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
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
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
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 —
I see the light at last.
They'll be dancing in the streets of Argos
thanks to you, thanks to this new stroke of —

Aieeeeee!

There's your signal clear and true, my queen!
Rise up from bed — hurry, lift a cry of triumph
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!

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.
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 —
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,
armed the cutting loose from the land,
armed for the cause, the rescue —

From within the palace CLYTAE-NESTRA 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,
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.
Yet someone hears on high — Apollo,
Pan or Zeus — the piercing wall
these guests of heaven raise,
and drives at the outlaws, late but true to revenge, a stabbing Fury!

CLYTAE-NESTRA 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,
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,
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We are the old, dishonoured ones,
the broken husks of men.
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,
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,
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
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.

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!

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

...
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,
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,
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!
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
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,
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,
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
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!’ –
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,
‘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,

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!
Law is law! –
Let all go well."

And once he slipped his neck in the strap of Fate,
his spirit veering black, impure, unholy,
one he turned he stopped at nothing,
seized with the frenzy
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,
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,
'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' —
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,
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 —
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,
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.
Let all go well today, well as she could want,
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.

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?

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.

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

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

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

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!
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 rack the walls.
Pour oil and wine in the same bowl,
what have you, friendship? A struggle to the end.
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,
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.
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.

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!

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
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.

Now to praise the gods.
The joy is worth the labour.
O Zeus my king and Night, dear Night,
queen of the house who covers us with glories,
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
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!

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
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,
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
down and out of sight.
'and radiant dreams are passing in the night,
the memories throb with sorrow, joy with pain . . .
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
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.

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
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,
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
towards our staunch defenders, Atreus' sons.

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

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
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.
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.

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?

- 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.

- 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.
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.

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.

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,
warn us home • • • we're all the spear has left.

LEADER:

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

HERALD:

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

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 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 . . . 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 dews soaked us, turned the ruts we fought from into gullies, made our gear, our scalps crawl with lice.

And talk of the cold, 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? 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.

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!' 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.

That's all I have to say.
583-610

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 -
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.'

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
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...

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.

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,

610-615

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.

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.
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?

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.

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,
that charioteer
who packs destruction shaft by shaft,
careening 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!

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

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.

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,
ever shipwreck up some rocky coast.

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.
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,
avive, 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,
to the bride of spears,
the whirlpool churning armies,
Oh for all the world a Helen!
Hell at the prows, 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, smacked
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
    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,
slashed at the sons of Priam - heartmate, 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
    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,
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,
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.

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

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
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,
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
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;
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 -
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:

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.

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 curers 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.

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

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.

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.

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

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.

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.
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,
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 poms of honour
and the stiff brocades of fame. To walk on them...
I am human, and it makes my pulses stir
with dread.

AGAMEMNON:

Give me the tributes of a man
and not a god, a little earth to walk on,
not this gorgeous work.

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.

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?

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?
AGAMEMNON

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:
If you are so determined -

Enough.

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 splendid 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.

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.

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.

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!

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 -

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 — 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 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, 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 ... 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 it kills our spirit kills our hopes and it’s real, true, no fantasy — stark terror whirls the brain and the end is coming 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 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 — 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 can end the plague of famine.

But a man’s life-blood is dark and mortal. Once it wet the earth what song can sing it back? 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, one man’s fate curbing the next man’s fate, my heart would outtrace 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 and the brain is swarming, burning —

 Clytaemnestra emerges from the palace and goes to Cassandra, impassive in the chariot.
Clytemnestra:

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.

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.

From us
you will receive what custom says is right.

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.

Clytemnestra:

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

Leader:

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

Clytemnestra:

She's mad,
hers 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!

Wheezing, 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.

Cassandra:

Aieeeee! Earth — Mother —
Curse of the Earth — Apollo Apollo!
AGAMEMNON

I45

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

CASSANDRA:
Aiecceel Earth – Mother –
Rape of the Earth – Apollo Apollo!

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 –

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 –

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 –

CASSANDRA:
CASSANDRA:

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 –

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!
LEADER:
Still lost. Her riddles, her dark words of god—
I'm groping, helpless.

CASSANDRA:
No no, look there!—
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!'

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.
Death is close, and quick.

CASSANDRA:
Look out! look out!—
Ai, drag the great bull from the mate—
writhing—
black horn glints, twists—
And now he buckles, look, the bath swirls red—
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
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?
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,
her life inspired with grief for him,
she sits 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.
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?
why the anguish, the wild dance?
Where do your words of god and grief begin?
CASSANDRA:
Ah, 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.

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.

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.

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!

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.

LEADER:
A god - and moved with love?

CASSANDRA:
Apollo the Prophet
introduced me to his gift.

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.

CASSANDRA:
I was ashamed to tell this once,
but now...
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 . . .  
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.  
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 -  
No, he cannot see  
the stroke that Fury's hiding, stealth, and murder.  
What outrage - the woman kills the man!  
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!  
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.

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

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

You bore him a child?

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

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

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

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

Once I betrayed him I could never be believed.

We believe you. Your visions seem so true.

Aieeece! -  
the pain, the terror! the birth-pang of the seer  
who tells the truth -  
it whirls me, oh,  
the storm comes again, the crashing chords!
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.

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.

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.

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.

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 -

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.

Why mock yourself with these - trappings, the rod, the god's wreath, his yoke around my throat?

Before I die I'll tread you -

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,

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 -

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.
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,

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 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 fating as she fared, and those who took her, judged by the gods, fating as they fare. I must be brave.
It is my turn to die.
LEADER: What now? what terror flings you back? Why? Unless some horror in the brain -

CASSANDRA: Murder.

The house breathes with murder - bloody shambles!

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.

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, 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.

CASSANDRA: I'd like a few words more, a kind of dirge, 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. 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.

CHORUS: But the lust for power never dies - 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 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 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:
but who? Someone's stabbed—

AGAMEMNON:
Aagh, again... 
second blow—struck home.

LEADER:
The work is done, 
you can feel it. The king, and the great cries— 
Close ranks now, find the right way out.

CHORUS:
—I say send out heralds, muster the guard, 
they'll save the house.

—And I say rush in now, 
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. 
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.
—No more suspicions, 
ot 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—

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 
Clytemnestra 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 overlap them?
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—

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.

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!

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.

LEADER:
You appal me, you, your brazen words—
exulting over your fallen king.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:
And you,
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.
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,
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.
 Didn't the law demand you banish him?—
but now you witness what I've done
and you are ruthless judges.

I'll meet you blow for blow. And if I fall
the throne is yours. If god decrees the reverse,
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!
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
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.
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,
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!

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—
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
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
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.

CHORUS:
The spirit!—you who tread
the house and the twinnborn sons of Tantalus—
you empower the sisters, Fury’s twins
whose power tears the heart!
Perched on the corpse your carrion raven
glories in her hymn,
herscreaming hymn of pride.
CLYTAEMNESTRA:
Now you set your judgement straight, you summon him! Three generations feed the spirit in the race.
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!
Praise the instatiate 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?
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, 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.

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, 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?...
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, clots will mass for the young who were devour'd.

Oh my king, my captain, how to salute you, how to mourn you?
What can I say with all my warmth and love?
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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! 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...
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.
AGAMEMNON

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?

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?

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 Iphigenia,
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.

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.

Aeschylus

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.

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.

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.

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 —
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
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,
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, crush down!' 

So you see him, down. And I, the weaver of justice,
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,
link by link I clamped the fatal scheme

Leader:
Aegisthus, you revel in pain — you sicken me.
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.
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!

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

LEADER:
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.

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.

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.
Can you accept the truth?