

AESCHYLUS THE ORESTEIA



TRANSLATED BY
ROBERT FAGLES

*

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY, NOTES
AND GLOSSARY BY
ROBERT FAGLES AND
W. B. STANFORD

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AGAMEMNON



CHARACTERS

WATCHMAN

CLYTAEMNESTRA

HERALD

AGAMEMNON

CASSANDRA

AEGISTHUS

CHORUS, THE OLD MEN OF ARGOS
AND THEIR LEADER

*Attendants of Clytaemnestra and of Agamemnon,
bodyguard of Aegisthus*

TIME AND SCENE: *A night in the tenth and final autumn of the Trojan war. The house of Atreus in Argos. Before it, an altar stands unlit; a watchman on the high roofs fights to stay awake.*

WATCHMAN:

Dear gods, set me free from all the pain,
the long watch I keep, one whole year awake . .
propped on my arms, crouched on the roofs of Atreus
like a dog.

I know the stars by heart,
the armies of the night, and there in the lead 5
the ones that bring us snow or the crops of summer,
bring us all we have –
our great blazing kings of the sky,
I know them, when they rise and when they fall . . .
and now I watch for the light, the signal-fire 10
breaking out of Troy, shouting Troy is taken.
So she commands, full of her high hopes.
That woman – she manoeuvres like a man.

And when I keep to my bed, soaked in dew,
and the thoughts go groping through the night 15
and the good dreams that used to guard my sleep . . .
not here, it's the old comrade, terror, at my neck.
I mustn't sleep, no –

Shaking himself awake.

Look alive, sentry.

And I try to pick out tunes, I hum a little,
a good cure for sleep, and the tears start,
I cry for the hard times come to the house,
no longer run like the great place of old.

Oh for a blessed end to all our pain,
some godsend burning through the dark –

Light appears slowly in the east; he struggles to his feet and scans it.

I salute you!

You dawn of the darkness, you turn night to day – 25
I see the light at last.
They'll be dancing in the streets of Argos
thanks to you, thanks to this new stroke of –

Aieeeeeee!

There's your signal clear and true, my queen!
Rise up from bed – hurry, lift a cry of triumph 30
through the house, praise the gods for the beacon,
if they've taken Troy . . .

But there it burns,
fire all the way. I'm for the morning dances.
Master's luck is mine. A throw of the torch
has brought us triple-sixes – we have won! 35
My move now –

Beginning to dance, then breaking off, lost in thought.

Just bring him home. My king,
I'll take your loving hand in mine and then . . .
the rest is silence. The ox is on my tongue.
Aye, but the house and these old stones,
give them a voice and what a tale they'd tell. 40
And so would I, gladly . . .
I speak to those who know; to those who don't
my mind's a blank. I never say a word.

He climbs down from the roof and disappears into the palace through a side entrance. A CHORUS, the old men of Argos who have not learned the news of victory, enters and marches round the altar.

CHORUS:

Ten years gone, ten to the day
our great avenger went for Priam — 45
Menelaus and lord Agamemnon,
two kings with the power of Zeus,
the twin throne, twin sceptre,
Atreus' sturdy yoke of sons
launched Greece in a thousand ships, 50
armadas cutting loose from the land,
armies massed for the cause, the rescue —

From within the palace CLYTAEMNESTRA raises a cry of triumph.

the heart within them screamed for all-out war!
Like vultures robbed of their young,
the agony sends them frenzied, 55
soaring high from the nest, round and
round they wheel, they row their wings,
stroke upon churning thrashing stroke,
but all the labour, the bed of pain,
the young are lost forever. 60
Yet someone hears on high — Apollo,
Pan or Zeus — the piercing wail
these guests of heaven raise,
and drives at the outlaws, late
but true to revenge, a stabbing Fury! 65

CLYTAEMNESTRA appears at the doors and pauses with her entourage.

So towering Zeus the god of guests
drives Atreus' sons at Paris,
all for a woman manned by many
the generations wrestle, knees
grinding the dust, the manhood drains, 70
the spear snaps in the first blood rites
that marry Greece and Troy.
And now it goes as it goes
and where it ends is Fate.
And neither by singeing flesh 75
nor tipping cups of wine
nor shedding burning tears can you
enchant away the rigid Fury.

CLYTAEMNESTRA lights the altars.

We are the old, dishonoured ones,
the broken husks of men. 80
Even then they cast us off,
the rescue mission left us here
to prop a child's strength upon a stick.
What if the new sap rises in his chest?
He has no soldiery in him, 85
no more than we,
and we are aged past ageing,
gloss of the leaf shrivelled,
three legs at a time we falter on.
Old men are children once again, 90
a dream that sways and wavers
into the hard light of day.

But you,
daughter of Leda, queen Clytaemnestra,
what now, what news, what message
drives you through the citadel 95
burning victims? Look,
the city gods, the gods of Olympus,
gods of the earth and public markets —
all the altars blazing with your gifts!

Argos blazes! Torches
 race the sunrise up her skies -
 drugged by the lulling holy oils,
 unadulterated,
 run from the dark vaults of kings.
 Tell us the news!
 What you can, what is right -
 Heal us, soothe our fears!
 Now the darkness comes to the fore,
 now the hope glows through your victims,
 beating back this raw, relentless anguish
 gnawing at the heart.

*CLYTEMNESTRA ignores them and
 pursues her rituals; they assemble for
 the opening chorus.*

O but I still have power to sound the god's command at the
 roads
 that launched the kings. The gods breathe power through
 my song,
 my fighting strength, Persuasion grows with the years -
 I sing how the flight of fury hurled the twin command,
 one will that hurled young Greece
 and winged the spear of vengeance straight for Troy!
 The kings of birds to kings of the beaking prows, one black,
 one with a blaze of silver
 skimmed the palace spearhand right
 and swooping lower, all could see,
 plunged their claws in a hare, a mother
 bursting with unborn young - the babies spilling,
 quick spurts of blood - cut off the race just dashing into life!
 Cry, cry for death, but good win out in glory in the end.

But the loyal seer of the armies studied Atreus' sons,
 two sons with warring hearts - he saw two eagle-kings
 devour the hare and spoke the things to come,
 'Years pass, and the long hunt nets the city of Priam,
 the flocks beyond the walls,
 a kingdom's life and soul - Fate stamps them out.
 Just let no curse of the gods lour on us first,
 shatter our giant armour
 forged to strangle Troy. I see
 pure Artemis bristle in pity -
 yes, the flying hounds of the Father
 slaughter for armies . . . their own victim . . . a woman
 trembling young, all born to die - She loathes the eagles' feast!
 Cry, cry for death, but good win out in glory in the end.

'Artemis, lovely Artemis, so kind
 to the ravening lion's tender, helpless cubs,
 the suckling young of beasts that stalk the wilds -
 bring this sign for all its fortune,
 all its brutal torment home to birth!
 I beg you, Healing Apollo, soothe her before
 her crosswinds hold us down and moor the ships too long,
 pressing us on to another victim . . .
 nothing sacred, no
 no feast to be eaten
 the architect of vengeance

Turning to the palace.
 growing strong in the house
 with no fear of the husband
 here she waits
 the terror raging back and back in the future
 the stealth, the law of the hearth, the mother -
 Memory womb of Fury child-avenging Fury!
 So as the eagles wheeled at the crossroads,
 Calchas clashed out the great good blessings mixed with doom
 for the halls of kings, and singing with our fate
 we cry, cry for death, but good win out in glory in the end.

Zeus, great nameless all in all,
 if that name will gain his favour,
 I will call him Zeus.
 I have no words to do him justice,
 weighing all in the balance, 165
 all I have is Zeus, Zeus -
 lift this weight, this torment from my spirit,
 cast it once for all.

He who was so mighty once,
 storming for the wars of heaven, 170
 he has had his day.
 And then his son who came to power
 met his match in the third fall
 and he is gone. Zeus, Zeus -
 raise your cries and sing him Zeus the Victor! 175
 You will reach the truth:

Zeus has led us on to know,
 the Helmsman lays it down as law
 that we must suffer, suffer into truth.
 We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart 180
 the pain of pain remembered comes again,
 and we resist, but ripeness comes as well.
 From the gods enthroned on the awesome rowing-bench
 there comes a violent love.

So it was that day the king, 185
 the steersman at the helm of Greece,
 would never blame a word the prophet said -
 swept away by the wrenching winds of fortune
 he conspired! Weatherbound we could not sail,
 our stores exhausted, fighting strength hard-pressed, 190
 and the squadrons rode in the shallows off Chalkis
 where the riptide crashes, drags,

and winds from the north pinned down our hulls at Aulis,
 port of anguish . . . head winds starving,
 sheets and the cables snapped 195
 and the men's minds strayed,
 the pride, the bloom of Greece
 was raked as time ground on,
 ground down, and then the cure for the storm
 and it was harsher - Calchas cried,
 'My captains, Artemis must have blood!' - 200
 so harsh the sons of Atreus
 dashed their sceptres on the rocks,
 could not hold back the tears,

and I still can hear the older warlord saying, 205
 'Obey, obey, or a heavy doom will crush me! -
 Oh but doom *will* crush me
 once I rend my child,
 the glory of my house -
 a father's hands are stained, 210
 blood of a young girl streaks the altar.
 Pain both ways and what is worse?
 Desert the fleets, fail the alliance?
 No, but stop the winds with a virgin's blood,
 feed their lust, their fury? - feed their fury! - 215
 Law is law! -
 Let all go well.'

And once he slipped his neck in the strap of Fate,
 his spirit veering black, impure, unholy,
 once he turned he stopped at nothing,
 seized with the frenzy 220
 blinding driving to outrage -
 wretched frenzy, cause of all our grief!
 Yes, he had the heart
 to sacrifice his daughter,
 to bless the war that avenged a woman's loss, 225
 a bridal rite that sped the men-of-war.

'My father, father!' - she might pray to the winds;
no innocence moves her judges mad for war.
Her father called his henchmen on,

on with a prayer, 230

'Hoist her over the altar
like a yearling, give it all your strength!
She's fainting - lift her,
sweep her robes around her,
but slip this strap in her gentle curving lips . . .
here, gag her hard, a sound will curse the house' - 235

and the bridle chokes her voice . . . her saffron robes
pouring over the sand

her glance like arrows showering
wounding every murderer through with pity
clear as a picture, live, 240
she strains to call their names . . .

I remember often the days with father's guests
when over the feast her voice unbroken,
pure as the hymn her loving father
bearing third libations, sang to Saving Zeus - 245
transfixed with joy, Atreus' offspring
throbbing out their love.

What comes next? I cannot see it, cannot say.
The strong techniques of Calchas do their work.
But Justice turns the balance scales, 250
sees that we suffer

and we suffer and we learn.
And we will know the future when it comes.
Greet it too early, weep too soon.

It all comes clear in the light of day. 255
Let all go well today, well as she could want,

Turning to CLYTAEMNESTRA.

our midnight watch, our lone defender,
single-minded queen.

LEADER:

We've come,
Clytaemnestra. We respect your power.
Right it is to honour the warlord's woman
once he leaves the throne. 260

But why these fires?
Good news, or more good hopes? We're loyal,
we want to hear, but never blame your silence.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Let the new day shine - as the proverb says -
glorious from the womb of Mother Night. 265

*Lost in prayer, then turning to the
CHORUS.*

You will hear a joy beyond your hopes.
Priam's citadel - the Greeks have taken Troy!

LEADER:

No, what do you mean? I can't believe it.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Troy is ours. Is that clear enough?

LEADER:

The joy of it,
stealing over me, calling up my tears - 270

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Yes, your eyes expose your loyal hearts.

LEADER:

And you have proof?

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

I do,
I must. Unless the god is lying.

LEADER:

That,
or a phantom spirit sends you into raptures.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

No one takes me in with visions - senseless dreams.

275

LEADER:

Or giddy rumour, you haven't indulged yourself -

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

You treat me like a child, you mock me?

LEADER:

Then when did they storm the city?

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Last night, I say, the mother of this morning.

LEADER:

And who on earth could run the news so fast?

280

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

The god of fire - rushing fire from Ida!
And beacon to beacon rushed it on to me,
my couriers riding home the torch.

From Troy

to the bare rock of Lemnos, Hermes' Spur,
and the Escort winged the great light west
to the Saving Father's face, Mount Athos hurled it
third in the chain and leaping Ocean's back
the blaze went dancing on to ecstasy - pitch-pine
streaming gold like a new-born sun - and brought
the word in flame to Mount Makistos' brow.

285

No time to waste, straining, fighting sleep,
that lookout heaved a torch glowing over
the murderous straits of Euripos to reach
Messapion's watchmen craning for the signal.

290

Fire for word of fire! tense with the heather
withered gray, they stack it, set it ablaze -
the hot force of the beacon never flags,
it springs the Plain of Asôpos, rears

295

like a harvest moon to hit Kithairon's crest
and drives new men to drive the fire on.

300

That relay pants for the far-flung torch,
they swell its strength outstripping my commands
and the light inflames the marsh, the Gorgon's Eye,
it strikes the peak where the wild goats range -
my laws, my fire whips that camp!

305

They spare nothing, eager to build its heat,
and a huge beard of flame overcomes the headland
beetling down the Saronic Gulf, and flaring south
it brings the dawn to the Black Widow's face -
the watch that looms above your heads - and now
the true son of the burning flanks of Ida
crashes on the roofs of Atreus' sons!

310

And I ordained it all.
Torch to torch, running for their lives,
one long succession racing home my fire. 315

One,
first in the laps and last, wins out in triumph.
There you have my proof, my burning sign, I tell you -
the power my lord passed on from Troy to me!

LEADER:

We'll thank the gods, my lady - first this story,
let me lose myself in the wonder of it all! 320
Tell it start to finish, tell us all.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

The city's ours - in our hands this very day!
I can hear the cries in crossfire rock the walls.
Pour oil and wine in the same bowl,
what have you, friendship? A struggle to the end. 325
So with the victors and the victims - outcries,
you can hear them clashing like their fates.

They are kneeling by the bodies of the dead,
embracing men and brothers, infants over
the aged loins that gave them life, and sobbing,
as the yoke constricts their last free breath, 330
for every dear one lost.

And the others,
there, plunging breakneck through the night -
the labour of battle sets them down, ravenous,
to breakfast on the last remains of Troy. 335
Not by rank but chance, by the lots they draw,
they lodge in the houses captured by the spear,
settling in so soon, released from the open sky,
the frost and dew. Lucky men, off guard at last,
they sleep away their first good night in years. 340

If only they are revering the city's gods,
the shrines of the gods who love the conquered land,
no plunderer will be plundered in return.
Just let no lust, no mad desire seize the armies
to ravish what they must not touch -
overwhelmed by all they've won! 345

The run for home
and safety waits, the swerve at the post,
the final lap of the gruelling two-lap race.
And even if the men come back with no offence
to the gods, the avenging dead may never rest -
Oh let no new disaster strike! And here 350
you have it, what a woman has to say.
Let the best win out, clear to see.
A small desire but all that I could want.

LEADER:

Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal,
full of self-command. I've heard your sign
and now your vision. 355

*Reaching towards her as she turns and
re-enters the palace.*

Now to praise the gods.
The joy is worth the labour.

CHORUS:

O Zeus my king and Night, dear Night,
queen of the house who covers us with glories, 360
you slung your net on the towers of Troy,
neither young nor strong could leap
the giant dredge net of slavery,
all-embracing ruin.

I adore you, iron Zeus of the guests 365
and your revenge - you drew your longbow
year by year to a taut full draw
till one bolt, not falling short
or arching over the stars,
could split the mark of Paris! 370

The sky stroke of god! - it is all Troy's to tell,
but even I can trace it to its cause:
god does as god decrees.

And still some say
that heaven would never stoop to punish men 375
who trample the lovely grace of things
untouchable. How wrong they are!

A curse burns bright on crime -
full-blown, the father's crimes will blossom, 380
burst into the son's.

Let there be less suffering . . .
give us the sense to live on what we need.

Bastions of wealth
are no defence for the man
who treads the grand altar of Justice 385
down and out of sight.

Persuasion, maddening child of Ruin
overpowers him - Ruin plans it all.
And the wound will smoulder on,
there is no cure,
a terrible brilliance kindles on the night. 390
He is bad bronze scraped on a touchstone:
put to the test, the man goes black.

Like the boy who chases
a bird on the wing, brands his city, 395
brings it down and prays,
but the gods are deaf
to the one who turns to crime, they tear him down.

So Paris learned:
he came to Atreus' house
and shamed the tables spread for guests, 400
he stole away the queen.

And she left her land *chaos*, clanging shields,
companions tramping, bronze prow, men in bronze,
and she came to Troy with a dowry, death, 405
strode through the gates
defiant in every stride,

as prophets of the house looked on and wept,
'Oh the halls and the lords of war,
the bed and the fresh prints of love. 410
I see him, unavenging, unavenged,
the stun of his desolation is so clear -
he longs for the one who lies across the sea
until her phantom seems to sway the house.

Her curving images,
her beauty hurts her lord, 415
the eyes starve and the touch
of love is gone,

'and radiant dreams are passing in the night,
the memories throb with sorrow, joy with pain . . . 420
it is pain to dream and see desires
slip through the arms,
a vision lost for ever
winging down the moving drifts of sleep.'
So he grieves at the royal hearth 425
yet others' grief is worse, far worse.
All through Greece for those who flocked to war
they are holding back the anguish now,
you can feel it rising now in every house;
I tell you there is much to tear the heart. 430

They knew the men they sent,
but now in place of men
ashes and urns come back
to every hearth.

War, War, the great gold-broker of corpses 435
holds the balance of the battle on his spear!
Home from the pyres he sends them,
home from Troy to the loved ones,
heavy with tears, the urns brimmed full,
the heroes return in gold-dust, 440
dear, light ash for men; and they weep,
they praise them, 'He had skill in the swordplay,'
'He went down so tall in the onslaught,'
'All for another's woman.' So they mutter
in secret and the rancour steals 445
towards our staunch defenders, Atreus' sons.

And there they ring the walls, the young,
the lithe, the handsome hold the graves
they won in Troy; the enemy earth
rides over those who conquered. 450

The people's voice is heavy with hatred,
now the curses of the people must be paid,
and now I wait, I listen . . .
there - there is something breathing
under the night's shroud. God takes aim 455
at the ones who murder many;
the swarthy Furies stalk the man
gone rich beyond all rights - with a twist
of fortune grind him down, dissolve him
into the blurring dead - there is no help. 460
The reach for power can recoil,
the bolt of god can strike you at a glance.

Make me rich with no man's envy,
neither a raider of cities, no,
nor slave come face to face with life
overpowered by another. 465

Speaking singly.

- Fire comes and the news is good,
it races through the streets
but is it true? Who knows?
Or just another lie from heaven? 470

- Show us the man so childish, wonderstruck,
he's fired up with the first torch,
then when the message shifts
he's sick at heart.

- Just like a woman
to fill with thanks before the truth is clear. 475

- So gullible. Their stories spread like wildfire,
they fly fast and die faster;
rumours voiced by women come to nothing.

LEADER:

Soon we'll know her fires for what they are,
her relay race of torches hand-to-hand -
know if they're real or just a dream,
the hope of a morning here to take our senses.
I see a herald running from the beach
and a victor's spray of olive shades his eyes
and the dust he kicks, twin to the mud of Troy,
shows he has a voice - no kindling timber
on the cliffs, no signal-fires for him.
He can shout the news and give us joy,
or else . . . please, not that.

480

Bring it on,
good fuel to build the first good fires.
And if anyone calls down the worst on Argos
let him reap the rotten harvest of his mind.

490

*The HERALD rushes in and kneels on
the ground.*

HERALD:

Good Greek earth, the soil of my fathers!
Ten years out, and a morning brings me back.
All hopes snapped but one - I'm home at last.
Never dreamed I'd die in Greece, assigned
the narrow plot I love the best.

495

And now

I salute the land, the light of the sun,
our high lord Zeus and the king of Pytho -
no more arrows, master, raining on our heads!
At Scamander's banks we took our share,
your longbow brought us down like plague.
Now come, deliver us, heal us - lord Apollo!
Gods of the market, here, take my salute.
And you, my Hermes, Escort,
loving Herald, the herald's shield and prayer! -
And the shining dead of the land who launched the armies,
warm us home . . . we're all the spear has left.

500

505

You halls of the kings, you roofs I cherish,
sacred seats - you gods that catch the sun,
if your glances ever shone on him in the old days,
greet him well - so many years are lost.
He comes, he brings us light in the darkness,
free for every comrade, Agamemnon lord of men.

510

Give him the royal welcome he deserves!
He hoisted the pickaxe of Zeus who brings revenge,
he dug Troy down, he worked her soil down,
the shrines of her gods and the high altars, gone! -
and the seed of her wide earth he ground to bits.
That's the yoke he claps on Troy. The king,
the son of Atreus comes. The man is blest,
the one man alive to merit such rewards.

515

520

Neither Paris nor Troy, partners to the end,
can say their work outweighs their wages now.
Convicted of rapine, stripped of all his spoils,
and his father's house and the land that gave it life -
he's scythed them to the roots. The sons of Priam
pay the price twice over.

525

LEADER:

Welcome home
from the wars, herald, long live your joy.

HERALD:

Our joy -
now I could die gladly. Say the word, dear gods.

530

LEADER:

Longing for your country left you raw?

HERALD:

The tears fill my eyes, for joy.

LEADER:

You too,
down with the sweet disease that kills a man
with kindness . . .

HERALD:

Go on, I don't see what you—

LEADER:

Love
for the ones who love you—that's what took you.

HERALD:

You mean 535
the land and the armies hungered for each other?

LEADER:

There were times I thought I'd faint with longing.

HERALD:

So anxious for the armies, why?

LEADER:

For years now,
only my silence kept me free from harm.

HERALD:

What,
with the kings gone did someone threaten you?

LEADER:

So much . . . 540
now as you say, it would be good to die.

HERALD:

True, we *have* done well.
Think back in the years and what have you?
A few runs of luck, a lot that's bad.
Who but a god can go through life unmarked? 545

A long, hard pull we had, if I would tell it all.
The iron rations, penned in the gangways
hock by jowl like sheep. Whatever miseries
break a man, our quota, every sun-starved day.

Then on the beaches it was worse. Dug in
under the enemy ramparts – deadly going.
Out of the sky, out of the marshy flats
the dew soaked us, turned the ruts we fought from
into gullies, made our gear, our scalps
crawl with lice.

And talk of the cold, 555
the sleet to freeze the gulls, and the big snows
come avalanching down from Ida. Oh but the heat,
the sea and the windless noons, the swells asleep,
dropped to a dead calm . . .

But why weep now? 560
It's over for us, over for them.
The dead can rest and never rise again;
no need to call their muster. We're alive,
do we have to go on raking up old wounds?
Good-bye to all that. Glad I am to say it. 565

For us, the remains of the Greek contingents,
the good wins out, no pain can tip the scales,
not now. So shout this boast to the bright sun –
fitting it is – wing it over the seas and rolling earth:

'Once when an Argive expedition captured Troy
they hauled these spoils back to the gods of Greece,
they bolted them high across the temple doors,
the glory of the past!' 570

And hearing that,
men will applaud our city and our chiefs,
and Zeus will have the hero's share of fame –
he did the work. 575

That's all I have to say.

LEADER:

I'm convinced, glad that I was wrong.
Never too old to learn; it keeps me young.

CLYTAEMNESTRA enters with her women.

First the house and the queen, it's their affair,
but I can taste the riches.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

I cried out long ago! - 580
for joy, when the first herald came burning
through the night and told the city's fall.
And there were some who smiled and said,
'A few fires persuade you Troy's in ashes.
Women, women, elated over nothing.' 585

You made me seem deranged.
For all that I sacrificed - a woman's way,
you'll say - station to station on the walls
we lifted cries of triumph that resounded
in the temples of the gods. We lulled and blessed 590
the fires with myrrh and they consumed our victims.

Turning to the HERALD.

But enough. Why prolong the story?
From the king himself I'll gather all I need.
Now for the best way to welcome home
my lord, my good lord . . . 595

No time to lose!
What dawn can feast a woman's eyes like this?
I can see the light, the husband plucked from war
by the Saving God and open wide the gates.

Tell him that, and have him come with speed,
the people's darling - how they long for him. 600
And for his wife,
may he return and find her true at hall,
just as the day he left her, faithful to the last.
A watchdog gentle to him alone,

Glancing towards the palace.

savage
to those who cross his path. I have not changed.
The strains of time can never break our seal. 605
In love with a new lord, in ill repute I am
as practised as I am in dyeing bronze.

That is my boast, teeming with the truth.
I am proud, a woman of my nobility -
I'd hurl it from the roofs! 610

She turns sharply, enters the palace.

LEADER:

She speaks well, but it takes no seer to know
she only says what's right.

*The HERALD attempts to leave; the
leader takes him by the arm.*

Wait, one thing.
Menelaus, is he home too, safe with the men?
The power of the land - dear king. 615

HERALD:

I doubt that lies will help my friends,
in the lean months to come.

LEADER:

Help us somehow, tell the truth as well.
But when the two conflict it's hard to hide -
out with it.

HERALD:

He's lost, gone from the fleets!
He and his ship, it's true. 620

LEADER:

After you watched him
pull away from Troy? Or did some storm
attack you all and tear him off the line?

HERALD:

There,
like a marksman, the whole disaster cut to a word.

LEADER:

How do the escorts give him out - dead or alive?

625

HERALD:

No clear report. No one knows . . .
only the wheeling sun that heats the earth to life.

LEADER:

But then the storm - how did it reach the ships?
How did it end? Were the angry gods on hand?

HERALD:

This blessed day, ruin it with *them*?
Better to keep their trophies far apart.

630

When a runner comes, his face in tears,
saddled with what his city dreaded most,
the armies routed, two wounds in one,
one to the city, one to hearth and home . . .
our best men, droves of them, victims
herded from every house by the two-barb whip
that Ares likes to crack,

635

that charioteer
who packs destruction shaft by shaft,
careering on with his brace of bloody mares -
When he comes in, I tell you, dragging that much pain,
wail your battle-hymn to the Furies, and high time!

640

But when he brings salvation home to a city
singing out her heart -
how can I mix the good with so much bad
and blurt out this? -

645

'Storms swept the Greeks,
and not without the anger of the gods!'

Those enemies for ages, fire and water,
sealed a pact and showed it to the world -
they crushed our wretched squadrons.

Night looming,

650

breakers lunging in for the kill
and the black gales come brawling out of the north -
ships ramming, prow into hooking prow, gored
by the rush-and-buck of hurricane pounding rain
by the cloudburst -

ships stampeding into the darkness,
lashed and spun by the savage shepherd's hand!

655

But when the sun comes up to light the skies
I see the Aegean heaving into a great bloom
of corpses . . . Greeks, the pick of a generation
scattered through the wrecks and broken spars.

660

But not us, not our ship, our hull untouched.
Someone stole us away or begged us off.
No mortal - a god, death grip on the tiller,
or lady luck herself, perched on the helm,
she pulled us through, she saved us. Aye,
we'll never battle the heavy surf at anchor,
never shipwreck up some rocky coast.

665

But once we cleared that sea-hell, not even
trusting luck in the cold light of day,
we battened on our troubles, they were fresh -
the armada punished, bludgeoned into nothing.

670

And now if one of them still has the breath
he's saying *we* are lost. Why not?
We say the same of him. Well,
here's to the best.

And Menelaus?

Look to it, he's come back, and yet . . .
if a shaft of the sun can track him down,
alive, and his eyes full of the old fire –
thanks to the strategies of Zeus, Zeus
would never tear the house out by the roots –
then there's hope our man will make it home.

You've heard it all. Now you have the truth.

Rushing out.

CHORUS:

Who – what power named the name that drove your fate? –
what hidden brain could divine your future,
steer that word to the mark,
to the bride of spears,
the whirlpool churning armies,

Oh for all the world a Helen!

Hell at the prow, hell at the gates
hell on the men-of-war,
from her lair's sheer veils she drifted

launched by the giant western wind,

and the long tall waves of men in armour,
huntsmen trailing the oar-blades' dying spoor
slipped into her moorings,

Simois' mouth that chokes with foliage,
bayed for bloody strife,

for Troy's Blood Wedding Day – she drives her word,
her burning will to the birth, the Fury
late but true to the cause,
to the tables shamed

and Zeus who guards the hearth –

the Fury makes the Trojans pay!

Shouting their hymns, hymns for the bride
hymns for the kinsmen doomed
to the wedding march of Fate.

Troy changed her tune in her late age,

and I think I hear the dirges mourning

'Paris, born and groomed for the bed of Fate!'

They mourn with their life breath,
they sing their last, the sons of Priam
born for bloody slaughter.

So a man once reared
a lion cub at hall, snatched
from the breast, still craving milk
in the first flush of life.

A captivating pet for the young,
and the old men adored it, pampered it
in their arms, day in, day out,
like an infant just born.

Its eyes on fire, little beggar,
fawning for its belly, slave to food.

But it came of age
and the parent strain broke out
and it paid its breeders back.

Grateful it was, it went
through the flock to prepare a feast,
an illicit orgy – the house swam with blood,
none could resist that agony –
massacre vast and raw!

From god there came a priest of ruin,
adopted by the house to lend it warmth.

And the first sensation Helen brought to Troy ...
call it a spirit

shimmer of winds dying
glory light as gold 735
shaft of the eyes dissolving, open bloom
that wounds the heart with love.

But veering wild in mid-flight
she whirled her wedding on to a stabbing end, 740
slashed at the sons of Priam - hearthmate, friend to the death,
sped by Zeus who speeds the guest,
a bride of tears, a Fury.

There's an ancient saying, old as man himself:
men's prosperity 745
never will die childless,
once full-grown it breeds.

Sprung from the great good fortune in the race
comes bloom on bloom of pain -
insatiable wealth! But not I, 750
I alone say this. Only the reckless act
can breed impiety, multiplying crime on crime,
while the house kept straight and just
is blessed with radiant children.

But ancient Violence longs to breed, 755
new Violence comes
when its fatal hour comes, the demon comes
to take her toll - no war, no force, no prayer
can hinder the midnight Fury stamped
with parent Fury moving through the house. 760

But Justice shines in sooty hovels,
loves the decent life.
From proud halls crusted with guilt by filthy hands
she turns her eyes to find the pure in spirit -
spurning the wealth stamped counterfeit with praise, 765
she steers all things towards their destined end.

*AGAMEMNON enters in his chariot,
his plunder borne before him by his
entourage; behind him, half hidden,
stands CASSANDRA. The old men
press towards him.*

Come, my king, the scourge of Troy,
the true son of Atreus -
How to salute you, how to praise you
neither too high nor low, but hit 770
the note of praise that suits the hour?
So many prize some brave display,
they prefer some flaunt of honour
once they break the bounds.
When a man fails they share his grief, 775
but the pain can never cut them to the quick.
When a man succeeds they share his glory,
torturing their faces into smiles.
But the good shepherd knows his flock.
When the eyes seem to brim with love 780
and it is only unction, fawning,
he will know, better than we can know.
That day you marshalled the armies
all for Helen - no hiding it now -
I drew you in my mind in black; 785
you seemed a menace at the helm,
sending men to the grave
to bring her home, that hell on earth.
But now from the depths of trust and love
I say Well fought, well won - 790
the end is worth the labour!
Search, my king, and learn at last
who stayed at home and kept their faith
and who betrayed the city.

AGAMEMNON:

First,
with justice I salute my Argos and my gods,
my accomplices who brought me home and won
my rights from Priam's Troy - the just gods.
No need to hear our pleas. Once for all
they consigned their lots to the urn of blood,
they pitched on death for men, annihilation
for the city. Hope's hand, hovering
over the urn of mercy, left it empty.
Look for the smoke - it is the city's seamount,
building even now.

The storms of ruin live!
Her last dying breath, rising up from the ashes
sends us gales of incense rich in gold.

For that we must thank the gods with a sacrifice
our sons will long remember. For their mad outrage
of a queen we raped their city - we were right.
The beast of Argos, foals of the wild mare,
thousands massed in armour rose on the night
the Pleiades went down, and crashing through
their walls our bloody lion lapped its fill,
gorging on the blood of kings.

Our thanks to the gods,
long drawn out, but it is just the prelude.

*CLYTAEMNESTRA approaches with
her women; they are carrying dark red
tapestries. AGAMEMNON turns to the
leader.*

And your concern, old man, is on my mind.
I hear you and agree, I will support you.
How rare, men with the character to praise
a friend's success without a trace of envy,
poison to the heart - it deals a double blow.
Your own losses weigh you down but then,
look at your neighbour's fortune and you weep.
Well I know. I understand society,
the flattering mirror of the proud.

My comrades . . .
they're shadows, I tell you, ghosts of men
who swore they'd die for me. Only Odysseus:
I dragged that man to the wars but once in harness
he was a trace-horse, he gave his all for me.
Dead or alive, no matter, I can praise him.

And now this cause involving men and gods.
We must summon the city for a trial,
found a national tribunal. Whatever's healthy,
shore it up with law and help it flourish.
Wherever something calls for drastic cures
we make our noblest effort: amputate or wield
the healing iron, burn the cancer at the roots.

Now I go to my father's house -
I give the gods my right hand, my first salute.
The ones who sent me forth have brought me home.

*He starts down from the chariot, looks
at CLYTAEMNESTRA, stops, and
offers up a prayer.*

Victory, you have sped my way before,
now speed me to the last.

*CLYTAEMNESTRA turns from the
king to the CHORUS.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Old nobility of Argos
gathered here, I am not ashamed to tell you
how I love the man. I am older,
and the fear dies away . . . I am human.
Nothing I say was learned from others.
This is my life, my ordeal, long as the siege
he laid at Troy and more demanding.

845

First,
when a woman sits at home and the man is gone,
the loneliness is terrible,
unconscionable . . .
and the rumours spread and fester,
a runner comes with something dreadful,
close on his heels the next and his news worse,
and they shout it out and the whole house can hear;
and wounds – if he took one wound for each report
to penetrate these walls, he's gashed like a dragnet,
more, if he had only died . . .

850

for each death that swelled his record, he could boast
like a triple-bodied Geryon risen from the grave,
'Three shrouds I dug from the earth, one for every body
that went down!'

855

The rumours broke like fever,
broke and then rose higher. There were times
they cut me down and eased my throat from the noose.
I wavered between the living and the dead.

860

Turning to AGAMEMNON.

And so

our child is gone, not standing by our side,
the bond of our dearest pledges, mine and yours;
by all rights our child should be here . . .

865

Orestes. You seem startled.

You needn't be. Our loyal brother-in-arms
will take good care of him, Strophios the Phocian.
He warned from the start we court two griefs in one.
You risk all on the wars – and what if the people
rise up howling for the king, and anarchy
should dash our plans?

870

Men, it is their nature,
trampling on the fighter once he's down.
Our child is gone. That is my self-defence
and it is true.

875

For me, the tears that welled
like springs are dry. I have no tears to spare.
I'd watch till late at night, my eyes still burn,
I sobbed by the torch I lit for you alone.

880

Glancing towards the palace.

I never let it die . . . but in my dreams
the high thin wail of a gnat would rouse me,
piercing like a trumpet – I could see you
suffer more than all
the hours that slept with me could ever bear.

885

I endured it all. And now, free of grief,
I would salute that man the watchdog of the fold,
the mainroyal, saving stay of the vessel,
rooted oak that thrusts the roof sky-high,
the father's one true heir.

890

Land at dawn to the shipwrecked past all hope,
light of the morning burning off the night of storm,
the cold clear spring to the parched horseman –
O the ecstasy, to flee the yoke of Fate!

It is right to use the titles he deserves.
Let envy keep her distance. We have suffered
long enough. 895

Reaching towards AGAMEMNON.

Come to me now, my dearest,
down from the car of war, but never set the foot
that stamped out Troy on earth again, my great one.

Women, why delay? You have your orders.
Pave his way with tapestries. 900

*They begin to spread the crimson
tapestries between the king and the
palace doors.*

Quickly.

Let the red stream flow and bear him home
to the home he never hoped to see - Justice,
lead him in!

Leave all the rest to me.
The spirit within me never yields to sleep. 905
We will set things right, with the god's help.
We will do whatever Fate requires.

AGAMEMNON:

There
is Leda's daughter, the keeper of my house.
And the speech to suit my absence, much too long.
But the praise that does us justice, 910
let it come from others, then we prize it.

This -

you treat me like a woman. Grovelling, gaping up at me -
what am I, some barbarian peacocking out of Asia?
Never cross my path with robes and draw the lightning.
Never - only the gods deserve the pomps of honour 915
and the stiff brocades of fame. To walk on them ...
I am human, and it makes my pulses stir
with dread.

Give me the tributes of a man
and not a god, a little earth to walk on,
not this gorgeous work. 920
There is no need to sound my reputation.
I have a sense of right and wrong, what's more -
heaven's proudest gift. Call no man blest
until he ends his life in peace, fulfilled.
If I can live by what I say, I have no fear. 925

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

One thing more. Be true to your ideals and tell me -

AGAMEMNON:

True to my ideals? Once I violate them I am lost.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Would you have sworn this act to god in a time of terror?

AGAMEMNON:

Yes, if a prophet called for a last, drastic rite.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

But Priam - can you see him if he had your success? 930

AGAMEMNON:

Striding on the tapestries of god, I see him now.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

And *you* fear the reproach of common men?

AGAMEMNON:

The voice of the people - aye, they have enormous power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Perhaps, but where's the glory without a little gall?

AGAMEMNON:

And where's the woman in all this lust for glory? 935

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

But the great victor - it becomes him to give way.

AGAMEMNON:

Victory in this . . . war of ours, it means so much to you?

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

O give way! The power is yours if you surrender,
all of your own free will, to me!

AGAMEMNON:

Enough.

If you are so determined -

940

Turning to the women, pointing to his boots.

Let someone help me off with these at least.
Old slaves, they've stood me well.

Hurry,

and while I tread his splendours dyed red in the sea,
may no god watch and strike me down with envy
from on high. I feel such shame -
to tread the life of the house, a kingdom's worth
of silver in the weaving.

945

He steps down from the chariot to the tapestries and reveals CASSANDRA, dressed in the sacred regalia, the fillets, robes, and sceptre of Apollo.

Done is done.

Escort this stranger in, be gentle.

Conquer with compassion. Then the gods
shine down upon you, gently. No one chooses
the yoke of slavery, not of one's free will -
and she least of all. The gift of the armies,
flower and pride of all the wealth we won,
she follows me from Troy.

950

And now,
since you have brought me down with your insistence,
just this once I enter my father's house,
trampling royal crimson as I go.

955

He takes his first steps and pauses.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

There is the sea
and who will drain it dry? Precious as silver,
inexhaustible, ever-new, it breeds the more we reap it -
tides on tides of crimson dye our robes blood-red.
Our lives are based on wealth, my king,
the gods have seen to that.
Destitution, our house has never heard the word.
I would have sworn to tread on legacies of robes,
at one command from an oracle, deplete the house -
suffer the worst to bring that dear life back!

960

965

Encouraged, AGAMEMNON strides to the entrance.

When the root lives on, the new leaves come back,
spreading a dense shroud of shade across the house
to thwart the Dog Star's fury. So you return
to the father's hearth, you bring us warmth in winter
like the sun -

970

And you are Zeus when Zeus
tramples the bitter virgin grape for new wine
and the welcome chill steals through the halls, at last
the master moves among the shadows of his house, fulfilled.

*AGAMEMNON goes over the threshold;
the women gather up the tapestries
while CLYTAEMNESTRA prays.*

Zeus, Zeus, master of all fulfilment, now fulfil our prayers - 975
 speed our rites to their fulfilment once for all!

*She enters the palace, the doors close,
 the old men huddle in terror.*

CHORUS:

Why, why does it rock me, never stops,
 this terror beating down my heart,
 this seer that sees it all -
 it beats its wings, uncalled unpaid 980
 thrust on the lungs
 the mercenary song beats on and on
 singing a prophet's strain -
 and I can't throw it off
 like dreams that make no sense, 985
 and the strength drains
 that filled the mind with trust,
 and the years drift by and the driven sand
 has buried the mooring lines
 that churned when the armoured squadrons cut for Troy ... 990
 and now I believe it, I can prove he's home,
 my own clear eyes for witness -

Agamemnon!

Still it's chanting, beating deep so deep in the heart
 this dirge of the Furies, oh dear god,
 not fit for the lyre, its own master 995
 it kills our spirit
 kills our hopes
 and it's real, true, no fantasy -
 stark terror whirls the brain
 and the end is coming 1000
 Justice comes to birth -
 I pray my fears prove false and fall
 and die and never come to birth!

Even exultant health, well we know,
 exceeds its limits, comes so near disease 1005
 it can breach the wall between them.

Even a man's fate, held true on course,
 in a blinding flash rams some hidden reef;
 but if caution only casts the pick of the cargo -
 one well-balanced cast - 1010
 the house will not go down, not outright;
 labouring under its wealth of grief
 the ship of state rides on.

Yes, and the great green bounty of god,
 sown in the furrows year by year and reaped each fall 1015
 can end the plague of famine.

But a man's life-blood
 is dark and mortal.
 Once it wets the earth
 what song can sing it back? 1020
 Not even the master-healer
 who brought the dead to life -
 Zeus stopped the man before he did more harm.

Oh, if only the gods had never forged
 the chain that curbs our excess, 1025
 one man's fate curbing the next man's fate,
 my heart would outrace my song, I'd pour out all I feel -
 but no, I choke with anguish,
 mutter through the nights.
 Never to ravel out a hope in time 1030
 and the brain is swarming, burning -

*CLYTAEMNESTRA emerges from the
 palace and goes to CASSANDRA,
 impassive in the chariot.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Won't you come inside? I mean you, Cassandra.
 Zeus in all his mercy wants you to share
 some victory libations with the house.
 The slaves are flocking. Come, lead them
 up to the altar of the god who guards
 our dearest treasures.

1035

Down from the chariot,
 this is no time for pride. Why even Heracles,
 they say, was sold into bondage long ago,
 he had to endure the bitter bread of slaves.
 But if the yoke descends on you, be grateful
 for a master born and reared in ancient wealth.
 Those who reap a harvest past their hopes
 are merciless to their slaves.

1040

From us
 you will receive what custom says is right.

1045

CASSANDRA remains impassive.

LEADER:

It's *you* she is speaking to, it's all too clear.
 You're caught in the nets of doom - obey
 if you can obey, unless you cannot bear to.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Unless she's like a swallow, possessed
 of her own barbaric song, strange, dark.
 I speak directly as I can - she must obey.

1050

LEADER:

Go with her. Make the best of it, she's right.
 Step down from the seat, obey her.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Do it *now* -

I have no time to spend outside. Already
 the victims crowd the hearth, the Navelstone,
 to bless this day of joy I never hoped to see! -
 our victims waiting for the fire and the knife,
 and you,
 if you want to taste our mystic rites, come now.
 If my words can't reach you -

1055

Turning to the LEADER.

Give her a sign,

1060

one of her exotic handsigns.

LEADER:

I think

the stranger needs an interpreter, someone clear.
 She's like a wild creature, fresh caught.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

She's mad,

her evil genius murmuring in her ears.
 She comes from a *city* fresh caught.
 She must learn to take the cutting bridle
 before she foams her spirit off in blood -
 and that's the last I waste on her contempt!

1065

*Wheeling, re-entering the palace. The
 LEADER turns to CASSANDRA, who
 remains transfixed.*

LEADER:

Not I, I pity her. I will be gentle.
 Come, poor thing. Leave the empty chariot -
 Of your own free will try on the yoke of Fate.

1070

CASSANDRA:

Aieeeee! Earth - Mother -
 Curse of the Earth - Apollo Apollo!

LEADER:

Why cry to Apollo?
He's not the god to call with sounds of mourning.

CASSANDRA:

Aieeeee! Earth - Mother -
Rape of the Earth - Apollo Apollo!

1075

LEADER:

Again, it's a bad omen.
She cries for the god who wants no part of grief.

*CASSANDRA steps from the chariot,
looks slowly towards the rooftops of
the palace.*

CASSANDRA:

God of the long road,
Apollo Apollo my destroyer -
you destroy me once, destroy me twice -

1080

LEADER:

She's about to sense her own ordeal, I think.
Slave that she is, the god lives on inside her.

CASSANDRA:

God of the iron marches,
Apollo Apollo my destroyer -
where, where have you led me now? what house -

1085

LEADER:

The house of Atreus and his sons. Really -
don't you know? It's true, see for yourself.

CASSANDRA:

No . . . the house that hates god,
an echoing womb of guilt, kinsmen
torturing kinsmen, severed heads,
slaughterhouse of heroes, soil streaming blood -

1090

LEADER:

A keen hound, this stranger.
Trailing murder, and murder she will find.

CASSANDRA:

See, my witnesses -
I trust to them, to the babies
wailing, skewered on the sword,
their flesh charred, the father gorging on their parts -

1095

LEADER:

We'd heard your fame as a seer,
but no one looks for seers in Argos.

CASSANDRA:

Oh no, what horror, what new plot,
new agony this? -
it's growing, massing, deep in the house,
a plot, a monstrous - *thing*
to crush the loved ones, no,
there is no cure, and rescue's far away and -

1100

1105

LEADER:

I can't read these signs; I knew the first,
the city rings with them.

CASSANDRA:

You, you godforsaken - you'd do *this*?
The lord of your bed,
you bathe him . . . his body glistens, then -
how to tell the climax? -
comes so quickly, see,
hand over hand shoots out, hauling ropes -
then lunge!

1110

LEADER:

Still lost. Her riddles, her dark words of god -
I'm groping, helpless.

CASSANDRA:

No no, look *there!* - 1115
what's that? some net flung out of hell -
No, *she* is the snare,
the bedmate, deathmate, murder's strong right arm!
Let the insatiate discord in the race
rear up and shriek 'Avenge the victim - stone them dead!' 1120

LEADER:

What Fury is this? Why rouse it, lift its wailing
through the house? I hear you and lose hope.

CHORUS:

Drop by drop at the heart, the gold of life ebbs out.
We are the old soldiers . . . wounds will come
with the crushing sunset of our lives. 1125
Death is close, and quick.

CASSANDRA:

Look out! *look out!* -
Ai, drag the great bull from the mate! -
a thrash of robes, she traps him -
writhing -
black horn glints, twists -
she gores him through!
And now he buckles, look, the bath swirls red - 1130
There's stealth and murder in the cauldron, do you hear?

LEADER:

I'm no judge, I've little skill with the oracles,
but even I know danger when I hear it.

CHORUS:

What good are the oracles to men? Words, more words,
and the hurt comes on us, endless words 1135
and a seer's techniques have brought us
terror and the truth.

CASSANDRA:

The agony - O I am breaking! - Fate's so hard,
and the pain that floods my voice is mine alone.
Why have you brought me here, tormented as I am? 1140
Why, unless to die with him, why else?

LEADER AND CHORUS:

Mad with the rapture - god speeds you on
to the song, the deathsong,
like the nightingale that broods on sorrow,
mourns her son, her son, 1145
her life inspired with grief for him,
she lilt and shrills, dark bird that lives for night.

CASSANDRA:

The nightingale - O for a song, a fate like hers!
The gods gave her a life of ease, swathed her in wings,
no tears, no wailing. The knife waits for me. 1150
They'll splay me on the iron's double edge.

LEADER AND CHORUS:

Why? - what god hurls you on, stroke on stroke
to the long dying fall?
Why the horror clashing through your music,
terror struck to song? - 1155
why the anguish, the wild dance?
Where do your words of god and grief begin?

CASSANDRA:

Ai, the wedding, wedding of Paris,
 death to the loved ones. Oh Scamander,
 you nursed my father . . . once at your banks
 I nursed and grew, and now at the banks
 of Acheron, the stream that carries sorrow,
 it seems I'll chant my prophecies too soon.

1160

LEADER AND CHORUS:

What are you saying? Wait, it's clear,
 a child could see the truth, it wounds within,
 like a bloody fang it tears -
 I hear your destiny - breaking sobs,
 cries that stab the ears.

1165

CASSANDRA:

Oh the grief, the grief of the city
 ripped to oblivion. Oh the victims,
 the flocks my father burned at the wall,
 rich herds in flames . . . no cure for the doom
 that took the city after all, and I,
 her last ember, I go down with her.

1170

LEADER AND CHORUS:

You cannot stop, your song goes on -
 some spirit drops from the heights and treads you down
 and the brutal strain grows -
 your death-throes come and come and
 I cannot see the end!

1175

CASSANDRA:

Then off with the veils that hid the fresh young bride -
 we will see the truth.
 Flare up once more, my oracle! Clear and sharp
 as the wind that blows towards the rising sun,
 I can feel a deeper swell now, gathering head
 to break at last and bring the dawn of grief.

1180

1185

No more riddles. I will teach you.
 Come, bear witness, run and hunt with me.
 We trail the old barbaric works of slaughter.

These roofs - look up - there is a dancing troupe
 that never leaves. And they have their harmony
 but it is harsh, their words are harsh, they drink
 beyond the limit. Flushed on the blood of men
 their spirit grows and none can turn away
 their revel breeding in the veins - the Furies!
 They cling to the house for life. They sing,
 sing of the frenzy that began it all,
 strain rising on strain, showering curses
 on the man who tramples on his brother's bed.

1190

1195

There. Have I hit the mark or not? Am I a fraud,
 a fortune-teller babbling lies from door to door?
 Swear how well I know the ancient crimes
 that live within this house.

1200

LEADER:

And if I did?
 Would an oath bind the wounds and heal us?
 But you amaze me. Bred across the sea,
 your language strange, and still you sense the truth
 as if you had been here.

1205

CASSANDRA:

Apollo the Prophet
 introduced me to his gift.

LEADER:

A god - and moved with love?

CASSANDRA:

I was ashamed to tell this once,
 but now . . .

LEADER:

We spoil ourselves with scruples,
long as things go well.

1210

CASSANDRA:

He came like a wrestler,
magnificent, took me down and breathed his fire
through me and -

LEADER:

You bore him a child?

CASSANDRA:

I yielded,
then at the climax I recoiled - I deceived Apollo!

LEADER:

But the god's skills - they seized you even then?

1215

CASSANDRA:

Even then I told my people all the grief to come.

LEADER:

And Apollo's anger never touched you? - is it possible?

CASSANDRA:

Once I betrayed him I could never be believed.

LEADER:

We believe you. Your visions seem so true.

CASSANDRA:

Aieeeee! -

the pain, the terror! the birth-pang of the seer
who tells the truth -

1220

it whirls me, oh,
the storm comes again, the crashing chords!

Look, you see them nestling at the threshold?
Young, young in the darkness like a dream,
like children really, yes, and their loved ones
brought them down . . .

1225

their hands, they fill their hands
with their own flesh, they are serving it like food,
holding out their entrails . . . now it's clear,
I can see the armfuls of compassion, see the father
reach to taste and -

For so much suffering,
I tell you, someone plots revenge.

1230

A lion who lacks a lion's heart,
he sprawled at home in the royal lair
and set a trap for the lord on his return.
My lord . . . I must wear his yoke, I am his slave.
The lord of the men-of-war, he obliterated Troy -
he is so blind, so lost to that detestable hellhound
who pricks her ears and fawns and her tongue draws out
her glittering words of welcome -

1235

No, he cannot see
the stroke that Fury's hiding, stealth, and murder.
What outrage - the woman kills the man!

1240

What to call
that . . . monster of Greece, and bring my quarry down?
Viper coiling back and forth?

Some sea-witch? -
Scylla crouched in her rocky nest - nightmare of sailors?
Raging mother of death, storming deathless war against
the ones she loves!

1245

And how she howled in triumph,
boundless outrage. Just as the tide of battle
broke her way, she seems to rejoice that he
is safe at home from war, saved for her.

Believe me if you will. What will it matter
if you won't? It comes when it comes,
and soon you'll see it face to face
and say the seer was all too true.
You will be moved with pity.

1250

LEADER:

Thyestes' feast,
the children's flesh - that I know,
and the fear shudders through me. It's true,
real, no dark signs about it. I hear the rest
but it throws me off the scent.

1255

CASSANDRA:

Agamemnon.
You will see him dead.

LEADER:

Peace, poor girl!
Put those words to sleep.

CASSANDRA:

No use,
the Healer has no hand in this affair.

1260

LEADER:

Not if it's true - but god forbid it is!

CASSANDRA:

You pray, and they close in to kill!

LEADER:

What man prepares this, this dreadful -

CASSANDRA:

Man?
You are lost, to every word I've said.

LEADER:

Yes -
I don't see who can bring the evil off.

1265

CASSANDRA:

And yet I know my Greek, too well.

LEADER:

So does the Delphic oracle,
but he's hard to understand.

CASSANDRA:

His fire! -
sears me, sweeps me again - the torture!
Apollo Lord of the Light, you burn,
you blind me -

1270

Agony!

She is the lioness,
she rears on her hind legs, she beds with the wolf
when her lion king goes ranging -
she will kill me -

Ai, the torture!

She is mixing her drugs,
adding a measure more of hate for me.
She gloats as she whets the sword for him.
He brought me home and we will pay in carnage.

1275

Why mock yourself with these - trappings, the rod,
the god's wreath, his yoke around my throat?
Before I die I'll tread you -

1280

*Ripping off her regalia, stamping it
into the ground.*

Down, out,

die die die!
Now you're down. I've paid you back.
Look for another victim - I am free at last -
make her rich in all your curse and doom.

*Staggering backwards as if wrestling
with a spirit tearing at her robes.*

See, 1285

Apollo himself, his fiery hands - I feel him again,
he's stripping off my robes, the Seer's robes!
And after he looked down and saw me mocked,
even in these, his glories, mortified by friends
I loved, and they hated me, they were so blind
to their own demise - 1290

I went from door to door,
I was wild with the god, I heard them call me
'Beggar! Wretch! Starve for bread in hell!'

And I endured it all, and now he will
extort me as his due. A seer for the Seer. 1295
He brings me here to die like this,
not to serve at my father's altar. No,
the block is waiting. The cleaver steams
with my life blood, the first blood drawn
for the king's last rites.

*Regaining her composure and moving
to the altar.*

We will die, 1300
but not without some honour from the gods.
There will come another to avenge us,
born to kill his mother, born
his father's champion. A wanderer, a fugitive
driven off his native land, he will come home 1305
to cope the stones of hate that menace all he loves.
The gods have sworn a monumental oath: as his father lies
upon the ground he draws him home with power like a prayer.

Then why so pitiful, why so many tears?
I have seen my city faring as she fared, 1310
and those who took her, judged by the gods,
faring as they fare. I must be brave.
It is my turn to die.

Approaching the doors.

I address you as the Gates of Death.
I pray it comes with one clear stroke, 1315
no convulsions, the pulses ebbing out
in gentle death. I'll close my eyes and sleep.

LEADER:
So much pain, poor girl, and so much truth,
you've told so much. But if you see it coming,
clearly - how can you go to your own death, 1320
like a beast to the altar driven on by god,
and hold your head so high?

CASSANDRA:
No escape, my friends,
not now.

LEADER:
But the last hour should be savoured.

CASSANDRA:
My time has come. Little to gain from flight.

LEADER:
You're brave, believe me, full of gallant heart. 1325

CASSANDRA:
Only the wretched go with praise like that.

LEADER:
But to go nobly lends a man some grace.

CASSANDRA:
My noble father - you and your noble children.

*She nears the threshold and recoils,
groaning in revulsion.*

LEADER:

What now? what terror flings you back?
Why? Unless some horror in the brain -

CASSANDRA:

Murder.

The house breathes with murder - bloody shambles! 1330

LEADER:

No, no, only the victims at the hearth.

CASSANDRA:

I know that odour. I smell the open grave.

LEADER:

But the Syrian myrrh, it fills the halls with splendour,
can't you sense it?

CASSANDRA:

Well, I must go in now,

mourning Agamemnon's death and mine. 1335
Enough of life!

*Approaching the doors again and
crying out.*

Friends - I cried out,
not from fear like a bird fresh caught,
but that you will testify to *how* I died.
When the queen, woman for woman, dies for me, 1340
and a man falls for the man who married grief.
That's all I ask, my friends. A stranger's gift
for one about to die.

LEADER:

Poor creature, you
and the end you see so clearly. I pity you.

CASSANDRA:

I'd like a few words more, a kind of dirge, 1345
it is my own. I pray to the sun,
the last light I'll see,
that when the avengers cut the assassins down
they will avenge me too, a slave who died,
an easy conquest.

Oh men, your destiny. 1350
When all is well a shadow can overturn it.
When trouble comes a stroke of the wet sponge,
and the picture's blotted out. And that,
I think that breaks the heart.

She goes through the doors.

CHORUS:

But the lust for power never dies - 1355
men cannot have enough.
No one will lift a hand to send it
from his door, to give it warning,
'Power, never come again!'
Take this man: the gods in glory 1360
gave him Priam's city to plunder,
brought him home in splendour like a god.
But now if he must pay for the blood
his fathers shed, and die for the deaths 1365
he brought to pass, and bring more death
to avenge his dying, show us one
who boasts himself born free
of the raging angel, once he hears -

Cries break out within the palace.

AGAMEMNON:

Aagh!

Struck deep - the death-blow, deep -

LEADER:

Quiet. Cries,

but who? Someone's stabbed -

AGAMEMNON:

Aaagh, again . . .

second blow - struck home. 1370

LEADER:

The work is done,

you can feel it. The king, and the great cries -

Close ranks now, find the right way out.

*But the old men scatter, each speaks
singly.*

CHORUS:

- I say send out heralds, muster the guard,
they'll save the house.

- And I say rush in now, 1375

catch them red-handed - butchery running on their blades.

- Right with you, do something - now or never!

- Look at them, beating the drum for insurrection.

- Yes,

we're wasting time. They rape the name of caution,
their hands will never sleep.

- Not a plan in sight. 1380

Let men of action do the planning, too.

- I'm helpless. Who can raise the dead with words?

- What, drag out our lives? bow down to the tyrants,
the ruin of the house?

- Never, better to die

on your feet than live on your knees.

- Wait, 1385

do we take the cries for signs, prophesy like seers
and give him up for dead?

- No more suspicions,

not another word till we have proof.

- Confusion

on all sides - one thing to do. See how it stands
with Agamemnon, once and for all we'll see - 1390

*He rushes at the doors. They open and
reveal a silver cauldron that holds the
body of AGAMEMNON shrouded in
bloody robes, with the body of
CASSANDRA to his left and
CLYTAEMNESTRA standing to his
right, sword in hand. She strides
towards the chorus.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Words, endless words I've said to serve the moment -
now it makes me proud to tell the truth.
How else to prepare a death for deadly men
who seem to love you? How to rig the nets
of pain so high no man can overleap them? 1395

I brooded on this trial, this ancient blood feud
year by year. At last my hour came.
Here I stand and here I struck
and here my work is done.
I did it all. I don't deny it, no.
He had no way to flee or fight his destiny -

1400

*Unwinding the robes from AGAMEM-
NON's body, spreading them before
the altar where the old men cluster
around them, unified as a chorus once
again.*

our never-ending, all embracing net, I cast it
wide for the royal haul, I coil him round and round
in the wealth, the robes of doom, and then I strike him
once, twice, and at each stroke he cries in agony -
he buckles at the knees and crashes here!
And when he's down I add the third, last blow,
to the Zeus who saves the dead beneath the ground
I send that third blow home in homage like a prayer.

1405

So he goes down, and the life is bursting out of him -
great sprays of blood, and the murderous shower
wounds me, dyes me black and I, I revel
like the Earth when the spring rains come down,
the blessed gifts of god, and the new green spear
splits the sheath and rips to birth in glory!

1410

1415

So it stands, elders of Argos gathered here.
Rejoice if you can rejoice - I glory.
And if I'd pour upon his body the libation
it deserves, what wine could match my words?
It is right and more than right. He flooded
the vessel of our proud house with misery,
with the vintage of the curse and now
he drains the dregs. My lord is home at last.

1420

LEADER:

You appal me, you, your brazen words -
exulting over your fallen king.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

And you, 1425
you try me like some desperate woman.
My heart is steel, well you know. Praise me,
blame me as you choose. It's all one.
Here is Agamemnon, my husband made a corpse
by this right hand - a masterpiece of Justice. 1430
Done is done.

CHORUS:

Woman! - what poison cropped from the soil
or strained from the heaving sea, what nursed you,
drove you insane? You brave the curse of Greece.
You have cut away and flung away and now
the people cast you off to exile, 1435
broken with our hate.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

And now you sentence me? -
you banish me from the city, curses breathing
down my neck? But he -
name one charge you brought against him then.
He thought no more of it than killing a beast,
and his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece,
but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter,
the agony I laboured into love
to charm away the savage winds of Thrace. 1440

Didn't the law demand you banish him? – 1445
 hunt him from the land for all his guilt?
 But now you witness what I've done
 and you are ruthless judges.

Threaten away!
 I'll meet you blow for blow. And if I fall
 the throne is yours. If god decrees the reverse, 1450
 late as it is, old men, you'll learn your place.

CHORUS:

Mad with ambition,
 shrilling pride! – some Fury
 crazed with the carnage rages through your brain –
 I can see the flecks of blood inflame your eyes! 1455
 But vengeance comes – you'll lose your loved ones,
 stroke for painful stroke.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Then learn this, too, the power of my oaths.
 By the child's Rights I brought to birth,
 by Ruin, by Fury – the three gods to whom 1460
 I sacrificed this man – I swear my hopes
 will never walk the halls of fear so long
 as Aegisthus lights the fire on my hearth.
 Loyal to me as always, no small shield
 to buttress my defiance.

Here he lies. 1465
 He brutalized me. The darling of all
 the golden girls who spread the gates of Troy.
 And here his spear-prize . . . what wonders she beheld! –
 the seer of Apollo shared my husband's bed,
 his faithful mate who knelt at the rowing-benches, 1470
 worked by every hand.

They have their rewards.
 He as you know. And she, the swan of the gods
 who lived to sing her latest, dying song –
 his lover lies beside him.
 She brings a fresh, voluptuous relish to my bed! 1475

CHORUS:

Oh quickly, let me die –
 no bed of labour, no, no wasting illness . . .
 bear me off in the sleep that never ends,
 now that he has fallen,
 now that our dearest shield lies battered – 1480
 Woman made him suffer,
 woman struck him down.

Helen the wild, maddening Helen,
 one for the many, the thousand lives
 you murdered under Troy, Now you are crowned 1485
 with this consummate wreath, the blood
 that lives in memory, glistens age to age.
 Once in the halls she walked and she was war,
 angel of war, angel of agony, lighting men to death.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Pray no more for death, broken
 as you are. And never turn 1490
 your wrath on her, call her
 the scourge of men, the one alone
 who destroyed a myriad Greek lives –
 Helen the grief that never heals. 1495

CHORUS:

The spirit! – you who tread
 the house and the twinborn sons of Tantalus –
 you empower the sisters, Fury's twins
 whose power tears the heart!
 Perched on the corpse your carrion raven 1500
 glories in her hymn,
 her screaming hymn of pride.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Now you set your judgement straight,
 you summon *him*! Three generations
 feed the spirit in the race. 1505
 Deep in the veins he feeds our bloodlust -
 aye, before the old wound dies
 it ripens in another flow of blood.

CHORUS:

The great curse of the house, the spirit,
 dead weight wrath - and you can praise it! 1510
 Praise the insatiate doom that feeds
 relentless on our future and our sons.
 Oh all through the will of Zeus,
 the cause of all, the one who works it all.
 What comes to birth that is not Zeus? 1515
 Our lives are pain, what part not come from god?

Oh my king, my captain,
 how to salute you, how to mourn you?
 What can I say with all my warmth and love?
 Here in the black widow's web you lie, 1520
 gasping out your life
 in a sacrilegious death, dear god,
 reduced to a slave's bed,
 my king of men, yoked by stealth and Fate,
 by the wife's hand that thrust the two-edged sword. 1525

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

You claim the work is mine, call me
 Agamemnon's wife - you are so wrong.
 Fleshed in the wife of this dead man,
 the spirit lives within me, 1530
 our savage ancient spirit of revenge.
 In return for Atreus' brutal feast
 he kills his perfect son - for every
 murdered child, a crowning sacrifice.

CHORUS:

And *you*, innocent of his murder?
 And who could swear to that? and how? . . . 1535
 and still an avenger could arise,
 bred by the fathers' crimes, and lend a hand.
 He wades in the blood of brothers,
 stream on mounting stream - black war erupts
 and where he strides revenge will stride, 1540
 clots will mass for the young who were devoured.

Oh my king, my captain,
 how to salute you, how to mourn you?
 What can I say with all my warmth and love?
 Here in the black widow's web you lie, 1545
 gasping out your life
 in a sacrilegious death, dear god,
 reduced to a slave's bed,
 my king of men, yoked by stealth and Fate,
 by the wife's hand that thrust the two-edged sword. 1550

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

No slave's death, I think -
 no stealthier than the death he dealt
 our house and the offspring of our loins,
 Iphigeneia, girl of tears.
 Act for act, wound for wound! 1555
 Never exult in Hades, swordsman,
 here you are repaid. By the sword
 you did your work and by the sword you die.

CHORUS:

The mind reels - where to turn?
 All plans dashed, all hope! I cannot think . . . 1560
 the roofs are toppling, I dread the drumbeat thunder
 the heavy rains of blood will crush the house
 the first light rains are over -
 Justice brings new acts of agony, yes,
 on new grindstones Fate is grinding sharp the sword of Justice. 1565

Earth, dear Earth,
if only you'd drawn me under
long before I saw him huddled
in the beaten silver bath.
Who will bury him, lift his dirge?

1570

Turning to CLYTAEMNESTRA.

You, can you dare *this*?
To kill your lord with your own hand
then mourn his soul with tributes, terrible tributes –
do his enormous works a great dishonour.
This god-like man, this hero. Who at the grave
will sing his praises, pour the wine of tears?
Who will labour there with truth of heart?

1575

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

This is no concern of yours.
The hand that bore and cut him down
will hand him down to Mother Earth.
This house will never mourn for him.
Only our daughter Iphigeneia,
by all rights, will rush to meet him
first at the churning straits,
the ferry over tears –
she'll fling her arms around her father,
pierce him with her love.

1580

1585

CHORUS:

Each charge meets counter-charge.
None can judge between them. Justice.
The plunderer plundered, the killer pays the price.
The truth still holds while Zeus still holds the throne:
the one who acts must suffer –
that is law. Who can tear from the veins
the bad seed, the curse? The race is welded to its ruin.

1590

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

At last you see the future and the truth!
But I will swear a pact with the spirit
born within us. I embrace his works,
cruel as they are but done at last,
if he will leave our house
in the future, bleed another line
with kinsmen murdering kinsmen.
Whatever he may ask. A few things
are all I need, once I have purged
our fury to destroy each other –
purged it from our halls.

1595

1600

*AEGISTHUS has emerged from the
palace with his bodyguard and stands
triumphant over the body of
AGAMEMNON.*

AEGISTHUS:

O what a brilliant day
it is for vengeance! Now I can say once more
there are gods in heaven avenging men,
blazing down on all the crimes of earth.
Now at last I see this man brought down
in the Furies' tangling robes. It feasts my eyes –
he pays for the plot his father's hand contrived.

1605

1610

Atreus, this man's father, was king of Argos.
My father, Thyestes – let me make this clear –
Atreus' brother challenged him for the crown,
and Atreus drove him out of house and home
then lured him back, and home Thyestes came,
poor man, a suppliant to his own hearth,
to pray that Fate might save him.

1615

So it did.

There was no dying, no staining our native ground
with *his* blood. Thyestes was the guest,
and this man's godless father –

1620

Pointing to AGAMEMNON.

the zeal of the host outstripping a brother's love,
made my father a feast that seemed a feast for gods,
a love feast of his children's flesh.

He cuts
the extremities, feet and delicate hands 1625
into small pieces, scatters them over the dish
and serves it to Thyestes throned on high.
He picks at the flesh he cannot recognize,
the soul of innocence eating the food of ruin -
look,

Pointing to the bodies at his feet.

that feeds upon the house! And then, 1630
when he sees the monstrous thing he's done, he shrieks,
he reels back head first and vomits up that butchery,
tramples the feast - brings down the curse of Justice:
'Crash to ruin, all the race of Pleisthenes, crash down!'

So you see him, down. And I, the weaver of Justice, 1635
plotted out the kill. Atreus drove us into exile,
my struggling father and I, a babe-in arms,
his last son, but I became a man
and Justice brought me home. I was abroad
but I reached out and seized my man, 1640
link by link I clamped the fatal scheme
together. Now I could die gladly, even I -
now I see this monster in the nets of Justice.

LEADER:

Aegisthus, you revel in pain - you sicken me. 1645
You say you killed the king in cold blood,
single-handed planned his pitiful death?
I say there's no escape. In the hour of judgement,
trust to this, your head will meet the people's
rocks and curses.

AEGISTHUS:

You say! you slaves at the oars -
while the master on the benches cracks the whip? 1650
You'll learn, in your late age, how much it hurts
to teach old bones their place. We have techniques -
chains and the pangs of hunger,
two effective teachers, excellent healers.
They can even cure old men of pride and gall. 1655
Look - can't you see? The more you kick
against the pricks, the more you suffer.

LEADER:

You, pathetic -
the king had just returned from battle.
You waited out the war and fouled his lair, 1660
you planned my great commander's fall.

AEGISTHUS:

Talk on -
you'll scream for every word, my little Orpheus.
We'll see if the world comes dancing to your song,
your absurd barking - snarl your breath away!
I'll make you dance, I'll bring you all to heel. 1665

LEADER:

You rule Argos? You who schemed his death
but cringed to cut him down with your own hand?

AEGISTHUS:

The treachery was the woman's work, clearly.
I was a marked man, his enemy for ages. 1670
But I will use his riches, stop at nothing
to civilize his people. All but the rebel:
him I'll yoke and break -
no cornfed colt, running free in the traces.
Hunger, ruthless mate of the dark torture-chamber,
trains her eyes upon him till he drops! 1675

LEADER:

Coward, why not kill the man yourself?
Why did the woman, the corruption of Greece
and the gods of Greece, have to bring him down?
Orestes -

If he still sees the light of day,
bring him home, good Fates, home to kill
this pair at last. Our champion in slaughter! 1680

AEGISTHUS:

Bent on insolence? Well, you'll learn, quickly.
At them, men - you have your work at hand!

*His men draw swords; the old men
take up their sticks.*

LEADER:

At them, fist at the hilt, to the last man -

AEGISTHUS:

Fist at the hilt, I'm not afraid to die. 1685

LEADER:

It's death you want and death you'll have -
we'll make that word your last.

*CLYTAEMNESTRA moves between
them, restraining AEGISTHUS.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

No more, my dearest,
no more grief. We have too much to reap
right here, our mighty harvest of despair.
Our lives are based on pain. No bloodshed now. 1690

Fathers of Argos, turn for home before you act
and suffer for it. What we did was destiny.
If we could end the suffering, how we would rejoice.
The spirit's brutal hoof has struck our heart.
And that is what a woman has to say. 1695
Can you accept the truth?

CLYTAEMNESTRA turns to leave.

AEGISTHUS:

But these . . . mouths
that bloom in filth - spitting insults in my teeth.
You tempt your fates, you insubordinate dogs -
to hurl abuse at me, your master!

LEADER:

No Greek
worth his salt would grovel at your feet. 1700

AEGISTHUS:

I - I'll stalk you all your days!

LEADER:

Not if the spirit brings Orestes home.

AEGISTHUS:

Exiles feed on hope - well I know.

LEADER:

More,
gorge yourself to bursting - soil justice, while you can.

AEGISTHUS:

I promise you, you'll pay, old fools - in good time, too! 1705

LEADER:

Strut on your own dunghill, you cock beside your mate.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Let them howl - they're impotent. You and I have power now.
We will set the house in order once for all.

*They enter the palace; the great doors
close behind them; the old men disband
and wander off.*