

Aeschylus
LIBATION BEARERS
[CHOEPHOROI]

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Note that in the following translation the line numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text and the numbers without brackets refer to the English text. The footnotes and stage directions have been added by the translator.

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, this 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., *Orestes* and *Orestes'* are both three-syllable words).

LIBATION BEARERS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ORESTES: son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra.

CHORUS: slave women captured at Troy and serving the royal palace at Argos.

ELECTRA: daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, sister of Orestes.

SERVANT: house slave serving in the royal palace.

CLYTAEMNESTRA: widow of Agamemnon, lover of Aegisthus, mother of Orestes and Electra.

PYLADES: friend of Orestes.

CILISSA: Orestes's old nurse, a servant in the palace.

AEGISTHUS: son of Thyestes, lover of Clytaemnestra.¹

ATTENDANTS on Orestes and Pylades and Aegisthus.

[Scene: Argos, at the tomb of Agamemnon some years after his murder by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. Behind the tomb stands the royal palace of the sons of Atreus. Enter Orestes and Pylades. They have just arrived in Argos.]

ORESTES

Hermes, messenger to the dead, guardian
of your father's powers, help rescue me—
work with me, I beg you, now I've come back,
returned to this land from exile.² On this grave,
on this heaped-up earth, I call my father,
imploring him to listen, to hear me . . .

[Orestes cuts two locks of his hair and sets them one by one on the tomb.]

Here's a lock of hair, offering to Inachus,
the stream where I was raised. Here's another,
a token of my grief. I was not there,
my father, to mourn your death. I could not stretch 10
my hand out to you, when they carried off
your corpse for burial.

[Enter Electra and the Chorus, dressed in black. They do not see Orestes and Pylades.]

What's this I see? [10]

What's this crowd of women coming here,
all wearing black in public? What does it mean?
What new turn of fate? Has some fresh sorrow
struck the house? Or am I right to think

¹Thyestes, the father of Aegisthus, was the brother of Atreus, the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

²Hermes, a divine son of Zeus, accompanied the dead down to Hades.

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they bring libations here to honour you,
my father, to appease the dead below?
That must be it. I see my sister there,
Electra. That's her approaching with them. 20
She's grieving—in great pain—that's obvious.
O Zeus, let me avenge my father's death.
Support me as my ally in this fight.
Pylades, let's stand over there and hide, [20]
so I can find out what is taking place,
what brings these suppliant women here.

[Orestes and Pylades conceal themselves from the sight of Electra and the Chorus]

CHORUS

I've been sent here from the palace,
to bring libations for the dead,
to clap out the hands' sharp beat.
Blood flows down my cheeks 30
from cuts my nails have scratched.
As life drags on and on, my heart
feeds itself on my laments,
to the sound of garments torn apart,
the sound of sorrow in our clothes,
as we rip the woven linen
covering our breasts.
No laughter any more. [30]
Our fortune beats us down.

With hair-raising shrieks, Fear, 40
dream-prophet in this house,
breathed a furious cry of terror,
at night, while people were asleep.
Deep within the inner house
the heavy scream re-echoed, all the way
to rooms where women slept.
Those who read our dreams,
who speak by heaven's will,
declared, "The dead beneath the ground [40]
are discontent—their anger grows 50
against the ones who killed them."

O Earth, my mother Earth,
to protect herself from harm
that godless woman sends me here

LIBATION BEARERS

with gifts, with loveless gifts.
But I'm too scared to speak her words,
the prayer she wishes me to say.
What can atone for blood
once fallen on the ground?
Alas for the grief-filled hearth, 60
Alas for the buried home! [50]
Sunless darkness grips the house
which all men hate, for now
their master's murdered.

It's gone—that ancient splendour
no man could resist or fight,
no man could overcome.
Its glory rang in every ear,
echoed in every heart.
Now it's been thrown away. 70
But each man feels the fear.
For now, in all men's eyes,
success is worshipped, [60]
more so than god himself.
But Justice is vigilant—
she tips the scales.
With some she's quick,
striking by light of day,
for others sorrows wait,
delaying until their lives 80
are half way sunk in twilight,
while others are embraced
by night that never ends.

The nurturing earth drinks blood,
she drinks her fill. That gore,
which cries out for revenge,
will not dissolve or seep away.
The guilty live in utter desperation—
madness preys upon their minds
infecting them completely. 90 [70]
The man who violates a virgin's bed
cannot be redeemed. All rivers flow
into one stream to cleanse his hand
of black blood which defiles him.
Such waters flow in vain.

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As for me—gods set a fatal noose
around my city, so I was led
out of my father’s house a slave.
Now I do what I have to do—
beat down my bitter rage. 100
Against my inclinations, [80]
I follow what my masters say,
whether right or wrong.
Still, behind our veils
we weep for her, this girl,
her senseless suffering,
as grief, concealed and cold,
congeals our hearts to ice.

ELECTRA

You women who keep our house in order,
now you’re here attending me in prayers, 110
in supplication, give me your advice.
What should I say as I pour out these cups,
my offering to grief? How frame my words
to make my prayer a tribute to my father?
Shall I say I bring these gifts with love,
from doting wife to her beloved husband, [90]
from my mother? I have no strength for that.
I don’t know what to say, as I pour out
this oil and honey on my father’s tomb.
Shall I recite the words men often use, 120
“May those who send this noble tribute
get back the same.” No, let him give them
a gift their treachery deserves! Or should I
stand here in silence and dishonour, the way
my father died, empty out these cups,
with eyes averted as I toss the gift,
let the earth drink, and then retrace my steps,
like someone sent to carry out the trash
left over from some purifying rite?
Help me, my friends, with your advice. 130 [100]
We share a common hatred in the house.
Don’t hide what’s in your hearts. Don’t be afraid
of anyone. Fate waits for each of us—
the free and those in bondage to another.
Speak up, if you can think of something better.

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CHORUS LEADER

I respect your father's tomb, as if it were
an altar. So I'll speak straight from my heart,
as you have asked.

ELECTRA

Then talk to me,
out of your reverence for my father's grave.

CHORUS LEADER

As you pour, bless those who are your friends. 140

ELECTRA

Of those close to me, whom shall I call friends? [110]

CHORUS LEADER

First, name yourself—then anyone
who hates Aegisthus.

ELECTRA

Then I'll make this prayer
on my own behalf. Shall I include you too?

CHORUS LEADER

That's your decision. In this ritual
you must let your judgment guide you.

ELECTRA

Who else should I then add to join with us?

CHORUS LEADER

He may be far from home, but don't forget Orestes.

ELECTRA

That's good. You give me excellent advice.

CHORUS LEADER

Remember, too, the guilty murderers. 150

ELECTRA

What do I say? I've never practised this.
Teach me what I should say.

CHORUS LEADER

Let some god
or mortal man come down on them.

ELECTRA

You mean as judge or as avenger? Which? [120]

CHORUS LEADER

Pronounce these words—and clearly—
“Someone who’ll pay back life by taking life.”

ELECTRA

Is it a righteous thing for me to do,
to petition gods like that?

CHORUS

Why not?
How can it not be a righteous thing to pray
to pay back one’s enemies for evil? 160

ELECTRA

O Hermes, mighty herald, moving
between earth above and earth below,
messenger to the dead, assist me now—
summon the spirits there beneath the ground
who guard my father’s house, to hear my prayers.
And call on Earth herself, who, giving birth
and nurturing all things, in due course takes back
the swollen tide of their increasing store.
As I pour out these offering to the dead,
I call upon my father, “Pity me— 170 [130]
and dear Orestes, too! How can we rule
in our own home? We’re beggars now,
as if our mother traded us away,
exchanged us for her mate, Aegisthus,
her partner in your murder. For now I live
just like a slave. Orestes lives in exile,
far from his estates. In their arrogance,
those two squander all the wealth you worked for.
And so I pray to you—dear father,
let good fortune bring Orestes home! 180
Father, hear me. Make me more self-controlled, [140]
than mother, my hand more righteous!
Those are my prayers for us. Our enemies—

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for them, my father, I pray someone will come
as your avenger, then kill your killers,
in retribution, as is just. As I pray
for our well being, I include this curse—
may they be caught by their own evil.
Bring us your blessing to the earth above,
with help from gods, and Earth, and Justice,
all combined to bring us victory.” 190

[Electra pours out her libation on the tomb.]

Those are my prayers, and over them I pour
libations. Your duty now is to lament,
to crown my prayers with flowers, chanting 150
your mournful chorus for the dead.

CHORUS

Come, let our tears begin,
fall, and die, as our master died.
Let them guard us from evil,
preserve the good, and keep away
with our outpoured libations 200
the polluting curse.
Hear me, O hear me,
my honoured master.
May your disembodied spirit
hear my prayer.

Alas, alas . . . ohhhhhhhh!
Let him come now, 160
some forceful man,
a power with the spear.
May he restore this house, 210
bent Scythian bow in hand,
a fist around his sword hilt.
Like Ares, god of war,
let him begin the slaughter!

ELECTRA

My father's now received his offerings.
The earth has drunk them up. But look—
here's something new. Come, look at it with me.

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CHORUS

Speak up. My heart's afraid. It's dancing.

ELECTRA

I see a lock of hair, an offering . . . on the tomb.

CHORUS

Whose is it? A man's? A full-grown girl's? 220

ELECTRA

It shouldn't be too difficult to guess, [170]
to sort out what this indicates.

CHORUS

How so? Let your youth instruct your elders.

ELECTRA

No one but me could have cut this off.

CHORUS

You're right. Those who should make offerings,
cutting their hair in grief, are enemies.

ELECTRA

Look at this . . . It looks just like . . .

CHORUS

Like whose?

I want to know.

ELECTRA

Like mine. It looks identical.

CHORUS

Perhaps Orestes? Did he place it here,
a secret offering?

ELECTRA

It really looks like his . . . 230
these curls . . .

CHORUS

But how could he come back?

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ELECTRA

He sent it here, a token of respect [180]
for his dead father.

CHORUS

Those words of yours
give us fresh cause for tears, if there's no chance
Orestes will set foot in this land again.

ELECTRA

Over my heart, too, breaks a bitter wave.
I feel as if a sword had sliced right through me.
Seeing this hair, my eyes weep thirsty drops—
I can't hold back my flood of grief. There's no way
I would expect one of the citizens, 240
someone in Argos, to own this lock.
It's clearly not that murderess' hair,
my mother's—her treatment of her children [190]
profanes the very name of mother.
But how can I accept without a doubt
this offering's from the man I love the most,
Orestes? I'm just clinging to a hope.
Alas. If only, like a messenger,
this hair possessed a friendly human voice,
my thoughts would not be so distracted. 250
It would tell me clearly what to do.
If someone I detest had cut it off,
I'd throw this lock away, but if it's his,
my brother's, it could share my sorrow,
adorn this tomb, a tribute to my father. [200]
I call upon the gods who understand
how storms whirl us off course, like sailors.
But if we're fated to come safely home,
then mighty trees can spring from tiny seeds.

[Electra notices footprints in the dirt around the tomb.]

Here are some footprints—more evidence— 260
tracks of feet, just like my own—in pairs—
two sets of footprints, his own and others,
some companion's. The heels, the arches—
these prints are shaped just like my own . . . [210]

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[Electra traces the tracks from the tomb towards Orestes's hiding place. Orestes emerges to meet her as she follows the footprints.]

The pain of this . . . my mind grows dizzy . . .

ORESTES

Pray for what must still be done. Thank the gods
for answering your prayers. Pray to them
that all will work out well.

ELECTRA

What? The gods?

What have they given me?

ORESTES

You've come to see
the person you've been praying for all this time.

270

ELECTRA

Then you know the man I was calling for?

ORESTES

I know your sympathies are with Orestes.

ELECTRA

Yes, but how have my prayers been answered now?

ORESTES

I'm here. You need look no more for friends.
I'm the dearest one you have.

ELECTRA

No, stranger.

You're weaving a net, a trick to trap me.

[220]

ORESTES

If so, I plot against myself as well.

ELECTRA

You just want to laugh at my distress.

ORESTES

If I laugh at you, I'm laughing at myself.

ELECTRA

Orestes . . . is it truly you? Can I
call you Orestes? 280

ORESTES

Yes, you can.
You're looking at Orestes in the flesh.
Why take so long to recognize the truth?
When you saw the lock of hair, that token
of my grief, and traced my footprints in the dust,
your imagination flew—you thought
you saw me. Look. Put this hair in place. [230]
It's your brother's. And it matches yours.
See this weaving here—that's your handiwork.
You worked the loom. Look at this design, 290
these animals . . .

[Electra is finally convinced. She almost breaks down with joy]

Control yourself. Calm down.
Don't get too overjoyed. Remember this—
our closest family is our enemy.

ELECTRA

You dearest member of your father's house.
the seed of hope through all our weeping—
trust to your own strength and win back again
your father's home. How my eyes rejoice!
To me you are four different loves—fate
declares that I must call you father,
and on you falls the love I ought to feel 300 [240]
towards my mother, who's earned my hate.
Then there's the love I bore my sister,
Iphigeneia, that cruel sacrifice—
and you're my faithful brother. You alone
sustained my sense of honour. May Power
and Justice stand with us now, our allies—
and may almighty Zeus make up the third.

ORESTES

O Zeus, Zeus, look down on what we do!
See the abandoned fledglings of the eagle,
whose father perished in the viper's coils, 310
that deadly net. Orphans now, we bear

the pangs of hunger, not yet mature enough [250]
 to bring our father's quarry to the nest.
 See us like this—I mean me and Electra—
 children without a father, both outcasts,
 banished from our home. If you wipe out
 these fledglings, what respect will you receive
 at feasts from hands like his, their father's,
 who offered you such wealthy sacrifice?
 Kill off the eagle's brood, then who will trust 320
 the signs you send? If this royal stock decays, [260]
 it cannot consecrate your altars
 with sacrificial oxen in the morning.
 Stand by us. You can elevate our house
 from its debased condition, make it great,
 though now it seems completely ruined.

CHORUS LEADER

Children, saviours of your father's home,
 don't speak too loud. Someone may hear you,
 my children, and to hear his tongue run on
 report to those in charge. O how I wish 330
 I see them dead one day, roasting in flames,
 sizzling like pitch.

ORESTES

Apollo's great oracle
 surely will defend me. Its orders were
 that I should undertake this danger. [270]
 It cried out in prophecy, foretelling
 many winters of calamity would chill
 my hot heart, if I did not take revenge
 on those who killed my father. It ordered me
 to murder them the way they murdered him,
 insisting they could not pay the penalty 340
 with their possessions. The oracle declared,
 "If not, you'll pay the debt with your own life,
 a life of troubles." It spoke a revelation,
 making known to men the wrath of blood guilt—
 from underneath the earth, infectious plagues,
 leprous sores which gnaw the flesh, fangs chewing [280]
 living tissue, festering white rot in the sores.
 It mentioned other miseries as well—
 attacks by vengeful Furies, stemming
 from a slaughtered father's blood, dark bolts 350

from gods below, aroused by murdered kinsmen
 calling for revenge, frenzied night fits.³
 Such terrors plague the man—he sees them all
 so clearly, eyeballs rolling in the dark.
 Then he's chased in exile from the city,
 his body scourged by bronze-tipped whips. [290]
 A man like this can never share the wine bowl,
 no libations mixed with love. We don't see
 his father's anger, but it casts him out—
 no access to an altar. There's no relief, 360
 and no one takes him in, until at last,
 universally despised, without a friend,
 he wastes in all-consuming pain and dies.
 Am I not right to trust such oracles?
 Even if I don't, the work must still be done.
 Many feelings lead to one conclusion—
 the gods' decree, my keen paternal grief, [300]
 the weight of poverty I bear. Besides,
 my countrymen, most glorious of men,
 whose courageous spirit brought down Troy, 370
 should not be subject to a pair of women.
 For Aegisthus is at heart a woman—
 if not, we'll learn about it soon enough.

CHORUS

O mighty Fates, bring all this to pass.
 Through Zeus's power, make all things right.
 For Justice, as she turns the scales
 exacting retribution, cries aloud,
 "Hostile words for hostile words— [310]
 let it be done. One murderous stroke
 is paid off by another lethal blow. 380
 The one who acts must suffer."
 So runs the ancient saying,
 now three generations old.

ORESTES

O my unhappy father,
 what can I say for you or do,
 to send you, where you rest
 so far away, some light
 to drive away your darkness?

³The Furies are the goddesses of blood revenge, particularly within the family.

But nonetheless some joy [320]
 comes from a funeral lament 390
 for glorious sons of Atreus,
 who once possessed the house.⁴

CHORUS

My child, among the dead
 the savage jaws of fire
 cannot destroy the spirit.
 He'll show his rage in time.
 Dead men receive their dirge—
 the guilty stand revealed.
 A father's funeral lament,
 strong and clear and just, 400
 searches far and wide, [330]
 confounding those who killed.

ELECTRA

Hear us now, my father,
 as, in turn, we mourn and weep.
 Your two children at your tomb
 now sing your death song.
 Your tomb has welcomed us,
 two suppliants and outcasts.
 What in this is good?
 What free from trouble? 410
 Who wrestles death and wins?

CHORUS

But if god wills it, he can turn [340]
 our dirges into joyful songs—
 instead of funeral laments
 around this monument
 chants of triumph ringing out
 throughout the palace halls,
 a welcome celebration
 for reunion with a friend.

ORESTES

My father, if only you had died 420
 hit by some Lycian spear at Troy!
 You'd have left your glory

⁴Atreus was the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

with your children in their home.
 In their dealings with the world
 men would now honour them. [350]
 You'd have won a tomb raised high
 in lands across the seas, a death
 your home could bear with ease.

CHORUS

Dear to the men you loved,
 the ones who died so bravely, 430
 you'd stand out under earth,
 as a majestic lord, minister
 of the mightiest gods below,
 who rule the dead. In life,
 you were a king of men— [360]
 the ones who hold the staff
 that every man obeys,
 those with authority
 to sentence men to die.

ELECTRA

I don't want you dead, my father, 440
 not even under Trojan walls,
 with all those other men
 who perished by the spear,
 where the Scamander flows.⁵
 No. I'd much prefer
 your killers had been killed
 by their own families,
 just as they murdered you.
 People then in far-off lands
 would hear about their deaths 450 [370]
 and not our present trouble.

CHORUS

Children, these things you say
 are merely your desires,
 finer than gold, greater still
 than the great happiness
 of those who live in bliss
 beyond the northern wind.
 But wishing is an easy thing.

⁵The Scamander was the river near Troy, the site of many battles in the Trojan War.

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Still, now it's striking home,
that double whip—for now
protectors underneath the earth
are helping us. Our masters
are unholy creatures
with polluted hands.
The children win the day!

ORESTES

Our words, like arrows, [380]
pierce down into the earth
straight to my father's ear.
O Zeus, Zeus, send us
from the world below 470
your long-delayed revenge,
pay back the wickedness
brought on by human hands.
O let that come to pass—
and thus avenge all fathers.

CHORUS

Let my heart cry out in triumph
when that man is stabbed,
when that woman dies.
Why should my spirit hide
what hovers here before me, 480
when driving hatred, like a storm, [390]
a biting headwind,
breaks across my heart?

ELECTRA

O when will mighty Zeus
strike them with his fist—
split their skulls apart!
Alas, alas! Give our land
some sign—confirm our faith.
From these crimes I seek
the rights of justice. 490
O Earth, hear me, and you,
blessed gods in earth below.

CHORUS

It's the law—once drops of blood
are shed upon the ground [400]

they cry out for still more blood.
 Slaughter calls upon the Furies
 of those who have been killed.
 Thus, hard on murder's heels
 destruction comes again.

ORESTES

Lords of the world below, alas, 500
 see the mighty curses of the dead.
 See survivors of the line of Atreus,
 here in our helplessness,
 cast out from home, dishonoured.
 O Zeus, where can we turn?

CHORUS

My fond heart races once again 410
 to hear your pitiful lament.
 But as I listen to your words
 I lose my hope. My heart
 grows dark. But then again 510
 hope comes to make me strong—
 all my unhappiness is gone.
 I see a bright new dawn.

ELECTRA

To what can we appeal? What else
 but to the agonies we suffer,
 anguish from the one who bore us,
 our mother. So let her grovel. 420
 She'll not appease our pain.
 We're bred from her, like wolves,
 whose savage hearts do not relent. 520

CHORUS

Like some Asian wailing woman,
 I beat out my lament, my fists
 keep pounding out the blows
 in quick succession. You see
 my hands—I stretch them out,
 then strike down from above.
 My torment beats upon my head
 until it breaks for sorrow.

ELECTRA

O cruel and reckless mother,
 that savage burial, our king, [430]
 no fellow citizens around, 530
 no suffering procession—
 you dared place him in the tomb
 without the rites of mourning.

ORESTES

Alas! As you say, totally disgraced.
 But she'll pay for his dishonour,
 by the gods, by my own hands.
 Let me kill her. Then let me die.

CHORUS

And let me tell you this—
 she first hacked off his limbs, 540 [440]
 then hung them round his neck.
 That's how she buried him,
 to make that slaughter
 a burden on your life—
 a thing you could not bear.
 You hear me? Your father's death—
 she made it an abomination.

ELECTRA

You describe my father's death,
 but I too was utterly disgraced,
 worth nothing, set apart, 550
 inside a cell, as if I were
 some rabid dog. I wept.
 What had I to laugh about,
 as I shed all those tears in hiding?
 Hear that. Carve that on your heart. [450]

CHORUS

Let your ears pick up her story,
 but keep your spirit firm.
 Things now stand as they stand.
 You're keen to know what's next,
 but you must wait, prepared 570
 to fight on with no turning back.

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ORESTES

Father, I call on you. Stand by your children.

ELECTRA

Through these tears I join his call.

CHORUS

In unison, our voices blend as one—
hear us. Return into the light.
Join us against our enemies.

[460]

ORESTES

Now war god Ares goes to meet
the war god Ares. Right fights with right.

ELECTRA

Dear gods, let justice choose what's right.

CHORUS

I hear these prayers and shudder.
This doom's been long delayed,
but it does come for those who pray.

580

O family bred for torments,
for the bloody strokes
of harsh discordant ruin,
for pains beyond enduring,
grief that can't be staunched.
For all this evil there's a remedy,
not from some stranger,
someone outside the house,
but from within, the cure
that blood strife brings,
their savage bloody fight.
To gods beneath the ground
we sing this hymn.

[470]

590

Hear us, you blessed gods of earth,
hear this supplication, and assist
with your good will these children.
Give them the victory!

ORESTES

Father, you may not have perished like a king,

600

but, in answer to my prayer, make me
the master of your house. [480]

ELECTRA

I, too, father,
have a request of you—let me escape,
once I've accomplished this enormous task,
once Aegisthus is destroyed.

ORESTES

Yes.
Then men would set up on your behalf
those feasts of honour our laws demand.
But otherwise, when people sacrifice
burnt offering to Earth at solemn banquets
they will not honour you.

ELECTRA

And I, too, 610
at my marriage feast, from the full store
of what I inherit in my father's house,
will pour libations to you. And your tomb
I'll honour above all other shrines.

ORESTES

O Earth, send my father up to see our fight.

ELECTRA

O Persephone, grant us glorious power.⁶ [490]

ORESTES

My father, remember that bath
where you were slaughtered.

ELECTRA

Remember the net in which they killed you.

ORESTES

My father, you were trapped in fetters, 620
but they weren't forged in bronze.

⁶Persephone is the queen of the underworld, wife of Hades.

ELECTRA

They covered you
with their deceit and shame.

ORESTES

Father, these taunts—
do they not stir your spirit?

ELECTRA

Will you raise
that beloved head of yours upright?

ORESTES

Either send Justice here to stand with us,
the ones you love, or let us, in our turn,
catch them in our grip, as they caught you—
that is, if you want to beat them down,
after the way they overpowered you.

ELECTRA

Father, listen to my last appeal—
see your children huddled at your tomb.
Take pity on them, your son and daughter.

630 [500]

ORESTES

Don't let the seed of Pelops disappear.⁷
With us alive, in death you cannot die.

ELECTRA

For to a man that's dead his children
are saving testament—like corks,
they hold up the net and keep the mesh
from sinking deep into the sea.

ORESTES

Hear us!
We're making our lament on your behalf.
Honour our request and save yourself.

640

CHORUS LEADER

There's nothing wrong expanding your lament.
For that will honour this neglected tomb.

[510]

⁷Pelops was the original founder of the royal family of Argos.

LIBATION BEARERS

But since your heart is rightly set to act,
it's time to test your fortune, time to start.

ORESTES

You're right. But first we might ask this question:
Why did that woman send out these libations?
What did she have in mind, trying so late
to heal a crime which cannot be forgiven?
What she sent here was paltry tribute
to the unforgiving dead. I don't see
what she intends. The gift's too trivial
for her offence. As the old saying runs,
"Pour out all you've got to make amends
for bloodshed, your work is all in vain."
If you know her reason, tell me now.
I'd like to hear.

650

[520]

CHORUS LEADER

My child, I know—I was there.
She had bad dreams. Vague terrors in the night
upset her. So that godless woman sent these gifts.

ORESTES

Do you know the nature of her dreams?
Can you give me details?

CHORUS LEADER

She'd given birth,
but to a snake. That's what she told me.

660

ORESTES

How did the dream end up? What happened?

CHORUS LEADER

She set it in bed wrapped in swaddling clothes,
just like a child.

ORESTES

And that newborn snake,
what did it want for nourishment?

[530]

CHORUS LEADER

She dreamt she offered it her breasts.

ORESTES

Didn't the monster bite her nipple?

CHORUS LEADER

No. But with her milk it sucked out clots of blood.

ORESTES

It's an omen. Her vision means a man.

CHORUS LEADER

She woke up with a scream, quite terrified. 670
 Many torches which stay unlit at night
 were set ablaze throughout the house
 to calm our mistress. Then she sent out
 libations for the dead—in the hope
 they'd work like medicine for her distress.

ORESTES

I pray to Earth and to my father's tomb [540]
 that this dream will fulfill itself in me.
 I think it matches me in every point.
 If that snake came from the same womb as me,
 if it was wrapped up in my swaddling clothes 680
 and opened up its jaws to suck the milk
 that nourished me, mixing sweet milk with blood,
 so she cried out in terror at the sight,
 then that must mean she'll die by violence,
 from nursing such a violent beast.
 I am that snake. And I will kill her. [550]
 That's the meaning of this dream.

CHORUS LEADER

Your reading of her dream seems right to me.
 So let it come. Tell your friends the rest—
 what they must do or take care not to do. 690

ORESTES

My plan is simple. First, Electra here
 must go inside. I'm instructing her
 to keep this bond with me a secret.
 The two in there deceived a noble man,
 then killed him. So we'll use deceit on them.
 They'll die in the same net. Lord Apollo,
 who's never wrong in what he prophesies,

LIBATION BEARERS

has ordered this. I'll approach the outer gates, [560]
 pretending I'm a stranger, prepared
 for anything. Pylades goes with me, 700
 as guest and ally of the house. We two
 will speak Parnassian dialect of Phocis.
 If no one at the gate is in the mood
 to let us in, alleging that the house
 is haunted by some evil demon,
 we'll wait there, so any passer-by
 will be intrigued and say, "What's going on?
 Why does Aegisthus shut his doors like this [570]
 against a suppliant? Is he at home?
 Is he aware of this?" If I get past the gate, 710
 across the outer threshold, then find that man
 seated on my father's throne or meet him
 face to face, his eyes will shift and fall,
 I promise you. Before he's had time to ask,
 "Stranger, what country are you from?"
 I'll kill him quickly with my sword.
 Our Fury never lacked for blood—
 for her third draught she'll drink his pure.
 Now, Electra, keep a close watch in there,
 check what's going on inside the house. 720
 We'll need to work on this together. [580]
 You women, be careful what you say—
 keep quiet—speak only when you have to.
 As for the rest, I invoke Apollo
 to cast his eyes down here and be my guide
 when the time comes to fight it out with swords.

[Orestes, Pylades, and Electra leave together.]

CHORUS

Earth brings forth many horrors—
 terrors and agonies—the sea's arms
 hold monsters, savage beasts.
 Between the earth and heaven 730
 hang fiery lights, suspended high. [590]
 Winged birds and beasts
 that walk along the ground
 can also speak of storms,
 the whirlwind's power.
 But who of us can speak
 about the arrogance of men

or women's reckless passion
 beyond all self-control,
 so they become conspirators 740
 in all our lethal woes?
 Passionate desire wins out—
 it gains a fatal victory
 in every woman.
 It ends all married love [600]
 in men and beasts.
 A man with any sense
 should recognize these things,
 once he recalls Althaea,
 ruthless child of Thestius, 750
 who planned her own son's ruin.
 She burned the fatal torch,
 knowing that Meleager's life,
 from the time he first appeared
 howling from his mother's womb,
 depended on that wood.⁸
 And so it was—he stayed alive [610]
 until her fire doomed him.
 Another story of a hateful girl
 tells of that murderous Scylla, 760
 who killed her father,
 brought to it by his enemies.
 Tempted by a gift from Minos,
 a golden necklace made in Crete,
 she plucked out her father's hair,
 the one which made Nisus immortal.
 As he lay peacefully asleep, [620]
 then died, murdered by that bitch,
 and Hermes led him off.⁹
 As I recall these stories 770
 of savagery without remorse,
 it's time to speak of marriages
 in which there was no love,
 which laid a curse upon the house,

⁸Althaea was the mother of Meleager. When he was born, the Fates told her that Meleager would live as long as a log in the fireplace. Althaea removed the log and preserved it to keep Meleager alive. However, when Meleager, in an angry fit, killed Althaea's two brothers, she threw the log in the fire and killed her son.

⁹Nisus had a purple lock of hair on which the safety of his kingdom depended. When Minos, king of Crete, besieged their city, Scylla, daughter of the king, cut off her father's lock and presented it to Minos, who promptly abandoned her.

LIBATION BEARERS

schemes devised by woman's cunning
 against her warrior lord, a man
 his enemies have cause to honour.
 I value hearth and home
 where passions do not rule,
 where women's spirits 780
 rein in their waywardness. [630]
 Of all such tales of crime, the worst
 concerns the isle of Lemnos,
 where all the women killed their men.¹⁰
 At that story people moan—
 they weep for that abomination.
 When some new troubles come
 men measure them by Lemnos.
 Horror at that deed brought on
 the hatred of the gods, and thus, 790
 cast out by humankind and in disgrace,
 that women's race dies out.
 No man can hold in reverence
 what gods abhor. So of these tales
 which one can I not justly cite?
 Justice wields her sword.
 She thrusts it home—
 hungry and sharp, [640]
 it slices deep,
 right by the lungs— 800
 and so the lawlessness
 of those who flout what's right,
 who violate the majesty of Zeus,
 lies trampled underfoot.
 The anvil of Justice now holds firm.
 Fate hammers out her sword—
 she forges it in time.
 At last the brooding Fury comes,
 famous spirit of revenge—
 leading a child inside the house, 810
 to cleanse the stain of blood, [650]
 the family curse from long ago.

[Enter Orestes and Pylades, with a couple of attendants. They move up to the front doors of the royal palace. Orestes knocks loudly on the door]

¹⁰The women of Lemnos offended the goddess Aphrodite, who, in revenge gave them all a dreadful smell. When the men of Lemnos started sleeping with other women, the wives on the island killed their husbands.

ORESTES

Hey, in there! You hear this knocking on the door?
 I'll try again. Anyone in there?
 All right, a third attempt. I'm knocking here—
 are you coming out? Anyone in there?
 Hello! Does Aegisthus welcome strangers?

SERVANT [*from within*]

All right. All right. I hear you. Stranger,
 what country are you from? Who are you?

ORESTES

Announce me to the masters of the house. 820
 I've come to bring them news. And hurry! [660]
 Night's black chariot is speeding overhead.
 It's time for people on the road to rest—
 drop anchor where all strangers feel at home.
 Tell someone to come out who's in control—
 the mistress would be fine, the master
 even better. We could speak our minds.
 After all, politeness can obscure the sense.
 When we talk man to man, we get the point—
 we say just what we mean without reserve. 830

[Clytaemnestra and Electra enter through the palace doors]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Stranger, welcome. Just ask for what you need.
 Inside we have all luxuries of home—
 warm baths and beds to charm away your pains. [670]
 We live under the eyes of Justice here.
 But if your business is more serious,
 men's work, then we'll send for Aegisthus.

ORESTES

I'm a stranger—a Daulian from Phocis—
 coming to Argos on private business,
 carrying this pack. I need to pause and rest.
 On my way here I ran into a man— 840
 we'd never met before. He told me
 where he was going and asked my route.
 As we talked, I learned his name—Strophius.
 He came from Phocis, too. And he said this,
 "Well, friend, since you're heading off to Argos, [680]

here's a message for Orestes' parents,
 something they've a right to know, so please
 remember it: Orestes is dead. Don't forget.
 Then, when you return, you can tell me
 whether his family wants to bring him back 850
 or have him buried here in Phocis,
 where he's a stranger, forever outcast.
 Right now his ashes sit in a bronze urn.
 The man was truly mourned." That's my message.
 That's what I heard. At this point I'm not sure
 whether I'm telling this to anyone who cares,
 but Orestes' parent ought to be informed. [690]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I . . . this news . . . what you just said . . .
 it's shattering . . . that curse we can't repress.
 It haunts the house, ranges everywhere . . . 860
 Someone kept safe and far away from here
 the curse seeks out. Its arrow strikes and kills.
 It takes those I love, drives me to desperation.
 And now Orestes. He was well prepared.
 He kept his feet well clear of muddy ground
 where hidden danger lurks. He offered hope
 the Furies' striking revels in this house
 might find a cure. Now, from what you say,
 we've lost that hope.

ORESTES

As far as I'm concerned, [700]
 with hosts as prosperous as you, I wish 870
 you'd seen me as the bearer of good news
 and welcomed me for that. What's kinder
 than the link between a stranger and his host?
 But to my mind, it would have been profane
 if I'd not told his loved ones, as I promised,
 as hospitality demands.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't worry.
 You'll receive what you deserve. In this house
 you're no less welcome for your news,
 which, in any case, someone else would bring.
 But now's the time when strangers on the road 880 [710]
 get entertained once their long journey's done.

[Clytaemnestra turns to Electra, ordering her as if she were a servant]

You there—take this traveller to the rooms
 we use to entertain our guests—and with him
 these fellow travellers, his attendants.
 Look after them the way this house requires.
 Those are my orders. See you follow them.
 I'm holding you responsible. Meanwhile,
 I'll go find the master of the house,
 tell him the news. We don't lack friends—
 from them we'll seek advice about this death. 890

[Electra escorts Orestes, Pylades, and their attendants into the palace. Clytaemnestra enters the palace. The Chorus is left alone on stage.]

CHORUS LEADER

Dear fellow slaves who serve this house,
 how long before our words can demonstrate
 just how strongly we support Orestes? [720]

CHORUS

O sacred Earth,
 heaped-up burial mound,
 lying above that noble corpse,
 commander of the ships,
 hear me now,
 help me now.
 Now's the moment 900
 for Persuasion to come in
 with her deceit,
 for that stealthy god,
 Hermes of the lower world,
 to guide the fight,
 the fatal clash of swords.

[Enter Orestes's Nurse, Cilissa, in tears.]

CHORUS LEADER

It seems the stranger's mischief is at work. [730]
 Here comes Orestes' nurse. I see she's crying.
 Cilissa, why are you walking by the gates,
 with your unpaid companion Sorrow? 910

NURSE

My mistress ordered me to fetch Aegisthus
 to meet the strangers—and to hurry up—
 so he can find out clearly, man to man,
 the news that's just arrived. With servants
 she puts on her gloomy face, but deep down
 her eyes are laughing at how well all this
 has ended up for her. But for this house [740]
 the stranger's news is simply a disaster.
 Once Aegisthus hears, gets the full report,
 he'll jump for joy. How miserable I feel! 920
 The old troubles of the house of Atreus,
 so hard to bear, how they've hurt my heart.
 I get these chest pains. But a blow like this—
 I've never had to bear such sorrow.
 Other troubles I've endured with patience,
 but dear Orestes, how it breaks my heart!
 When he was born, I got him from his mother. [750]
 I nursed him. I spent all night on my feet,
 answering his cries. So much tiring work—
 all for nothing. A helpless child like that 930
 one has to nurse as if he were a beast.
 How'd I do that? By following his moods.
 A child in swaddling clothes can't speak at all.
 So if he needed something to eat or drink,
 or had just wet himself, his one response
 came from his instincts. So I had to use
 a prophet's skill. But often I was wrong.
 I had to launder linen. Yes, I was
 wet nurse and washerwoman, all in one, [760]
 two special skills. I received Orestes 940
 from his own father's hands. Now he's dead.
 That's what I've been told. It makes me cry.
 Well, I must go. I have to fetch Aegisthus,
 the man who brought this house to ruin.
 He'll be glad enough to hear my words.

CHORUS LEADER

Did she tell him how to come and what to bring?

NURSE

How's that? Say it again. I need a clearer sense
of what you're asking.

CHORUS LEADER

Did she tell him
to come with guards or unattended?

NURSE

She said he should bring his spearmen with him. 950

CHORUS LEADER

Don't give that message to Aegisthus, [770]
that hateful tyrant. Tell him to come alone,
with a joyous heart, as quickly as he can.
He won't suspect a thing. The messenger
can straighten out a crooked message.

NURSE

What? Does your heart feel good about this news?

CHORUS LEADER

Why not, if Zeus turns evil into good?

NURSE

How's that to happen? Orestes,
the house's hope, is gone.

CHORUS LEADER

Not so fast.
A prophet who claimed that would be a bad one. 960

NURSE

What are you saying? Do you know something
more than what I've heard?

CHORUS LEADER

Go on then.
Relay your message. Do what you've been told.
Let the gods care about what most concerns them. [780]

NURSE

All right, I'll go and do what you suggest.
With blessings from the gods, I pray all this
will work out for the best.

[Exit Nurse, off in search of Aegisthus, who is not in the palace.]

CHORUS

Now, in answer to my prayers,
 I implore you, Zeus,
 father of Olympian gods, 970
 restore this house,
 give it good fortune, so those
 who rightly love due order
 may witness it right here.
 In every word we cry,
 we plead for justice.
 O Zeus, protect what's right.

Zeus, Zeus,
 inside that palace [790]
 place him face to face 980
 before his enemies.
 If you exalt him
 he'll willingly repay you,
 three or four times over.

You know that orphan colt,
 child of a man you cherish,
 stands now in harness,
 yoked to a chariot of pain.
 Control the way he runs,
 preserve his pace, 990
 so he will last the course,
 and we may see him surge,
 as he races to his goal.

You gods inside the house, [800]
 in those inner chambers,
 where you celebrate its wealth,
 hear me, you gods
 who sympathize with us.
 Cleanse that ancient blood
 of crimes committed long ago. 1000
 Let old murder cease to breed.

And Apollo, you who dwell
 in that massive well-built cavern,
 grant that this man's house
 may raise its head once more,
 so with loving eyes we see

LIBATION BEARERS

the veil of darkness yield
to freedom's light. [810]

May Hermes, Maia's son,
support him in what's right. 1010
He sends the finest winds
to hold an enterprise on course,
when that's his will—
and when he so desires,
he will make known
much hidden from our view,
or speak in riddles in the night,
darkening men's eyes,
which see no better by the light of day.

Soon at last we'll shout in song 1020
of the deliverance of this house— [820]
no shrill lament of those who mourn,
but robust songs the sea wives sing
when the wind sits fair,
“Good sailing now—for me,
for me this means more riches—
no dangers for the ones I love.”

But you, Orestes, do your part—
when your moment comes, be brave.
When she cries out “My son!” 1030
cry in return “My father's son!”
Then murder her in innocence. [830]
In your heart maintain
the heart of Perseus.¹¹
Satisfy the rage
of those you love
under the earth,
and here above.
With blood murder
inside the house 1040
eradicate the cause
of all our blood-guilt.

[Enter Aegisthus.]

¹¹Perseus, a son of Zeus, was a famous hero, who, among other things, killed the Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turned people to stone.

AEGISTHUS

A stranger's story called me here—
 I'm told that travellers have arrived
 with startling and unwelcome news— [840]
 Orestes is dead—yet one more burden
 laid upon this house, a terrifying load,
 while it still bears raw festering wounds
 from earlier murder. But is what they saw
 the living truth? That's what I must confirm. 1050
 Or is it some fearful women's gossip,
 which blazes up, then dies away to nothing?
 Can you clear my mind? What do you know?

CHORUS LEADER

Well, we heard the news. But go inside.
 You can learn it from the guests themselves.
 The power in a messenger's report
 is not like hearing what he has to say
 when you confront him face to face. [850]

AEGISTHUS

I want to see this messenger and check
 if he was present at Orestes' death, 1060
 or if he's just repeating what he heard
 from some vague rumours. I'll see through him.
 These keen eyes of mine won't be deceived.

[Exit Aegisthus into the palace.]

CHORUS

Zeus, O Zeus,
 what do I say? How do I start
 appealing to the gods in prayer?
 How from a loyal heart
 can I find what to say,
 matching words with deeds?
 Now blood-stained blades 1070
 are slicing men to death [860]
 and totally destroying forever
 Agamemnon's house, or else
 with freedom's blazing light
 Orestes wins the throne,
 and all his father's riches.
 The ambush now is set—

LIBATION BEARERS

noble Orestes by himself
must face two enemies.
Let him emerge the victor!

1080

[Aegisthus screams in pain from inside the palace.]

CHORUS MEMBERS *[speaking separately]*

Listen!

[870]

What was that?

What's going on,
in there, inside the palace?

[Some members of the chorus start to move towards the palace doors.]

CHORUS LEADER

Stay back. Until this work is finished,
we won't get involved in all the bloodshed.
That way no one can blame us.

[A servant emerges through the palace doors.]

It's over.

Whatever the result, the fighting's over.

SERVANT

O it's horrible—my master's killed!
He's dead. Alas! I'll cry it out again,
a third time, Aegisthus is no more!

[The servant moves to a side door and tries desperately to pull it open.]

Come on! Come on! Open this door! Hurry!
Unbolt the women's doors! A strong right arm
is all it takes! Not to help Aegisthus—
he's already dead. No point in trying.
Come on! Am I shouting to the deaf,
or are you all asleep?

1090

[880]

[The servant gives up pounding on the side door.]

A waste of time.

Where's Clytaemnestra gone? What's she doing?
Her own neck's resting on the razor's edge—
this justice could strike her down as well.

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the main palace doors.]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What's happening? Why are you shouting
all around the house?

SERVANT

I'm telling you 1100
the dead are murdering the living!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I see. I understand your paradox.
We're being destroyed by someone's trickery,
just as we destroyed. All right, then,
get me a man-killing axe—and quickly!

[Exit servant into the palace.]

Let's see now if we win through or lose. [890]
The wretched business brings me down to this.

[The palace doors open to reveal the dead body of Aegisthus with Orestes standing over it. Pylades is beside Orestes.]

ORESTES

The very one I seek. This fellow here
has had enough.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, not Aegisthus,
not my love, my power . . . dead. 1110

ORESTES

You loved this man? Then you'll find your rest
in a common grave with him—he's one man
you won't abandon when he dies.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Hold off, my son, my child. Take pity
on these breasts. Here you often lay asleep.
Your toothless gums sucked out the milk
that made you strong.

LIBATION BEARERS

ORESTES

Pylades, what do I do?
It's a dreadful act to kill my mother.

PYLADES

What then becomes of what Apollo said, [900]
what he foretold at Delphi? We made an oath. 1120
Make all men your enemies but not the gods.

ORESTES

That's good advice. As judge in this debate
I say you prevail.

[Orestes turns on Clytaemnestra and pulls her towards the body of Aegisthus.]

Over here.
I want to kill you right beside this man.
When he was alive, you considered him
better than my father, so once you're dead
you can sleep on by his side. You loved him.
The man you should have loved you hated.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I brought you up. Let me grow old with you.

ORESTES

What? Kill my father and then live with me? 1130

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My child, in this our fate's to blame. [910]

ORESTES

Then, in the same way, Fate brings on your death.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My son, do you not fear your mother's curse?

ORESTES

You bore me, then threw me out to misery.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, no—I sent you to live with a friend.

ORESTES

You sold me in disgrace—a free man's son.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What's the price I charged for you?

ORESTES

That's too shameful to declare in public.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't forget to name your father's failings, too.

ORESTES

Don't charge him with anything—he worked hard
while you sat here at home. 1140

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My son, it's painful
for women to go on without their men. [920]

ORESTES

Maybe, but while they stay safely in the home
their men look after them.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My son, you really mean to do this—
to slaughter your own mother?

ORESTES

You kill yourself.
I'll not be the murderer. You will.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Take care.
The vicious hounds which avenge all mothers
will hunt you down.

ORESTES

What about my father's?
If I don't kill you, there's no escaping them.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

It seems as if, while still alive, I waste
my useless tears at my own tomb. 1150

LIBATION BEARERS

ORESTES

My father's destiny has marked you out.
It states that you must die.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Alas for me!
You are the snake I bore and nourished.

ORESTES

Yes. That terror in your dream foretold the truth.
You killed the man you should not kill, and now [930]
you'll suffer what no one should ever see.

[Orestes pushes Clytaemnestra inside the palace doors. Pylades goes with them. The doors close behind them.]

CHORUS LEADER

The fate of these two victims makes me grieve.
But long-suffering Orestes rides the crest
of so much bloodshed, we'd prefer he triumph— 1160
the bright eyes of this house must never fade.

CHORUS

Just as justice came at last
to Priam and his sons,
a crushing retribution,
so a double lion comes
to Agamemnon's house,
a two-fold slaughter.¹²
Apollo's suppliant, the exile, [940]
sees his action through,
driven on by justice 1170
sent from gods above.

Raise now a shout of triumph
above our master's house,
free of misery at last,
free of that tainted couple
squandering its wealth,
and free of its unhappy fate.

¹²Priam was king of Troy, killed when the city was ransacked at the end of the Trojan War.

LIBATION BEARERS

He came back with a secret plan,
fighting to win crafty vengeance.
The goddess took him by the hand, 1180
true daughter of great Zeus,
his guide throughout the fight. [950]
Men call her rightful Justice—
who destroys her enemies
once she breathes in anger.

Raise a shout of triumph now
above our master's house,
free of misery at last,
free of that tainted couple
squandering its wealth, 1190
free of its unhappy destiny.

From his shrine deep within the earth,
Parnassian Apollo spoke in prophecy—
“Well intentioned stealthy trickery
will conquer long-entrenched deceit.”
I pray his words somehow prevail,
so I never am a slave to wickedness.
True reverence should worship heaven's rule. [960]

Look now, dawn is coming!
Great chains on the home are falling off. 1200
Let this house rise up! For far too long
it's lain in pieces on the ground.

Time, which brings all things to pass,
will soon move through these doors,
once purifying rites expel
polluting evil. That will change
the roll of fortune's dice—they'll fall
so all can see the fair result,
a happy destiny once more [970]
for all who live within the house. 1210

Look now, dawn is coming!
Great chains on the home are falling off.
Let this house rise up! For far too long
it's lain in pieces on the ground.

[The palace doors are thrown open, revealing Orestes standing above the bodies of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra. Pylades stands beside Orestes. With them are attendants holding the bloodstained robes of Agamemnon.]

ORESTES

Here you see them—this pair of tyrants.
 They killed my father, then robbed my home.
 Once they sat enthroned in regal splendour.
 They're lovers still, as you can witness here
 by how they died, true to the oaths they swore.
 They made a pact to murder my poor father, 1220
 then die together. Well, they've kept their word.

[Orestes starts unfurling the robes in which Agamemnon was killed.]

Look at this again, all those of you 1230 [980]
 who pay attention to this house's troubles.
 This robe they used to trap my helpless father.
 With it they tied his hands and lashed his feet.
 Spread it out. Stand round here in a group—
 put it on display, my father's death shroud,
 so that the Father (not mine—the one
 who sees everything, the Sun) can see
 my mother's sacrilege. Then he will come 1230
 on the day when I am judged, to testify
 that I pursued and even killed my mother
 in a just cause. About Aegisthus' death
 there's nothing I need say. As an adulterer, [990]
 he dies—our law's just punishment.
 But as for her who planned this evil act
 against her husband, a man whose children
 she carried in her womb—I loved her once,
 but she became my bitter enemy,
 as you can see. What do you make of her? 1240
 If she'd been born a viper or sea snake,
 she wouldn't need to bite—her very touch
 would make men rot, so evil is her heart,
 so reckless.

[Orestes stoops and picks up the bloody robe.]

What do I call this?
 What fine words will do? A snare for some wild beast?
 A corpse's shroud? The curtain from a bath

wrapped round his legs? No. It's a hunting net.
 That name sounds right—robes to trap a man, [1000]
 entangling his feet, something a highway thief
 might use to trick and rob a stranger. 1250
 With such a net he'd take so many lives,
 his pleasure in the work would warm his heart.
 May I never live with such a woman.
 Before that, let the gods destroy me—
 let me die without a child.

CHORUS

Alas for this horrific act,
 the monstrous way she died.
 But woe on the survivor, too—
 his suffering begins to flower.

ORESTES

Did she commit the crime or not? Come here. 1260 [1010]
 This clothing is my witness, dyed with blood.
 It's from Aegisthus' blade. These bloody stains
 with time have blotted out the fine embroidery.
 But I can praise my father. Now at last
 I'm here to mourn him, as I hold this robe,
 the net that brought about my father's death.
 But I lament my act, my suffering.
 I mourn the entire race, for though I've won,
 I can't avoid the guilt which now pollutes me.

CHORUS

No mortal goes through life unscathed, 1270
 free from pain until the end.
 One trouble comes today,
 yet another comes tomorrow. [1020]

ORESTES [*starting to break down*]

But still, you need to understand . . .
 I don't know how this will end . . . I feel like
 some chariot racer lashing on my team,
 but we're way off track . . . My mind is racing . . .
 it's lost control. Something's overpowering me . . .
 carrying me off . . . Deep in my heart, fear
 prepares its furious song and dance. 1280
 So while I still have my wits about me,
 to all my friends I publicly proclaim

LIBATION BEARERS

I killed my mother not without just cause.
She was guilty of my father's murder,
a woman gods despised. What drove me on?
I cite as my chief cause the Delphic prophet, [1030]
Apollo's priest, who said this to me,
"If you carry out this act, you'll go free—
no charge of evil. But if you refuse . . ."
I won't describe the punishment— 1290
no arrow fired from a bow could reach
the top of so much pain.

[Pylades hands Orestes an olive branch, the mark of a suppliant to Apollo's oracle at Delphi.]

Look at me now—
armed with this branch and wreath, I go
a suppliant to earth's central navel stone,
Apollo's realm, to that sacred flame
which, people say, never dies away,
an exile who murdered his own blood.
Apollo's prophet gave me his orders—
I'm to go to his shrine, no other place.
As to how I did this brutal act, 1300
I call all men of Argos—be my witnesses [1040]
to Menelaus when he comes back home.
Remember me in years to come. Now I go,
wandering in exile from my country.
Whether I live or die, I leave with you
your memory of me.

CHORUS LEADER

But you've done great things.
Why depress your spirit with such talk,
ominous predictions, evil omens?
You've freed the city, all of Argos,
hacking off the heads of those two serpents, 1310
a healing blow.

[Orestes is suddenly overpowered with fear by a vision of his mother's Furies coming after him.]

ORESTES

No . . . They're here . . .
Look, you women . . . over there . . .
like Gorgons draped in black . . . their heads

hundreds of writhing snakes . . . [1050]
I can't stand it here . . .

CHORUS LEADER

What's wrong? What are you looking at?
Of all men you have a father's strongest love,
so stay calm. Don't give in to fear

ORESTES

It's no imagined horror, no!
It's real. Out there my mother's blood hounds wait.
They want revenge.

CHORUS LEADER

Your hands are still bloodstained—
that's made your mind disordered.

ORESTES

Lord Apollo! 1320
They come at me! Hordes of them! Their eyes
drip blood . . . it's horrible!

CHORUS LEADER

There's just one cure—
Apollo's touch will cleanse you, set you free [1060]
of these hallucinations.

ORESTES

You don't see them. I do.
They're coming for me. I have to leave . . .

[Orestes runs off. Pylades follows him.]

CHORUS LEADER

Good fortune go with you. And may god
watch over you, protect you with his favours.

CHORUS

The third storm has broken on the palace,
then run its course across the royal clan.
First, came the torments of those children 1330

LIBATION BEARERS

slaughtered for Thyestes' food.¹³ Next came
the suffering of a man, our warrior lord,
Achaëa's king. And now the third—
do I call him our saviour or our doom?
When will all this cease? When will murder,
its fury spent, rest at last in sleep?

[1070]

[The Chorus slowly leaves the scene.]

¹³Thyestes, father of Aegisthus, was a brother of Atreus and thus uncle of Agamemnon. Atreus had killed Thyestes's two sons and served them to him at what was supposed to be a feast of reconciliation. Aegisthus's murder of Agamemnon is his revenge for those killings.