you prophesy
seems true enough.

CASSANDRA

Aiiiee . . . the pains I feel.
The fearful labour pains of true prophecy
seize me, confuse me, as they start again,
full of foreboding. Look there—see those creatures,
young ones, sitting by the house, dark shapes,
like something from a dream? They're like children
murdered by their loved ones . . . their hands are full,
clenching chunks of their own flesh as food, 1440 [1220]
their guts and inner organs . . . it's all so clear . . .
that awful meal their own father tasted.
For all that, I say, revenge is on the way,
someone's planning it, a craven lion,
a beast wallowing in bed, keeping watch,
waiting for my master to get back.
Yes, my master—since I must now bear
the yoke of slavery. That lord of war,
who led the fleet and ravaged Ilion,
has no idea what that cur is up to, 1450
what evil plans the hateful bitch is hatching,
as her tongue licks his hands in welcome,
ears perked up for joy, like treacherous Ate, [1230]
goddess who destroys. It's outrageous—
the woman kills her man. What shall I call her?
What awful monster suits her? A snake?

AGAMEMNON

An amphisbaena with a head at either end?
Or perhaps a Scylla living in the rocks,
preying on sailors, raging mother of hell,
who breathes relentless war on loved ones. 1460
How that woman, in her audacity,
screamed out in triumph, like a battle cry,
pretending to enjoy his safe return!
Whether you credit what I say or not—
that doesn't really matter. Why should it?
What will come will come. And soon enough, [1240]
as you stand here full of pity, you'll say
Cassandra's prophecies were all too true.

CHORUS

I understand about Thyestes' meal,
and tremble thinking how he ate his children's flesh. 1470
Terror grips me as I hear these truths
without embellishment. As for the rest,
hearing that just makes me lose my way.

CASSANDRA

I tell you you'll see Agamemnon dead.

CHORUS MEMBER

Poor girl, calm yourself. Tone down those words.

CASSANDRA

No—no one can heal what my words prophesy.

CHORUS

Not if they're true. But may the gods forbid!

CASSANDRA

While you pray here, others move in to kill. [1250]

CHORUS LEADER

What man is going to commit such crimes?

CASSANDRA

What man? You've completely missed the point. 1480
You've failed to understand my prophecies.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

Yes I have—
I don't see who has means to do it.

CASSANDRA

Yet I can speak Greek well enough.

CHORUS LEADER

So does the oracle at Delphi,
but understanding what it says is hard.

CASSANDRA

O this fire! His fire comes over me once more!
The pain . . . Lycian Apollo . . . burning me . . .
That two-footed lioness . . . crouching there
with a wolf, once the noble lion's gone . . .
She's going to kill me . . . the agony!
Now she prepares her drugs, and in her rage,
vows I too will be a part of her revenge,
as she whets a sword to kill her king.
He brought me here. Now we both die.
Her retribution. So why do I bear
these ornaments that mock me, this rod,
these prophet's wreaths around my neck?
Let me be rid of you before I die

1490 [1260]

[Cassandra breaks her wand and throws off the insignia of her office as a prophet.]

There, an end to you. With you down there,
I get revenge. Make some other woman rich.
Let her preach destruction instead of me.

1500

[Cassandra now starts tearing off her clothes.]

Look how Apollo now in person strips me,
rips my prophetic robes, the god who watched,
as my friends in their hatred turned on me,
mocked me so savagely in these very clothes—
they thought they knew what they were doing.
But they were wrong. I heard them call me names,
“beggar,” “starving wretch”—I endured them all.
And now the prophet god is done with me.
He's led his prophet to her place of death.
No father's altar for me here—instead

[1270]

1510

AGAMEMNON

a chopping block awaits, slaughtered
in one hot stroke of bloody sacrifice.
But we'll not die without the gods' revenge.
Another man will come and will avenge us, [1280]
a son who'll kill his mother, then pay back
his father's death, a wanderer in exile,
a man this country's made a stranger.
He'll come back and, like a coping stone,
bring the ruin of his family to a close. 1520
For gods have made a powerful promise—
his father's stretched out corpse will bring him home.
Why then do I lament so piteously?
Since I'm the one who first saw how Troy
would be wiped out the way it was,
since I see now how those who took the city
are being destroyed in judgment from the gods,
I'll go to meet my fate. I'll dare to die. [1290]
I greet this doorway as the gates of Death.
Once the death blow strikes, I pray I'll have 1530
a gentle end—no struggle, as my life blood
drains away. And then I'll close my eyes.

CHORUS LEADER

You poor woman, so much pain and wisdom.
You've said so much. But if you see your death—
see it so clearly—how can you go on
so bravely to the altar, like an ox
destined by gods for sacrifice?

CASSANDRA

There's no way out. My friends, the time has come.

CHORUS LEADER

But there's some benefit in going last. [1300]

CASSANDRA

This is the day. It makes no sense to run. 1540

CHORUS LEADER

You know, you endure your suffering
with courage I admire.

AGAMEMNON

CASSANDRA

No one hearing that
has reason to be glad.

CHORUS LEADER

But to die well
confers some human dignity.

CASSANDRA [*approaching the door then moving back in horror*]

I cry for you, my father, your noble children.

CHORUS LEADER

What's wrong? Why turn around in fear?

CASSANDRA

This house . . . It's horrific!

CHORUS

Why call out in horror? Is there some vision
in your mind?

CASSANDRA

It's this house—
it stinks of murder, blood slaughter . . .

1550

CHORUS LEADER

No, no—that's the smell of sacrifice,
victims at the hearth.

[1310]

CASSANDRA

That smell . . .
it's like an open grave . . .

CHORUS

Do you mean the splendid Syrian incense?
It's all through the house.

CASSANDRA [*turning back to the palace doors*]

No. But I must go.
I'll lament my death, and Agamemnon's, too,
inside the house. Enough of living!
Alas, my friends, I'm not holding back in fear,
like some bird trapped in bushes. I want you
to witness how I went to meet my death,

1560

AGAMEMNON

when for me another woman will be killed,
a man will die for one who married evil.
This is my last request before I die.

[1320]

CHORUS LEADER

I pity you, poor creature, and your death,
which you have prophesied.

CASSANDRA

One last time
I feel the urge to speak, not sing a dirge
about my death. I pray to the sun,
here in the light of his most recent day,
that those who carry out revenge for me
will make my enemies pay with their blood
for butchering a slave, an easy victim.
Alas, for human life. When things go well,
a shadow overturns it all. When badly,
a damp sponge wipes away the picture.
Of these two, the second is more pitiful.

1570

[1330]

[Cassandra exits slowly and deliberately through the palace doors, which close behind her.]

CHORUS

To rest unsatisfied amid great wealth
is in the nature of all human beings.
No one can point and order it away
from princely homes by uttering the words
“Dissatisfaction, enter here no more!”
Take Agamemnon. The powers in heaven
permitted him to capture Priam’s town,
to return home honoured by the gods.
But now, if he must pay the penalty
for blood which other men before him shed
and die in retribution for the dead
he killed himself, what mortal human being
who hears all this can boast he lives
a life unscarred by fate?

1580

[1340]

[A scream comes from inside the palace.]

AGAMEMNON *[from inside]*

Help me!

I’m hit . . . a deadly blow . . .

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER EIGHT

But just to stay alive, 1610
should we bow down before these tyrants,
who desecrate the house?

CHORUS MEMBER NINE

No. We can't do that.
Death would be preferable, a gentler fate
than such a tyranny.

CHORUS MEMBER TEN

But should we assume,
just on the basis of those groans we heard,
that Agamemnon's dead?

CHORUS MEMBER ELEVEN

Before we act,
we must have clearer evidence. To guess like this
is not really knowing what is true or not.

CHORUS LEADER

That's it then—everyone agrees on this— [1370]
we need to know more clearly how things stand 1620
with Agamemnon, son of Atreus.

[The palace doors open, revealing the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytaemnestra stands over them. She is covered in blood.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Before this moment I said many things
to suit my purposes. I'm not ashamed
to contradict them now. How else could I
act on my hate for such a hateful man,
who feigned his love, how else prepare my nets
of agony so high no one could jump them?
I've brooded on this struggle many years,
the old blood feud. My moment's come at last,
though long delayed. I stand now where I struck, 1630
where I achieved what I set out to do.
I did all this. I won't deny the fact. [1380]
Round this man I cast my all-embracing net,
rich robes of evil, as if catching fish—
he had no way out, no eluding fate.
I stabbed him twice. He gave out two groans.

AGAMEMNON

Then as his limbs went limp, I hit again,
a third blow, my prayerful dedication
to Zeus, underground protector of the dead.
He collapsed, snorting his life away, 1640
spitting great gobs of blood all over me, [1390]
drenching me in showers of his dark blood.
And I rejoiced—just as the fecund earth
rejoices when the heavens send spring rains,
and new-born flower buds burst into bloom.
That's how things stand, old men of Argos.
Be joyful, if that's how you feel. For me,
this is my triumph. If it were fitting
to pour libations on this corpse,
I'd pour my curses out—that would be just. 1650
He filled the mixing bowls in his own house
with such destructive misery, and now
he drinks it to the dregs. He's home at last.

CHORUS LEADER

What you say I find incredible!
How can that tongue of yours gloat like this,
exulting over your dead husband? [1400]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You're testing me, as if I were some silly woman.
But my heart is fearless. Let me tell you
what you already know—then you can praise
or criticize me as you like. I don't care. 1660
This man is Agamemnon, my husband.
He's a corpse, the work of this right hand,
a work of justice. That's how matters stand.

CHORUS LEADER

Woman, what earth-grown poison have you eaten,
what evil drink drawn from the surging sea,
that you're so mad to risk the public voice,
the curses people mutter? You cast him off.
You cut him down. So now you'll be thrown out, [1410]
exiled from the city—a hateful thing
to your own people.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So now 1670
you'd sentence me to banishment,

AGAMEMNON

send me from the city a thing accursed?
Back then you made no accusation
against this man lying here. He sacrificed
his own child, that dear girl I bore in pain,
to charm the winds from Thrace—and didn't care.
To him she was a beast for slaughter.
He had flocks of them—his farms were full.
Shouldn't you have banished him from Argos
in punishment for that polluting crime? 1680 [1420]
You're strict enough when you pass judgment
on what I've done. So let me caution you—
I'm prepared to fight you head to head.
If you win, well then, you can govern me.
But if god lets me prevail, you old men
will learn, old as you are, to behave yourselves.

CHORUS LEADER

You're too ambitious, far too arrogant.
Blood-drenched murder has made you mad. That's plain.
Your eyes are full of blood. Now stroke for stroke
you'll pay for what you've done. You've lost your friends,
you've lost your honour and you've . . . [1430]

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*interrupting*]

Then hear this, too, the force behind my oath—
by that Justice I exacted for my child,
by Ate, goddess of destruction,
by the Fury to whom I offered up this man,
my hopes will never walk these halls in fear,
so long as Aegisthus stokes the blazing fires
in my hearth. And he's as loyal to me now
as always, my shield, no man to trifle with.
He'll boost my confidence. Here he lies, 1700
the man who abused his wife, seduced
by every captive girl at Ilion—
and here she lies, his concubine, his spear prize, [1440]
the faithful prophetess who shared his bed.
She also knew the rowing benches
where sailors sweat. They get what they deserve.
He's dead. She, like a swan, sang her last song,
then died. Now she lies there, his sweetheart.
She'll bring new thrills, fresh pleasures to my bed.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS

O that some Fate would soon come, 1710
free from suffering and quick,
bringing endless sleep, [1450]
our last eternal sleep,
now our gracious lord is dead.
For a woman's sake
he suffered much, and now
by a woman's hand he died.

Alas for you, Helen, frantic woman.
On your own, beneath Troy's walls,
you slaughtered many lives, 1720
and more than many.
Now you wear your final garland—
one long remembered for the blood
which will never wash away. [1460]
Back then in this house
lived a spirit of strife,
a power that broke our king.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't torment yourself like this, invoking
death and fate, or redirect your rage
on Helen, as if she killed those men, 1730
all those Danaan lives, all by herself,
and brought us pain past remedy.

CHORUS

O spirit that falls upon this house,
on Menelaus, on Agamemnon,
descendants of Tantalus,
you overpower me
through these two sisters, [1470]
each with power like a man.
You consume my heart with grief.
Perched on his corpse 1740
the hateful raven caws her song,
her harsh triumphal tune.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're talking sense, when you call on
the demon of this house, who's eaten up
three generations, the one who nurtures

AGAMEMNON

bloodlust in our guts. And so new blood
spurts out before the old wound heals. [1480]

CHORUS

You appeal to that huge fiend
haunting this house,
whose anger weighs it down, 1750
to that tale of evil fate
insatiably consuming us.
Alas, alas, the will of Zeus,
the cause of everything,
who brings all things about.
What can come to mortal men
except at Zeus's will?
And in what's happened here
what's not caused by the gods?

Alas, my king, my lord— 1760
How shall I weep for you? [1490]
How speak of you with love?
To lie entangled in the spider's web,
gasping life away—a sacrilege—
stretched out on this bed of shame,
struck down in treachery,
the two-edged sword
wielded by your wife.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Are you saying this work is mine? That's not so.
Don't think of me as Agamemnon's wife. 1770
The form of this corpse's wife was taken on [1500]
by the ancient savage spirit of revenge.
For that brutal meal prepared by Atreus,
it sacrificed one full-grown man,
payment for two butchered children.

CHORUS

Who would ever say
you bear no guilt
for Agamemnon's murder?
How could they? How?
Yet that avenging spirit 1780
acting on his father's crime
could well have egged you on.

AGAMEMNON

Black Ruin moves ahead with force [1510]
through streams of family blood
granting vengeance for the young
served up as chunks of meat.

Alas, my king, my lord—
How shall I weep for you?
How speak of you with love?
To lie entangled in the spider's web, 1790
gasping life away—a sacrilege—
stretched out on this bed of shame,
struck down in treachery,
the two-edged sword
wielded by your wife. [1520]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I don't think the man died wretchedly,
like some poor slave. Surely his own deceit
brought ruin on this house? His suffering
matches exactly what he did himself.
Remember my own Iphigeneia, 1800
his daughter, that sweet flower whom we mourn.
So let him not boast out loud in Hades.
He was the first to draw his sword,
and by the sword he's been repaid.

CHORUS

There's no clear way, and now [1530]
this family's falling. I'm afraid.
It's not just bloody drops. No,
storms of blood rain batter down,
destroying the house, while fate
on yet another whetstone, 1810
hones the edge of Justice,
for the next act, one more crime.

O Earth, my Earth—
how I wish you'd swallowed me
before I ever saw my king
lying low on such bed, [1540]
a silver-plated bath.
Who will now bury him?
Who will lament for him?
Will you dare to do this, 1820

AGAMEMNON

a woman mourning for the spirit
of the husband she's just killed,
complete the injustices you've done
with wretched favours to the dead
to expiate your monstrous crimes?
As people stand around the grave
to praise this god-like man, in tears,
whose sad heart will be sincere? [1550]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

That business is none of your concern.
At our hands he collapsed in death. 1830
We'll bury him. But this house will not weep.
No. Iphigeneia will meet him down there,
as is fitting—the daughter greets her father
happily by that swift stream of sorrow.
Then she'll embrace the man with love.

CHORUS

One disgrace exchanged for yet another, [1560]
the struggle to decide is hard.
The man who sins is sinned against,
the killer pays the price.
Yet while Zeus sits upon his throne 1840
this decree from god remains—
the man who acts will suffer.
Who can then cast from this house
its self-perpetuating curse?
This race is wedded to destruction.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're close to getting at the truth.
For my part, I'm prepared to swear an oath
to the demon of the House of Atreus—
I'll rest content with what's been done, [1570]
hard though that is, if he'll leave this house alone, 1850
transferring family murder somewhere else,
to some other clan. I don't need much,
a small part of our wealth, if I can free
these halls entirely of this madness,
the urge we have to kill each other.

[Enter Aegisthus with armed attendants. The situation now grows increasingly tense, with the soldiers menacing the members of the Chorus, who begin to coalesce as a political unit,

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rediscovering their strength. This sense of a major irreconcilable political division and the threat of civil war grows increasingly acute until the end of the play.]

AEGISTHUS

What a glorious day of retribution!
Now I can say that once again the gods
looking down on men avenge their crimes.
How it fills my heart with joy to see this man
stretched out here in a robe the Furies wove, 1860 [1580]
full payment for deceitful treachery
his father's hand devised. For Atreus,
king of Argos, was this man's father.
To set the record straight, my father,
Thyestes, brother to Atreus,
challenged his authority. So Atreus
expelled him from his home and city.
But Thyestes in his misery returned,
a suppliant at his own hearth, praying
Fate would save him, he would not be killed, 1870
his own blood would not stain his native ground.
Atreus, the godless father of this man, [1590]
welcomed him effusively, but not with love.
He set up what seemed a celebration—
a feast day with lots of meat, but served
my father flesh of his own children.
He sliced their toes and fingers off. Over these
he diced the other parts, then passed this dish
to Thyestes, where he sat beside him.
My father then, in total ignorance, 1880
took the food he didn't recognize,
and ate the meal which, as you've witnessed,
destroyed the race. When Thyestes learns
the abominable thing he's done, he screams,
staggers back, vomits up the butchered flesh.
Then, kicking down the banquet table
to underscore his cry for justice,
he calls down on the House of Atreus
a curse no one can bear, "Let them all die, [1600]
the race of Pleisthenes—all die like this."¹⁰ 1890

¹⁰In some legends Atreus had a son Pleisthenes who was raised by his brother Thyestes. Thyestes sent Pleisthenes to kill Atreus, but the latter killed him, not knowing he was his son. This was the cause of the notorious banquet. In other stories Pleisthenes (perhaps another person with the same name) is the husband of Aerope and father of Menelaus and Agamemnon. When Pleisthenes died, Atreus married

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AEGISTHUS [*half drawing his sword*]
My hand is on my sword, as well.
I'm not afraid to die.

CHORUS LEADER
You say you'll welcome death. That's good to hear.
We're happy to oblige.

[Clytaemnestra, alarmed at the way in which the conflict has grown, moves quickly between the guards led by Aegisthus and the Chorus.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA
Stop this, my dearest. 1950
Let's not act to bring on further trouble.
Our wretched harvest is bountiful enough—
we've reaped sufficient pain. No more bloodshed.
You honourable old men, go home. Yield to fate,
before you hurt yourselves. What we've done here
we had to do. Let our troubles end right now.
That we'll allow, even though our fate [1660]
has struck a heavy blow. That's my advice,
what a woman ought to say, if any here
will act on it.

AEGISTHUS
What about these men 1960
who let their tongues prattle on against me,
hurling insults in my face, testing fate?
They throw aside all moderate restraint
to abuse their master.

CHORUS LEADER
Men of Argos
will never cringe before an evil man.

AEGISTHUS
I'll get my own back soon enough.

CHORUS LEADER
Not if fate brings Orestes home again.

AEGISTHUS
I understand how exiles feed on hope.

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CHORUS LEADER

Go on. Fatten yourself up. While you still can,
pollute all Justice.

AEGISTHUS

You must know you'll pay
for all this insolence to me. 1970 [1670]

CHORUS

Keep on bragging—
just like a cock beside his hen.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*pulling Aegisthus towards the palace doors*]

Leave them their feeble yelping. You and I
control the house. We'll put things in order.

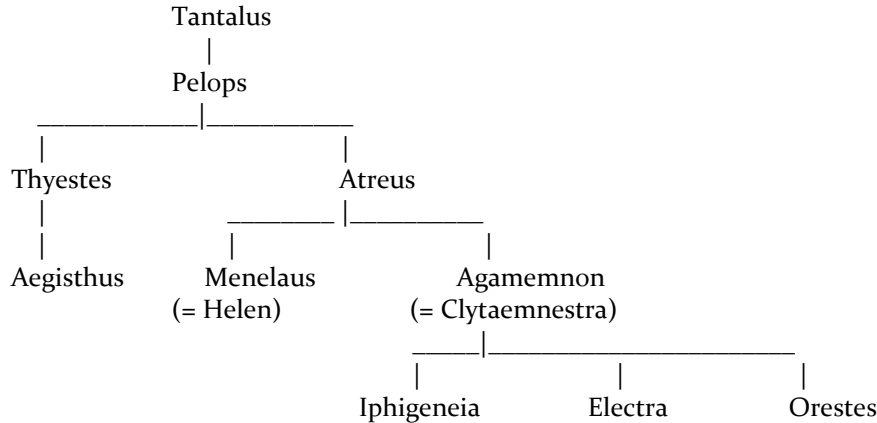
[Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus back slowly into the palace and close the doors, leaving the guards and Chorus still facing each other. Slowly the Chorus disintegrates and its members walk off one by one. The guards form up in front of the palace, an armed defence before the doors.]

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A Note on the Mythological Background to the *Oresteia*

The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of the major events in the long history of the House of Atreus, one of the most fecund and long-lasting of all the Greek legends. Like so many other stories, the legend of the House of Atreus varies a good deal from one author to the next and there is no single authoritative version. The account given below tries to include as many of the major details as possible.

Family Tree of the House of Atreus (Simplified)



The Main Details of the Story of the House of Atreus

1. The family of Atreus (father of Agamemnon and Menelaus) traces its origins back to Tantalus, king of Sipylos, a son of Zeus (famous for his eternal punishment in Hades, as described in the *Odyssey*, where he is always thirsty but can never drink, hence the origin of the word tantalizing). Tantalus had a son called Pelops.
2. Pelops wished to marry Hippodameia, daughter of king Oenomaus. Oenomaus set up a contest (a chariot race against the king) for all those who wished to woo his daughter. If the suitor lost, he was killed. A number of men had died in such a race before Pelops made his attempt. Pelops bribed the king's charioteer (Myrtilus) to disable the king's chariot. In the race, Oenomaus's chariot broke down (the wheels came off), and the king was killed. Pelops then carried off Hippodameia as his bride. Pelops also killed his co-conspirator, Myrtilus, by throwing him into the sea. Before he drowned Myrtilus (in some versions Oenomaus) cursed Pelops and his family. This act is the origin of the famous curse on the House of Atreus.
3. Pelops does not seem to have been affected by the curse (though he had troubles enough). He had a number of children, the most important of whom were his two sons, the brothers Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus married Aerope, and they had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. And Thyestes had two sons and a daughter Pelopia.

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4. Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled (in some versions at the instigation of the god Hermes, father of Myrtilus, the charioteer killed by Pelops). Thyestes had an affair with Atreus's wife, Aerope, and was banished from Argos by Atreus. However, Thyestes petitioned to be allowed to return, and Atreus, apparently wishing a reconciliation, agreed to allow Thyestes to come back and prepared a huge banquet to celebrate the end of their differences.

5. At the banquet, however, Atreus served Thyestes the cooked flesh of Thyestes's two slaughtered sons. Thyestes ate the food, and then was informed of what he had done. This horrific event is the origin of the term Thyestean Banquet. Overcome with horror, Thyestes cursed the family of Atreus and left Argos with his one remaining child, his daughter Pelopia.

6. Some versions of the story include the name Pleisthenes, a son of Atreus who was raised by Thyestes. To become king, Thyestes sent Pleisthenes to kill Atreus, but Atreus killed him, not realizing he was killing his son. This, then, becomes another cause of the quarrel. In yet other accounts, someone called Pleisthenes is the first husband of Aerope and the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus. When he died, so this version goes, Atreus married Aerope and adopted her two sons. In Aeschylus's play there is one reference to Pleisthenes; otherwise, this ambiguous figure is absent from the story.

7. In some versions, including Aeschylus's account, Thyestes had one small infant son who survived the banquet, Aegisthus. In other accounts, however, Aegisthus was the product of Thyestes's incestuous relationship with his daughter Pelopia after the murder of the two older sons, conceived especially to be the avenger of the notorious banquet.

8. Agamemnon and Menelaus, the two sons of Atreus, married Clytaemnestra and Helen respectively, two twin sisters, but not identical twins (Clytaemnestra had a human father; whereas, Helen was a daughter of Zeus). Helen was so famous for her beauty that a number of men wished to marry her. The suitors all agreed that they would act to support the man she eventually married in the event of any need for mutual assistance. Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra had three children, Iphigeneia, Orestes, and Electra.

9. When Helen (Menelaus's wife) ran off to Troy with Paris, son of Priam, king of Troy, Agamemnon and Menelaus organized and led the Greek forces against the Trojans. The army assembled at Aulis, but the fleet could not sail because of contrary winds sent by the goddess Artemis, who was angry at Agamemnon. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to placate Artemis and enable the fleet to sail for Troy (the first long chorus in the *Agamemnon*, recalls this sacrifice).

10. With Agamemnon and Menelaus off in Troy, Aegisthus (son of Thyestes) returned to Argos, where he became the lover of Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife. They sent Orestes into exile, to live with an ally, Strophius in Phocis, and humiliated Electra,

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Agamemnon's surviving daughter (either treating her as a servant or marrying her off to a common farmer). When Agamemnon returned, the two conspirators successfully killed him and assumed royal control of Argos. They also killed Cassandra, a Trojan prophetess, who had been given to Agamemnon by his army as spoils of war and whom he brought back to Argos when he returned home.

11. Orestes returned from exile and, in collaboration with his sister Electra, avenged his father by killing Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. In many versions this act makes him lose his self-control and he becomes temporarily deranged. He then underwent ritual purification by Apollo and sought refuge in the temple of Athena in Athens. There he was tried and acquitted. This action put the curses placed on the House of Atreus to rest.

Some Comments

The story of the House of Atreus, and particularly Orestes's and Electra's revenge for their father's murder, is one of the most popular and enduring of all Greek legends, a favourite among the classical tragedians, and still very popular with modern playwrights (e.g., T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Jean Paul Sartre). However, different writers tell the story in very different ways.

Homer, for example (in the *Odyssey*) sets up Orestes's killing of Aegisthus as an entirely justified way to proceed (Homer ascribes the main motivation and planning to Aegisthus, who has to persuade Clytaemnestra to agree and who, it seems, does the actual killing). In fact, the action is repeatedly mentioned as a clear indication of divinely supported justice (there is no direct mention of the killing of Clytaemnestra, although there is a passing reference to Orestes's celebrations over his "hateful" mother after the killing of Aegisthus). Sophocles and Euripides tell basically the same story but with different depictions of the main characters (in Euripides's version Orestes and Electra are hateful; whereas, in Sophocles's *Electra* they are much more conventionally righteous).

Aeschylus confines his attention to Atreus's crime against his brother (the Thyestean banquet) and what followed from it. There is no direct reference to Thyestes's adultery with Atreus's wife (although Cassandra makes a reference to a man sleeping with his brother's wife) or to any events from earlier parts of the story (unless the images of chariot racing are meant to carry an echo of Pelops's actions). This has the effect of making Atreus's crime against his brother the origin of the family curse (rather than the actions of Pelops or Tantalus) and tends to give the reader more sympathy (perhaps) for Aegisthus than some other versions do.

Curiously enough, Orestes's story has many close parallels with the Norse legend on which the story of Hamlet is based (son in exile is called upon to avenge a father killed by the man who has seduced his mother, perhaps with the mother's consent; the son carries out the act of killing his mother and her lover with great difficulty, undergoing fits of madness, and so on). Given that there is no suggestion of any possible literary-historical

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link between the origin of these two stories, the similarity of these plots offers a number of significant problems for psychologists and mythologists to explore. This puzzle is especially intriguing because the Hamlet-Orestes narrative is by far the most popular story in the history of English dramatic tragedy.