

AESCHYLUS
THE EUMENIDES
[THE KINDLY ONES]

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[Last revised May 2012, Reformatted 2019]

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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Note that in the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text, and the numbers without brackets refer to the text of the translation.

The *Eumenides* is the third play in the series of three plays which make up the *Oresteia*.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PRIESTESS: prophetic priestess (the Pythia) of Apollo at Delphi

APOLLO: divine son of Zeus, god of prophecy

ORESTES: son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra

CLYTAEMNESTRA: mother of Orestes, appearing as a ghost after her murder

CHORUS: Furies, goddesses of blood revenge

ATHENA: divine daughter of Zeus who was born fully grown from his head (without a mother)

ATHENIAN CITIZENS

[Scene: The play opens just in front of the temple of Apollo at Delphi.]

[Enter the Pythia, the Priestess of Apollo.]

PRIESTESS

In my prayer, I hold Earth in highest honour,

EUMENIDES

as the first of prophets among all gods.
 Then, after her came Themis. That goddess,
 so the legend goes, followed her mother
 at this seat of prophecy. Third in line,
 another Titan, Phoebe, child of Earth,
 was then assigned to occupy this throne.
 There was no force—Themis approved the change.
 Phoebe then gave it as a birthday gift
 to the god who takes his name from her, 10
 Phoebus Apollo. He left the island Delos,
 moving from his lake and ridge to Pallas, [10]
 to those shores where ships sail in to trade.
 Then he came to live on Mount Parnassus.
 A reverential escort came with him—
 children of the fire god, Hephaestus,
 highway builders who tame the wilderness
 and civilize the land. As he marched here,
 people came out in droves to worship him,
 including their king and helmsman, Delphus. 20
 Then Zeus inspired in him prophetic skills,
 and set him on this throne as fourth in line.
 Here Apollo speaks for Zeus, his father.
 My prayers begin with preludes to these gods. [20]
 My words also give special prominence
 to the goddess who stands outside the shrine,
 Pallas Athena. I revere those nymphs
 inhabiting Corycia's rocky caves,
 where flocks of birds delight to congregate,
 where holy spirits roam. I don't forget 30
 how Dionysus, ruler of this land,
 divine commander of those Bacchic women,
 ripped Pentheus apart, as if he were
 a cornered rabbit. I also call upon
 the streams of Pleistus and Poseidon's power,
 and Zeus most high, who fulfills all things.
 I'll take my seat now on the prophet's throne.
 May I be fortunate, above the rest, [30]
 to see far more than previous attempts.
 If any Greeks are in attendance here, 40
 let them draw lots and enter, each in turn,
 as is our custom. I will prophesy,
 following directions from the god.

[The Priestess enters the temple, only to return immediately, very agitated. She collapses onto her hands and knees.]

It's horrible!
 Too horrible to say . . . awful to see.
 It drives me back . . . out of Apollo's shrine.

EUMENIDES

My strength is gone . . . I can't stand up.
 I have to crawl on hands and knees—my legs
 just buckle under me . . . An old woman
 overcome with fear is nothing, a child.
 No more . . .

[The Priestess gathers herself together and stands with great difficulty, holding onto the temple doors for support.]

| | | |
|---|----|------|
| As I was entering the inner shrine— | 50 | |
| the part covered up with wreaths—I saw him, | | [40] |
| right on the central navel stone, a man | | |
| the gods despise, sitting there, in the seat | | |
| reserved for suppliants, hands dripping blood. | | |
| He'd drawn his sword, but held an olive branch. | | |
| It had a tuft of wool on top, a mark | | |
| of reverence—a large one, really white. | | |
| I saw all that distinctly. But then I saw | | |
| in front of him something astonishing, | | |
| on the benches groups of women sleeping— | 60 | |
| well, they weren't exactly women, | | |
| I'd say more like Gorgons—then again, | | |
| not much like Gorgons either. Years ago, | | |
| I once saw a picture of some monsters | | |
| snatching a feast away from Phineas. | | [50] |
| But the ones inside here have no wings— | | |
| I checked. They're black and totally repulsive, | | |
| with loud rasping snorts that terrify me. | | |
| Disgusting pus comes oozing from their eyes. | | |
| As for their clothing—quite inappropriate | 70 | |
| to wear before the statues of the gods, | | |
| or even in men's homes. I've never seen | | |
| a tribe which could produce this company, | | |
| a country which would admit with pride | | |
| that it had raised them without paying a price, | | |
| without regretting all the pain they cost. | | |
| Where does this end? That is Apollo's work. | | [60] |
| Let that be his concern. His force is strong— | | |
| what he reveals has healing power. | | |
| He reads the omens and can purify | 80 | |
| the home, his own and other men's. | | |

[The scene changes to reveal the inside of the temple, with Orestes clutching the central stone (the navel stone) and the Furies asleep in front of him. Apollo enters from the back of the temple (the inner shrine). Apollo moves to stand near Orestes.]

APOLLO

I'll not leave you—no, I'll stand beside you,
 your protector till the end. Close at hand

EUMENIDES

or far away, I'll show no gentleness
towards your enemies. Right now you see
these frenzied creatures overcome with sleep,
just lying there, these loathsome maidens,
ancient children, hags. No god or man [70]
or animal has intercourse with them.
They're born for evil. That's why they live 90
within the blackest gloom of Tartarus,
under the earth. Olympian gods and men
despise them. But you should still keep going.
Do not give up. They'll chase you everywhere,
as you move along well-traveled ground,
across wide continents, beyond the seas,
through cities with the ocean all around.
Don't grow weary brooding on your pain.
And then, once you reach Athena's city,
sit down, and wrap your arms around her, 100 [80]
embrace her image. With people there
to judge your cause and with the force of speech,
the spell-binding power in words, we'll find
a way to free you from misfortune.
For I was the one who urged you on
to kill your mother.

ORESTES

My lord Apollo,
you have no knowledge how to be unjust.
That being the case, now learn compassion, too.
Your power to do good is strong enough.

APOLLO

Remember this—don't let fear defeat you 110
by conquering your spirit. And you, Hermes, [90]
my own blood brother from a common father,
protect this man. Live up to that name of yours,
and be his guide. Since he's my suppliant,
lead him as if you were his shepherd—
remember Zeus respects an outcast's rights—
with you to show the way, he'll get better,
and quickly come among men once again.

[Exit Orestes. Apollo moves back into the inner sanctuary. Enter the Ghost of Clytaemnestra.]

GHOST OF CLYTAEMNESTRA *[addressing the sleeping chorus]*

Ah, you may be fast asleep, but now
what use is sleeping? On account of you, 120
I alone among the dead lack honour.
The ghosts of those I killed revile me—

they never stop. I wander in disgrace.
 They charge me with the most horrific crimes.
 But I, too, suffered cruelty from those [100]
 most dear to me. And yet, although I died
 at the hands of one who killed his mother,
 no spirit is enraged on my behalf.
 Look here—you see these slashes on my heart?
 How did they get there? While it's asleep 130
 the mind can see, but in the light of day
 we have no vision of men's destiny.
 You've licked up many of my offerings,
 soothing milk and honey without wine.
 I've given many sacrificial gifts
 with fire in my hearth at solemn banquets,
 in that night hour no god will ever share.
 I see all that being trampled underfoot. [110]
 He's gone, eluded you—just like a fawn,
 he's jumped the centre of your nets with ease. 140
 He mocks your efforts as he moves away.
 Listen to me. I'm speaking of my soul.
 So rouse yourselves! Wake up, you goddesses
 from underground. While you dream on I call—
 now Clytaemnestra summons you!

[The members of the Chorus begin to make strange sounds and to mutter in their sleep.]

You may well moan—the man's escaped. He's gone. [120]
 He's flown a long way off. The friends he has
 are stronger than my own. You sleep on there
 so heavily, no sense of my distress.
 Orestes, the man who killed his mother, 150
 has run off! You mutter, but keep sleeping.
 On your feet! Why won't you get up? What work
 has fate assigned you if not causing pain?
 Sleep and hard work, two apt confederates,
 have made these fearsome dragons impotent,
 draining all their rage.

CHORUS MEMBER *[muttering in her sleep]*

Seize him!

Seize him! Seize him! Seize that man! Look out! [130]

GHOST OF CLYTAEMNESTRA

You hunt your prey, but only in your dreams,
 whimpering like hounds who never lose
 their keenness for the hunt. But you don't act! 160
 Get up! Don't let exhaustion beat you down.
 Sleep makes you soft—you overlook my pain.

Let my reproaches justly prick your hearts,
 a spur for those who act with righteousness.
 Blow your blood-filled breath all over him.
 Let those fires in your bodies shrivel him.
 Go on! Drive him to a fresh pursuit. Go!

[The Furies begin to wake up slowly, one after the other. As they start to get up, the Ghost of Clytaemnestra exits.]

CHORUS LEADER *[waking up and rousing the other Furies]*

Wake up! Come on, I'll wake you up. [140]
 Now do the same for her. Still sleeping?
 Stand up. Wipe that sleep out of your eyes. 170
 Let's chant our prelude—that should take effect.

[The Furies, now awake, gather as a group, moving around trying to find Orestes or smell his track. They speak these lines as individual members of the larger group.]

-Ah ha, what this? Dear sisters, something's wrong.

-I've been through a lot, and all for nothing.

-We're being made to suffer something bad,
 alas, an evil we cannot endure.

-Our quarry's slipped our nets. He's gone!
 Once sleep came over us, we lost our prey.

-You're disgraceful, Hermes, a child of Zeus
 who loves to steal.

-For a god you're young— [150]
 but still you trample on more ancient spirits. 180

-You showed that suppliant respect,
 a godless man, so vicious to his parent.

-You may be a god, but you're a thief.
 You filched a man who killed his mother.

-Who can say there's justice in such theft?

-In my dreams shame struck—
 it came on like a charioteer
 who gripped his cruel whip so tight,
 then hit under my heart,
 deep in my gut. 190

EUMENIDES

-I feel the executioner's scourge,
the one who wields a heavy lash,
weighed down with pain. [160]

-Younger gods are doing this—
they push their ruling power
beyond what's theirs by right.

Their throne drips blood
around its foot,
around its head.

-I see Earth's central navel stone
defiled with blood, corrupted,
stained with guilt. 200

-The prophet soils the hearth,
pollutes the shrine himself,
acting on his own behalf. [170]
against divine tradition,
he honours human things.

-He sets aside decrees of fate
established long ago.

-Though he inflicts his pain on me,
he'll never free that man. 210
Let him flee underground,
he'll find no liberty below.

-As he seeks to cleanse himself
he'll meet the next avenger—
a family member coming for his head.

[Enter Apollo from the inner part of the shrine.]

APOLLO

Get out! I'm ordering you to leave this house.
Move on! Out of my prophet's sanctuary! [180]
Go now, or else you'll feel my arrows bite,
glittering winged snakes shot from a golden string. 220
Then, your agonies will make you choke,
spit out black froth you suck from men,
and vomit up the clotted blood you've drunk
from murder. This shrine's no place for you.
No, you belong where heads are sliced away,
eyes gouged out—where justice equals slaughter—
where youthful men are ruined by castration,

EUMENIDES

APOLLO

Assigned?

250

What's that? Proclaim your fine authority.

CHORUS LEADER

We chase out of their homes those criminals
who slaughter their own mothers.

[210]

APOLLO

What about a wife who kills her husband?

CHORUS LEADER

That's not blood murder in the family.

APOLLO

What?

What about Zeus and his queen Hera—
your actions bring disgrace on them.
You ignore the strongest bonds between them.
Your claim dishonours Aphrodite, too,
goddess of love, from whom all men derive
their greatest joys. With man and woman
a marriage sealed by fate is stronger
than any oath, and justice guards it.
Now, if one partner kills the other one,
and you're not interested in punishment,
if you feel no urge to act, then I say
the way you chase Orestes is unjust.
I don't see why in one case you're so harsh
when you don't really care about the other.
However, goddess Athena will take charge—
she'll organize a trial.

260

[220]

270

CHORUS LEADER

But that fugitive—
he'll never be free of me, never.

APOLLO

Then go after him. Bring yourself more trouble.

CHORUS LEADER

Don't try to curb my powers with your words.

APOLLO

Your powers? Those I wouldn't take,
not even as a gift.

CHORUS LEADER

Of course not.
 You're already great, by all accounts—
 right by Zeus' throne. But for my part,
 since I'm called onward by a mother's blood, [230]
 I'll chase this man with justice of my own. 280
 I scent the trail!

APOLLO

I'll help my suppliant
 and bring him safely home. With gods and men
 the anger of a man who seeks redemption
 will be dreadful, if, of my own free will,
 I abandon him.

[Apollo exits into the inner shrine. The scene now changes to Athens, just outside the Temple of Athena. Orestes enters and move up to the large statue of Athena.]

ORESTES

Queen Athena,
 I've come here on Apollo's orders.
 I beg your kindness. Please let me enter,
 a man accursed, an outcast. I don't seek
 ritual purification—my hands are clean—
 but my avenging zeal has lost its edge, 290
 worn down, blunted by other people's homes,
 by all well-beaten pathways known to men.
 I've stayed true to what Apollo told me
 at his oracle. Crossing land and sea, [240]
 I've reached this statue by your shrine at last.
 Here I take up my position, goddess.
 I await the outcome of my trial.

[Enter the Furies, like hunting dogs, still tracking Orestes by his scent. They do not see him at first.]

CHORUS LEADER

Ah ha! Here we have that man's clear scent,
 a silent witness, but firm evidence.
 After him! Like hounds chasing a wounded fawn, 300
 we track him by the drops of blood he sheds.
 Man-killing work—the effort wearies me.
 My lungs are bursting. We've roamed everywhere,
 exploring all the regions of the earth,
 crossing seas in wingless flight, moving on [250]
 faster than any ship, always in pursuit.
 Now he's cornered here, cowering somewhere.
 I smell human blood—I could laugh for joy!
 Start looking for him! Seek him out again!

Check everywhere. Don't let him escape. 310
That man killed his mother—he must pay!

[The Chorus of Furies catch sight of Orestes and crowd around him.]

CHORUS *[different individuals]*

—He's over there! Claiming sanctuary,
at that statue of the eternal goddess,
embracing it. He must want a trial,
a judgment on his murderous violence. [260]

—Impossible! A mother's blood, once shed,
soaks in the earth and can't come back again—
the flowing stream moves through the ground,
then disappears forever.

—No. You must pay me back.
I'll suck your blood. 320
Drinking your living bones sustains me—
I feed upon your pain.

—Though it wears me out, I'll drag you down,
still living, to the world below. And there
you'll pay for murdering your mother.

—You'll see there other human criminals
who've failed to honour gods and strangers, [270]
who've abused the parents they should love.
They all receive the justice they deserve.

—Hades, mighty god of all the dead, 330
judges mortal men below the ground.
His perceptive mind records all things.

ORESTES

My misery has been my teacher—
I know that men are cleansed in many ways,
that sometimes it's appropriate to speak,
sometimes to stay silent. And in this case
a wise master has ordered me to speak.
Blood on my hands is dormant now, fading— [280]
polluting stains from my mother's murder
have been washed away. When they were fresh, 340
Apollo in his temple cleansed my guilt—
slaughtering pigs to make me pure again.
It's a long story to describe for you,
right from the start, all the men I've seen,
ones I've stayed with, then left unharmed.

Time destroys all things which age with time.
 Now, with full reverence and holy speech,
 I invoke Athena, this country's queen.
 I beg her help. Let her appear unarmed.
 She'll win true allies in me, my land, 350 [290]
 the Argive people. We'll trust her forever.
 No matter where she is—in Libya,
 in some region by the springs of Triton,
 her birthplace, with her covered feet at rest
 or on the move, assisting those she loves,
 or whether, like some bold commander
 in the Phelegraeon plain, battle site
 of gods and giants, she surveys the field—
 I pray she'll come, for she's a goddess
 and hears me, even though she's far away. 360
 May she come here. May she deliver me.

CHORUS LEADER

But Apollo's power will not save you—
 nor will Athena's. You're slated to die 300]
 abandoned and alone, without a sense
 of heartfelt joy, a bloodless criminal
 sucked dry by demons, just a shade—no more.

[Orestes makes no answer.]

What? You ignore my words and won't reply,
 you, a victim fattened up for me,
 my consecrated gift? You'll not perish
 on any altar—no, I'll eat you alive. 370

[Orestes continues to remain silent.]

All right then, hear our song, a spell to chain you.

CHORUS

Come, let's link our arms and dance—
 Furies determined to display
 our fearful art, to demonstrate
 collective power we possess 310]
 to guide all mortals' lives.

We claim we represent true justice.
 Our anger never works against
 a man whose hands are clean—
 all his life he stays unharmed. 380
 But those men guilty of some crime,
 as this one is, who hide away,

concealing blood-stained hands—
 we harass them as testament
 to those they've murdered.
 Blood avengers, always in pursuit,
 we chase them to the end. [320]

Hear me, Mother Night,
 mother who gave birth to me
 so I could avenge 390
 the living and the dead.
 Leto's child, Apollo,
 dishonours me—he tears
 that man out of my hands,
 the hare who cowers there,
 who by rights must expiate
 his mother's blood.

Let this frenzied song of ours
 fall upon our victim's head,
 our sacrifice—our frenzy 400
 driving him to madness—
 obliterate his mind. [330]
 This is our Furies' chant
 It chains up the soul,
 destroys its harmony,
 and withers mortal men.

Remorseless Fate gave us this work
 to carry on forever, a destiny
 spun out for us alone, 410
 to attach ourselves to those
 who, overcome with passion,
 slaughter blood relatives.
 We chase after them until the end,
 until they go beneath the ground.
 In death they find small freedom. [340]

Let this frenzied song of ours
 fall upon our victim's head,
 our sacrifice—our frenzy
 driving him to madness—
 obliterate his mind. 420
 This is our Furies' chant.
 It chains up the soul,
 destroys its harmony,
 and withers mortal men.

These rights are ours from birth—
 even the immortal gods [350]
 may not lay hands on us.
 We share no feasts with them,
 no fellowship—their pure white robes
 are no part of our destiny. 430

The task I take upon myself is mine,
 to overthrow whole families,
 when strife inside the home
 kills someone near and dear.
 We chase that murderer down,
 the one who's spilled fresh blood.
 For all his strength, we wear him down.

That's why we're now here,
 eager to contest the charge,
 to challenge other gods, 440 [360]
 to make sure none of them
 ends up controlling what is ours.
 There will be no trial—
 for Zeus despises us,
 considers us unworthy,
 refusing to converse with us
 because we deal in blood.

The task I take upon myself is mine,
 to overthrow whole families,
 when strife inside the home 450
 kills someone near and dear.
 We chase that murderer down,
 the one who's spilled fresh blood.
 For all his strength, we wear him down.

Those proud opinions people have,
 who raise themselves so high,
 who puff themselves to heaven,
 will melt away, dissolving
 in dishonour underground,
 when we, in our black robes, 460
 beat out our vengeful dance— [370]
 when we launch our attack.

Leaping from the heights,
 we pound them with our feet—
 our force trips up the runner
 as he sprints for home,
 a fate he cannot bear.

EUMENIDES

His mind is so confused
he does not sense his fall.
Dark clouds of his defilement 470
hover all around the man.
Murky shadows fall,
enveloping his home—
and Rumour spreads
a tale of sorrow. [380]

Leaping from the heights,
we pound them with our feet—
our force trips up the runner
as he sprints for home,
a fate he cannot bear. 480
So things remain.
We have our skills—
our powers we fulfill,
keeping human evil in our minds.
Our awesome powers
cannot be appeased by men.
Dishonoured and despised,
we see our work gets done.
Split off from gods,
with no light from the sun, 490
we make the path more arduous
for those who still can see
and for the blind.

What man is not in awe
or stands there unafraid [390]
to hear me state my rights,
those powers allowed by Fate
and ratified by all the gods,
mine to hold forever?

Those old prerogatives 500
I still retain—they're mine.
I have my honour, too,
though my appointed place
is underneath the ground
in sunless darkness.

[Enter Athena.]

ATHENA

I heard someone summon me from far away.
I was in Troy, by the Scamander's banks,
taking ownership of new property,

a gift from ruling leaders of Achaea,
 a major part of what their spears had won, 510 [400]
 assigned to me entirely and forever,
 a splendid gift for Theseus's sons.
 I've come from there at my untiring pace,
 not flying on wings, but on this whirling cape,
 a chariot yoked to horses in their prime.
 Here I see an unfamiliar crowd,
 strangers to this place, nothing I fear,
 but astonishing to see. Who are you?
 I'm talking to all those assembled here—
 the stranger crouching there beside my statue, 520
 and those of you like no one ever born, [410]
 creatures no god has seen in goddesses,
 in form a thing unknown to mortal men.
 But to say such things about one's neighbour
 who's done no wrong is far from just
 and contravenes our customs.

CHORUS LEADER

Daughter of Zeus,
 you'll find out everything—and briefly, too.
 We are immortal children of the Night.
 Below ground, where we have our homes,
 we're called the Curses.

ATHENA

Now I know your race 530
 I know what people call you.

CHORUS LEADER

But our powers—
 these you'll quickly ascertain as well.

ATHENA

Those I'd like to learn. Please state them clearly. [420]

CHORUS LEADER

We hound out of their homes all those who kill.

ATHENA

Once the killer flees, where does he finally go?

CHORUS LEADER

Where no one thinks of joy, for there is none.

ATHENA

Your screams would drive this man to such a flight?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes—he thought it right to kill his mother.

ATHENA

Why? Was he forced to do it? Did he fear
another person's anger?

CHORUS LEADER

Where's the urge 540
so strong to force a man to kill his mother?

ATHENA

There are two sides to this dispute. I've heard
only one half the argument.

CHORUS LEADER

What about the oath?
He won't deny he did it or accept
the guilt we charge him with.

ATHENA

Where do you stand? [430]
You wish to be considered righteous,
but not to act with justice.

CHORUS LEADER

How? Teach me.
You clearly have a mind for subtleties.

ATHENA

I assert that no one should use oaths
to let injustice triumph.

CHORUS LEADER

Question him. 550
Then make a righteous judgment.

ATHENA

Are you prepared
that I should be the one to do this,
to produce a final verdict?

CHORUS LEADER

Why not?
We respect your worth, as you do ours.

ATHENA

Stranger, do you have anything to say

by way of a response? State your country,
 lineage, and circumstance. And then,
 defend yourself against their accusations,
 if you really trust the justice of your case,
 as you sit here clinging to my statue, 560
 a sacred suppliant beside my hearth, [440]
 doing what Ixion did so long ago.
 Speak to me. Address all this directly.

ORESTES

Queen Athena, your last words express
 important doubts which I must first remove.
 I'm not a suppliant in need of cleansing.
 Nor have I fallen at your statue's feet
 with my hands defiled. On these two points
 I'll offer weighty proof. Our laws assert 570
 a criminal polluted with blood guilt
 will be denied all speech until he's cleansed
 by someone authorized to purify
 a man for murder, who sprinkles him
 with suckling victim's blood. Some time ago, [450]
 in homes of other men, I underwent
 such purification rites with slaughtered beasts,
 at flowing streams, as well. So, as I say,
 there are no grounds for your misgivings here.
 As for my family, you'll know that soon enough—
 I'm an Argive, son of Agamemnon. 580
 You may well ask his story—he's the man
 who put that naval force together.
 You worked with him to see that Ilion,
 Troy's city, ceased to be. When he came home,
 he died in a disgraceful way, butchered
 by my mother, whose black heart snagged him [460]
 in devious hunting nets—these still exist,
 attesting to that slaughter in his bath.
 I was in exile at the time. I came back.
 I killed my mother—that I don't deny— 590
 to avenge the murder of my father,
 whom I truly loved. For this murder
 Apollo bears responsibility,
 along with me. He urged me to it,
 pointing out the cruel reprisals I would face
 if I failed to act against the murderers.
 Was what I did a righteous act or not?
 That you must decide. I'll be satisfied,
 no matter how you render judgment.

EUMENIDES

Don't trample it profanely underfoot [540]
because self-interest sees advantages.
Remember punishment will come—
that outcome's fixed and permanent.
So each of you, above all else,
should honour parents, 690
pay them the deference you owe,
respect all guests and strangers
you welcome in your home.

For happiness will never fail [550]
the man who follows justice,
freely and without constraint.
He'll never be destroyed.
But the reckless man who goes too far,
who piles up riches for himself
in any way he can and disregards 700
all justice—I tell you this—
in time he'll have to strike his sail,
as storming torments break his ship,
as his yardarm shatters.

He screams for help.
But no one listens.
In the middle of the seas
he fights—but all in vain.
Whirlpools suck him down,
while heaven roars with laughter 710 [560]
at the sight of this hot-tempered man
who used to boast with pride
he'd never come to grief
now helpless, panic stricken,
unable to ride out the waves.
He always lived for wealth—
now that, too, smashes on the reef,
the rock of Justice—he drowns,
unseen and unlamented.

[The scene shifts to the Areopagus, the high court of Athens. Athena enters with a herald and ten citizens, the jury she has selected. A crowd of citizens enters with her. Orestes moves to the place where the accused stands.]

ATHENA

Herald, blow the call for order in this court. 720
Raise that Etruscan trumpet, fill your lungs,
let these people hear an ear-piercing blast.
As they crowd into this court of judgment [570]
it's better to have silence. The whole city
can listen to my laws, which are eternal.

So can these litigants. Then all will see
the justice in our verdict for themselves.

[Enter Apollo. He moves to stand behind Orestes.]

Lord Apollo, you have your own domain.
What's your role here? Announce that to us.

APOLLO

I've come here as a witness. That man, 730
the accused, according to our customs,
came a suppliant to my shrine, my hearth.
I purified him of the blood he spilled.
As his advocate, I share the blame
arising from his mother's murder. [580]
Start the trial. You understand procedure.
Confirm that with a just decision.

ATHENA *[addressing the Furies]*

Then I'll begin the trial. You speak up first.
The plaintiff opens our proceedings.
Tell us the facts. Begin at the beginning— 740
inform us clearly of the issues here.

CHORUS LEADER

There are many of us, but we'll keep
our speeches brief.

[Turning to interrogate Orestes]

Answer our questions,
as we put them one by one. First, tell us—
did you kill your mother?

ORESTES

Yes, I killed her.
I don't deny the fact.

CHORUS LEADER

We take first fall.
Three falls wins the match.

ORESTES

You gloat, [590]
but your opponent isn't pinned down yet.

CHORUS LEADER

Now you must describe the murder for us.
How did you kill her?

ORESTES

I'll tell you—
I drew my sword and slit her throat.

750

CHORUS LEADER

Who persuaded you to do this? Whose advice?

ORESTES

The orders of this god. He is my witness.

CHORUS LEADER

The prophet ordered you to kill your mother?

ORESTES

He did. And to this moment I have no regrets.

CHORUS LEADER

But if the verdict lays its hands on you,
you'll change your story soon enough.

ORESTES

I'm confident. My father from his grave
will send the help I need.

CHORUS LEADER

So you trust the dead,
and yet you killed your mother?

760

ORESTES

I do, for she was guilty of two crimes.

[600]

CHORUS LEADER

How so? Inform the judges on this point.

ORESTES

She killed her husband and my father.

CHORUS LEADER

But her death evens out the score for her.
You're still living.

ORESTES

When she was still alive
you didn't hound her into exile. Why?

CHORUS LEADER

She and her victim shared no common blood.

ORESTES

And my mother and me? Are we blood linked?

CHORUS LEADER

How else could she sustain you in her womb,
you murderer? Do you now reject 770
the closest bond there is, a mother's blood?

ORESTES [*turning to Apollo*]

You must give evidence, Apollo. [610]
Take the lead for me. Did I kill her justly?
For I don't deny I did the murder.
But whether that act of shedding blood
was just or not, as you perceive the facts,
you must decide, so I can tell the court.

APOLLO

Let me address this high court of Athena.
Tribunal members, what I have to say
will proceed from justice. I'm a prophet. 780
I cannot tell a lie. And never yet,
when I've been seated in my oracle,
have I said anything in prophecy
concerning woman, man, or city state,
that Olympian father Zeus did not command.
Make sure you understand how powerful
his justice is. That's why I urge you now— [620]
obey the will of Zeus, our father.
No oath has greater strength than Zeus.

CHORUS LEADER

Then, Zeus, according to your reasoning, 790
told your oracle to give the order—
Orestes must avenge his father's death,
ignoring any rights his mother had.

APOLLO

Yes. For these two things are not the same—
he died a noble man, a special king
who bears a sceptre given by the gods,
an honoured king who dies by murder,
and at a woman's hand, not in a fight
where arrows fly in from a distance,
as with the Amazons, but in a way 800
which we'll describe for you, Athena,

and those here ready to decide this case
 when you cast your votes. He'd just come home, [630]
 returning from a long and harsh campaign,
 where in the eyes of loyal citizens
 he'd won success beyond all expectation.
 She welcomed him. Then, he took his bath.
 As he stepped out—still on the outer rim—
 she threw the cloak, his shroud, around him,
 just like a tent. She caught him in those robes, 810
 whose endless folds enclosed him like a net.
 Then she hacked him down. I'm telling you,
 that's how the splendid leader of the ships
 went to his death. As for that woman,
 I speak of her to rouse a sense of shame
 in those men chosen here to judge this case.

CHORUS

So your claim is Zeus thinks a father's death [640]
 is more significant? But on his own
 he chained up his old father, Cronos.
 Does that not contradict what you've just said? 820
 I ask you judges to take note of this.

APOLLO

You monsters—how all the gods detest you!
 Zeus has power to smash those chains apart.
 For that he has a remedy, many ways
 to set us free. But once a mortal's blood
 has drained into the dust, the man is dead.
 And then there's no return. My father Zeus
 has made no charms for that, though he can change [650]
 all other things without a pause for breath.

CHORUS LEADER

You plead to set him free. But think of this— 830
 will this man, who shed his mother's blood,
 who spilled it on the ground, return back home,
 to live in Argos in his father's house?
 Where are the public altars he can use,
 the family cleansing rites he can attend?

APOLLO

I'll speak to that, as well. Make sure you note
 how right my answer is. That word mother—
 we give it to the one who bears the child.
 However, she's no parent, just a nurse
 to that new life embedded in her. 840
 The parent is the one who plants the seed,

the father. Like a stranger for a stranger, [660]
 she preserves the growing life, unless
 god injures it. And I can offer proof
 for what I say—a man can have a child
 without a mother. Here's our witness,
 here—Athena, child of Olympian Zeus.

[Apollo points to Athena.]

No dark womb nursed her—no goddess bears
 a child with ancestry like hers. Athena,
 since I know so many other things, 850
 I'll make your city and your people great.
 That's why I sent this man a suppliant
 to your own shrine, so he might prove himself,
 then place eternal trust in you, dear goddess, [670]
 and you could win a new ally in him,
 in his descendants, too, and thus create
 an everlasting bond with his posterity.

ATHENA

Has each side said enough? Shall I now
 instruct the judges to cast their votes,
 acting on their judgment of what's just? 860

CHORUS LEADER

Though we've already shot our final arrow,
 we'll stay to hear this contest to the end.

ATHENA

Why not? Now, as for you defendants,
 what can I do to avoid your censure?

APOLLO

You have heard what you have heard.

[To jurors]

My friends,
 as you cast your ballots, make sure your hearts [680]
 respect that oath you made.

ATHENA

You citizens of Athens, you judges
 at the first trial ever held for murder,
 hear what I decree. Now and forever 870
 this court of judges will be set up here
 to serve Aegeus' people. This place,

this Mount of Ares, is where Amazons,
 once marched in force, enraged at Theseus.
 Here they pitched their tents. Then they built
 a new city on the heights, with lofty walls
 to match his own, making a sacrifice
 to Ares, god of war, from whom this rock
 derives its name, the Mount of Ares. [690]
 From this hill Reverence and Terror, 880
 two kindred rulers of my citizens,
 will guarantee they don't commit injustice,
 by day or night, unless the citizens
 pollute the laws with evil innovations.
 Once limpid waters are stained with mud,
 you'll never find a drink. My people,
 avoid both anarchy and tyranny.
 I urge you to uphold this principle.
 Show it due reverence. As for terror,
 don't banish it completely from the city. 890
 What mortal man is truly righteous
 without being afraid? Those who sense the fear [700]
 revere what's right. With citizens like these
 your country and your city will be safe,
 stronger than anything possessed by men
 in Pelops' country or in Scythia.
 So here I now establish this tribunal,
 incorruptible, magnificent,
 swift in punishment—it stands above you,
 your country's guardian as you lie asleep. 900
 I've gone through this at length to urge you on,
 my citizens, today and in the future.
 But now you must get up, cast your ballots,
 decide this case, while honouring your oath. [710]
 I'm finished—that's all I have to say.

[The members of the tribunal begin to step forward and cast their votes into the urns.]

CHORUS LEADER

Watch out. Don't ever show us disrespect.
 For our united power can crush your land.

APOLLO

Let me remind you—fear the oracles,
 not just mine, but those of Zeus the Father.
 Don't make them barren.

CHORUS LEADER *[to Apollo]*

You interfere 910

in blood work that's not your proper business.
Your oracles remain no longer pure.

APOLLO

When the first man-killer Ixion
went a suppliant to Zeus for cleansing,
was Zeus wrong to treat him as he did?

CHORUS LEADER

Argue all you want. But in this judgment
if I don't prevail, I'll be back again [720]
to bring this country to its knees.

APOLLO

Among all gods, old and new alike,
you have no honour. I will triumph here. 920

CHORUS LEADER

Just as you triumphed in the house of Pheres,
persuading Fate to free all men from death.

APOLLO

Surely it's right to help a worshipper,
especially when his need is desperate?

CHORUS LEADER

You made those ancient goddesses, the Fates,
drunk on wine, then got them to suspend
the oldest rule of order we possess.

APOLLO

Well, you'll soon lose this case. Then you can spew
your poison and not hurt your enemies. [730]

CHORUS

You're young. You'd ride roughshod over me 930
because I'm old. I'll await the verdict,
see where this trial ends. I have my doubts
about my anger at this city.

ATHENA

It's now my task to give my final verdict.
And I award my ballot to Orestes.
No mother gave me birth—that's why
in everything but marriage I support
the man with all my heart, a true child
of my father Zeus. Thus, that woman's death
I won't consider more significant. 940

She killed her husband, guardian of their home. [740]
 If the votes are equal, Orestes wins.
 Now, members of the jury, do your job.
 Shake the ballots from the urns—and quickly.

[The urns are emptied and the ballots counted.]

ORESTES

O Phoebus Apollo, how did they vote?

CHORUS

O black mother Night, are you watching this?

ORESTES

Now for the result. Either I hang
 or live on to see the light of day.

CHORUS

Either we're finished or our honour thrives.

APOLLO

Shake out all ballots, friends. Count them fairly. 950
 Divide them with due care. Make no mistakes.
 Errors in judgment now can mean disaster. [750]
 A single ballot cast can save this house.

[The ballots are shown to Athena]

ATHENA

The numbers of the votes are equal—thus,
 this man's acquitted of the murder charge.

ORESTES

O Pallas Athena, you've saved my house.
 I'd lost my homeland—now you give it back,
 and anyone in Greece can say, "This man
 is once again an Argive, occupying
 his father's property, thanks to Pallas, 960
 thanks to Apollo, and thanks to Zeus,
 third god and all-fulfilling saviour." [760]
 Faced with these pleaders for my mother's cause,
 Zeus chose to honour my father's death.
 Now I'll go home. But first I make this oath
 to your land and people for all time to come—
 never will an Argive leader march in here
 with spears arrayed against you. If he does,
 in violation of this oath of mine,
 from the grave we'll see his effort fails. 970

We'll bring him bad luck, trouble on the march, [770]
 send birds of evil omen over him.
 He'll regret the pains his campaign brings him.
 But all those who keep this oath, who honour
 for all time Athena's city, allies
 who fight on its behalf, such citizens
 we'll treat with greater favour and good will.
 And so farewell to you, Athena,
 farewell to those who guard your city.
 In struggles with your enemies, I hope 980
 you catch them in a stranglehold, win out,
 and gain the spear denoting victory.

[Apollo and Orestes leave. The Furies move to surround Athena.]

CHORUS

You younger gods, you've wrenched our ancient laws
 out of my grasp, then stamped them underfoot.
 You heap on us dishonourable contempt. [780]
 Now my anger turns against this land
 I'll spread my poisons—how it's going to pay,
 when I release this venom in my heart
 to ease my grief. I'll saturate this ground.
 It won't survive. From it disease will grow, 990
 infecting leaves and children—that's justice.
 Sterility will spread across the land,
 contaminate the soil, destroy mankind.
 What can I do now but scream out in pain?
 The citizens make fun of us, the Furies. [790]
 How can we put up with such indignity,
 daughters of Night disgracefully abused,
 dishonoured, shamed, our powers cast aside?

ATHENA

Let me persuade you not to spurn this trial.
 You've not been beaten—the votes were fair, 1000
 the numbers equal, no disgrace to you.
 But we received clear evidence from Zeus.
 The one who spoke the oracle declared
 Orestes should not suffer for his act.
 So don't be vengeful, breathing anger [800]
 on this land and drenching it with showers,
 whose drops, like spears, will kill the seeds,
 and blast its fruitfulness. I promise you
 in all righteousness you'll have your place,
 a subterranean cavern, yours by right. 1010
 Beside the hearth you'll sit on glittering thrones,
 worshipped with reverence by my citizens.

CHORUS

You younger gods, you've wrenched our ancient laws
 out of my grasp, then stamped them underfoot.
 You heap on us dishonourable contempt. [810]
 Now my anger turns against this land
 I'll spread my poisons—how it's going to pay,
 when I release this venom in my heart
 to ease my grief. I'll saturate this ground.
 It won't survive. From it disease will grow, 1020
 infecting leaves and children—that's justice.
 Sterility will spread across the land,
 contaminate the soil, destroy mankind.
 What can I do now but scream out in pain?
 The citizens make fun of us, the Furies.
 How can we put up with such indignity, [820]
 daughters of Night disgracefully abused,
 shamed, dishonoured, our powers cast aside?

ATHENA

But you've not lost honour—you're goddesses.
 Don't let your anger lead you to excess, 1030
 to blast this land of men past remedy.
 I have faith in Zeus. Why must I mention that?
 Well, I'm the only god who knows the keys
 to Zeus' arsenal where he keeps sealed
 his lightning bolt. But there's no need for that.
 Accept my argument. Don't let rash tongues [830]
 hurl threats against this land, condemning it
 to sterile fruitlessness. Ease your anger.
 Let your fury's black and bitter waves recede.
 You can live with me, receive full honours. 1040
 The first fruits of this fertile land are yours,
 forever, all those offerings for heirs,
 for marriages—from now on they're yours.
 With all this, you'll praise what I'm advising.

CHORUS

Such suffering for me.
 My ancient wisdom
 driven underground,
 despised, dishonoured.
 The shame, my shame.
 This pure rage I breathe 1050 [840]
 consumes me utterly.
 What sinks under my ribs
 and pains my heart?

O Night, my mother,
 the cunning of those gods,
 too hard to overcome,
 takes all my ancient powers,
 and leaves me nothing.

ATHENA

I'll bear with your rage, for you are older,
 and thus your wisdom far exceeds my own. 1060
 But Zeus gave me a fine intelligence as well. [850]
 So let me tell you this—if you leave here,
 for this land you'll feel a lover's yearning.
 As time goes on, my citizens will win
 increasing honour, and you, on your thrones,
 seated outside the house of Erechtheus,
 a place of honour, will win more respect
 from lines of men and women filing past
 than you could find in all the world beyond.
 So cast no stones for bloodshed on this land, 1070
 my realm. Do not corrupt our youthful hearts,
 intoxicating them with rage, like wine, [860]
 or rip the heart out of a fighting cock
 to set it in my people, giving them
 a thirst for reckless internecine war.
 Let them fight wars abroad, without restraint
 in those men driven by a lust for fame.
 I want no birds who fight their wars at home.
 That's what I offer you. It's yours to take.
 Do good things, receive good things in honour. 1080
 Take your place in a land the gods all love.

CHORUS

Such suffering for me— [870]
 my ancient wisdom
 driven underground,
 despised, dishonoured.
 The shame, my shame.
 This pure rage I breathe
 consumes me utterly.
 What sinks under my ribs
 and pains my heart? 1090
 O Night, my mother,
 the cunning of those gods,
 too hard to overcome,
 takes all my ancient powers,
 and leaves me nothing. [880]

ATHENA

I'll not tire of telling you your gifts,
 so you can never lodge complaints that I,
 a newer god, or men who guard this land
 failed to revere such ancient goddesses
 and cast you out in exile from our city. 1100

No. But if you respect Persuasion,
 holding in reverence that sacred power
 whose soothing spell sits on my tongue,
 then you should stay. If that's not your wish,
 it would be unjust to vent your anger
 on this city, injuring its people,
 enraged at them from spite. It's up to you—
 take your allotted portion of this land, [890]
 justly entitled to your share of honour.

CHORUS LEADER

Queen Athena, this place you say is ours, 1110
 what exactly is it?

ATHENA

One free of pain,
 without anxieties. Why not accept?

CHORUS LEADER

If I do, what honours would I get?

ATHENA

Without you no house can thrive.

CHORUS LEADER

You'd do this? You'd grant me that much power?

ATHENA

I will. Together we'll enrich the lives
 of all who worship us.

CHORUS LEADER

This promise you make—
 you'll hold to it forever?

ATHENA

Yes. I don't say anything I don't fulfill. 1120

CHORUS LEADER

Your magic's doing its work, it seems— [900]
 I feel my rage diminish.

ATHENA

Then stay.
In this land you'll win more friends.

CHORUS LEADER

Let me speak out a blessing on the land.
Tell me what I might say.

ATHENA

Speak nothing
of brutal victories—only blessings
stemming from the earth, the ocean depths,
the heavens. Let gusting winds caress the land
in glorious sunlight, our herds and harvests
overflow with plenty, so they never fail 1130
our citizens in time to come, whose seed
will last forever. Let their prosperity [910]
match how well they worship you. I love
these righteous men, the way a gardener loves
his growing plants, this race now free of grief.
These things are yours to give. For my part,
I'll see this city wins triumphal fame
in deadly wars where men seek glory,
so all men celebrate victorious Athens.

CHORUS

Then we'll accept this home 1140
and live here with Athena.
We'll never harm a place
which she and Ares
and all-powerful Zeus
hold as a fortress of the gods,
this glorious altar, the shield
for all the gods of Greece. [920]
I make this prayer for Athens,
prophesying fine things for her—
bounteous happy harvests 1150
bursting from the earth,
beneath a radiant sun.

ATHENA

To all my citizens I'll act with kindness,
setting in place these goddesses among them—
powerful divinities, implacable—
whose office is to guide all mortals' lives [930]
in everything they do. If there's a man
who's never felt their weight, he's ignorant
of where life's blows arise. His father's crimes

drag him before these goddesses, and there, 1160
 for all his boasting, his destruction comes—
 dread silent anger crushing him to dust.

CHORUS

Hear me speak my blessing—
 let no winds destroy the trees
 nor scorching desert heat move in [940]
 to shrivel budding plants,
 no festering blight kill off the fruit.
 May Pan foster fertility
 and make the flocks increase,
 to every ewe twin lambs, 1170
 all born in season, and in Athens
 may the earth be rich in treasure,
 paying fine gifts to Hermes,
 god of unexpected luck.

ATHENA

Do you hear that, you guardians of my city?
 The blessings they will bring? They're powerful,
 the sacred Furies, among immortal gods, [950]
 among the dead below. With mortal men
 it's clear they work their wills decisively,
 for some a life of song, for others lives of tears. 1180

CHORUS

I forbid those deadly accidents
 which cut men down before their time.
 And all you gods with rightful powers,
 let our lovely girls all live [960]
 to find a husband. Hear our prayers,
 you sacred Fates, our sisters,
 you children of the Night,
 who apportion all things justly,
 who have a place in every home,
 whose righteous visitations 1190
 at all times carry weight, everywhere
 most honoured of the gods.

ATHENA

I rejoice to hear these love-filled blessings
 conferred upon this land. It pleases me [970]
 Persuasion kept watch on my tongue and lips,
 when I met their fierce refusal. But Zeus,
 the patron god of our assemblies,
 has triumphed. Our struggle here for justice
 has left us victorious forever.

May all citizens look on with favour
at those who bring such favours to them.

CHORUS

Farewell, once more farewell, 1240
all those who live in Athens,
gods and men, inhabitants
of Pallas' city. Pay us respect,
while we live here among you—
you'll have cause to celebrate
the fortunes of your lives. [1020]

ATHENA

My thanks to you for these words of blessing.
Now I'll send you down by blazing torchlight
to your homes beneath the earth, with this escort 1250
of those duty-bound to guard my statue.
That seems right. For the most precious part
of all the land of Theseus will come out,
a splendid throng of girls and mothers,
groups of older women.

[From the processional company some women bearing scarlet robes move forward to place the robes on the Furies. Athena speaks directly to them.]

Invest these Furies
with their special crimson robes. Honour them.
Then, move on with the torches, so this group, [1030]
our fellow residents, can show the love
they bear this land, and for all time to come
bring our city strength and great good fortune.

[The women dress the Furies in the scarlet robes and sing the final song of joy and thanks, as the entire procession of Athena, Furies, and citizens moves off stage.]

THE WOMEN OF ATHENS

Move on with your loyal escort, 1260
you mighty children of the Night,
children without children, no longer young,
yet glorious in your honours.
You citizens, nothing but blessings in your songs.

Deep in those primeval caverns
far underground, our sacrifices,
the sacred honours we bestow on you
will maintain our city's reverence.
All of you, nothing but blessings in your songs.

EUMENIDES

Come forward, sacred goddesses,
benevolent and gracious to our land,
come forward with the flaming torches,
rejoicing as we move along our way.
Now raise triumphal cries to crown our song!

1270 [1040]

Peace now reigns forevermore
between Athena's people and their guests.
For all-seeing Zeus and Fate herself
have worked together for this ending.
Now raise triumphal cries to crown our song!

[The entire group moves off singing and dancing.]

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is an Emeritus Professor at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* and of *Essays and Arguments: A Handbook for Writing Student Essays*. He also translated a number of works, including the following:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, Eumenides*)
Aeschylus, *Persians*
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*
Aristophanes, *Birds*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Aristophanes, *Knights*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Aristophanes, *Peace*
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Abridged)
Cuvier, *On the Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Diderot, *A Conversation Between D'Alembert and Diderot*
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*
Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Euripides, *Electra*
Euripides, *Hippolytus*
Euripides, *Medea*
Euripides, *Orestes*
Homer, *Iliad* (Complete and Abridged)
Homer, *Odyssey* (Complete and Abridged)
Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
Kafka, *Selected Shorter Writings*
Kant, *Universal History of Nature and Theory of Heaven*
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*
Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, Volume I
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life*
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* [Second Discourse]
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* [First Discourse]
Rousseau, *Social Contract*
Sophocles, *Antigone*
Sophocles, *Ajax*
Sophocles, *Electra*
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*
Wedekind, *Castle Wetterstein*
Wedekind, *Marquis of Keith*.

Most of these translations have been published as books or audiobooks (or both)—by Richer Resources Publications, Broadview Press, Naxos, Audible, and others.

EUMENIDES

Ian Johnston maintains a web site where texts of these translations are freely available to students, teachers, artists, and the general public. The site includes a number of Ian Johnston's lectures on these (and other) works, handbooks, curricular materials, and essays, all freely available.

The address where these texts are available is as follows: <http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/>

