

# Aeschylus Agamemnon

Translated by  
Ian Johnston  
Vancouver Island University  
Nanaimo, BC  
Canada  
[ian.johnston@viu.ca](mailto:ian.johnston@viu.ca)

This text is in Word 7 and formatted for a booklet which can be printed on standard quarto paper (8.5 in. By 11 in.), folded, and stapled to form a booklet. To change the format to a standard document on quarto paper, download the text in Word, go to Page Layout, then Margins, then Custom Margins, and change the Multiple Pages box from Book Fold to Normal and the Orientation from Landscape to Portrait. If you are printing a booklet, the number of pages must be divisible by four (hence, the two blank pages at the end of this text). If you are changing the booklet format, you should delete the two final blank pages.

This translation may be distributed in printed or electronic form (in whole or in part) to students without permission and without charge. Performing artists are permitted to use the text for their productions and to edit it to suit their purposes (again, without permission and without charge). However, commercial publication in any form is prohibited except with the written permission of the translator.

# AGAMEMNON

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This document has certain copyright restrictions. For information please contact Ian Johnston (at [ian.johnston@viu.ca](mailto:ian.johnston@viu.ca))

Note that in the following text the numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text and that the numbers without brackets refer to this text. Foot-notes have been added by the translator.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

WATCHMAN: servant of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.

CHORUS: old men, citizens of Argos.

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

HERALD: soldier serving with Agamemnon.

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

MESSENGER: a servant in the palace.

CASSANDRA: daughter of Priam, King of Troy, a priestess of Apollo.

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

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

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

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

WATCHMAN

I pray the gods will give me some relief  
and end this weary job. One long full year  
I've been lying here, on this rooftop,  
the palace of the sons of Atreus,  
resting on my arms, just like a dog.

## AGAMEMNON

I've come to know the night sky, every star,  
the powers we see glittering in the sky,  
bringing winter and summer to us all,  
as the constellations rise and sink.  
I'm still looking for that signal flare, 10  
the fiery blaze from Troy, announcing  
it's been taken. These are my instructions [10]  
from the queen. She has a fiery heart,  
the determined resolution of a man.  
When I set my damp, restless bed up here,  
I never dream, for I don't fall asleep.  
No. Fear comes instead and stands beside me,  
so I can't shut my eyes and get some rest.  
If I try to sing or hum a tune,  
something to do instead of trying to sleep, 20  
since I'm always awake, I start to weep,  
as I lament what's happened to this house,  
where things are not being governed well,  
not like they used to be. How I wish  
my watching could end happily tonight, [20]  
with good news brought by fire blazing  
through this darkness.

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

Fire gleaming in the night!  
What a welcome sight! Light of a new day—  
you'll bring on many dancing choruses  
right here in Argos, celebrations 30  
of this joyful news. *[Shouting]* It's over! It's over!  
I must call out to wake the queen,  
Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife,  
to get her out of bed, so she can raise  
a shout of joy as soon as possible  
inside the palace, welcoming this fire—  
if indeed the city of Troy's fallen,  
as this signal fire seems to indicate. [30]  
For my part, I'll start things off by dancing,  
treating my king's good fortune as my own. 40

AGAMEMNON

I've had a lucky dice roll, triple six,  
thanks to this fiery signal . . . .

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

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

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

CHORUS

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

50 [40]

60 [50]

Then one of the supreme powers—  
Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus—  
hears the shrill wailing cry,  
hears those screaming birds,

## AGAMEMNON

who live within his realm, 70  
and sends a late-avenging Fury  
to take revenge on the transgressors.  
In just that way, mighty Zeus, [60]  
god of hospitality,  
sends those sons of Atreus  
against Alexander\*, son of Priam—  
for that woman's sake, Helen,  
the one who's had so many men,  
condemning Trojans and Danaans  
to many heartfelt struggles, both alike, 80  
knees splintering as the fighting starts.<sup>1</sup>

Now things stand as they stand.  
What's destined to come will be fulfilled,  
and no libation, sacrifice, or human tears  
will mitigate the gods' unbending wrath  
of sacrifice not blessed by fire.

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

But you, daughter of Tyndareus,  
queen Clytaemnestra,  
what's going on? What news?  
What reports have you received

<sup>1</sup>Alexander: an alternative name for Paris, son of Priam.

## AGAMEMNON

that lead you to send your servants out  
commanding all this sacrifice?

For every god our city worships—

all-powerful gods above the earth,

and those below, and those in heaven,

[90]

and those in the marketplace—

110

their altars are ablaze with offerings.

Fires rise here and there and everywhere,

right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils

brought from the palace—sweet and holy,

their purity sustains those flames.

Tell us what you can,

tell us what's right for us to hear.

Cure our anxious thoughts.

For now, at one particular moment,

[100]

things look grim, but then our hopes,

120

rising from these sacrificial fires,

make things seem better, soothing

corrosive pains that eat my heart.

I have the power to proclaim

that prophecy made to our kings,

as they were setting on their way,

a happy outcome for their expedition.

My age inspires in me Persuasion still,

the power of song sent from the gods,

to sing how two kings of Achaea's troops,

130

united in a joint command, led off

[110]

the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears,

marching against Troy, land of Teucer.

They got a happy omen—two eagles,

kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships.

One bird was black, the other's tail was white,

here, close to the palace, on the right,

in a place where everyone could see.

The eagles were gorging themselves,

140

devouring a pregnant hare

and all its unborn offspring,

struggling in their death throes still.

[120]

AGAMEMNON

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

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

150

“In due course this expedition  
will capture Priam's city, Troy—  
before its towers a violent Fate  
will annihilate all public goods.

[130]

But may no anger from the gods  
cast its dark shadow on our troops,  
our great bit forged to curb Troy's mouth.  
For goddess Artemis is full of anger  
at her father's flying hounds—she pities  
the cowering sacrificial creature in distress,  
she pities its young, slaughtered  
before she's brought them into life.  
Artemis abominates the eagles' feast.”

160

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

“And lovely Artemis—  
though you're gentle with the tender cubs  
of vicious lions and take special joy  
in the suckling young of all wild living beasts,  
promise things will work out well,  
as this omen of the eagles indicates,  
an auspicious sign, but ominous.  
And I call Apollo, god of healing,  
to stop Artemis delaying the fleet,  
by sending hostile winds  
to keep the ships from sailing,  
in her demand for another sacrifice,  
one which violates all human law,  
which no feast celebrates—  
it shatters families and makes the wife

[140]

170

[150]

180

## AGAMEMNON

lose all respect and hate her husband.  
For in the home a dreadful anger waits.  
It does not forget and cannot be appeased.  
Its treachery controls the house,  
waiting to avenge a slaughtered child.”  
Calchas prophesied that fatal destiny,  
read from those birds, as the army marched,  
speaking by this palace of the kings.

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

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

As for Uranus, who was once so great, 200  
bursting with arrogance for every fight,  
people will talk about that god  
as if he’d never even lived. [170]  
And his son, Cronos\*, who came after,  
has met his match and is no more.<sup>1</sup>  
But whoever with a willing heart  
cries his triumphal song to Zeus  
will come to understand all things.

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,  
has established his fixed law— 210  
wisdom comes through suffering.  
Trouble, with its memories of pain,  
drips in our hearts as we try to sleep, [180]

<sup>1</sup>*Uranus and Cronos*: Uranus was the original god, who was overthrown by his son Cronos. Then Cronos, in turn, was overthrown by his son Zeus.



## AGAMEMNON

so men against their will  
learn to practice moderation.  
Favours come to us from gods  
seated on their solemn thrones—  
such grace is harsh and violent.

So then the leader of Achaean ships,  
the elder brother, Agamemnon, 220  
did not blame or fault the prophet,  
but gave in to fortune's sudden blows.  
For Achaea's army, stranded there,  
on the shores across from Calchis, [190]  
was held up by opposing winds at Aulis,  
where tides ebb and flow.

Troops grew weary, as supplies ran low.  
Winds blew from the Strymon river,  
keeping ships at anchor, harming men  
with too much leisure. Troops grew hungry. 230  
They wandered discontent and restless.  
The winds corroded ships and cables.  
The delay seemed endless, on and on, until  
the men, the flower of Argos, began to wilt.  
Then Calchas proclaimed the cause of this—  
it was Artemis. And he proposed [200]  
a further remedy, but something harsh,  
even worse than the opposing winds,  
so painful that the sons of Atreus  
struck their canes on the ground and wept. 240

Then Agamemnon, the older king, spoke up:\*  
“It's harsh not to obey this fate—  
but to go through with it is harsh as well,  
to kill my child, the glory of my house,  
to stain a father's hands before the altar [210]  
with streams of virgin's blood.<sup>1</sup>  
Which of my options is not evil?

<sup>1</sup>Calchas tells Agamemnon he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to appease Artemis and stop the hostile winds.

## AGAMEMNON

How can I just leave this fleet,  
and let my fellow warriors down?  
Their passionate demand for sacrifice  
to calm the winds lies within their rights—  
even the sacrifice of virgin blood.  
So be it. All may be well.”

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

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

As she threw her saffron robe onto the ground,  
she glanced at the men, each of them,  
those carrying out the sacrifice,  
her eyes imploring pity. She looked  
just like a painting dying to speak.  
She’d often sung before her father’s table,

AGAMEMNON

when, as host, he'd entertained his guests,  
a virgin using her flawless voice  
to honour her dear father with her love,  
as he prayed for blessing  
at the third libation.

290

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

[250]

300

*[Enter Clytaemnestra through the palace doors]*

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

[260]

310

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

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

320

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

[270]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Then your eyes reveal your faithful loyalty.

CHORUS LEADER

Is this report reliable? Is there proof?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Of course there is. Unless some god deceives me.

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA: Not at all.

As if I'd listen to some dozing brain.

CHORUS LEADER:

Perhaps some unfledged rumour raised your hopes?

330

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

CHORUS LEADER

When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

CHORUS LEADER

How could a messenger get here so fast?

[280]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Hephaestos, god of fire, sent his bright blaze

## AGAMEMNON

speeding here from Ida, his messenger,  
flames racing from one beacon to the next—  
from Ida to Hermes' rock in Lemnos. 340  
From that island the great flames sped  
to the third fire, on the crest of Athos,  
sacred to Zeus, and then, arcing high,  
the beacon light sprang across the sea,  
exulting in its golden fiery power,  
rushing on, like another sun, passing  
the message to the look-out towers  
at Macistus. The man there was not sleeping, [290]  
like some fool. Without a moment's pause,  
he relayed the message, so the blazing news 350  
sped on, leaping across Euripus' stream,  
to pass the signal to the next watchmen,  
at Messapion. Those men, in their turn,  
torched a pile of dried-out heather, firing  
the message onward. The flaming light  
was not diminished—its strength kept growing.  
Like a glowing moon, it jumped across  
the plain of Asopus, up to the ridges  
on mount Cithaeron, where it set alight  
the next stage of the relay race of fire. 360  
Those watching there did not neglect their work—  
that light which came to them from far away [300]  
they passed on with an even greater blaze,  
which dashed across the shores of Gorgopus,  
to reach mount Aegiplanctus, with orders  
for those there to keep the beacon moving.  
They lit a fire, a huge flaming pillar,  
with unchecked force, speeding the message on—  
its light visible even at the headland  
by the Saronic Gulf. It swooped down, 370  
once it reached the crest of Arachnaeus,  
that look-out near our city—and from there  
jumped down onto the roof of Atreus' sons,  
flames directly linked to blazing Troy. [310]  
I organized these messengers of fire,  
setting them up in sequence, one by one.  
In that race the first and last both triumph,

## AGAMEMNON

the ones who sent the message and received it.  
That's the evidence I set before you,  
a message from my husband, dispatched  
all the way from burning Troy to me.

380

### CHORUS

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

### CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

[320]

390

400

[330]

410

[340]

AGAMEMNON

so they ravage what they should leave alone.  
For to get safely home, the army needs  
to make that long journey back again.  
But even if the soldiers do reach home  
without offending any god, harsh sorrow  
for the dead may still be watching for them,  
unless some new disaster intervenes.  
Well, I've let you hear my woman's words.  
May good things now prevail for all to see.  
I take this news as cause for common joy.

420

[350]

CHORUS LEADER

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

*[Clytaemnestra goes back into the palace]*

CHORUS

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

430

[360]

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

440

Men will say it's a blow from Zeus  
and trace his presence in all this.  
He acts on what he himself decides.  
Some people claim that gods

[370]

## AGAMEMNON

don't really care about those men  
who trample underfoot 450  
favours from the pure in heart.  
Such people are profane.  
For we now clearly see  
destruction is the penalty  
for those with reckless pride,  
who breathe a boastful spirit  
greater than is just,  
because their homes are full,  
stuffed with riches to excess, 460  
beyond what's best for them.  
Let men have sufficient wealth  
to match good sense, not so much [380]  
it piles up their misfortunes.  
There's no security in riches  
for the insolent man who kicks aside  
and pushes from his sight  
great altars of righteousness.

Such a man is overpowered  
by perverse Persuasion,  
insufferable child of scheming Folly. 470  
And there's no remedy.  
His evil's not concealed—  
it stands out, a lurid glitter,  
like false bronze when rubbed. [390]  
All men can judge his darkness,  
once he's tested by events.  
He's like a child chasing a flying bird.  
He brands his city with disgrace  
which cannot be removed,  
for no god hears his prayers. 480  
The man who lives this way,  
doing wrong, the gods destroy.  
Such a man was Paris. He came  
to the home of the sons of Atreus, [400]  
and then abused their hospitality,  
running off with his host's wife.



## AGAMEMNON

But she left her people  
the smash of shield and spear,  
a fleet well armed for war.  
To Troy she carried with her 490  
no dowry but destruction.  
Daring what should not be dared,  
she glided through Troy's gates.  
The prophets in this house cried out,  
"Alas, alas for house and home, [410]  
and for the royal leaders here.<sup>1</sup>  
Alas, for the marriage bed,  
still holding traces of her body,  
the one who loved her husband.  
As for him, he sits apart, 500  
in pain, silent and dishonoured.

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

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

These are the sorrows in the house,  
around the hearth, and pain  
much worse than this. For everywhere,  
throughout the land of Greece,  
in every home where men set out 520 [430]

<sup>1</sup>The lines following describe Menelaus' reaction to Helen's disappearance.

AGAMEMNON

to gather in that army  
there is insufferable grief.  
Many disasters pierce the heart.  
People know the ones who leave,  
but every house gets back  
weapons and ash, not living men.

For Ares, god of war, pays gold  
for soldier's bodies. In spear fights  
he tips the scales, then back from Troy  
he ships a heavy freight of ash,  
cremated bodies of the dead,  
sent home for loved ones to lament.

[440]  
530

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

540 [450]

The people's voice, once angered,  
can create dissent, ratifying a curse  
which now must have its way.  
And so, in my anxiety, I wait,  
listening for something murky,  
something emerging from the gloom.  
For gods aren't blind to men who kill.  
In time, black agents of revenge,  
the Furies, wear down and bring to nothing  
the fortunes of a man who prospers  
in unjust ways. They wear him out,  
reverse his luck, and bring him at last

550  
[460]

AGAMEMNON

among the dead. There's no remedy. 560  
To boast too much of one's success  
is dangerous—the high mountain peak  
is struck by Zeus' lightning bolt. [470]  
I'd choose wealth no one could envy.  
May I never be the sort of man  
who puts whole cities to the sword.  
Let me never see myself enslaved,  
my life in someone else's power.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

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

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

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

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

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

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR

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

CHORUS LEADER

We'll quickly know about these signal fires,  
flaming beacons passed from place to place. [490]  
We'll find out if that really did occur  
or if, just like a dream, this joyful light  
has come in order to deceive our hopes.  
For I see a herald coming from the shore—  
an olive bough of triumph shades his face.  
The dry dust on him, all those muddy clothes,  
tell me he'll report the facts. Nor will he  
light some flaming pile of mountain wood 590  
to pass a signal on with smoke. No—

AGAMEMNON

he'll shout out to us what he has to say,  
and we can then rejoice still more,  
or else . . . but I won't think of that. Let's have  
good news to add to what we know already.  
If anyone is praying for something else  
to happen to our city, let him reap  
the harvest of his own misguided heart.

[500]

*[Enter Herald]*

HERALD

Greetings to this Argive soil, my father's land.  
On this day, ten years later, I've come back.  
I've seen many hopes of mine destroyed,  
and only one fulfilled—I've made it home.  
I never dreamed I'd die here in Argos,  
with a burial plot in this land I love.  
I bless the land, the bright light of this sun—  
and I give thanks to Zeus, our highest god,  
and to Apollo, lord of Pytho.

600

May you never fire your arrows at us  
any more. We had enough of those,  
my lord, beside Scamander's banks,  
when you took your stand against us. But now,  
Apollo, may you preserve and heal us.

[510]

And I greet all gods assembled here,  
including Hermes, whom I honour,  
the well-loved herald god, worshipped  
as the herald's patron. And next I pray  
the heroic spirits who sent us off  
will welcome back the remnants of our army,  
those spared being slaughtered by the spear.  
O you hall of kings, you roof I cherish,  
you sacred seats and gods who face the sun,  
if your shining eyes in days gone by  
have welcomed our king home, then do so now,  
after his long absence. He's coming here,  
carrying light into this darkness, for you  
and all assembled here—our mighty king,  
lord Agamemnon. Greet him with full respect.  
For he's uprooted Troy—with the pick axe

610

620

[520]

AGAMEMNON

of avenging Zeus he's reduced her soil.  
The altars of the gods and all their shrines 630  
he has obliterated, laying waste  
all that country's rich fertility.  
Around Troy's neck he's fixed destruction's yoke.  
Now he's coming home, king Agamemnon,  
the fortunate elder son of Atreus, [530]  
among all men he merits the most honour.  
For neither Paris nor his accomplice,  
the Trojan city, can ever boast again  
their deeds were greater than their suffering.  
Guilty of rape and theft, he's lost his loot. 640  
He's utterly destroyed his father's house,  
the land, too, which sustained his people.  
So Priam's sons have paid the price twice over.

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

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

CHORUS LEADER

It's as if you had some pleasing sickness.

HERALD

How so? Tell me exactly what you mean. 650

CHORUS LEADER

You suffered from love for those who loved you.

HERALD

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

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

What caused this gnawing trouble in your heart?

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

660 [550]

HERALD

It's true we have done well.  
As for what happened long ago, you could say  
some worked out happily, and some was bad.  
But who except the gods avoids all pain  
throughout his life? If I told what we went through—  
the hardships, wretched quarters, narrow berths,  
the harsh conditions—was there anything  
we did not complain about? We had our share  
of trouble every day. And then on shore  
things were even worse. We had to camp  
right by the enemy wall. It was wet—  
dew from the sky and marshes soaked us.  
Our clothes rotted. Our hair grew full of lice.  
And it was freezing. The winters there,  
beyond endurance, when snows from Ida  
froze birds to death. And then the heat,  
so hot at noon, the sea, without a ripple,  
sank to sleep. . . . But why complain about it?  
Our work is done. It's over for the dead,  
who aren't about to spring to life again.  
Why should the living call to mind the dead?

670

[560]

680

[570]

AGAMEMNON

There's no need to relive those blows of fate.  
I think it's time to bid a long farewell  
to our misfortune. For those still living,  
the soldiers left alive, our luck's won out.  
No loss can change that now. We've a right,  
as we cross land and sea, to boast aloud,  
and cry out to the sun, "Argive forces once,  
having captured Troy, took their spoils of war  
and nailed them up in gods' holy shrines,  
all through Greece, glorious tribute from the past!"  
So whoever hears the story of these things  
must praise our generals—our city, too.  
Full honour and thanks to Zeus who did the work.  
That's my full report.

690

[580]

CHORUS LEADER

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

*[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace]*

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

700

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Some time ago I cried out in triumph,  
rejoicing when that first messenger arrived,  
the fiery herald in the night, who told me  
Troy was captured and was being destroyed.  
Some people criticized me then, saying,  
"How come you're so easily persuaded  
by signal fires Troy's being demolished?  
Isn't that just like a woman's heart,  
to get so jubilant?" Insults like these  
made it appear as if I'd lost my wits.  
But I continued with my sacrifice,  
and everywhere throughout the city  
women kept up their joyful shouting,  
as they traditionally do, echoing  
their exultation through all holy shrines,

[590]

710

## AGAMEMNON

tending sweet-smelling spicy flames,  
as they consumed their victims. So now,  
why do I need you to go on and on  
about all this? I'll hear it from the king.  
But, so I can give my honoured husband  
720 [600]  
the finest welcome home, and with all speed—  
for what light gives a woman greater pleasure  
than to unbar the gates to her own husband  
as he comes home from battle, once the gods  
have spared his life in war?—tell him this,  
and give him the message to come home  
as soon as possible. The citizens  
will love to see him, and when he gets back,  
in this house he'll find his wife as faithful  
as when he left, a watch dog of the home,  
730  
loyal to him, hostile to his enemies,  
and, for the rest, the same in every way.  
In this long time, I've not betrayed our bond—  
[610]  
I've known no pleasure with another man,  
no breath of scandal. About such things  
I understand as much as tempering bronze.  
I'm proud to state this, for it's all true—  
nothing a noble lady should feel shame to say.

*[Clytaemnestra exits back into the palace]*

### CHORUS LEADER

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

### HERALD

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

### CHORUS LEADER

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



AGAMEMNON

HERALD

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

HERALD

It’s not right I talk of our misfortunes,  
and spoil such an auspicious day as this.  
We ought to keep such matters separate  
in deference to the gods. When a messenger  
arrives distraught, bringing dreadful news  
about some slaughtered army, that’s one wound  
inflicted on the city. Beyond that, [640]  
from many houses many men are driven  
to their destruction by the double whip 770  
which Ares, god of war, so loves—  
disaster with two prongs, a bloody pair.  
A messenger weighed down with news like this  
should report the Furies’ song of triumph.  
But when he brings good news of men being saved  
to a city full of joyful celebrations . . .  
How can I mix the good news and the bad,  
telling of the storm which hit Achaeans,

## AGAMEMNON

a storm linked to the anger of the gods? 780  
For fire and sea, before now enemies, [650]  
swore a common oath and then proclaimed it  
by destroying Achaea's helpless forces.  
At night malevolent seas rose up,  
as winds from Thrace smashed ships together.  
Pushed round by the power of that storm,  
and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships  
scattered, then disappeared, blown apart  
by the evil shepherd's whirlwind. Later,  
when the sun's bright light appeared again, 790  
we witnessed the Aegean sea in bloom  
with corpses of Achaean troops and ships. [660]  
As for us, some god saved us in secret  
or interceded for us—our boat survived,  
its hull intact. That was no human feat.  
Some divine hand was on our steering oar,  
some stroke of Fortune wanted our ship saved,  
not swamped by surf as we rode at anchor  
or smashed upon the rocky coast. And then,  
once we'd avoided Hades on those seas, 800  
we couldn't believe our luck, as we brooded,  
in the bright light of day, on all our troubles,  
this new disaster which destroyed our fleet, [670]  
dispersing it so badly. So on those ships  
if anyone's still breathing, he'll now say  
we're the ones who've been destroyed. Why not,  
when we say much the same of them?  
But let's hope things all turn out for the best.  
As for Menelaus, wait for his return—  
that should be your first priority. 810  
If some ray of sunlight finds him still alive,  
his vision still intact, thanks to Zeus,  
whose crafty plans at this point don't include  
destruction of the entire race, there's hope  
he'll soon come home again. Now you've heard this,  
you've listened to the truth. [680]

*[Exit Herald]*

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS

Whoever came up with that name,  
a name so altogether true—  
was there some power we can't see  
telling that tongue what to say, 820  
the tongue which prophesied our fate—  
I mean the man who called her Helen,  
that woman wed for warfare,  
the object of our strife?

For she's lived up to that name—  
a hell for ships, a hell for men,  
a hell for cities, too.  
From her delicately curtained room [690]  
she sailed away, transported  
by West Wind, an earth-born giant. 830  
A horde of warriors with shields  
went after her, huntsmen  
following the vanished track  
her oars had left, all the way  
to where she'd beached her ship,  
on leafy shores of Simois.  
Then came bloody war.

And so Troy's destiny's fulfilled— [700]  
wrath brings a dreadful wedding day,  
late retribution for dishonour 840  
to hospitality and Zeus,  
god of guest and host,  
on those who celebrated with the bride,  
who, on that day, sang aloud  
the joyful wedding hymns.  
Now Priam's city, in old age, [710]  
has learned a different song.

I think I hear loud funeral chants,  
lamenting as an evil fate  
the marriage Paris brought. 850  
The city's filled with songs of grief.  
It must endure all sorrows,  
the brutal slaughter of its sons.

AGAMEMNON

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

[720]

860

But with time the creature grew  
and its true nature showed—  
the one its parents gave it.  
So it paid back those who reared it,  
preparing a meal in gratitude,  
an unholy slaughter of the flocks,  
house awash with blood,  
while those who lived inside the home  
were powerless against the pain,  
against the massive carnage.  
By god's will they'd brought up  
a priest of doom in their own house.

870

[730]

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

880

[740]

Among men there's a saying,  
an old one, from times long past:  
A man's prosperity, once fully grown,

890

[750]

AGAMEMNON

has offspring—it never dies  
without producing children.  
From that man's good fortune  
spring up voracious pains  
for all his race. But on this  
I don't agree with other men.  
I stand alone and say  
it's the unholy act that breeds  
more acts of the same kind.  
A truly righteous house is blessed,  
its children always fair and good.

900 [760]

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

910 [770]

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

920 [780]

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

CHORUS LEADER

Welcome, son of Atreus, my king,  
Troy's destroyer. How shall I address you?  
How honour you without extravagance,  
without failing to say what's suitable?

## AGAMEMNON

For many men value appearances  
more than reality—thus they violate  
what’s right. Everyone’s prepared to sigh  
930 [790]  
over some suffering man, though no sorrow  
really eats their hearts, or they can pretend  
to join another person’s happiness,  
forcing their faces into smiling masks.  
But a good man discerns true character—  
he’s not fooled by eyes feigning loyalty,  
favouring him with watered-down respect.  
Back when you were gathering the army  
in Helen’s cause—I won’t deny the fact—  
[800]  
I saw you in an unflattering light,  
940  
an unfit mind steering our ship astray,  
trying through that sacrifice to boost the spirits  
of dying soldiers. But now, with love,  
with a full heart, I welcome your return.  
For those who’ve won final success, the joy  
is worth the toil. If you enquire, in time  
you’ll learn about the men who stayed at home,  
those who with justice stood guard for the city  
and those who failed to carry out what’s right.

## AGAMEMNON

First I salute Argos and my native gods,  
950 [810]  
as is right, the ones who worked with me  
for my safe return and for the justice  
I brought down on Priam’s city. The gods  
refused to listen to their urgent pleas,  
then cast their ballots—there was no dissent—  
into the urn of blood—to kill their men,  
to wipe out Ilion. The other urn,  
the one for clemency, stood there empty—  
only Hope took up her stand beside it.  
Even now smoke from the burning city,  
960  
an auspicious sign, tells of its capture.  
The storms from its destruction still live on.  
As fiery embers cool, their dying breaths  
give off ripe smells of wealth. For all this,  
[820]  
we must give the gods eternal thanks.

## AGAMEMNON

Around Troy we've cast a savage net.  
For a woman's sake, the beast from Argos,  
born from the belly of that wooden horse,  
in the night, as the Pleiades went down,  
jumped out with their shields and razed the city. 970  
Leaping over walls, the ravenous lion  
gorged itself on blood of royalty.  
So much for my long prelude to the gods.  
As for your concerns, I've heard your words,  
and I'll keep them in mind. I agree with you—  
we'll work together. By nature few men  
possess the inborn talent to admire  
a friend's good fortune without envy.  
Poisonous malice seeps into the heart,  
doubling the pain of the infected man, 980  
weighing him down with misfortunes of his own,  
while he groans to see another's wealth.  
I understand too well companionship  
no more substantial than pictures in a glass.  
From my experience, I'd say those men  
who seemed so loyal to me are shadows,  
no more than images of true companions. [840]  
All except Odysseus—he sailed with me  
much against his will, but once in harness,  
he was prepared to pull his weight for me. 990  
I say this whether he's alive or dead.  
For other issues of the city and our gods,  
we'll set up a general assembly,  
all of us discussing things together.  
We must make sure what's working well  
remains that way in future. By contrast,  
where we need some healing medicine,  
we'll make a well-intentioned effort  
to root out all infectious evil,  
burning the sores or slicing them away. 1000 [850]

*[Enter Clytaemnestra with attendants carrying the purple carpet]*

Now I'll go inside my palace, my hearth and home,  
first, to greet the gods who sent me off

## AGAMEMNON

and today bring me back. May victory,  
which has been mine, stay with me forever.

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

### CLYTAEMNESTRA

Citizens, you senior men of Argos here,  
I'm not ashamed to speak before you all,  
to state how much I love my husband. With time,  
men's fears diminish. So I'll speak out now.  
I don't talk as one who has been taught  
by others, so I'll just describe my life, 1010  
my oppressive life, all the many years  
my husband's been away at Ilion. [860]  
First, it's unmitigated trouble  
for a woman to sit at home alone,  
far from her man. She has to listen to  
all sorts of painful rumours. Messengers  
arrive, hard on each other's heels, bearing  
news of some disaster—and every one  
tells of troubles worse than those before,  
shouted throughout the house. If my husband 1020  
had had as many wounds as I heard rumours  
coming to this house, he'd have more holes in him  
than any net. If he'd died as many times  
as rumour killed him, he could claim to be  
a second Geryon, that triple-bodied beast, [870]  
and boast of being covered up with earth  
three times, one death for every separate shape.  
Because of all these spiteful messages,  
others have often had to cut me loose,  
a high-hung noose strung tight around my neck. 1030  
That's why our son, Orestes, is not standing here,  
the most trusted bond linking you and me.  
He should be, but there's no cause to worry.  
He's being cared for by a friendly ally, [880]  
Strophius of Phocis, who warned me twice—  
first, of your own danger under Ilion's walls,  
second, of people here, how they could rebel,  
cry out against being governed, then overthrow



## AGAMEMNON

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

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

You women, don't just stand there.  
 I've told you what to do. Spread out those tapestries,  
 here on the ground, directly in his path. Quickly! 1070  
 Let his path be covered all in red, so Justice [910]  
 can lead him back into his home, a place

AGAMEMNON

he never hoped to see. As for the rest,  
my unsleeping vigilance will sort it out,  
with the help of gods, as fate decrees.

AGAMEMNON

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

AGAMEMNON

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So then why be ashamed by what men say?

AGAMEMNON

But what people say can have great power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

1110 [940]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

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

1120

## AGAMEMNON

*[Agamemnon, in bare feet, comes down from the chariot onto the tapestries]*

So much for that.

*[Agamemnon turns to call attention to Cassandra in the chariot]*

Welcome this foreign girl [950]  
into our house. And do it graciously.  
For god, who sees us from far away,  
looks down with favour on a gentle master.  
No one freely puts on slavery's yoke,  
but this girl, the finest flower of all our loot,  
comes with us as my army's gift to me.  
And now, since you've talked me into this, 1130  
I'll proceed into my palace, treading  
on this crimson pathway as I go.

*[Agamemnon starts to move slowly along the tapestries towards the palace and up the stairs. Cassandra remains in the chariot]*

CLYTAEMNESTRA

There is the sea. Who will drain it dry?  
It gives us crimson dye in huge amounts,  
as valuable as silver, inexhaustible.  
With that we dye our garments. And of these [960]  
our house has a full store, thanks to the gods.  
We're rich. We have no sense of poverty.  
I'd have vowed to tread on many clothes,  
to use what we have stored up in our home, 1140  
if an oracle had ordered such a payment  
to save your life. If the root still lives,  
the house can blossom into leaf once more,  
growing high-arching shade, protection  
against the Dog Star's scorching season.  
Your return to your father's hearth and home  
brings us the summer's heat in winter time.  
It's like when Zeus makes wine from bitter grapes, [970]  
the house immediately grows cool, once its lord  
strolls through his own halls in complete command. 1150

*[By this time Agamemnon has reached the palace doors and has just entered the palace]*

AGAMEMNON

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

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

CHORUS

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

1160 [980]

My own eyes tell me  
Agamemnon has returned.  
For that I need no further witness.  
But still, here, deep in my heart,  
the spontaneous song  
keeps up its tuneless dirge,  
as the avenging Furies chant.  
It kills my confidence, my hope.

1170

[990]

Everything inside me  
beats against my chest,  
surging back and forth  
in tides of grim foreboding—  
something's moving to fulfillment.  
But I pray my premonitions  
prove false and never come to light.

1180

[1000]

For, as we know, boundaries  
of vigorous health break down—  
disease is always pressing hard  
the common wall between them.  
So with the fate of men.

AGAMEMNON

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

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

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You should go in, too—I mean you up there,  
Cassandra. Zeus, in his mercy to you,  
has made you member of our household,  
one who shares its purification rites. 1220  
So you can take your place before the altar

AGAMEMNON

of the god protecting all our wealth,  
along with other slaves. So come down.  
Leave the chariot. And leave your pride behind.  
Men say even Hercules, Alcmene's son, [1040]  
once long ago was sold in slavery  
and had to eat its bitter bread. If fate  
has brought you to the same condition,  
be very grateful you serve masters here  
who've been rich for ever. Certain men, 1230  
those who've reaped a harvest of rich goods  
beyond their dreams, maltreat their slaves.  
They go too far. But here, with us, you'll get  
the treatment our traditions say is right.

CHORUS LEADER [*addressing Cassandra*]

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

CHORUS LEADER [*to Cassandra*]

Go with the queen. Of all your options now  
what she says is best. Do as she says.  
Step down from your chariot seat.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

She's mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart.  
She's just left her newly captured city,  
then come here, without sufficient time  
to learn to stomach the controlling bit.  
She will, once her anger's been dissolved  
in foaming blood. But I'll waste no more time,  
dealing with her contempt outside the house.

1260

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

[1070]

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

Aieeeee . . . earth . . . sky . . .

Apollo . . . Apollo . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

Aieeee . . . earth . . . sky . . .

1270

Apollo . . . my destroyer . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

[1080]



AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER

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

1280

CASSANDRA

Apollo!

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

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

[1090]

1290

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

[1100]

1300

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

O evil woman, you're going to do it.  
Your own husband, the man who shares your bed—  
once you've washed him clean . . . there in the bath . . .  
How shall I describe how all this ends?  
It's coming soon. She's stretching out her hand . . . 1310 [110]  
and now her other hand is reaching for him . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CHORUS

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

CASSANDRA

Look over there! Look now!  
Keep the great bull from his mate.  
She's caught him in her robes— 1330  
now she gores him with her black horn.

AGAMEMNON

A trap! He's collapsing in the bath!  
I'm telling you what's going on—  
he's being murdered in there,  
while bathing—a plot to kill him!

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CHORUS

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

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS MEMBER

These vain prophetic cries of woe you chant, [1150]  
where do they start? Why introduce  
such horrific fear into your songs? 1360

AGAMEMNON

How do you set some limit to the path  
where what you see so ominously leads?

CASSANDRA

Alas for that wedding . . . Paris and his bride . . .  
how it destroyed his loved ones . . .  
Alas for the Scamander, river of my home!  
By your banks I was raised so long ago,  
brought up to all this misery . . . And now it seems  
I must soon chant my prophecies  
by Cocytus and banks of Acheron,  
twin rivers of the dead.

[1160]

1370

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

1380

[1170]

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

Then my prophecy will veil itself no more,  
like some new bride half-concealed from view.  
Let it now rise as clear as a fresh wind  
blowing toward the rising sun, a wave

1390

[1180]

AGAMEMNON

cresting through the dawn and bringing on  
a tide of woe far greater than my own.  
I'll teach you no more in cryptic riddles.  
And you bear witness—run the trail with me,  
as I sniff out the track of ancient crimes.  
Up there on that roof there sits a chorus—  
it never leaves. They sing in harmony,  
but the song is harsh, predicting doom. 1400  
Drinking human blood has made them bold—  
they dance in celebration through the house.  
The family's Furies cannot be dislodged. [1190]  
Sitting in the home, they chant their song,  
the madness that began all this, each in turn  
cursing that man who defiled his brother's bed.  
Have I missed the mark? Or like a fine archer  
have I hit the beast? Or am I selling lies,  
a fortune teller babbling door to door?  
Tell me on your oath how well I know 1410  
these old stories of this family's crimes.

CHORUS LEADER

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

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS MEMBER

Surely the god was not in love with you?

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

I promised to,  
but then I broke my word.

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

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

[1210]

CHORUS MEMBER

How did you escape Apollo's anger?

1430

CASSANDRA

Since I resisted him, no one believes me.

CHORUS MEMBER

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

CASSANDRA

Aieee . . . the pains I feel.  
The fearful labour pains of true prophecy  
seize me, confuse me, as they start again,  
full of foreboding. Look there—see those creatures,  
young ones, sitting by the house, dark shapes,  
like something from a dream? They're like children  
murdered by their loved ones . . . their hands are full,  
clenching chunks of their own flesh as food,  
their guts and inner organs . . . it's all so clear . . .  
that awful meal their own father tasted.  
For all that, I say, revenge is on the way,  
someone's planning it, a craven lion,  
a beast wallowing in bed, keeping watch,  
waiting for my master to get back.  
Yes, my master—since I must now bear

1440

[1220]

## AGAMEMNON

the yoke of slavery. That lord of war,  
who led the fleet and ravaged Iliion,  
has no idea what that cur is up to, 1450  
what evil plans the hateful bitch is hatching,  
as her tongue licks his hands in welcome,  
ears perked up for joy, like treacherous Ate, [1230]  
goddess who destroys. It's outrageous—  
the woman kills her man. What shall I call her?  
What awful monster suits her? A snake?  
An amphisbaena with a head at either end?  
Or perhaps a Scylla living in the rocks,  
preying on sailors, raging mother of hell,  
who breathes relentless war on loved ones. 1460  
How that woman, in her audacity,  
screamed out in triumph, like a battle cry,  
pretending to enjoy his safe return!  
Whether you credit what I say or not—  
that doesn't really matter. Why should it?  
What will come will come. And soon enough, [1240]  
as you stand here full of pity, you'll say  
Cassandra's prophecies were all too true.

### CHORUS

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

### CASSANDRA

I tell you you'll see Agamemnon dead.

### CHORUS MEMBER

Poor girl, calm yourself. Tone down those words.

### CASSANDRA

No—no one can heal what my words prophesy.

### CHORUS

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

### CASSANDRA

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

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

What man is going to commit such crimes?

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

CASSANDRA

Yet I can speak Greek well enough.

CHORUS LEADER

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

CASSANDRA

O this fire! His fire comes over me once more!  
The pain . . . Lycian Apollo . . . burning me . . .  
That two-footed lioness . . . crouching there  
with a wolf, once the noble lion's gone . . .  
She's going to kill me . . . the agony! 1490 [1260]  
Now she prepares her drugs, and in her rage,  
vows I too will be a part of her revenge,  
as she whets a sword to kill her king.  
He brought me here. Now we both die.  
Her retribution. So why do I bear  
these ornaments that mock me, this rod,  
these prophet's wreaths around my neck?  
Let me be rid of you before I die . . .

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

There, an end to you. With you down there,  
I get revenge. Make some other woman rich. 1500  
Let her preach destruction instead of me.

*[Cassandra now starts tearing off her clothes]*

Look how Apollo now in person strips me,  
rips my prophetic robes, the god who watched, [1270]



## AGAMEMNON

as my friends in their hatred turned on me,  
mocked me so savagely in these very clothes—  
they thought they knew what they were doing.  
But they were wrong. I heard them call me names,  
“beggar,” “starving wretch”—I endured them all.  
And now the prophet god is done with me.  
He’s led his prophet to her place of death. 1510  
No father’s altar for me here—instead  
a chopping block awaits, slaughtered  
in one hot stroke of bloody sacrifice.  
But we’ll not die without the gods’ revenge.  
Another man will come and will avenge us, 1280  
a son who’ll kill his mother, then pay back  
his father’s death, a wanderer in exile,  
a man this country’s made a stranger.  
He’ll come back and, like a coping stone,  
bring the ruin of his family to a close. 1520  
For gods have made a powerful promise—  
his father’s stretched out corpse will bring him home.  
Why then do I lament so piteously?  
Since I’m the one who first saw how Troy  
would be wiped out the way it was,  
since I see now how those who took the city  
are being destroyed in judgment from the gods,  
I’ll go to meet my fate. I’ll dare to die. 1290  
I greet this doorway as the gates of Death.  
Once the death blow strikes, I pray I’ll have 1530  
a gentle end—no struggle, as my life blood  
drains away. And then I’ll close my eyes.

### CHORUS LEADER

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

### CASSANDRA

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

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

But there's some benefit in going last.

[1300]

CASSANDRA

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

1540

CHORUS LEADER

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

CASSANDRA

No one hearing that  
has reason to be glad.

CHORUS LEADER

But to die well  
confers some human dignity.

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

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

CHORUS LEADER

What's wrong? Why turn around in fear?

CASSANDRA

This house . . . It's horrific!

CHORUS

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

CASSANDRA

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

1550

CHORUS LEADER

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

[1310]

CASSANDRA

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

CHORUS

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

AGAMEMNON

CASSANDRA [*turning back to the palace doors*]

No. But I must go.

I'll lament my death, and Agamemnon's, too,  
inside the house. Enough of living!  
Alas, my friends, I'm not holding back in fear,  
like some bird trapped in bushes. I want you  
to witness how I went to meet my death,  
when for me another woman will be killed,  
a man will die for one who married evil.  
This is my last request before I die.

1560

[1320]

CHORUS LEADER

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

CASSANDRA

One last time

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

1570

[1330]

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

CHORUS

To rest unsatisfied amid great wealth  
is in the nature of all human beings.  
No one can point and order it away  
from princely homes by uttering the words  
"Dissatisfaction, enter here no more!"  
Take Agamemnon. The powers in heaven  
permitted him to capture Priam's town,  
to return home honoured by the gods.  
But now, if he must pay the penalty  
for blood which other men before him shed

1580

AGAMEMNON

and die in retribution for the dead  
he killed himself, what mortal human being  
who hears all this can boast he lives  
a life unscarred by fate?

[1340]

*[A scream comes from inside the palace]*

AGAMEMNON *[from inside]*

Help me!

I'm hit . . . a deadly blow . . .

CHORUS LEADER

Silence!

1590

Who cried out then? Something about a deadly blow.

AGAMEMNON *[within]*

Aaagh! I'm hit again . . . a second blow . . .

CHORUS LEADER

That's the king in there. Those cries, I think,  
tell us what's going on. Come now, let's decide  
what's best to do, our safest course of action.

*[At this point the Chorus breaks up in panic, losing its unity as a group. Individual members speak to each other in great confusion]*

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

Here's my advice—summon all the people,  
call them to bring help up to the palace.

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

I say we must attack the house at once,  
catch them at it, swords still wet with blood.

[1350]

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

My view is we should do something like that.  
I vote we act. There's no time to delay.

1600

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR

It's all so clear. This is their opening move—  
a sign they're going to tyrannize the city.

CHORUS MEMBER FIVE

We're wasting time. They've thrown aside  
all sense of hesitation. Their hands won't rest.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS MEMBER SIX

I don't know what scheme I could propose.  
It's up to those who can carry out the plan  
to tell us what to do.

CHORUS MEMBER SEVEN

That's my view, too. [1360]  
I don't know how to bring the dead to life  
with nothing but our words.

CHORUS MEMBER EIGHT

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

CHORUS MEMBER NINE

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

CHORUS MEMBER TEN

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

CHORUS MEMBER ELEVEN

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Before this moment I said many things  
to suit my purposes. I'm not ashamed  
to contradict them now. How else could I  
act on my hate for such a hateful man,  
who feigned his love, how else prepare my nets

AGAMEMNON

of agony so high no one could jump them?  
I've brooded on this struggle many years,  
the old blood feud. My moment's come at last,  
though long delayed. I stand now where I struck, 1630  
where I achieved what I set out to do.

I did all this. I won't deny the fact. [1380]

Round this man I cast my all-embracing net,  
rich robes of evil, as if catching fish—  
he had no way out, no eluding fate.

I stabbed him twice. He gave out two groans.  
Then as his limbs went limp, I hit again,  
a third blow, my prayerful dedication  
to Zeus, underground protector of the dead.

He collapsed, snorting his life away, 1640  
spitting great gobs of blood all over me,  
drenching me in showers of his dark blood. [1390]

And I rejoiced—just as the fecund earth  
rejoices when the heavens send spring rains,  
and new-born flower buds burst into bloom.

That's how things stand, old men of Argos.  
Be joyful, if that's how you feel. For me,  
this is my triumph. If it were fitting

to pour libations on this corpse,  
I'd pour my curses out—that would be just. 1650

He filled the mixing bowls in his own house  
with such destructive misery, and now  
he drinks it to the dregs. He's home at last.

CHORUS LEADER

What you say I find incredible!

How can that tongue of yours gloat like this,  
exulting over your dead husband? [1400]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You're testing me, as if I were some silly woman.

But my heart is fearless. Let me tell you  
what you already know—then you can praise  
or criticize me as you like. I don't care. 1660

This man is Agamemnon, my husband.

He's a corpse, the work of this right hand,  
a work of justice. That's how matters stand.

AGAMEMNON

CHORUS LEADER

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So now 1670  
you'd sentence me to banishment,  
send me from the city a thing accursed?  
Back then you made no accusation  
against this man lying here. He sacrificed  
his own child, that dear girl I bore in pain,  
to charm the winds from Thrace—and didn't care.  
To him she was a beast for slaughter.  
He had flocks of them—his farms were full.  
Shouldn't you have banished him from Argos  
in punishment for that polluting crime? 1680 [1420]  
You're strict enough when you pass judgment  
on what I've done. So let me caution you—  
I'm prepared to fight you head to head.  
If you win, well then, you can govern me.  
But if god lets me prevail, you old men  
will learn, old as you are, to behave yourselves.

CHORUS LEADER

You're too ambitious, far too arrogant.  
Blood-drenched murder's made you mad. That's plain.  
Your eyes are full of blood. Now stroke for stroke  
you'll pay for what you've done. You've lost your friends, 1690  
you've lost your honour . . . [1430]

CLYTAEMNESTRA *(interrupting)*

Then hear this, too, the force behind my oath—  
by that Justice I exacted for my child,  
by Ate, goddess of destruction,  
by the Fury to whom I offered up this man,  
my hopes will never walk these halls in fear,

## AGAMEMNON

so long as Aegisthus stokes the blazing fires  
in my hearth. And he's as loyal to me now  
as always, my shield, no man to trifle with.  
He'll boost my confidence. Here he lies, 1700  
the man who abused his wife, seduced  
by every captive girl at Ilion—  
and here she lies, his concubine, his spear prize, [1440]  
the faithful prophetess who shared his bed.  
She also knew the rowing benches  
where sailors sweat. They get what they deserve.  
He's dead. She, like a swan, sang her last song,  
then died. Now she lies there, his sweetheart.  
She'll bring new thrills, fresh pleasures to my bed.

## CHORUS

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

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

## CLYTAEMNESTRA

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



## AGAMEMNON

### CHORUS

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

### CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're talking sense, when you call on  
the demon of this house, who's eaten up  
three generations, the one who nurtures  
bloodlust in our guts. And so new blood  
spurts out before the old wound heals. [1480]

### CHORUS

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

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

## AGAMEMNON

the two-edged sword  
wielded by your wife.

### CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

### CHORUS

Who would ever say  
you bear no guilt  
for Agamemnon's murder?  
How could they? How?  
Yet that avenging spirit 1780  
acting on his father's crime  
could well have egged you on.  
Black Ruin moves ahead with force [1510]  
through streams of family blood  
granting vengeance for the young  
served up as chunks of meat.

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

### CLYTAEMNESTRA

I don't think the man died wretchedly,  
like some poor slave. Surely his own deceit  
brought ruin on this house? His suffering  
matches exactly what he did himself.  
Remember my own Iphigeneia, 1800  
his daughter, that sweet flower whom we mourn.

## AGAMEMNON

So let him not boast out loud in Hades.  
He was the first to draw his sword,  
and by the sword he's been repaid.

### CHORUS

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

O Earth, my Earth—  
how I wish you'd swallowed me  
before I ever saw my king  
lying low on such bed, [1540]  
a silver-plated bath.  
Who will now bury him?  
Who will lament for him?  
Will you dare to do this, 1820  
a woman mourning for the spirit  
of the husband she's just killed,  
complete the injustices you've done  
with wretched favours to the dead  
to expiate your monstrous crimes?  
As people stand around the grave  
to praise this god-like man, in tears,  
whose sad heart will be sincere? [1550]

### CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

### CHORUS

One disgrace exchanged for yet another, [1560]

AGAMEMNON

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

1840

CLYTAEMNESTRA

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

[1570]

1850

*[Enter Aegisthus with armed attendants. The situation now grows increasingly tense, with the soldiers menacing the members of the Chorus, who begin to coalesce as a political unit, rediscovering their strength. This sense of a major irreconcilable political division and the threat of civil war grows increasingly acute until the end of the play]*

AEGISTHUS *[moving up to join Clytaemnestra by the palace doors]*

What a glorious day of retribution!  
Now I can say that once again the gods  
looking down on men avenge their crimes.  
How it fills my heart with joy to see this man  
stretched out here in a robe the Furies wove,  
full payment for deceitful treachery  
his father's hand devised. For Atreus,  
king of Argos, was this man's father.  
To set the record straight, my father,  
Thyestes, brother to Atreus,  
challenged his authority. So Atreus  
expelled him from his home and city.

1860

[1580]

## AGAMEMNON

But Thyestes in his misery returned,  
a suppliant at his own hearth, praying  
fate would save him, he would not be killed, 1870  
his own blood wouldn't stain his native ground.  
Atreus, the godless father of this man, [1590]  
welcomed him effusively, but not with love.  
He set up what seemed a celebration—  
a feast day with lots of meat, but served  
my father flesh of his own children.  
He sliced their toes and fingers off. Over these  
he diced the other parts, then passed this dish  
to Thyestes, where he sat beside him.  
My father then, in total ignorance, 1880  
took the food he didn't recognize,  
and ate the meal which, as you've witnessed,  
destroyed the race. When Thyestes learns  
the abominable thing he's done, he screams,  
staggers back, vomits up the butchered flesh.  
Then, kicking down the banquet table  
to underscore his cry for justice,  
he calls down on the House of Atreus  
a curse no one can bear, "Let them all die,  
the race of Pleisthenes—all die like this."\* [1600]  
That's why you see this man lying here. 1890  
This murder was my plan for justice.  
For Atreus threw my broken father out,  
and me as well, his third son, still a child,  
an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes.  
But I grew up. And Justice brought me back.  
I seized the man who'd banished me.  
I planned each detail of this murderous scheme.  
Now I see him in the nets of Justice, [1610]  
I can face even my own death with joy. 1900

### CHORUS LEADER

To me you're contemptible, Aegisthus,  
getting pleasure from all this agony.  
You say you killed the king deliberately,  
and planned the cowardly slaughter on your own.  
I tell you—remember this—when justice comes,

AGAMEMNON

your head will not escape the people's cursing  
or death by stoning at their hands.

AEGISTHUS

So you say—but you man the lower oars.  
Your masters on the higher tiers control the ship.  
You may be old, but you'll learn how painful  
it is at your age to be taught your place.  
Hunger pangs and chains, two worthy teachers,  
make excellent cures for teaching wisdom,  
even with old men. Surely you have eyes.  
Can't you see this? You shouldn't kick at thorns.  
You'll only hurt yourselves.

1910

[1620]

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

  You womanly creature!  
You stayed at home, waiting out the war,  
until the men came back. You soiled a real man's bed,  
then planned to kill our king.

AEGISTHUS

  This talk of yours  
will soon give you sufficient cause to weep.  
The tongue of Orpheus was not like yours—  
the pleasure of his voice drew all things to him.  
Your puny squawking merely irritates.  
But once I chain you up, my force has ways  
to make you more compliant.

1920

[1630]

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

  As if you rule in Argos!  
You, the one who plotted Agamemnon's death,  
but weren't brave enough to kill the man yourself!

AEGISTHUS

Clearly it was the woman's role to trick him.  
I was not a man whom he would trust.  
After all, I'm an old enemy of his.  
But with his wealth I'll try to rule the people.  
Those who resist I'll strap under the yoke.  
It won't be light—not like a well-fed trace horse.

1930

[1640]

AGAMEMNON

No. Miserable starvation in the dark—  
then we'll see how docile they can be.

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

You coward—  
why not kill the man yourself? Why rely  
upon that woman for the murder,  
a disgrace to her own country and its gods?  
Oh, can Orestes still see the light of day?  
If his good fortune holds, will he come home,  
win out, and kill the two of them up there?

1940

AEGISTHUS [*moving down to be with his troops*]

If that's the way you want to act and speak,  
you'll get your lesson fast. Men, stand ready.  
My trusty guard, your work's in front of you.

[1650]

*[The soldiers place their weapons at the ready and move into menace the Chorus. The Chorus stands its ground, raising their staves as weapons]*

CHORUS LEADER

Don't give way. Each of you, get your weapons ready.

AEGISTHUS [*half drawing his sword*]

My hand is on my sword, as well.  
I'm not afraid to die.

CHORUS LEADER

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

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Stop this, my dearest.  
Let's not act to bring on further trouble.  
Our wretched harvest is bountiful enough—  
we've reaped sufficient pain. No more bloodshed.  
You honourable old men, go home. Yield to fate,  
before you hurt yourselves. What we've done here  
we had to do. Let our troubles end right now.  
That we'll allow, even though our fate

1950

[1660]

AGAMEMNON

has struck a heavy blow. That's my advice,  
what a woman ought to say, if any here  
will act on it.

AEGISTHUS

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

1960

CHORUS LEADER

Men of Argos  
will never cringe before an evil man.

AEGISTHUS

I'll get my own back soon enough.

CHORUS LEADER

Not if fate brings Orestes home again.

AEGISTHUS

I understand how exiles feed on hope.

CHORUS LEADER

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

AEGISTHUS

You must know you'll pay  
for all this insolence to me.

1970

[1670]

CHORUS

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*pulling Aegisthus towards the palace doors*]

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

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



# AGAMEMNON

## AGAMEMNON

### A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

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

Aeschylus, *Oresteia (Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, Eumenides)*  
Aeschylus, *Persians*  
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*  
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*  
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*  
Aristophanes, *Birds*  
Aristophanes, *Clouds*  
Aristophanes, *Frogs*  
Aristophanes, *Knights*  
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*  
Aristophanes, *Peace*  
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics (Abridged)*  
Cuvier, *On the Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*  
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*  
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*  
Diderot, *A Conversation Between D'Alembert and Diderot*  
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*  
Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*  
Euripides, *Bacchae*  
Euripides, *Electra*  
Euripides, *Hippolytus*  
Euripides, *Medea*  
Euripides, *Orestes*  
Homer, *Iliad (Complete and Abridged)*  
Homer, *Odyssey (Complete and Abridged)*  
Kafka, *Metamorphosis*  
Kafka, *Selected Shorter Writings*  
Kant, *Universal History of Nature and Theory of Heaven*  
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*  
Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy, Volume I*  
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

## AGAMEMNON

Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*  
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*  
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*  
Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life*  
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*  
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* [Second Discourse]  
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* [First Discourse]  
Rousseau, *Social Contract*  
Sophocles, *Antigone*  
Sophocles, *Ajax*  
Sophocles, *Electra*  
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*  
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*  
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*  
Wedekind, *Castle Wetterstein*  
Wedekind, *Marquis of Keith*.

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

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

The address where these texts are available is as follows:

<https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/>

For comments and questions, please contact [Ian Johnston](#).