THE ORESTEIA

A TRILogy CONSISTING OF THE TRAGEDIES:
AGAMEMNON
THE LIBATION BEARERS
THE EUMENIDES

BY
AESCHYLUS

A TRANSLATION BY
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The Roof of Agamemnon’s Palace, before dawn. A watchman stands guard.

WATCHMAN. O gods, free me from this awful task! For one full year I’ve been stuck up on this tower of the Atreidae, crouched on my haunches like a dog. I have come to know every single star in the night sky, the whole twinkling mob that arcs over my head with the seasons. And still I wait, hoping to spot another light, an earthly one — the signal fire from Troy, heralding its fall. Those are my orders from the queen, her woman’s heart steeled by a man’s resolve.

I toss and turn up here on my dew-soaked cot. I never dream, because I never sleep. No. Fear comes and chases sleep away. My eyes refuse to shut. When I whistle or hum to stay alert, the sad melody makes me grieve for the terrible state of this house, the misrule and dishonor. Oh, how I wish my watch could end tonight! Whichever of you gods hears the prayers of humble men, hear me now, and let the light from Troy kindle an early dawn!

Sees something far off.

The Fire! At last! Gleaming in the night! O, welcome sight! Light of a new dawn — there’ll be dancing in the streets because of you. (shouting) It’s over! The war is over! I have to wake Clytemnestra, Agamemnon’s wife — rouse her out of bed so she can lead the celebration. (again shouting) Troy has fallen! The fire says so! (to himself) As for me, first I am going to dance and treat the king’s good luck as my own! The dice rolls. . . Triple sixes! I win! I win!

I hope the master returns soon. I want to clasp his hand in mine. As for certain other matters, my lips are sealed. A big ox stands on my tongue. Although, if this house had a tongue of its own, it might have quite a few tales of its own to tell. But of that I speak only to those who already know the situation. For those who do not, my mind is blank.

Scene changes to the steps of the palace later that morning. Many women praying, far back, including Clytemnestra and her handmaidens. Chorus of Argive elders enters.

CHORUS. Ten years have passed since Menelaus, Priam’s great adversary, and lord Agamemnon, the two mighty Atreidae sharing sway in Argos, left with a thousand Argive ships, to press their cause with force — hearts screaming in their fury like a pair of eagles overwhelmed with the loss of their young.

Then one of the supreme powers — Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus — hears their wailing, hears those screaming birds, who live within his realm, and sends a late-avenging Fury to punish the transgressors. In just that way, all-powerful Zeus, god of hosts and guests, sends the Atreidae against Paris, son of Priam, for that woman’s sake, Helen of many men — condemning Trojans and Achaeans alike to innumerable conflicts.

Now things stand as they stand. What is destined to come will come. And no libation, sacrifice, or human tears will turn the gods’ unbending wrath.

As for us, whose old bones confer no honor, we who were left behind when the army sailed so long ago, we wait here, using up our remaining vigor to prop ourselves up with canes, like little children, unfit for Ares, god of war. And so it is with old men, too, who, when they reach

1. The sons of Atreus: Agamemnon and Menelaus.

2. A powerful city in northwest Turkey.

3. Apollo, god of healing, music and prophecy, favored the Trojans; Zeus, king of the gods, tried to remain neutral during the war; Pan is a satyr, a minor deity.

4. King of Troy.

5. Greeks. “Achaean” and “Argive” are often synonyms for “Greek,” Achaea and Argos used for Greece.
extremes of age, wither like leaves, and go their way three-footed, no better than a child, as they wander as if in a daydream.

But you, daughter of Tyndareus, queen Clytemnestra, what is all this? What reports have you received that lead you to send your servants out commanding all these prayers? For every god our city worships—all-powerful gods above the earth, and those below, and those in heaven, and those in the marketplace—their altars are ablaze with offerings. Fires rise everywhere, right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils brought from the palace. Tell us what you know, and set our minds to rest. For while things seem grim, these sacrificial fires give me hope.

I well recall that omens manifested to our kings, as they were setting out, foretold success for their expedition.

**Cross fade to strong wind, crashing waves, martial drums, clanking armour, marching, etc. under.**

The two generals of Achaean’s troops, united in a joint command, led off the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears, marching against Troy, Priam’s domain.

**Martial sounds fade out under eagles cry.**

A promising sign came to them—two eagles, kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships. One bird was black, the other’s tail was white. They were gorging themselves, devouring a hare swollen with unborn young.

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

Then the army’s prophet, Calchas, saw the warlike Atreidae in those birds that were eating the hare. He then interpreted the omen, saying—

CALCHAS. In time, this army will capture Priam’s city. But may no anger from the gods cast its dark shadow on our troops, our great bridle forged to curb Troy’s mouth. For the goddess Artemis\(^1\) rages at her father’s ravenous birds. She pities the cowering hare, she pities its young, slaughtered in the womb. Artemis abominates the eagles’ feast.

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

CALCHAS. And lovely Artemis—though you are gentle with the tender cubs of vicious lions and take special joy in the suckling young of all wild beasts—grant us a good outcome, as this omen promises, an auspicious sign, but ominous.

I call upon Apollo, god of healing, to stop Artemis from delaying the fleet with hostile winds. For the offering she now demands violates all human pity—it shatters families and makes the wife 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 child slain.

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

**Violent winds, crashing waves up, hold under:**

Achaean’s army was stranded by opposing winds at Aulis, where tides ebb and flow. Troops grew hungry, as supplies dwindled. They wandered discontent and restless. The winds corroded ships and cables. Calchas proclaimed the cause of this was Artemis. And he proposed a remedy, but something harsh, even worse than the opposing winds, so painful that the Atreidae struck their staffs on the ground and wept.

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1. Goddess of the hunt, Apollo’s sister, Angry at Agamemnon, she has caused contrary winds to blow at Aulis, demanding that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia.
Then Agamemnon, the older king, rose to speak—

AGAMEMNON. Heavy indeed my fate should I refuse this god’s command — but to obey is harsher still — to butcher my daughter, the pride of my house — to stain a father’s hands before the altar with a virgin’s blood. Which choice is worse? How can I abandon my allies? Their call for sacrifice to calm the winds lies within sacred law — even the sacrifice of an innocent’s blood. So be it! May all go well!

CHORUS. When Agamemnon strapped on the harsh yoke of necessity, his spirits changed, and his intentions became profane, unsanctified. He undertook an act beyond all daring. Troubles come, above all, from delusions that incite 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.

Segue to men praying, build under:

In their eagerness for war, those leaders paid no heed to the girl’s pleas, her cries of “Father!” — nor to her virgin youth. Agamemnon offered up a prayer, then ordered men to seize her and raise her, high above the altar, like a goat. They forced a gag into her lovely mouth, like a horse’s bit, to stifle any curse which she might cry against her kin. 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.

Sound out. Original ambience returns.

What happened next I did not see. And I will not say — only that the rough winds abated as Calchas foretold. The scales of Justice move to show that wisdom comes through suffering. As for what will come — we will discover that when it comes. Until then, let it well enough alone. To know the future is to invite sorrow before its time. Whatever is ordained to happen will happen, like tomorrow’s dawn. But I hope whatever follows will be well, and accord with the wishes of our queen, the guardian of Argos and our sole protection.

 Clytemnestra comes forward.

CHORUS. Queen Clytemnestra, we have come here in deference to your royal authority. With our king abroad, his throne is empty — so it is only right for us to pay allegiance to his wife. I am eager to hear your news, whether what you have heard is good or not. Your sacrificial offerings give us hope. But we won’t object if you stay silent.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I have a welcome message. As the adage says, “May Dawn be born from mother Night.” You will hear great news, acceding all your hopes — the Argives have captured Priam’s realm!

CHORUS. Tell me that again. I must have heard you wrong — what you said just now — it cannot be true!

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

CHORUS. Your words fill me with joy. So much so I cannot hold back tears.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Then your eyes confirm your loyalty.

CHORUS. Can you verify the truth of this report? Is there proof?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Of course. Unless some god deceives me.

CHORUS. Has some vision persuaded you of this, something in a dream?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Not at all. As if I would heed some phantom!
CHORUS. Perhaps some nascent rumor raised your hopes?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Now you treat me like a child.

CHORUS. When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTEMNESTRA. The very night in which this splendid day was born.

CHORUS. But how could a herald arrive so fast?

CLYTEMNESTRA. Hephaestus, from Mount Ida sent forth his brilliant blaze. Beacon passed beacon on to us by courier-flame: From Ida, above the Trojan plain to Lemnos — to the strong blaze on the summit of Athos, sacred to Zeus. Thence, soaring high aloft so as to leap across the sea, the flame, speeding joyously onward, its golden beam, as another sun, passed the message on to the sentry at Macistus. And he, without delay nor carelessly yielding to sleep, did not neglect his part as messenger. Far over Euripus’ stream came the light alerting the sentries on Messapion, who torched a heap of withered brush and urged the message on. Their flame, gleaming like the moon, arced over the plain of Asopus to Cithaeron's ridges, and sparked another relay of missive fire. Across Gorgopous’ water shot the light, to Mount Aegiplanctus, from there it passed the headland of the Saronic gulf — until it reached the sentinel nearest to our city, the peak of Arachnaeus. And finally, it came to rest upon the rooftop of the Atreidae.

Such are the torch-bearers that I myself arranged, racing the course one after the other. And the victor is he who ran both first and last. This is the kind of proof and token I give you, the message of my husband, direct from Troy to me.

CHORUS. My queen, I soon will raise my prayers of thanks to all the gods, but now I wish to savor your wonderful news. What more can you tell?

CLYTEMNESTRA. On this very day Achaea’s army holds the town of Troy. Within its walls, I fancy, voices shout in mass confusion. If you place oil and vinegar together in a bowl, they never mix, but stay separate. It is much the same in Troy, with the mingled cries of conquerors and conquered differing according to their share of triumph or defeat. Trojans fall upon the corpses of their husbands and their brothers. Children scream for their lifeless fathers. Captives now, they weep ceaselessly for their beloved slain.

At the same time, the Argives, weary and famished after a long night’s work, gorge themselves on the bounty of the vanquished. They are sheltered now from frost and dew in captured Trojan homes — not according to their rank, but rather as luck allots each one his share. They are happy and they will sleep soundly through all the night, every single man. For, what need have they to post a guard?

Now — if these warriors fully and piously respect the gods of the conquered land and spare their shrines, those who have conquered will not, in their turn, be conquered. Therefore, I pray that no frenzied greed, no lust for plunder overcome the Achaeans, to make them plunder what they ought to leave untouched. For they still must travel far before they reach their homes. And, even if they do achieve a safe return without offending any god, the vengeance of the dead may lie in wait with some malicious purpose. So — Now you have heard my woman’s speech. May good things now prevail for all to see. I think we all have cause to celebrate! (She enters the palace.)

CHORUS. You speak like a man of sense. And now that I have heard your news and affirmed its truth, it is time to raise our thanks to the gods, who have bestowed such blessings that well merit our gratitude.

1. God of fire and the forge.
O Zeus, my king, and friendly Night, you have handed us great glories to keep as our possessions. You cast upon the towers of Troy your all-ensnaring net, and no one, young or old, escaped its fatal mesh.

I worship mighty Zeus, god of guests and hosts, who made this happen. For a long time now he has aimed his bow at Paris, making sure his arrow would neither fall short nor fly above the stars and miss.

Men will proclaim this a blow from Zeus and trace his presence in our victory. He acts on what he himself decides. Some people claim that the gods don’t concern themselves about those men who trample underfoot favors from the pure in heart. Such people are profane. For we now clearly see that ruin is the penalty for those with reckless pride, who breathe a spirit boastful beyond decency, because their homes are overfull with riches. Let men have wealth enough to match good sense. Too many riches multiply misfortunes.

Wealth does not protect the insolent man who kicks aside and pushes from his sight great altars of virtue. Such a man is overpowered by warped Persuasion, insufferable child of scheming Folly. And there is no cure. His evil is not concealed. It stands out, a lurid glitter, like false bronze when rubbed. All men can judge his darkness, once events test him. He is like a child chasing a flying bird. He brands his city with disgrace that cannot be removed, for no god hears his prayers. The man who lives this way, doing wrong, the gods destroy. Such a man was Paris. He came the home of the Atreidae, and then abused their hospitality, running off with the wife of his host.

But she left her people the smash of shield and spear, a fleet well armed for war. To Troy she carried with her no dowry but destruction. Daring what should not be dared, she glided through Troy’s gates. The prophets in this house cried out, “Terrible, terrible for house and home, and for the royal leaders here. Terrible for the marriage bed, still holding traces of her body, the one who loved her husband.”

As for him, Menelaus, the husband, he sits apart, in pain, silent and dishonored. 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 delight now in graceful statues, for to his blank eyes all beauty has gone. In his dreams he sees sad visions, memories of former joy — a vain relief, for when the man thinks he sees such beauty there, all at once it is 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 forth to gather in that army, there is insufferable grief. Many woes pierce the heart. Instead of those who left, every house gets back weapons and ashes, not living men. For Ares, god of war, pays gold for the bodies of fallen soldiers. In spear fights he tips the scales. Then back from Troy he ships a heavy freight of ash, corpses burned on funeral pyres, sent home for loved ones to mourn. He trades dust for men, shiploads of urns filled with ashes.

At home the people weep, praising one man for his battle skill, another for courageous death. Some complain about that woman, how she is to blame for all of this — but they do so quietly. Nonetheless, this sorrow spreads resentment against the leaders of the war, the Atreidae. Meanwhile, over there, across the seas in Troy, around the city walls, the hostile ground swallows our best young men, now hidden in the earth they conquered.

The people’s voice, once angered, can create dissent, ratifying a curse which now must go its way. And so, in my anxiety, I wait, listening for something dark, something emerging from the gloom. For gods are not blind to men who kill. In time, black agents of revenge, the Furies, wear down
and bring to naught the fortunes of a man who prospers unjustly. They wear him out, reverse his luck, and drag him down at last among the dead. There is no remedy.

To boast too much of one’s success brings danger. Even the highest mountain peak is struck by Zeus’ lightning. I would choose wealth no one could envy. May I never be the sort of man who puts whole cities to the sword. Nor let me ever see myself enslaved, my life in someone else’s power.

This welcome fiery message has spread quickly all through the city. But is it true?

What man is such a senseless child he lets his heart catch fire at this news, only to be shattered by some fresh report?

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

Yes, they are far too trusting. The proper order in a woman’s mind is easily upset. Rumors women start soon die out and come to nothing.

**Messenger approaches from a distance.**

We will know soon enough about these flaming beacons passed from place to place. 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 will report the facts. Nor will he light some flaming pile of mountain wood to pass a signal on with smoke. No — he will shout out to us what he has to say, and we can then rejoice still more, or else . . . but I will not think of that. May good news 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.

**The Messenger enters.**

MESSENGER. Hail Argos, my father’s land! After ten long years, I return to you. I once had many hopes, but all are dashed, except this one — to come home. I long ago gave up any dream of dying here and resting in a grave hollowed from my native soil. I bless the land, the gleaming Argive sun! And I offer up my thanks to Zeus, our highest god — and to Apollo, lord of Pytho. May you never aim more arrows at us! We had enough of those, my lord, beside Scamander’s banks, when you took your stand against us. But now, Apollo, preserve and heal us.

And hail to all gods assembled here, Hermes in particular, whose protection all messengers enjoy. And next I pray that the noble spirits who sent us off will welcome back the remnants of our forces, spared slaughter by the spear.

Oh, you hall of kings, you cherished roof tops, you sacred seats and gods who face the sun! If your shining eyes in former days have ever welcomed home our king, then do so now, after his many years away. He comes back bringing light into this darkness, for you and all assembled here — our mighty king, god-like Agamemnon.

Greet him with full respect. For, it was he who, wielding the ax of avenging Zeus, smote the walls of Troy, smashed them into rubble and ground them into the soil. He has obliterated the altars of the Trojan gods and all their shrines, laid waste to all that country’s rich fertility. Around Troy’s neck he has clenched a yoke of ruin.

He is on his way here now, king Agamemnon, blessed elder son of Atreus. Among all men, he deserves the highest honor. For neither Paris nor his allies, the Trojan people, can ever boast

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1. A serpent like monster of Delphi slain by Apollo, hence, the region around Delphi, where Apollo is said to dwell.

2. Troy’s river.
again that their triumphs outpaced their sorrows. Guilty of rape and theft, Paris has forfeited his plunder and brought devastation to his father’s house, and to the land as well, which once sustained his city. So Priam’s sons have paid a hefty fine.

CHORUS. A hearty welcome, herald! We rejoice in your return.

MESSENGER. I, too, rejoice, and would gladly die right now, if the gods should so decree, now that I am home.

CHORUS. Did you miss this land so much?

MESSENGER. Yes, which is why my eyes fill with tears.

CHORUS. Not unlike some sweet disease.

MESSENGER. How so? Tell me what you mean.

CHORUS. You suffered from love for those who love you.

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

CHORUS. Yes, so much so, my anxious heart would often cry aloud.

MESSENGER. You feared for your sons?

CHORUS. For ourselves as well.

MESSENGER. For yourselves! What caused this fear?

CHORUS. Long ago I learned to keep my silence, the medicine that best prevents more grief.

MESSENGER. Why? Were you afraid of someone once the kings were gone?

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

MESSENGER. True, we have done well. As for things that happened in the past, you could say some turned out well, and some badly. But who except the gods escapes all pain in a lifetime, eh? If I told you what we endured — privations, leaking tents, sparse provisions, constant peril — was there nothing we failed to grumble about?

We had to camp near the enemy wall. It was always damp. Dew from the sky and marshes soaked us. Our clothes rotted. Lice flourished in our hair. And we froze. The winters there unbearable, when snows from Ida froze birds to death. And then the heat, so hot at noon, the sea would boil. . . .

But why complain about it now? Our work is done. All suffering has ended for the dead, who are not about to spring to life again. Why should the living call the dead to mind? Why recall those blows of fate? The time has come, I think, to say farewell to sorrow. For those still living, the soldiers who survive, our luck has seen us through. No loss can change that now.

We have a right, as we go about the world, to boast, “The Argive forces that vanquished Troy, nailed their spoils of war up in gods’ holy shrines throughout Achaea, as a glorious tribute and reminder of what was done!” So whoever hears the story of these deeds must praise our leaders — our city, too. Full honor and thanks must go to Zeus, to whom our victory is due. That is all I can say.

CHORUS. You speak the truth. I was wrong, I admit it. But the old can always learn from younger men, and your words enrich us all.

Clytemnestra enters.

CHORUS. But here is the queen. It is she who the news most concerns.
LYTEMNESTRA. Some time ago I raised my voice in triumph, rejoicing when that first messenger arrived, the fiery herald of the night who told me Troy was ours. There were some who blamed me then and said, “How are you so easily swayed by signal fires? Is it not just like a woman to jump to conclusions?” Insults like these made me look as if I were mad. But I kept on with my hecatombs, and all through the city, women raised their joyful cries, as custom demands, echoing their exultation through all our holy shrines, while tending incense-sweetened altar fires, and laying their offerings of thanks before the gods.

So, why do I now need a messenger of flesh and blood to tell me what I already know? Whatever else there is to tell I soon will hear directly from the king.

(to Messenger) But, so I may give my honored husband the finest welcome home, and with all speed — for what gives a woman greater pleasure than to unbar the gates to her own husband, once the gods have spared his life in war? — give him this message from me. Tell him to hurry back. The people are eager to feast their eyes on him again. And when he arrives, he will find in his house a wife as faithful to him as when he left, a watch dog of his home — loyal, a foe to his foes, and, for the rest, the same in every way as when he left.

Not once in all the time of his absence have I betrayed our bond. I have known no pleasure with other men, excited no whisper of scandal. I understand as much about such things as I do about forging bronze. I say this with pride, for I have carried myself the way a high-born woman should.

She leaves.

CHORUS. She seems to speak from the heart, but those who listen closely know she only says what is expected of her. But tell me, herald, what do you know of Menelaus, our younger king — did he come back with you?

MESSENGER. I fear a good report of Menelaus would be a lie.

CHORUS. I wish your news of him was true and good. It goes hard when these things clash.

MESSENGER. Menelaus vanished — the army lost sight of him and his ship.

CHORUS. Did he sail away from Troy, or did some storm attack the entire fleet and cut him off from you?

MESSENGER. Like a skilled archer, you hit the mark — your last surmise is right.

CHORUS. Have you heard nothing since the storm, whether he lives or not?

MESSENGER. No one knows, except the life-sustaining sun, arcing above the earth.

CHORUS. Tell me what happened when that storm struck the Achaean fleet.

MESSENGER. It seems wrong to spoil this auspicious day with talk of sad events. In deference to the gods we ought to keep good and ill apart. When a herald comes bowed down with woeful news, he tears a never-healing wound in the city’s heart. From many houses many men are driven to their end by the double whip that Ares, bringer of strife, so loves — disaster with two prongs, one for the city, the other for the hearth, a bloody pair. A messenger thus weighed down must dutifully sing the Furies’ song of triumph. But when he bears news of survival and victory that brings joy to the city . . . How can I mingle tales of good and ill fortune, telling of the storm that struck the Achaean — a storm brought by angry gods?

Fire and sea, before now enemies, swore a common oath and then proclaimed it by destroying Achaean’s helpless forces. At night, roaring seas rose up, as Thracian winds smashed ships
together. Buffeted by the power of that storm, and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships scattered, then vanished, blown asunder by the savage shepherd’s gale. Later, when the sun’s bright light appeared again, we saw the Aegean blooming, as it were, with Achaean corpses and wreckage.

As for us, some god must have saved us — our boat survived, its hull intact. That was by no human action. Some immortal hand gripped our steering oar, perhaps Tyche, Fortune herself, rescued our ship from being swamped by surf or smashed upon the rocky coast as we rode at anchor. And then, when at last we realized that we had skirted Hades’ on those seas, we were not as relieved at our good luck, as we were chastened by all our woes on the Trojan plain, and this fresh misfortune, which drowned all those ships and scattering what remained.

So if anyone is still breathing on those far-flung ships, he will believe that we are the ones who have come to ruin. Why not, when we believe the same of them? Though we can hope that all these things will end well. As for Menelaus, watch for his return. If some ray of sunlight finds him still alive, his vision still intact, his four limbs still attached and functioning — preserved by Zeus, who cannot possibly wish to snuff out the entire blood-line — there is hope that we will see him again.

Now that I have told you this, you have the whole truth as I have it to give you.

Exit.

CHORUS. Whoever came up with that name, a name so altogether true — was there some power we cannot see telling that tongue what to say, the tongue that 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 she sailed away, transported by the West Wind, an earth-born giant. A horde of warriors with shields went after her, huntsmen following the vanished track her oars had left, all the way to where she had beached her ship, on the leafy shores of Simois. Then came bloody war.

And so Troy’s destiny is fulfilled. Wrath brings a dreadful wedding day, late retribution for dishonor 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, has learned a different song. I think I hear loud funeral chants, lamenting as an evil fate the marriage Paris brought. The city fills with songs of grief. It must endure all sorrows, the brutal slaughter of its sons.

A man once raised a lion cub in his own home. In early life the cub was gentle. Children loved it, and it brought the old men great delight. They gave it many things and clapped 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. 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.

I imagine 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

1. God ruling the land of the dead.
2. Small river in Turkey.
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.1

Among men there is a saying, an old one, from times long past: A man’s prosperity, once fully 
grown, has offspring. It never dies without producing children. From that man’s good fortune 
spring up unquenchable pains for all his race. But on this I do not agree with other men. I stand 
alone and say it is the unholy act that breeds more acts of the same kind. A truly virtuous house 
is blessed, its children always fair and just.

Old violent aggression loves to generate new troubles among evil men — soon or late, when it 
is 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 malice from which it sprang.

But virtue shines out from grimy dwellings, honoring 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. Virtue leads all 
things to well-deserved fulfillment.

Cheers off-stage. Agamemnon drives up in a chariot with Cassandra.2 Clytemnestra and 
servants enter from palace.

CHORUS. Hail, Atreides,3 my king, scourge of Troy! How shall I address you? How honor you in 
seemly terms, expressing neither too little or too much? For, many men esteem appearance more 
than truth, offending decency. Many men have ready sighs for someone else’s woes, though 
secretly unmoved. Or else they feign to share another’s joy, their faces grinning masks. But a just 
man sees through false regard.

When first you mustered troops in Helen’s cause — I will not lie — I saw you in another light. 
You seemed to me unfit to lead, an oarsman steering Argive ships astray, and trying by that 
wrongful sacrifice to raise the hopes of your unfortunate men. But now, with all my loyal heart, 
I cheer your hard-fought victory and welcome your return.

Quickly grasp the reigns of state again, my king! Seek to learn how Argos fared while you were 
gone, and ask which of those who stayed behind served the city well and which did harm.

AGAMEMNON. First, I salute Argos and its gods — the ones who brought about my safe return and 
the justice that I meted out on Priam’s land. The gods were deaf to all the urgent pleas, then cast 
their lots — there was no dissent — into the urn of blood — to kill their men, to ruin Troy. The 
other urn, the one for mercy, stood there empty — Hope alone took up a stand beside it.

Smoke still rises from the charred remains, a fitting sign of the city’s fall. The storms from its 
downfall will thunder in men’s minds for years to come. As fiery embers cool, their dying breaths 
give off the reek of wealth. For all this, we must never forget what we owe the gods. Around the 
Trojan plain, the Argives cast a savage net. For a woman’s sake, the beast from Argos, born from 
the belly of that wooden horse, at night as the Pleiades went down, sprang out with weapons 
drawn and razed the city. Bounding over walls, the famished lion gorged itself on royal blood.

So much for long preliminaries to the gods.

As for your concerns, old man, I heard your words, and will consider them. I agree with you —

1. The Furies are ancient she-demons who avenge blood crimes.

2. A daughter of Priam and a prophet, now Agamemnon’s slave and mistress.

3. Son of Atreus, that is, Agamemnon.
we will work together. Few men possess the inborn gift to banish envy when a friend is blessed with luck. Malicious venom seeps into the heart, doubling the pain of the stricken man, afflicting him with ills of his own, while he groans to see another prosper. I understand too well what false friends are — fealty no more solid than reflections in a stream. During my years away, those men who once seemed true to me became nothing more than shadows in my eyes. All except Odysseus.¹ He sailed with me against his will, but once in harness, he strove to do his best for me. I say this unaware of whether he be alive or dead.

Concerning other matters bearing on the city, we will call an assembly where all of us can talk things out in concert. We must ensure that everything that does our city good remains intact. And where we need to heal, we must make every effort to cleanse infection, searing whatever wounds we find, or cutting them away.

Now I go inside my palace, my hearth and home, first, to greet the gods who sent me off and brought me back this day. May victory, which was mine at Troy, stay with me forever.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Elders of Argos, I am not ashamed to speak before you, to say how much I love my husband. With time, men’s fears wane. So I will speak out now. I do not talk as one who has been schooled in speech, so I will just describe my life, my oppressive life, all the many years my husband was away at Troy.

First, it is sheer torture for a woman to sit at home alone, far from her man. She has to listen to all sorts of dreadful rumors. Heralds arrive, hard on each other’s heels, bearing news of some catastrophe — each one worse than those that came before. If my husband had suffered as many wounds as I heard tell of, he would have more holes in him than any net. If he had died as many times as rumor slew him, he could claim to be a second Geryon,² that triple-bodied beast, and boast of dying thrice, one death for every separate shape.

Because of all these dire reports, others have often had to cut me down, a high-hung noose strung tight around my neck. That is why our son, Orestes,³ is not standing here, the most trusted bond linking you and me. He should be, but there is no cause to worry. He is being cared for by a friendly ally, Strophius of Phocis,⁴ who warned me twice — first, of your own danger under Troy’s walls — second, of people here, how they could rebel, cry out against my governance, then overthrow the Council. For it is natural to men, once someone is down, to trample on him all the more. That is how I explain myself.

And it is all true. As for me, my eyes are dry — the welting sources of my tears are parched, no drop remains. Many long nights I wept until my eyes were red, as I kept watching for that signal light I had set up for you. 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 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 of our household, the mainstay of our ship of state, the lofty pillar which holds our roof beams high, his father’s truly begotten son, for men at sea

¹. King of islands in Western Greece, who entered the war reluctantly, but who served well and devised the stratagem of the Trojan Horse; now lost at sea.

². A monster with three bodies and three heads.

³. Iphigeneia, who was sacrificed at Aulis, Orestes, a toddler, and Electra, a young teen, are the children of Agamemnon and Clytemenstra.

⁴. A region of central Greece.
a land they glimpse beyond their wildest hopes, the fairest dawn after a night of storms, a flowing stream to thirsty travelers. 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 have suffered many ills. And now, my beloved lord, come to me here, climb down from that chariot. But, my king, do not place upon the common ground the foot which stamped out Troy. — You women, don’t just stand there. I have told you what to do. Spread out those tapestries, here on the ground, directly in his path. Quickly! Let his path be covered all in red, so Justice can lead him back into his home, a place he never hoped to see. As for the rest, my unsleeping vigilance will sort it out, with the help of the gods, as fate decrees.

**Serving women lay down a rich red carpet.**

**AGAMEMNON.** Daughter of Leda,¹ guardian of my home, your speech was, like my absence, far too long. Such praise as I deserve should come from others. Then it is worthwhile. All those things you said — do not puff me up with such female honors, or grovel there before me babbling tributes, like some barbarian. Do not invite envy to cross my path by strewing it with tapestry. That is how we honor 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 am telling you, honor me as a man, not as a god. My fame proclaims itself. It needs no foot mats made out of such embroideries. To avoid wrong doing is god’s greatest gift. When a man’s life ends in great prosperity, only then can we declare that he is a happy man. Thus, if I act, in every circumstance, as I ought to now, there is nothing I need fear.

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** Do not say that just to spoil my arrangements.

**AGAMEMNON.** You should know I will not go back on my word.

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** You must fear something, then, to act this way. You have made some promise to the gods.

**AGAMEMNON.** I have spoken! I fully understand, as well as any man, just what I am doing.

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** What do you think Priam would have done, if he had had your success?

**AGAMEMNON.** That is clear — he would have walked across these tapestries.

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** So then why fear what men say?

**AGAMEMNON.** What people say can have great power.

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** True, but the man who is not envied is not worth envying.

**AGAMEMNON.** It is not womanly to be so bent on competition.

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** It is fitting that the happy conqueror should let himself be overcome.

**AGAMEMNON.** And in this contest, that is the sort of victory you value?

**CLYTEMNESTRA.** For my sake, be strong and yield to me of your own will.

**AGAMEMNON.** Well, if it is what you want . . . Quick, someone get these sandals off — they have served my feet so well. (treading on the carpet) 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 is much shame when my feet squander assets of my house, wasting wealth and costly woven finery.

(he stops) So much for that.

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¹ Clytemnestra and Helen are both daughters of Leda, a Greek princess, but Helen’s father was Zeus.
(Indicating Cassandra.) Welcome this foreign girl into our house. And do it graciously. For god, who sees us from far away, looks down with favor on a gentle master. No one freely puts on slavery’s yoke, but this girl — Cassandra, Priam’s daughter, the finest prize of all we plundered — comes as my army’s gift to me. And now, since you have talked me into this, I will proceed into my palace, treading on this crimson pathway as I go.

He goes into palace.

CLYTEMNESTRA. 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 our house has a full store, thanks to the gods. We are rich. We have no sense of poverty. I had vowed to tread on many such cloths, to use what we have stored up in our home, as 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. As when Zeus makes wine from bitter grapes, the house immediately grows cool, once its lord strolls through his own halls in complete command. O Zeus, Zeus, who accomplishes all things, answer my prayers. Take care to bring about all things that reach fulfillment through your will.

CHORUS. Why does this sense of dread hover so uneasingly around my heart? 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. Everything inside me beats against my chest, surging back and forth in tides of grim foreboding. Something is moving to fulfillment. Oh — I pray my premonitions prove false and never come to light.

As we know, boundaries of robust health break down — disease is always pressing hard against the common wall between them. So with the fate of men. It holds to a straight course, then, all at once, can crash upon a hidden rock of grief. But if, as a precaution, men toss overboard some part of their rich cargo at the right time, the house, though grieving, will not completely founder, nor will its hull be swamped.

But once a murdered man’s dark blood has soaked the ground, who then can bring him back? Even Aesculapius, 1 whose skill could raise the dead, was stopped by Zeus’ thunderbolt. Was that not a 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. I would speak out loud and clear. I would cry out my forebodings. But now it mutters in the dark, uneasy, holding little hope for resolution. And still my spirit smoulders.

CLYTEMNESTRA. (To Cassandra.) You should go in, too — I mean you up there, Cassandra, Priam’s daughter. Zeus, in his mercy to you, has made you a member of our household, to share its rites. So you can take your place before the altar of the god protecting all our wealth, along with the other slaves. So come down. Leave the chariot. And leave your pride behind. Men say even Heracles, Alcmene’s son, 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, wealthy in honor as well as goods. Certain men, those who have reaped a harvest of riches beyond their dreams, maltreat their slaves. They go too far. But here, with us, you will get treatment that accords with our beneficent traditions.

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1. A Greek physician who became a god of medicine and healing.
CHORUS. (to Cassandra) Our queen is talking to you. Her meaning is clear. Fate has caught you in its nets. Best you obey, unless such action is beyond your power.

CLYTEMNESTRA. If she is not like a swallow, with a song all her own, something barbarously obscure, I will speak so she can understand. She must obey.

CHORUS. Of all your choices now what she says is best. Do as she says.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Come down now! I do not 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 had better come at once. If what I say means nothing to you, if you cannot understand, at least use your foreign hand to make a sign.

CHORUS. The stranger needs an interpreter. She is like some wild thing, freshly trapped.

CLYTEMNESTRA. She is mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart. She has 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. (leaving) But I will waste no more time dealing with her contempt outside the house.

CHORUS. I will 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?

CASSANDRA. [screaming] Aieeee . . . earth . . . sky . . . Apollo . . . Apollo . . . !!

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

CASSANDRA. Aieeee . . . earth . . . sky . . . Apollo . . . my destroyer . .

CHORUS. She cried out again. Such ominous words — and to a god who is not to be invoked at times of grieving.

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

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

CASSANDRA. Apollo! Oh Apollo! God of the road . . . You are obliterating me! Where am I now? Where have you led me? What house is this?

CHORUS. If you do not know where you are, I will tell you — you are at the house of the Atreidae.

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

CHORUS. This stranger’s like a keen hound on the scent. She is on the trail of blood.

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

CHORUS. We’ve heard about your fame in oracles. But here in Argos no one wants a prophet.

CASSANDRA. O god, what is 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.

CHORUS. I do not understand what she is saying now. What she first said, that I understood — the whole city talks about it.

CASSANDRA. Oh evil woman, you are going to do it. Your own husband, the man who shares your
bed — once you have washed him clean . . . there in the bath . . .

CHORUS. I still do not understand. What she is saying is just too confused.

CASSANDRA. Look! Look over there! What is that apparition? It that the net of death? No, she is the net, his bed mate, murder’s eager proxy. Let those insatiable Furies harrying this clan rise up and scream for joy — another victim has fallen into their hands!

CHORUS. What Fury do you now invoke? to shriek throughout this house? You frighten me.

CHORUS. Drop by drop dark blood flows around my heart — like mortal wounds when life’s sun sets and death is near.

CASSANDRA. A trap! He is collapsing in the water! I tell you he is being murdered in the bath!

CHORUS. It takes no skill interpreting oracles to hear disaster in those outcries.

CHORUS. What good ever comes to men from oracles? They predict only evil. All those skilful words encourage men to dread the seer’s pronouncements.

CASSANDRA. O god Apollo, I am next! Why have you brought me here in my wretchedness, if not to die, the second victim?

CHORUS. You are possessed. Some god controls you mind. And so you wail aloud about your death, just like some shrill nightingale that sings ceaselessly of her heart’s distress, wailing all her life for her dead nestling.

CASSANDRA. Oh 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 raised to hack me to death.

CHORUS. You keep repeating that. Where does it end? That is what I cannot see.

CASSANDRA. Then my prophecy will no more veil itself, like some new bride half-veiled. I will 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. Drinking human blood has made them bold — they dance in celebration through all the rooms. The house’s Furies cannot be dislodged. 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.¹

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 these old stories of this family’s crimes.

CHORUS. How could an oath of ours, no matter how sincere, help heal your grief? But I am amazed that you, born overseas, can say so much about a foreign city, as if you had lived here.

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

CHORUS. Surely the god was not in love with you?

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

CHORUS. When all goes well, everyone scruples.

¹. Thyestes, twin brother of Atreus, seduced his sister-in-law. Atreus retaliated by chopping up Thyestes’ children and serving them to him at a banquet. Thyestes then placed a curse of the House of Atreus, as Aegisthus explains below.
CASSANDRA. Apollo was like a mighty wrestler, panting all over me, in love.
CHORUS. Did you succumb to him — bear him a child?
CASSANDRA. I promised to, but then I broke my word.
CHORUS. Did you already have prophetic skill, inspired by the god?
CASSANDRA. At that time I used to prophesy to all my countrymen. I would foretell disasters.
CHORUS. How did you escape Apollo’s anger?
CASSANDRA. I did not escape. Ever since I resisted him, no one believes me.
CHORUS. But to us, at least, what you prophesy seems true enough.
CASSANDRA. Aieee . . . the pains I feel! The fearful labor 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 are like children murdered by their loved ones . . . their hands are full, clenching chunks of their own flesh as food . . . it is all so clear . . . that awful meal their own father tasted.
For all that, I say, revenge is on the way, someone is planning it, a craven jackal, a beast wallowing in bed, keeping watch, waiting for my master to return. Yes, my master — since I must now bear the yoke of slavery. That lord of war, who led the fleet and ravaged Troy, has no idea what that cur is up to, what evil plans the hateful bitch is hatching, as her tongue licks his hands in welcome, like treacherous Ate, goddess who destroys. It is outrageous — the woman kills her man.
What shall I call her? What awful monster suits her? A snake? An amphisbaena¹ with a head at either end? Or perhaps a Scylla² living in the rocks, preying on sailors, raging mother of hell, who breathes relentless war on loved ones. 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 — matters little. Why should it? What will come will come. And soon enough, as you stand here full of pity, you will say Cassandra’s predictions were all too true.
CHORUS. I understand about Thyestes’ meal, and tremble thinking how he ate his children’s flesh. Terror grips me as I hear these truths boldly stated. As for the rest, hearing that just makes me lose my way.
CASSANDRA. I tell you, you will see Agamemnon dead.
CHORUS. Poor girl, calm yourself. Tone down those words.
CASSANDRA. No — no one can heal what my words foretell.
CHORUS. Not if they are true. But may the gods prevent it!
CASSANDRA. While you pray here, others move in to kill.
CHORUS. What man is going to commit such crimes?
CASSANDRA. What man? You have completely missed the point.
CHORUS. Yes I have — I do not see who has means to do it.
CASSANDRA. Yet I can speak your language well enough.
CHORUS. So does the oracle at Delphi, but understanding what it says is hard.

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1. A serpent with two heads and eyes that glow like candles.
CASSANDRA. Oh this fire! His fire comes over me once more! The pain . . . LycianApollo . . . burning me . . . That two-footed lioness . . . crouching there with a jackal, once the noble lion is gone . . . she is going to kill me . . . The agony! Now she prepares her drugs, and in her rage, vows I too will partake 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, this prophet’s wreath 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. Enrich some other woman! Let someone else preach destruction instead of me.

**She starts tearing off her clothes.**

Look how Apollo now in person strips me, rips my prophetic robes, the god who watched, 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 has led his seer to her place of death. No father’s altar for me here — instead a chopping block awaits, slaughtered in one hot stroke of bloody sacrifice.

But we will not die without the gods’ revenge. Another man will come and will avenge us, a son who will slay his mother, paying back his father’s death, an exile, a man this country has made a stranger. He will come back and, like a coping stone, bring the ruin of his family to a close. For gods have made a powerful oath — his father’s supine corpse will bring him home.

Why then do I lament so piteously? Since I am the one who first saw how Troy would be obliterated, since I see now how those who razed the city are being destroyed in judgment from the gods, I will go to face my destiny. I will dare to die. I greet this doorway as the gates of Death. Once the death blow strikes, I pray I will have a gentle end — no struggle, as my life blood drains away. And then I will close my eyes.

**CHORUS.** You poor woman, so much pain and wisdom. You have 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 is no way out. My friends, my time has come.

**CHORUS.** But there is some benefit in going last.

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

**CHORUS.** You endure your suffering with courage I admire.

CASSANDRA. No one hearing that has reason to be proud.

**CHORUS.** But to die well confers some human dignity.

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

**CHORUS.** What is wrong? Why turn around in fear?

CASSANDRA. This house — It is terrifying!

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

CASSANDRA. It is this house. It reeks of murder, blood slaughter . . .

**CHORUS.** No, no! That is only the smell of sacrifice, victims at the hearth.

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1. Lycia is a region of Asia Minor.
CASSANDRA. That smell — it is like an open grave . . .
CHORUS. The Syrian incense? It burns throughout the house.

CASSANDRA. No. But I must go. I will mourn my death, and Agamemnon’s, too, inside there. Enough of living! Ah, my friends, I am 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.

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

CASSANDRA. One last time I feel the urge to speak. Not a dirge about my death, rather 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, easy prey. Alas, for human life. When things go well, a mere shadow overturns it all. When badly, a damp sponge wipes every trace away. Of these two, the second is more to be pitied.

She enters palace.

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 honored by the gods. But now — if he must pay the penalty for blood which other men before him shed and die in retribution for the dead he himself has killed — what mortal who hears all this can boast he lives a life unscarred by fate?

A scream back.

AGAMENNON. [from inside] Help me! I am hit . . . a deadly blow . . .
CHORUS. Silence! Who cried out?

AGAMENNON. [within] Aaagh! I am hit again . . .

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

CHORUS B. Summon all the people, call them to bring help up to the palace.

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

CHORUS. I agree. But quickly! There is no time to delay.

CHORUS B. This is only their opening move — a sign they are going to tyrannize the city.

CHORUS. We are wasting time.

CHORUS C. It is up to those who can carry out a plan to tell us what to do.

CHORUS. Yes. I do not know how to bring the dead to life with nothing but words.

CHORUS B. But just to stay alive, should we not bow down before these tyrants who desecrate the house?

CHORUS C. No. We cannot do that. Death would be better!

CHORUS. But should we assume, just on the basis of those groans we heard, that Agamemnon is dead?

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

CHORUS. That is it then — everyone agrees on this — we need to know more clearly how things
stand with Atreides.

The palace doors swing open, discovering Clytemnestra, covered with blood, standing over the corpses of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Behold the body of the scourge of Troy beside his lifeless war prize! Before this moment I said many things to suit my ends. I am 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 of agony so high no one could jump over them? I have brooded on this struggle many years, the old blood feud. My moment has come at last, though long delayed. I stand now where I struck, where I achieved what I set out to do. I did all this. I won’t deny the fact.

Round this man I cast my all-embracing net, rich robes of malice, 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, vomiting blood all over me, drenching me as you see. And I rejoiced — just as the fecund earth rejoices when the heavens send spring rains, and newborn buds burst into bloom.

That is how things stand, old men of Argos. This is my triumph. If it were fitting to pour libations on this corpse, I would pour my curses out — that would be just. He filled the mixing bowls in his own house with such misery, and now he drinks it to the dregs. He is home at last.

CHORUS. What you say I find incredible! How can you exult over your dead husband?

CLYTEMNESTRA. You are 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 blame me as you like. I do not care. This man, Agamemnon, my husband, is dead, the work of this right hand, a work of justice. That is how matters stand.

CHORUS. Woman, what earth-grown poison have you eaten, what evil drink drawn from the surging sea, that you are so mad as to risk the people’s anger? You cast him off. You cut him down. So now you will be thrown out, exiled from the city, as a thing despised by your own people.

CLYTEMNESTRA. So now you would sentence me to banishment, send me from the city a thing accursed? Back then you made no accusation against this man lying here. He slaughtered his own child, that girl I bore in pain, to charm the winds from Thrace — and didn’t care. To him she was a beast to lay before the altar. He had flocks of them — his farms were full. Shouldn’t you have banished him from Argos for that polluting crime? You are strict enough when you pass judgment on what I have done. So let me warn you — I am prepared to fight you head to head. If you win, well then, you can govern me. But if the gods favor me, you will learn, old as you are, how to comport yourselves.

CHORUS. You are too ambitious, far too arrogant. Blood-drenched murder has made you mad. That is plain. Your eyes are full of blood. Now stroke for stroke you will pay for what you have done. You have lost your friends, you have lost your honor—

CLYTEMNESTRA. (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, I will never walk these halls in fear, so long as Aegisthus stokes the blazing fires in my hearth. And he is as loyal to me now as always, my shield, no man to trifle with.

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1. Her lover, the only surviving son of Thestes.
Here he lies, the man who abused his wife, seduced by every captive girl at Troy — and here she lies, his concubine, his spear prize, the faithful seer who shared his bed. She also knew the rowing benches where sailors sweat. They get what they deserve. He is dead. She, like a swan, sang her last song, then died. Now she lies there, his sweetheart. She will bring new thrills, fresh pleasures to my bed.

CHORUS. May some Fate come, free from sorrow and quick, bringing endless sleep, our last eternal sleep, now our great protector is dead. For a woman’s sake he suffered much, and now by a woman’s hand he died.

A curse on you, Helen, frantic woman! On your own, beneath Troy’s walls, you ended many. Now you wear your final garland — one long remembered for the blood that will never wash away. Back then in this house lived a spirit of strife, a power that broke our king.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Do not torment yourself like this, invoking death and fate, or redirect your rage on Helen, as if she killed those men, all those Achaean lives, all by herself.

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

CLYTEMNESTRA. You talk sense when you call on the demon of this house, who has devoured three generations, the one who nurtures bloodlust in our very entrails. And so new blood spurts out before the old wound heals.

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

My king, my lord — How shall I weep for you? How speak of you with love? To lie entangled in the spider’s web, gasping life away — a sacrilege — struck down in treachery, the two-edged sword wielded by your own wife.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Are you saying this work is mine? That is not so. Do not think of me as Agamemnon’s wife. The form of this corpse’s wife was taken on 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 acting on his father’s crime could well have spurred you on. Black Ruin moves ahead with force through streams of family blood, meting vengeance for the young served up at a nightmarish feast.

My king, my lord — How shall I weep for you? How speak of you with love? To lie entangled in the spider’s web, gasping life away — a sacrilege — struck down in treachery, the two-edged sword wielded by your own wife.

CLYTEMNESTRA. I do not 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, his daughter, that sweet flower who we mourn. So let him not boast out loud.

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1. Ancestor of the Atreidae. For his transgressions, Tantalus was condemned in the underworld to have fruit and drink within reach but be never able to obtain it.
in Hades’ realm! He was the first to draw his sword, and by the sword he has been repaid.

CHORUS. O Earth, my Earth — how I wish you had swallowed me before I ever saw my king lying low on such bed, a silver-plated bath. Who will now bury him? Who will mourn him?

CLYTEMNESTRA. That is none of your concern. We will 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. She will embrace the man with love.

CHORUS. One disgrace exchanged for yet another, 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.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Now you are close to the truth. For my part, I am prepared to swear an oath to the demon of the House of Atreus — I will rest content with what has been done, hard though that is, if he will leave this house alone, transferring family murder somewhere else, to some other clan. I do not 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.

Aegisthus arrives with armed men.

AEGISTHUS. 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 woven by the Furies, in full payment for deceitful treachery his father’s hand devised. For Atreus, king of Argos, was this man’s father.

Know you that my father, Thyestes, brother to Atreus, challenged his authority. So Atreus expelled him from his home and city. But Thyestes in his misery returned, a suppliant at his own hearth, praying fate to save him, that he would not be killed, his own blood would not pollute his native soil. Atreus, the godless father of this man here, welcomed him effusively, but not with love.

He arranged what seemed a celebration — a feast with plentiful meat, but served my father flesh of his own children. Thyestes, in total ignorance, took the food he did not recognize, and ate the meal which, as you have witnessed, destroyed the race. When Thyestes learned the abominable thing he had done, he screamed, staggered back, and vomited up the butchered flesh. Then, kicking down the banquet table, called down on the House of Atreus an unbearable curse — “Let them all die, the entire race of Pleisthenes,1 all die like this.”

That is why you see this man lying here. This murder was my plan for retribution. For Atreus threw my broken father out, and me as well, his third son, still an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. But I grew up in exile. And Justice brought me back. I seized the man who banished me. I planned each detail of this murderous scheme. Now I see him in the nets of Justice, I can face even my own death with joy.

CHORUS. Aegisthus, you are contemptible, 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 indeed arrives, it will be you who will not escape the people’s curse or death by stoning at their hands.

AEGISTHUS. So you say — but you man the lower oars. Your masters on the higher deck control the ship. You will learn how painful it is at your age to be taught your place. Hunger pangs and

1. Father of Atreus and Thyestes.
chains, two worthy teachers, make excellent teachers, even with old men. Your aged eyes may be dim, but surely you are not totally blind. You should not kick at thorns. You will only hurt yourselves.

CHORUS. You woman! You stayed at home, waiting out the war, until the men came back. You soiled a real man’s bed, then planned to kill that man.

AEGISTHUS. This talk of yours going to bring you pain. The tongue of Orpheus¹ was unlike yours — the pleasure of his voice drew all things to him. Your puny squawking merely irritates. But chains will quiet you.

CHORUS B. As if you rule in Argos! You, who plotted Agamemnon’s death, but hadn’t the courage to kill the man yourself!

AEGISTHUS. Clearly the woman had to do it. I could not get close to him. After all, I am an old enemy. But with his wealth I will rule you people. Those who resist I will strap under the yoke. Then we will see how docile you can be.

CHORUS C. Not if Orestes still sees the light of day. You may yet feel the thrust of his blade!

AEGISTHUS. If that is the way you want to act and speak, you will get your lesson fast. (calling)

Men, stand ready!

Guards draw their arms.

CHORUS. Do not give way! Get your weapons ready.

AEGISTHUS. My hand is on my sword as well. I am not afraid to die.

CHORUS. You say you will welcome death. Good to hear! We are happy to oblige.

CLYTEMNESTRA. No, beloved, no! Let us cause no further trouble. Our wretched harvest is bountiful enough — we have reaped sufficient pain. No more bloodshed. (to Chorus) You honorable old men, go home. Yield to fate, before you come to harm. What we have done here we had to do. Let our troubles end right now.

AEGISTHUS. What about these men who let their tongues prattle on against me, hurling insults in my face, testing fate?

CHORUS. Men of Argos will never cringe before an evil man.

AEGISTHUS. I will get my own back soon enough.

CHORUS. Not if fate brings Orestes back.

AEGISTHUS. I understand how exiles feed on hope.

CHORUS. Go on! Fatten yourself on the spoils of your villainy. While you still can, pollute all justice.

AEGISTHUS. You must know you will pay for all your insulance to me.

CHORUS. Hear him boast like a cock beside his hen.

CLYTEMNESTRA. Aegisthus, leave them their impotent yelping. You and I control the house. We will put all things in order.

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1. Legendary musician whose songs could charm even the gods.
PROLOGUE
Before Agamemnon’s Tomb, day
Orestes, Pylades

1. MUSIC MAIN TITLE UP, FADE OUT UNDER:

2. PYLADES Orestes, this seems to be the tomb of your murdered father.

3. ORESTES Hermes, guide of the dead, guardian of your father’s powers, I pray you give me strength. For I have come back to this land from exile. On this grave, this burial mound, I call my father, imploring him to hear me . . .

4. Here is a lock of hair, an offering to Inachus, the stream where I was raised. And here another, a token for the dead. I was not here, my father, to mourn your death. I could not stretch my hand out to you at your burial.

5. MUSIC FADE UP ELECTRA AND CHORUS, CHANTING BACK

6. Look there!

7. PYLADES A band of women, all in black, marching toward us. What can have happened?

8. ORESTES Has some fresh hardship struck the house?

9. PYLADES No, they seem to be bringing libations here to honor your father.

10. ORESTES You must be right. I see my sister, Electra, with them. She weeps, clearly in great pain. — O Zeus, let me avenge my father’s death! Support me as my ally in this struggle. — Pylades, let us stand aside, so I can learn what brings these suppliants to this place.

PARADOS

11. MUSIC SOLEMN MARCH.

12. CHORUS I am sent here from the palace with libations for the dead. Blood flows down my cheeks from cuts my nails have scratched. As life drags on, my heart consumes itself with grief — the sound of it in our robes, as we rend the woven linen and weep for carefree times lost forever.
1. CHORUS cont’d

Fear shrieked through the house last night, foreboding cries, heard in the deepest recesses, that chilled us as we slept. The readers of dreams, divinely inspired, declared that the wrath of the dead is surging up from their graves against their murderers. O Earth, my mother Earth!

2. 

To protect herself from harm, the godless queen sends me here with appeasing gifts, loveless gifts. But I fear to pray as she instructed. For what can atone for blood once spilled?

3. 

O house of desolation! Darkness grips the palace where a king was slain. Gone is its former greatness, unassailable in its might. Its glory rang in every ear, echoed in every heart. Only fear remains. For now, in all men’s eyes, success is revered more than god himself. But Justice is vigilant. She tips the scales. For some her strike comes swiftly by daylight. For others she lurks till dusk, while others she swallows in an eternal night.

4. 

The nurturing earth drinks her fill of blood, which cries out for revenge, and will not dissolve or seep away. The guilty live in utter desperation. Madness preys upon their minds, an all-consuming infection.

5. 

Just as the virgin’s bed once stained can never be redeemed, in such a way, though all rivers flow into one cleansing stream, bloody hands never shall wash clean.

6. 

As for me — the gods set a fatal noose around my city, Troy, and I was led from my father’s house a slave. Now I do what I have to do, beating down my bitter rage. Against my will, I follow my masters’ orders, right or wrong. Still, behind my veil I deplore the iniquity of my masters, and am chilled with secret horror.

**EPISODE ONE**

The Same

*Electra, Chorus, Orestes (Pylades)*

7. ELECTRA

You women of my house, since you are here attending me in prayer, give me your counsel. What should I say as I pour these grave offerings? How frame my words to make my prayer worthy of my father? Shall I say that I bear these gifts from a doting wife to her beloved husband — from my mother? I do not dare. Shall I recite the words men often use, “Repay in kind these worthy gifts.” No! Let him repay them as their treachery deserves!
1. ELECTRA cont’d  Or should I stand here in silence and dishonor, the way my father died — empty these urns with eyes averted, let the earth drink, then hurl the vessel from me and retrace my steps, like someone sent to remove the household trash? Help me, friends! We share a common hatred. Do not hide your hearts. I am no one you need fear. Fate awaits each of us — whether free or in bondage. Speak up, if you know of something better.

2. CHORUS  I respect your father’s tomb, as if it were an altar. So I will speak straight from my heart, as you have asked.

3. ELECTRA  Then talk to me, out of your reverence for my father’s grave.

4. CHORUS  As you pour, bless those who are your friends.

5. ELECTRA  Of those close to me, who can I call friends?

6. CHORUS  First, name yourself — then anyone who hates Aegisthus.

7. ELECTRA  Then I will pray on my own behalf. Shall I include you too?

8. CHORUS  If you wish.

9. ELECTRA  Who else should I add to join with us?

10. CHORUS  Orestes, though he is far from home.

11. ELECTRA  Good. You advise me well.

12. CHORUS  Remember, too, the guilty slayers.

13. ELECTRA  In what way? I have never practiced this. Teach me.

14. CHORUS  Let some god or mortal man come down on them.

15. ELECTRA  You mean as judge or as avenger? Which?

16. CHORUS  Pronounce these words — and clearly — “One who will exact life for life.”

17. ELECTRA  Is it pious thus to petition gods?

18. CHORUS  Why wouldn’t it be? How can it be impious to pray for the punishment of evil?

19. ELECTRA  Oh Hermes, mighty herald, moving between earth above and earth below, messenger to the dead, aid me now. Summon the spirits there beneath the ground who guard my father’s house, to hear my prayers. And call on Earth herself, who, giving birth and nurturing all things, in due.
1. ELECTRA cont’d

    course takes back the swollen tide of their increasing store.
    As I pour out these offerings, I call upon you, father, to pity
    me — and dear Orestes, too! How can we rule in our own
    home? We are beggars now, as if our mother sold us in
    exchange for Aegisthus, her partner in your murder.

2. I live like a slave. Orestes languishes in exile, estranged
    from his birthright. In their profligacy, those two oppressors
    squander all the wealth you strove for. And so I pray you,
    dear father, let fortune bring Orestes home! Make me better
    than mother, my hand more virtuous! Those are my prayers
    for us.

3. Our enemies — for them, my father, I pray that someone
    will come as your avenger, to slay your slayers in
    retribution, as is just. As I pray for our well being, I include
    this curse — may they be trapped by their own wickedness.
    Send your blessing to the earth above, with help from gods,
    and Earth, and Justice, all combined to bring us victory.

4. SHE POURS THE LIBATIONS.

5. Those are my prayers, and over them I pour these libations.
    (to Chorus) Your duty now is to crown my prayers with
    flowers, reciting your mournful chant for the dead.

6. CHORUS

    (chanting) Come, let our tears begin,
    fall, and die, as our master died.
    Let them guard us from evil,
    preserve the good, and keep away
    with our outpoured libations
    the polluting curse.
    Hear me, oh hear me,
    my honored master!
    May your disembodied soul hear my prayer.

7. Oh, bring one now to redeem this house,
    some powerful spear man,
    one who bends a Scythian bow;
    or wields the sword
    for fighting hand to hand.

8. ELECTRA

    My father has now received his offerings. The earth has
    drunk them up. But look — here is something odd.
1. CHORUS What is it?
2. ELECTRA A lock of hair, laid as an offering on the tomb.
3. CHORUS Whose is it?
4. ELECTRA Nobody could mistake it.
5. CHORUS How so? Let your youth instruct our age.
6. ELECTRA No one in Argos could have cut this off except me.
7. CHORUS True. Those others who should mourn are the dead man’s foes.
8. ELECTRA It looks just like . . .
9. CHORUS Like whose? I want to know.
10. ELECTRA Like mine.
11. CHORUS Perhaps Orestes! Did he place it here, a secret offering?
12. ELECTRA It really looks like his . . .
13. CHORUS But how could he dare return?
14. ELECTRA Perhaps he sent it here by a friend, as a token for his dead father.
15. CHORUS Fresh cause for tears, if Orestes dares not set foot in Argos himself.
16. ELECTRA Over my heart, too, breaks a bitter wave. I feel as if a sword has cut clean through me. No one in Argos left this here, least of all that murderess who profanes the name of mother. Yet, how can I be certain that this offering comes from the man I love most— Orestes, my brother?
17. If this lock had a human voice, like some messenger, it could ease my mind and tell me whether to cast it away as coming from an enemy, or if, belonging to my sorrow’s partner, it should remain to grace this tomb. I know not what to do.
18. ORESTES (approaching) Thank the gods for answering your prayers.
19. ELECTRA Why? What have they given me?
20. ORESTES The man you prayed for.
21. ELECTRA What do you know of him?
1. ORESTES
   I know your heart is with Orestes.

2. ELECTRA
   Yes, but how have my prayers been answered now?

3. ORESTES
   I am here. You need look no more for allies. I am the most devoted one you have.

4. ELECTRA
   No, stranger! You weave some net to trap me in.

5. ORESTES
   If so, I plot against myself as well.

6. ELECTRA
   You just want to mock my distress.

7. ORESTES
   If I mock you, I mock myself.

8. ELECTRA
   Orestes . . . is it truly you? Can I call you Orestes?

9. ORESTES
   Yes. Orestes stands before you. Why take so long to recognize the truth? When you saw the lock of hair, that token of my grief, your mind flew to the thought of me. Here. Put this hair in place. See, it is mine. And it matches yours. Study this mantle — You made this. You worked the loom. Look at this design, these animals, you wove them.

10. ELECTRA BEGINS TO WEEP.

11. Govern yourself! Be calm! Remember — our nearest in blood hates us both.

12. ELECTRA
   O dearest member of your father’s house. the seed of hope through all our suffering — trust to your own strength and win back your patrimony. Oh, I am so happy! To me you are four different loves. You take the place of the father we lost, the mother who betrayed us, and the sister cruelly sacrificed. And as well, you are my faithful brother. You alone sustained my sense of worth. May Power and Justice stand allies with us now — and may almighty Zeus stand the third.

13. ORESTES
   O Zeus, look down on what we do! See the abandoned fledglings of the eagle, whose father perished in the viper’s coils, that deadly net. Orphans now, we bear the pangs of hunger, not yet strong enough to bring our father’s quarry to the nest. Behold our condition, Electra and myself, fatherless children, outcasts, banished from our own home.

14. If you destroy these fledglings, what respect will you receive at feasts from hands like his, their father’s, who offered you such abundance? Who will trust your omens? If this royal stock decays, it cannot consecrate your altars.
1. **ORESTES cont’d**
   with sacrificial oxen. Stand by us. You can raise our house from wreckage, make it great again, though now it lies in ruin.

2. **CHORUS**
   Children, hope of your father’s house, speak softly. Someone may hear you and carry tales to those in power. Oh how I wish to see them dead one day, roasting in flames, sizzling like pitch.

3. **ORESTES**
   Apollo’s great oracle surely will defend me. It commanded me to take revenge on those who slew my father, to strike them down the way they struck him down.

4. **ORESTES**
   Otherwise, I would pay with countless miseries. Some would come from demons under the earth — ravaging disease, flesh-eating sores, poisonous fangs tearing living tissue, scabrous suppurating wounds. And other ills — attacks by vengeful Furies, roused by murdered kinsmen demanding vengeance, bringing wild imaginings, madness. For such an outcast, there is no sanctuary, no respite — until at last, despised, friendless, he withers in all-consuming pain and dies.

5. **ORESTES**
   Am I wrong to trust such oracles? Even if I did not, the deed must still be done. One end answers many calls — the gods’ decree, compassion for my father, the theft of my patrimony. And there is my duty to my countrymen, most glorious of men, wasters of Troy. They should not have to bow to a pair of women. For Aegisthus is at heart a woman. Or, if there is any manhood in him, we will test it soon enough.

6. **CHORUS**
   Omnipotent Fates, bring all this to pass! Through Zeus’ power, make all things right. For Justice turns the scales exacting retribution and shouts, “Blood for blood! Blow for blow. Transgressors must pay.” So runs the lesson of three generations.

7. **ORESTES**
   Oh father of dread, what can I say or do so far from your distant resting place to send light against your darkness? — Although, I have heard it said that the homage of mourners can comfort the sons of Atreus, former princes of this house.

8. **CHORUS**
   My child, among the dead, not even savage jaws of fire can destroy the soul. He will show his rage in time. The dead are mourned, the guilty discovered. A eulogy for a father, strong and clear and just, seeks far and wide to confound offenders.
1. ELECTRA
   Hear us now, my father, as, in turn, we mourn and weep.
   Your two children at your tomb now sing your death song.
   Your tomb has welcomed us, two suppliants and outcasts.
   What in this is good? What is free from woe? Who wrestles
dead and wins?

2. CHORUS
   But if god wills it, he can turn our dirges into joyful songs.

3. ORESTES
   My father, if only you had died by some Lycian spear at
Troy! You would have bequeathed glory to your children in
their home. Men would now honor them. You would have
won a tomb raised high in foreign lands, a death your home
could lightly bear.

4. CHORUS
   Dear to the men you loved, the ones who died so bravely,
you would stand majestic in the underworld, minister of the
mightiest gods below, who rule the dead. In life, you were a
king of men — the one who holds the staff that every man
obeys.

5. ELECTRA
   I do not want you dead, my father, not even under Trojan
walls, with all those others who perished by the spear
where the Scamander flows. No. I wish your killers had
been killed by their own kin, just as they murdered you.
Then people in far-off lands would hear about their deaths
and not our own distress.

6. CHORUS
   Children, what you wish for is finer than gold, greater than
the bliss of those who live beyond the northern wind. But
wishing is easy. Even so, that double whip is lashing home
— for now forces under the earth are stirring to help us.
Our oppressors are marked for their polluted hands. Your
day is imminent!

7. OESTES
   Our words, like arrows, bore into the earth straight to my
father’s ear.

8. ORESTES
   O Zeus, Zeus, send us from the world
below your long-delayed revenge, pay back
the evil wrought by human hands. Oh, let
that come to pass — and thus avenge all
fathers.

   CHORUS
   Let my heart cry out in triumph when that
man is slain, when that woman dies! Why
should I hide what reigns within me —
hatred, driving like a storm, a tempest
raging in my heart?
1. **ELECTRA**
   Oh, when will mighty Zeus strike them with his fist — split their skulls apart?
   Give our land some sign — confirm our faith. From these crimes I seek the rights of justice. Oh Earth, hear me, and you, divinities below.

2. **ORESTES**
   Lords of the world below, alas, see the mighty curses of the dead. See survivors of the line of Atreus, here in our helplessness, cast out from home, dishonored. Oh Zeus, where can we turn?

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

4. **ELECTRA**
   Oh cruel and reckless mother! — that savage burial of a king, his people barred, no mourning procession — you dared place him in the tomb without the sacred rites.

5. **ORESTES**
   She will pay for his dishonor, by the gods and my own hands! Let me kill her. Then let me die.

6. **CHORUS**
   And let me tell you this — she first tore off his limbs, then hung them round his neck. Thus she buried him, to burden your life with crushing pain. You hear me? Your father’s death she made a travesty.

7. **ELECTRA**
   You tell of events I was not allowed to see. I was thought worthless, caged like some rabid dog. Hear that! Carve that on your heart.

8. **CHORUS**
   Listen well and let her story steel your resolve. Things now stand as they stand. You want to know what comes, but you must wait, ready to strike with no backward glance.

9. **ORESTES**
   Father, I call on you! Stand by your children!
1. ELECTRA
Through these tears I join his call!

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

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

4. ELECTRA
Dear gods, let justice choose the victor!

5. CHORUS
These entreaties make me shudder. This doom’s been long delayed, but it does come for those who pray.

ORESTES
Father, you may not have perished like a king, but, in answer to my prayer, make me the master of your house.

O family bred for torments, for bloody strokes of ruin, for pains beyond enduring and endless grief!

ELECTRA
I, too, father, supplicate you — destroy Aegisthus and set me free.

The cure for all these ills comes not from some stranger outside the house, but from within — by pain and blood.

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

To gods beneath the ground we raise our voices. Hear us, you blessed gods of earth!

ELECTRA
Father, hear my last appeal — Behold your children huddled at your tomb. Take pity on them, your son and daughter.

6. CHORUS
It is well to prolong your prayer, for that will honor this neglected tomb. But since your heart is rightly set to act, it is time to test your fortune, time to start.

7. ORESTES
You are right. But first we might ask this question — Why did that woman send out these libations? What did she hope to gain? If you know her reason, tell me now. I want to hear.

8. CHORUS
My child, I do know. I was there. She had foreboding dreams.

9. ORESTES
Do you know the nature of her dreams?

10. CHORUS
She gave birth to a snake. That is what she told me.

11. ORESTES
What else occurred?
1. CHORUS  She set it in a bed wrapped in swaddling clothes, just like a child.

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

3. CHORUS  She dreamt she offered it her teat.

4. ORESTES  Didn’t the monster bite?

5. CHORUS  No. But with her milk it sucked out blood.

6. ORESTES  It is an omen! Her vision means a man.

7. CHORUS  She woke up screaming, terrified. Many torches extinguished at night were lit throughout the house to calm her. Then she sent out these libations for the dead — in the hope they would work like medicine for her distress.

8. ORESTES  I pray to Earth and to my father’s tomb that this dream will fulfill itself in me. I think it matches me in every point. That snake came from the same womb as did I — it was wrapped up in my swaddling clothes and sucked the milk that nourished me, mixing it with blood so that she screamed. It portends that she will die by violence, from nursing such a violent beast. Me. I am that snake. And I will kill her. That is the meaning of this dream.

9. CHORUS  Your reading of her dream rings true. So be it! Tell your friends the rest — what they must do or take care not to do.

10. ORESTES  My plan is simple. First, Electra, you must go inside. Keep this bond with me a secret. The two in there deceived a noble man, then killed him. So we will use deceit on them. They’ll die in the same net. Lord Apollo, whose predictions never err, has ordered this.

11.  I will approach the outer gates, claiming to be a stranger. Pylades goes with me as guest and ally of the house. We two will speak the dialect of Phocis. If no one at the gate admits us because of the turmoil within, we will stay there, so that any passer-by will want to know what is going on, why Aegisthus shuts his doors against a suppliant.

12.  If I then get past the gate, across the outer threshold, then find that man seated on my father’s throne or meet him face to face, his eyes will shift and fall, I promise you. Before he can ask my name and country, I will cut him
1. ORESTES cont’d down. Our Fury never lacked for blood — for her third helping she will drink his.

2. Electra, you must stay alert within the house so that nothing goes amiss. You women, be careful what you say — keep mum — speak only when you must. As for the rest, I invoke Apollo to cast his eyes down here and be my guide when the time comes for crossing swords.

3. MUSIC BRIDGE.

STASIMON ONE

4. CHORUS Earth brings forth many horrors — terrors and agonies — the sea’s arms hold monsters, savage beasts. Between the earth and heaven hang fiery lights, suspended high. Winged birds and beasts that walk along the ground can also speak of storms, the whirlwind’s power.

5. But who of us can speak about the arrogance of men and women’s reckless passion conspiring in all our deadly woes? Passionate desire wins out. It wins a fatal victory in every woman. It ends all married love in men and beasts.

6. Witness Althaea, ruthless child of Thestius, who planned her own son’s ruin. She burned the fatal torch, knowing that Meleager’s life, from the time he first appeared howling from his mother’s womb, depended on that wood. And so it was — he stayed alive until her fire doomed him.

7. The tale is told of murderous Scylla, who killed her father, the minion of his enemies. Tempted by a gift from Minos, a golden necklace made in Crete, she plucked out the hair that made Nisus immortal. As he lay peacefully asleep, he died, murdered by that bitch, and Hermes led him away.

8. In these stories of pitiless savagery, we must include the loveless marriage that laid a curse upon this house — schemes devised by a cunning woman against her warrior lord, a man even his foes respected. I value a hearth and home where passions hold no sway, where women suppress their waywardness.

9. Of all such crimes, the worst occurred on Lemnos, where all the women slew their men. At that story, people moan — they weep for that atrocity. When some new troubles come, men measure them by Lemnos. Horror at that deed brought on the hatred of the gods, and thus, cast out by
1. **CHORUS cont’d**
mortals, acursed, that women’s race died out. No human can revere what the gods despise. Are not all these crimes despicable?

2. Justice wields her sword. She thrusts it home. Hungry and sharp, it cuts deep, through the lungs. Thus, those who transgress and test the majesty of Zeus, perish in misery.

3. The anvil of Justice now holds firm. Fate hammers out her blade — she forges it in time. At last the brooding Fury comes, infamous avenger — leading a youth inside the house to cleanse it of the blood-taint, the curse upon the house from ages past.

4. **MUSIC BRIDGE.**

**EPISODE TWO**
The Palace
*Orestes, Pylades, Servant, Clytemnestra, Nurse*

5. **SOUND BANGING.**

6. **ORESTES**
You in there! You hear this knocking?

7. **PYLADIES**
Try again.

8. **SOUND MORE BANGING.**

9. **ORESTES**
Anyone in there?

10. **PYLADIES**
All right, a third attempt.

11. **SOUND BANGING.**

12. **ORESTES**
You have visitors! Are you coming out?

13. **PYLADIES**
Anyone in there?

14. **ORESTES**
Does not Aegisthus welcome strangers?

15. **SOUND LARGE DOOR OPENS UNDER:**

16. **SERVANT**
(approaching) All right. All right. I hear you. Stranger, what country are you from? Who are you?

17. **ORESTES**
Announce me to the masters of the house. I have come to bring them news. And hurry! Night’s black chariot is speeding overhead, time for people on the road to rest — drop anchor where all strangers feel welcome. Tell one of the masters of the house to come — the mistress, or better the master. We could speak more frankly to a man. After
1. **ORESTES cont’d**

   all, delicacy can obscure meaning. When we talk man to man, we can get to the point, say plainly what we mean without reserve.

2. **CLYTEMNESTRA**

   (approaching) Stranger, welcome. Just ask for what you need. Inside we have all the luxuries of home — warm baths and beds to soothe away your pains. We live under the eyes of Justice here. But if your business is more serious, men’s work, then we will send for Aegisthus.

3. **ORESTES**

   I come from Phocis — in Argos on private business, transporting this pack of goods. I need to pause and rest. On my way here I ran into a man, a stranger to me. He told me where he was going and asked my route. As we talked, I learned his name — Strophius. He too came from Phocis. And he said this, “Well, friend, since you are heading to Argos, give a message to Orestes’ parents, something they have a right to know, so please remember it: Orestes has died.

   “Do not forget this. Then, when you return, you can tell me whether his family wants to bring him back or have him buried here in Phocis, where he is a stranger, forever outcast. Right now his ashes sit in a bronze urn. The man was truly mourned.”

4. **ORESTES**

   That is my message. whether I tell it to anyone who cares, I do not know. But Orestes’ parent ought to be informed.

5. **CLYTEMNESTRA**

   I . . . this news . . . what you just said . . . it is shattering . . . that curse we cannot repress. It haunts the house, ranges everywhere . . . Someone kept safe and far away from here the curse seeks out. Its arrow strikes and kills. It takes those I love, drives me to desperation. And now Orestes. He was careful. He kept his feet well clear of muddy ground where hidden danger lurks. He offered hope that the Furies’ predatory revels in this house might finally end. Now, from what you say, we have lost that hope.

6. **ORESTES**

   For myself, with hosts as prosperous as you, I wish you had seen me as the bearer of good news and welcomed me for that. What is kinder than the link between a stranger and his host? But to my mind, it would have been profane if I had not told his loved ones, as I promised, and as hospitality demands.

7. **CLYTEMNESTRA**

   Worry not. You will receive what you deserve. In this house you are no less welcome for your news. If not you, someone else would have brought it. Strangers on the road
1. CLYTEM cont’d) should be treated as honored guests at the end of along
day’s journey.

2. (to Servant) You there — take this wayfarer and his
attendant to the guest rooms. See to their comfort the way
this house requires. Those are my orders. See you follow
them. I will hold you responsible. Meanwhile, I will find
the master of the house, and tell him the news. We do not
want for friends, from them we will seek advice about this
death.

3. SOUND THEY ENTER HOUSE. DOOR SHUTS.

4. CHORUS Sisters in bondage, how long before we can show how
strongly we support Orestes? O sacred Earth, mound above
that noble corpse, commander of ships — hear me now,
help me now! The moment has come for Persuasion to
approach with her deceit, for that stealthy god, Hermes of
the lower world, to guide the contest, the fatal clash of
swords.

5. DOOR OPENS. NURSE APPROACHES, WEEPING.

6. It seems the stranger’s plan is working. Here comes
Orestes’ nurse. I see she’s crying. (to Nurse) Cilissa, where
are you going, with your unpaid companion Sorrow?

7. NURSE My mistress ordered me to fetch Aegisthus to meet the
strangers — and hurry — so he can find out clearly, man to
man, the news that has just arrived. In front of servants,
she puts on a gloomy face, but deep down her eyes are
laughing at how well things are going for her.

8. For the rest of us in the house, the stranger’s news is
devastating. Aegisthus will be happy to hear it, but I feel
terrible! The old family troubles, hard to endure, have
already weakened my heart, given me chest pains. But a
blow like this — I have never had to bear such misery. My
poor Orestes! When he was born, I got him from his
mother. I nursed him. I spent all night on my feet,
answering his cries. So much tiring work — all for
nothing.

9. A helpless child like that you have to keep an eye on day
and night, as if he were a dumb beast — watch his moods,
his expressions. A baby cannot tell you what he needs, if he
is hungry or thirsty or has wet himself. So I had to acquire
the art of a sooth sayer. I would be wrong sometime and
there would be a mess for me to clean.
1. **NURSE cont’d**
   Oh, yes, I was wet nurse, nanny and washerwoman, all in one. For his father entrusted him to me. Now he’s dead. They just now told me. That is why I’m crying. Well, I must go. I have to fetch Aegisthus, the man who brought this house to ruin. He’ll be glad enough to hear my words.

2. **CHORUS**
   Did she tell him how to come and what to bring?

3. **NURSE**
   "How to come?” What do you mean?

4. **CHORUS**
   Did she tell him to bring guards or come unattended?

5. **NURSE**
   She said he should bring his spearmen.

6. **CHORUS**
   Say nothing of that to Aegisthus, that hateful tyrant. Tell him to come alone, with a cheerful heart, as quickly as he can. He must not suspect a thing. The messenger can straighten a crooked message.

7. **NURSE**
   What? Are you happy at this news?

8. **CHORUS**
   Why not, if Zeus turns evil into good?

9. **NURSE**
   How can that happen? Orestes, the hope of this house, is gone.

10. **CHORUS**
    Do not be too sure. A seer who claimed that would be a bad one.

11. **NURSE**
    What are you saying? Do you know something more than I?

12. **CHORUS**
    Hurry! Relay your message. Do as instructed. The gods will see to their own affairs.

13. **NURSE**
    All right, I’ll go and do as you suggest. (leaving) With blessings from the gods, I pray all this works out for the best.

14. **MUSIC**
    **BRIDGE.**

**STASIMON TWO**

15. **CHORUS**
    Now, in answer to my prayers, I implore you, Zeus, father of Olympian gods, redeem this house, give it good fortune, preserve those who seek to restore due order. In every word we cry, we plead for justice. O Zeus, preserve it well!

16. Zeus, inside that palace set him face to face before his foes. If you exalt him he will gladly repay you, three or four times over.
1. CHORUS cont’d You know that orphan colt, child of a man you cherish, stands now in harness, yoked to a chariot of pain. Control the way he runs, preserve his pace, so he will last the course, and we may see him surge, as he races to his goal.

2. You gods who lurk within the inner chambers of this house, proud of its wealth — hear me, like-minded spirits — cleanse that ancient blood of crimes committed long ago. Let old murder cease to breed.

3. And Apollo, you who dwell in that massive well-built cavern, grant that this man’s race may raise its head once more, so that with loving eyes we see the veil of darkness yield to freedom’s light.

4. May Hermes, Maia’s son, sustain him in virtue. He sends the best winds to keep an undertaking on course, when he chooses — and when he so desires, he reveals much that hides from our view, or darkening men’s eyes with riddles, turns day to night.

5. Then at last, we will proclaim the deliverance of this house — no shrill lament of those who mourn, but robust songs the sea wives sing when the wind blows fair, “Good sailing now! For me, for me this means true wealth — safety for the ones I love.”

6. Orestes, do your part — when your moment comes, be brave. When she cries “My son!” cry in return “My father’s son!” Then, guiltless, slay her. Take on the heart of Perseus. Satisfy the rage of those you love under the earth, and here above. With blood and death, purge the house of iniquity.

7. MUSIC BRIDGE.

8. AEGIS THUS (approaching) A stranger’s story called me here, I hear that travelers have brought shocking and unwelcome news — Orestes is dead — yet one more burden laid upon this house, which still bears festering wounds from earlier woes.

9. But is it true? That’s what I must confirm. Or is it some women’s gossip, which flares up briefly, then dies down to nothing? Can you ease my mind? What do you know?
1. **CHORUS**
   Well — we did hear something of the kind. But go inside. You can learn it from the guest himself. Hearing it from us is not like hearing him face to face.

2. **AEGINSTHUS**
   Yes, I want to see this messenger and learn if he witnessed Orestes’ death, or if he’s just repeating some vague rumor. I will see through any deception. (leaving) These keen eyes of mine will not be fooled.

3. **SOUND**
   PALACE DOOR OPENS, SHUTS.

4. **CHORUS**
   Zeus, Zeus, what do I say? How start praying for divine aid? How find adequate words? Blood-stained blades are about to clash within, either wiping out the seed of Agamemnon, or, kindling freedom’s blazing light, winning for Orestes throne and wealth. The ambush now is set — noble Orestes by himself must contest two foes. Let him emerge the victor!

5. **AEGINSTHUS SCREAMS IN PAIN FROM INSIDE THE PALACE. TREMULO UNDER:**

6. (severally) Listen!

7. What was that?

8. What has happened in the house?

9. Don’t go in there! Let this work be done, without blood stains on our hands. That way no blame can fall on us.

10. **SERVANT**
    (entering) Oh, it’s horrible!

11. **CHORUS**
    So it ends.

12. **MUSIC**
    OUT.

13. **SERVANT**
    My master is slain! He is dead. I’ll cry it out again, a third time, Aegisthus is no more!

14. **BANGS ON DOOR.**

15. Come on! Come on! Open this door! Hurry! Unbolt the women’s doors! A strong right arm is all it takes! Not to help Aegisthus — he’s already dead. No point in trying. Come on! Am I shouting to the deaf? Are all of you asleep? A waste of time. Where has Clytemnestra gone? What is she up to? Her own head rests on the chopping block — the blade could strike at any moment.

16. **SOUND**
    SMALL DOOR OPENS.
1. Clytemnestra: (entering) What is this? What are you shouting about?
2. Servant: I’m telling you the dead are murdering the living!
3. Clytemnestra: Ah! I see. I understand your paradox. By ruse we killed, by ruse we are to die. All right, then, get me an axe — and quickly!
5. Now we shall see who at last will win, he or I. The wretched business brings me down to this.
7. Orestes: (approaching, carrying Aegisthus’ corpse) Look, Pylades, the very one I seek. This fellow here has had enough.
8. Sound: He lets the body fall.
9. Clytemnestra: No, not Aegisthus! not my love, my power . . . dead!
10. Orestes: You loved this man? Then you may rest in a common grave with him — he is one man you will not forsake at his death.
11. Clytemnestra: Hold! My son, my child, take pity on these breasts. Here you often lay asleep and sucked milk that made you strong.
13. Pylades: What then of Apollo’s command, his prophecy at Delphi? You made an oath. Make all men your foes, but not the gods.
15. Grabs Clytemnestra pulls her to corpse.
16. Over here. I want to lay your corpse beside this man. When he was alive, you thought him better than my father, so in death you can sleep by his side. You loved him. The man you should have loved you hated.
17. Clytemnestra: I raised you. Let me grow old with you.
18. Orestes: What? Kill my father and then live with me?
19. Clytemnestra: Fault destiny, my child, as much as I.
2. CLYTEMNESTRA  Do you not fear your mother’s curse?

3. ORESTES  You bore me, then cast me out in misery.

4. CLYTEMNESTRA  No, no — I sent you to a friend.

5. ORESTES  You sold me in disgrace — a free man’s son.

6. CLYTEMNESTRA  And the price I charged for you?

7. ORESTES  Too shameful to declare.

8. CLYTEMNESTRA  Your father, too, committed shameful crimes.

9. ORESTES  Charge him not with anything. He strove against danger abroad while you reposed in safety here.

10. CLYTEMNESTRA  My son, it goes hard for women without their men.

11. ORESTES  Man’s labor feeds the woman who sits idle.

12. CLYTEMNESTRA  My son, you really mean to do this — to slay your own mother?

13. ORESTES  You slay yourself. I am not the murderer. You are.

14. CLYTEMNESTRA  Beware! The furious hounds that avenge all mothers will hunt you down.

15. ORESTES  What about my father’s furious hounds? If I spare you, I shall surely not escape them.

16. CLYTEMNESTRA  It seems as if, while still alive, I waste useless tears at my own funeral.

17. ORESTES  My father’s destiny has chosen you. It decrees that you must die.

18. CLYTEMNESTRA  You are the snake I bore and fed.

19. ORESTES  Yes. That terror in your dream foretold the truth. You killed the man you should not kill, and now you will suffer what no one should ever see. Come!

20. SOUND  THEY GO INSIDE. PALACE DOORS SWING SHUT.

21. MUSIC  BRIDGE.
STASIMON THREE

1. CHORUS
   The fate of these two victims wrenches the heart. But long-
   suffering Orestes rides the crest of so much bloodshed, we
   hope he triumphs — the bright eyes of this house must
   never fade.

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

3. Raise now a shout of triumph above our master’s house,
   free of misery at last, free of that evil pair who squandered
   its wealth, and free of its unhappy fate.

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

5. Raise now a shout of triumph above our master’s house,
   free of misery at last, free of that evil pair who squandered
   its wealth, and free of its unhappy fate.

6. From his shrine deep within the earth, Parnassian Apollo
   predicted that virtuous stealth would conquer long-
   entrenched deceit. So be it! May I never again serve wicked
   masters. In true piety, let us praise the gods who rule our
   lives!

7. Behold, a new dawn is breaking! Great chains are falling
   away. Let this house rise up! Too long has it lain in ruins.

8. Time, which brings all things to pass, will soon move
   through these gates, once purifying rites cast pollution out.
   That will change the roll of fortune’s dice — they shall fall
   so all can see a fair result, good days for all who dwell
   within.

9. Behold, a new dawn is breaking! Great chains are falling
   away. Let this house rise up! Too long has it lain in ruins.

10. MUSIC BRIDGE.
EPISODE FOUR
The Same
Orestes, Chorus

1. **SOUND**

   PALACE DOORS OPEN. CHORUS GASPS.

2. **ORESTES**

   See here at my feet — a pair of tyrants. They slew my father, then robbed my home. Once they sat enthroned in regal splendor. They are lovers still, as you can witness by how they cling in death, true to the oaths they swore. They made a pact to murder my hapless father, and then to die together. Well, they have kept their word.

3. **UNFURLS A ROBE.**

4. **Look again, you who know this house’s trials. They used this robe to trap my father. With this they tied his hands and lashed his feet. Spread it out. Stand round in a group — put it on display, my father’s death shroud, so that the Father — not mine, the one who sees all things, the Sun — can view my mother’s sacrilege. Then he will come when I am judged, to testify that I pursued and slew my mother justly.**

5. **About Aegisthus’ death I need say nothing. As an adulterer, he dies — our law’s just punishment. But as for her who planned this evil act against her husband, a man whose children she bore in her womb — I loved her once, but she became my bitter foe, as you can see. What do you make of her? If she were a viper or sea snake, she would never need to bite — her very touch would make men rot, so venomous her heart, so poisonous her soul.**

6. **What should I call this robe? What fine words will do? A snare for some wild beast? A corpse’s shroud? The curtain from a bath wrapped round his legs? No. A hunting net. That name sounds right — robes to trap a man, entangling his feet, something a thief on the road might use to trick and rob a stranger. With such a net he could take so many lives, his pleasure in the work would warm his heart. May I never live with a woman like this one. Before that, let the gods destroy me — let me die without a child.**

7. **CHORUS**

   Bemoan this horrific act, the monstrous way she died. But pity the survivor, too — his suffering begins to ripen.

8. **ORESTES**

   Did she commit the crime or not? Come here. This garment is my witness, dyed with blood — blood from Aegis thus’
1. ORESTES cont’d blade. These bloody stains with time have blotted out the fine embroidery.

2. But I can praise my father. Now at last I am here to mourn him, as I hold this robe, the net that brought about his death. But I lament my act, my suffering. I mourn the entire race, for though I have won, I cannot avoid the guilt which now pollutes me.

3. CHORUS No mortal goes through life unscathed, free from pain until the end. One trouble comes today, yet another comes tomorrow.

4. ORESTES But still, you need to understand . . . I do not know how this will end . . . I feel like some chariot racer lashing on my team, but we have strayed way off the course . . . My mind is racing . . . it has lost control. Something overpowers me . . . carries me off . . . Deep in my heart, fear prepares a furious song and dance. So while I still have my wits about me, to all my friends I publicly proclaim I killed my mother justly. She was guilty of my father’s murder, a woman gods despised.

5. What drove me on? I cite as my chief cause the Delphic seer, Apollo’s priest, who said this to me, “If you carry out this act, you’ll go free — no charge of evil. But if you refuse . . . “ I will not describe the punishment — no arrow shot from a bow could reach the top of so much agony.

6. I go a suppliant to earth’s central navel stone, Apollo’s realm, to that sacred flame, which, people say, never wanes, an exile who murdered his own blood. Apollo’s sibyl gave me his orders — I am to go to his shrine, nowhere else. As to how I came to do this brutal act, I call all men of Argos to be my witnesses before Menelaus when he returns. Remember me in years to come. Now I go, wandering in exile again from my country. Whether I live or die, I leave with you your memory of me.

7. CHORUS But your deed is a great thing. Why depress your soul with such talk, ominous predictions, bad omens? You have freed the city, all of Argos, hacking off the heads of those two serpents, a healing blow.

8. MUSIC SNEAK UP FURIES THEME; HOLD UNDER:

9. ORESTES No! — They’re here — Look, you women — over there — like Gorgons draped in black — their heads, hundreds of writhing snakes — I can’t bear it . . .
1. **CHORUS**
   What is wrong? What are you looking at? Of all men you have a father’s strongest love, so stay calm. Stand up to fear.

2. **ORESTES**
   This is no illusion of horror, no! They’re real! My mother’s furious hounds! Snarling for revenge!

3. **CHORUS**
   The blood on your hands has confounded your mind.

4. **ORESTES**
   Lord Apollo! They attack me! Hordes of them! Their eyes drip blood . . . it’s horrible!

5. **CHORUS**
   Just one thing can cure you — Apollo’s touch will cleanse you, free you of these imaginings.

6. **ORESTES**
   You do not see them, but I do. They’re coming for me. (running off) I must escape . . .

7. **CHORUS**
   Good fortune go with you! And may god watch over and protect you.

8. **CHORUS**
   The third storm has broken savagely over the palace, and run its course. First, came the torments of those children slaughtered for Thyestes’ food. Next came the suffering of a man, our warrior lord, Achaea’s king. And now the third — do I call him rescuer or destroyer? When will all this end? When will murder, its tempest spent, rest at last in sleep?

9. **MUSIC**
   UP AND CONCLUDE.
PROLOGUE
Delphi, Before the Temple, morning

Pythia

1. **SOUND**
   LARGE MILLING CROWD. DRUM BEAT. CROWD QUIETS DOWN.

2. **PYTHIA**
   In this my prayer, I hold Earth in highest honor, as the first of prophets among all gods. Then, after her came Themis. That goddess, so the legend goes, followed her mother at this seat of foretelling. Third in line, another Titan, Phoebe, child of Earth, was then assigned to occupy this throne. There was no force — Themis approved the change. Phoebe then bestowed it to the god who takes his name from her, Phoebus Apollo.

3. He came from Delos to live here on Mount Parnassus. A reverential escort came with him — children of the fire god, Hephaestus, road builders who tame the wilderness and civilize the land. As he marched here, people flocked to worship him, including their king and leader, Delphis. Then Zeus inspired in him prophetic skills, and set him on this throne as fourth in line. Here Apollo speaks for Zeus, his father.

4. My prayers begin with preludes to these gods. My words also give special prominence to the goddess who stands outside the shrine, Pallas Athena. I revere those nymphs inhabiting Corycia’s rocky caves, where flocks of birds delight to congregate, where holy spirits roam.

5. Nor do I forget how Dionysus, ruler of this land, divine commander of Bacchic women, ripped Pentheus apart, as if he were a cornered hare. I also call upon the streams of Pleistus and Poseidon’s power, and Zeus most high, who fulfills all things.

6. Now I take my seat on the sibyl’s throne. May the gods favor me with insight! (to crowd) If any Greeks are here, let them draw lots and enter, each in turn, as is our custom. I will counsel them as the god inspires me.

7. **SHE ENTERS TEMPLE. MILLING CROWD. SHE SCREAMS, BACK. CROWD OUT.**

8. **TENSE UNDERSCORE.**

9. (crawling out of temple) Horrible! Unspeakable! Things too ghastly to behold drive me out of Apollo’s shrine. My
1. PYTHIA cont’d
   strength is gone . . . I cannot stand and have to crawl on
   hands and knees — my legs just buckle under me . . . An
   old woman overcome with fear is nothing, a child.

2. As I was approached the garlanded inner shrine, I saw upon
   the center-stone a man the gods despise, seated like a
   suppliant, hands dripping blood. His one hand held a
   sword, his other an olive branch twined with tufts of wool,
   a mark of piety, large and white. I saw all that distinctly.

3. Before him on the benches something astonishing, on the
   benches groups of women sleeping — well, not exactly
   women. Gorgons — then again, not like Gorgons either. I
   once saw a picture of monstrous Harpies snatching food
   away from Phineas. But the ones inside have no wings.
   They are black and hideous, making loud rasping noises
   that terrify me. Foul pus seeped from their eyes. Their dress
   unfit in a holy place or even in men’s homes.

4. Never have I seen a tribe like unto this company. No
   country that would claim them without regret. What will
   befall them I leave to far-seeing Apollo. For he has power
   to heal and purify.

5. MUSIC
   SEQUE TO BRIDGE.

   EPISODE ONE
   Inside the Temple
   Apollo, Orestes

6. SOUND
   FADE UP RHONCHI OF SLEEPING FURIES.

7. ORESTES
   My lord Apollo, always just, be merciful as well. Your
   might prevails against all evil.

8. APOLLO
   I will not desert you. I will stand by you until the end. Close
   at hand or far away, I will keep your enemies at bay — just
   as now you see these frenzied creatures overcome with
   sleep — these loathsome hags, primeval spawns. They
   were born for evil deep within the blackest gloom of
   Tartarus. Olympian gods and men despise them.

9. You must keep on, never succumb, though they pursue you
   everywhere. Never tire nor give in to your pain. Once you
   reach Athena’s city, take sanctuary in her temple and
   embrace her image. With people there to judge your cause
   and with the force of speech, we will find a way to free you
   from misfortune. For I was the one who urged you to slay
   your mother. Remember this — never surrender to fear.
1. APOLLO cont’d And you, Hermes, blood of my blood, child of my father, preserve this man. You are called “the guide of souls,” so may you guide my suppliant. Lead him as if you were his shepherd. Remember Zeus holds sacred an outcast’s rights. Speed him safely to his destination. (to Orestes, leaving) Now come!

2. SOUND THEY LEAVE.

3. MUSIC GHOST THEME UP, CONTINUE UNDER:

4. CLYTEMNESTRA (materializing; ghostly acoustic) Sleeping are you? Rise! What use are you asleep? Must I alone among the dead lack honor at your hands? The souls of those I killed never cease tormenting me. I wander in disgrace. They charge me with the most horrific crimes. But I, too, suffered cruelty from those most dear to me. And yet, although I died at the hands of my own son, no power bestirs itself for me.

5. Look here — you see these gashes on my breast? How did they get there? While asleep the mind can see, but in the light of day we have no vision of men’s destiny.

6. You have lapped up the many sacrificial gifts I left for you in the night, feasts for you alone. I see all that was wasted. He is gone, eluded you — like a fawn, he jumped your nets with ease. He mocks your efforts as he runs away. Hear me plead for my very soul! So rouse yourselves! Wake up, you goddesses from below. (dematerializing) While you dream I call — Clytemnestra summons you!

7. MUSIC GHOST THEME OUT.

PRARADOS

8. CHORUS (severally) Wake up!

9. Come on, I’ll wake you up. Now do the same for her.

10. Still sleeping? Stand up!

11. Wipe that sleep out of your eyes.

12. Ah ha, what this? Sisters, something is wrong.

13. All our work has come to nothing!

14. Oh, pain beyond endurance!
1. CHORUS cont’d  Our quarry slipped our nets. Escaped! Once sleep came over us, we lost our prey.


3.  You protect an unworthy suppliant, a godless man, a matricide!

4.  Who can claim justice in such theft?

5.  In my dreams, shame struck me like a racer’s whip, when he urges his team with lashes. It stung me sharply under my heart. I can still feel it!.

6.  These younger gods are ever forcing their rule beyond just boundaries. The throne drips blood, at its head and foot.

7.  I see Earth’s center-stone defiled with blood, corrupted and accursed.

8.  The prophet soils his own hearth, pollutes the shrine himself. Against divine tradition, he honors human things.

9.  He sets aside decrees of fate established long ago.

10. Though he inflict his pain on me, he will never free that man. Though he flee into the deepest recesses of the earth, he shall not escape.

11. As he seeks to cleanse himself, he will meet the next avenger coming for his head.

12. MUSIC STING.

   EPISODE TWO

   The Same

   Apollo, Chorus

13. APOLLO  (entering) Out! I command you to leave this house at once — or else you’ll feel my arrows’ bite, winged snakes shot from a golden string. Then your agonies will choke you. You will spit out the black froth you suck from men, and vomit up the clotted blood of your victims.

14.  You are not fit to enter this sanctuary. No, you belong where heads are sliced away, eyes gouged out — where justice equals slaughter — where youthful men are ruined by castration, where others suffer mutilation, stoning —
1. APOLLO cont’d
   where men impaled on spikes scream without surcease. That is the sort of the feast you crave.

2. Do you hear? For this the gods despise you. Your very appearance proclaims your character. Go haunt some blood-soaked lion’s den, not infect this temple with your pollution. So leave this place, you flock without a shepherd, you herd the gods despise.

3. CHORUS
   Lord Apollo, listen now to us. You have not just abetted this crime — you did it all yourself. You bear all the guilt.

4. APOLLO
   What does that mean? Go on. Keep talking.

5. CHORUS
   You told that stranger to kill his mother.

6. APOLLO
   To avenge his father. Why is that wrong?

7. CHORUS
   Then you supported him, a murderer.

8. APOLLO
   And I instructed him to come back here to expiate his crime.

9. CHORUS
   Then why insult us, the ones who drove him here?

10. APOLLO
    You are not fit to enter here.

11. CHORUS
    We have a duty to perform.

12. APOLLO

13. CHORUS
    We drive from their homes all those who slay their own mothers.

14. APOLLO
    What about a wife who kills her husband?

15. CHORUS
    That blood is not her own.

16. APOLLO
    What? You would ignore those pledges of Zeus to queen Hera? You scorn the strongest bonds between them. Your claim dishonors Aphrodite, too, goddess of love, from whom all men derive their greatest joys. With man and woman a marriage sealed by fate is stronger than any oath, and justice guards it. Now, if you are not concerned when one partner kills the other, then I say your torment of Orestes is unjust. I do not see why you come down hard to the one and indifferent to the other.

17. But it is of no moment, for Athena will judge the right and wrong of this.
1. **CHORUS**
   I shall never free that outcast — never.

2. **APOLLO**
   Then go! Pursue him and bring yourself more trouble.

3. **CHORUS**
   You cannot curb my powers with your words.

4. **APOLLO**
   Your powers? Those I would not take, even as a gift.

5. **CHORUS**
   Of course not. They call you great already at the foot of
   Zeus’ throne. But for my part, since I am called onward by
   a mother’s blood, I’ll hound this man with my own style of
   justice.

6. **APOLLO**
   And I shall defend my suppliant with all my power. For,
   with gods and men, were I to abandon him a terrible wrath
   will surely follow.

7. **MUSIC**
   BRIDGE.

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**EPISODE THREE**

**Temple of Athena, Athens**

*Orestes, Chorus*

8. **ORESTES**
   Queen Athena, I have come by order of Apollo. I beg your
   kindness. Grant me sanctuary, a man accursed, an outcast. I
   do not seek forgiveness — my hands are clean — but my
   ardor is worn down, blunted by other homes and places, of
   all the well-trod roads. I have kept to Apollo’s oracle.
   Crossing land and sea, I have reached this statue by your
   shrine at last. Here, goddess, I take my place and await the
   outcome of my trial.

9. **SOUND**
   FADE UP BUZZ AND HISS OF FURIES.

10. **CHORUS**
    Ah ha! Here we have that man’s clear scent, a silent
    witness, but firm evidence. After him! Like hounds chasing
    a wounded fawn, we track him by the drops of blood he
    sheds. Man-killing work — the effort wears me. My lungs
    are bursting. We have sought him everywhere, explored all
    the regions of the earth, crossed seas in wingless flight,
    moving on faster than any ship, always in pursuit. Now he
    is cornered here, cowering somewhere. I smell human
    blood — I could laugh for joy! Start looking for him! Seek
    him out again! Look everywhere. Block his escape. That
    matricide must pay!

11. (severally) There he is!
1. CHORUS cont’d

Claiming sanctuary, at that statue of the eternal goddess, embracing it.

2. 

He must want a trial, a judgment on his murderous violence.

3. 

Impossible! A mother’s blood, once shed, soaks in the earth and cannot emerge again — the flowing stream moves through the ground, then disappears forever.

4. 

No. You must pay me back. I will suck your blood, and feed upon your pain.

5. 

I will drag you down, still living, to the underworld. And there you will pay for murdering your mother.

6. 

You will see there other human criminals who have dishonored gods and strangers, who have abused the parents they should love. They all receive the justice they deserve.

7. 

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

8. ORESTES

I have been seasoned in adversity, and know the riddances of evil — when to speak and when be silent. And in this instance, a wise master has ordered me to speak. The blood on my hands is dormant now, fading — polluting stains of matricide have been washed away. When they were fresh, Apollo in his temple cleansed my guilt — slaughtering pigs to make me pure again. It is a long story to describe for you, right from the start, all the men visited and left unharmed.

9. 

Time as it passes withers all things. Now, with full reverence and sanctity, I invoke Athena, queen of this land. I beg her help. Let her appear unarmed. She will win true allies in me, my land and people. We will trust her forever. No matter where she is — in Libya, in some region by the springs of Triton, her birthplace, with her sandaled feet still or roving, assisting those she loves, or whether in Phlegra she surveys the plain like some bold commander — the goddess will hear me, though far away. May she come and grant me deliverance.

10. CHORUS

Neither Apollo nor Athena can save you. You are destined to die abandoned and alone, bereft of joy, a bloodless criminal sucked dry by demons, no more than a shell.
1. CHORUS cont’d

What? You ignore my words and will not reply — you, a victim fattened up for me, my consecrated gift? You will not perish on any altar — no, I will eat you alive. (pause)
All right then, hear our spell to chain you.

   STASIMON ONE

2. CHORUS

Come, let us link our arms — Furies set to manifest our fearful art, to show our collective power to manipulate the lives of mortals.

3.

We represent true justice. Our anger never works against a man whose hands are clean — all his life he stays unharmed. But those who trespass, as this one has, who seeks to hide his crimes — we harry them as testament to those they have slain. Blood avengers, relentless, we pursue them to the end.

4.

Hear me, Mother Night, mother who gave birth to me so I could avenge the living and the dead. Leto’s child, Apollo, dishonors me. He tears that man out of my hands, the hare who cowers there, who by rights must pay for his mother’s blood.

5.

Our frenzied call falls upon his head, our sacrificial victim — driving him to madness — wiping out his mind. This is the cry of Furies. It chains the soul, destroys its harmony, and withers mortal men.

6.

Remorseless Fate gave allotted this work to us forever, a web spun for us alone, to cling to those who slaughter kindred — to plague them until they lie beneath the earth. And even then they are granted little peace.

7.

These rights are ours from birth. The deathless gods may not touch us. We share no feasts with them, no fellowship — their unsullied robes take no part in our destiny.

8.

That is what brings us here, eager to contest the charge, to challenge other gods, to make sure none of them usurps our prerogatives. There will be no trial — for Zeus despises us, considers us unworthy, refuses to deal with us because we trade in blood.

9.

For I freely take upon myself the task to overthrow whole families if need be, when strife engenders murder. We relentlessly pursue that killer who spills blood of his blood. However strong, we wear him down.
1. **CHORUS cont’d** Those proud opinions people have, who raise themselves so high, who puff themselves to heaven, will dissolve in dishonor underground, when, robed in black, we spring.

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

3. His mind is so confused he does not sense his fall. Dark clouds of his defilement hover all around him. Murky shadows fall, enveloping his home. And Rumor spreads a tale of woe.

4. Leaping from the heights, we stomp him with our feet — we trip the runner as he sprints for sanctuary, a fate he cannot bear.

5. Such is our place in the eternal order of things — ever vigilant for human evil. Men cannot appease us. Feared and despised, we do out work. Split off from gods, with no light from the sun, we make the road hard for the sighted and the blind together.

6. **SOUND** CHARIOT, HORSES FAR BACK, GALLOPING UP, UNDER.

7. What man is not in awe or unafraid to hear of the power allotted me by Fate and ratified on high, mine from time immemorial to hold forever? And though I dwell below the earth in sunless gloom, I have my honor, too.

8. **MUSIC** STING.

**EPISODE THREE**

The Same

Athena, Leader, Orestes

9. **SOUND** CHARIOT PULLS UP, STOPS. HORSES NEIGH.

10. **ATHENA** I have heard a cry from the distant banks of Scamander, where I was taking hold of land the Achaean leaders conceded to me, a great share of their spear-prize, dedicated to me solely and forever, a fine gift for the sons of Theseus.¹ I have come from there at my untiring pace, not flying on wings, but on my chariot yoked to swift horses.

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¹ “Sons of Theseus,” *i.e.*, the citizens of Athens.
1. ATHENA cont’d

Here I see an unfamiliar crowd, strangers to this place, nothing I fear, but astonishing to see. Who are you? I’m talking to all those assembled here — the stranger crouching there beside my statue, and those of you like no one ever born, creatures no god has seen in goddesses, in form a thing unknown to mortal men. But to say such things about one’s neighbor who have done no wrong is far from just and contravenes our customs.

2. CHORUS

Daughter of Zeus, I will tell you everything — and briefly, too. We are immortal children of the Night. Below ground, where we dwell, we are called the Curses.

3. ATHENA

Now I know your race and what to call you.

4. CHORUS

But our powers — these you will quickly learn as well.

5. ATHENA

Those I wish to learn. Please state them clearly.

6. CHORUS

We hound out of their homes all those who kill.

7. ATHENA

When the killer flees, where does he go?

8. CHORUS

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

9. ATHENA

Your screams would drive this man to such a flight?

10. CHORUS

Yes — he thought it right to kill his mother.

11. ATHENA

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

12. CHORUS

What can force a man to kill his mother?

13. ATHENA

There are two sides to this dispute. I have heard only one.

14. CHORUS

You need not put him under oath. He can neither deny the deed nor his guilt for it.

15. ATHENA

You claim to be minions of justice, but act unjustly.

16. CHORUS

How? Teach me. You clearly have a mind for fine distinctions.

17. ATHENA

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

18. CHORUS

Question him then. Judge for yourself.

19. ATHENA

Are you prepared that I should be the one to do this, to pronounce a final verdict?
1. CHORUS
   Why not? We respect your worth, as you do ours.

2. ATHENA
   Stranger, have you anything to say in response? State your country, lineage, and circumstance. And then, defend yourself against their accusations, if you really trust the justice of your case. You cling to my statue, a sacred suppliant beside my hearth, doing what Ixion did so long ago. So speak to me. Address all this directly.

3. ORESTES
   Queen Athena, your last words express important doubts which I must first remove. I am not a suppliant in need of redemption. Nor have I fallen at your statue’s feet with my hands defiled. On these two points I offer strong proof.

4. The laws hold that a criminal stained with blood guilt must hold silent until he is duly cleansed. I have already undertaken such rites at other shrines, both with burnt offerings and with water from flowing streams. So, as I say, there are no grounds for your misgivings here.

5. As for my family, you will know that soon enough. I am an Argive, son of Agamemnon. You may well ask his story — he is the man who put that naval force together. You worked with him to raze the Trojan citadel. When he came home, he died disgracefully, butchered by my mother, whose black heart snared him in devious hunting nets — these still exist, attesting to that slaughter in his bath.

6. I was in exile then. I returned and slew my mother — that I avow— to avenge the murder of my father, who I truly loved. For my deed, Apollo shares responsibility with me. He urged me to it, pointing out the cruel reprisals I would face if I failed to act against the murderers. Was what I did a righteous act or not? That you must decide. I will be satisfied, no matter how you render judgment.

7. ATHENA
   This is a grave matter, too complex for any mortal man to judge. It is not right even for me to decide such cases, where murder done in passion merits hard swift punishment. Above all, you come a suppliant here, purified and hence no danger to my shrine. Thus, in my city, I judge you innocent.

8. But these Furies have a purpose that cannot be ignored. If they fail to triumph in this case, they will spread their poisonous resentment — it will seep underground, infecting us, bring ever-lasting plague upon our land,
1. ATHENA cont’d

something we cannot abide. So stands the case — two choices, both disastrous. Allow one to prevail, defeat the other?

2.

No, I see no way of resolving this. But since the judgment now falls on me, I shall appoint a human court to try this murder, a tribunal bound by oath. I shall establish it for all time. So, you two parties, summon your witnesses, set out your proofs, with sworn evidence to back your claims. Once I have picked the best men in Athens, I will return and preside. They will rule fairly in this case, bound by a sworn oath to act with justice.

3. SOUND

VANISHING EFFECT.

STASIMON TWO

4. CHORUS

If his legal action triumphs, if now this matricide prevails, then newly set divine decrees will topple all order. Mortals will at once believe that everything is permitted. From now on parents can expect repeated blows of suffering inflicted by their children — now and forever.

5.

Furies who keep watch on men will bring no wrath to bear on human crimes — so then we set death loose everywhere, all forms of killing known to man. So one, seeing his neighbor’s pain, will ask another, “Where does this end? When does our suffering diminish?” But the poor wretch can offer nothing — his remedies are vain, without effect.

6.

So when a terrible disaster strikes, let no one make the old appeal, “Justice, you Furies! Hear me, you powers on your thrones!” It may well happen soon — a father in despair, a mother in some new crisis, may scream out for pity. Now the edifice of justice falls.

7.

There are times when fear can lead to good. Such terror needs to stand guard, always ready to check the passionate heart. It profits men to learn control through suffering. For where is there a man or city — both alike in this regard — who still respects justice without a heart tempered by fear?

8.

It is wrong to praise a wanton life, or one too circumscribed. God, however wayward, favors moderation. And I say arrogance is surely born from sacrilege. From a healthy heart and mind comes the happiness men love, the joy they ask for in their prayers.
1. **CHORUS cont’d**

I say it all, when I tell you this — Justice has an altar. Give it due reverence. Do not trample on it because self-interest sees advantages. Remember punishment will come — an outcome fixed and permanent. So each of you, above all else, should honor parents, pay them the deference you owe, respect all guests and strangers you welcome under your roof.

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

3. **He screams for help. But no one hears. Surrounded by churning seas he fights — in vain. Whirlpools suck him down, while heaven laughter at the sight of this heedless man — who once conceived himself impervious to harm — now helpless, panicked, unable to ride out the waves. He always lived for wealth — now that, too, smashes on the reef, the rock of Justice — he drowns, unseen and unlamented.**

4. **MUSIC BRIDGE.**

**EPISODE FOUR**

The High Court of Athens

*Athena, citizens, Orestes, Apollo*

5. **SOUND LARGE MILLING CROWD.**

6. **ATHENA**

Herald, blow the call for order! Raise that Etruscan trumpet, fill your lungs, let these people hear an ear-piercing blast.

7. **MUSIC HORN.**

8. **SOUND CROWD QUIETS DOWN UNDER:**

9. **ATHENA**

Let us have silence! The whole city can hear my eternal laws. So can these litigants. Then all will see the justice in our verdict . . . Lord Apollo, you have your own domain. Tell me, what have you to do with this?

10. **APOLLO**

I have come as a witness. That man, the accused, according to our customs, came a suppliant to my shrine, my hearth. I purified him of the blood he spilled. As his advocate, I share the blame arising from his mother’s death. Start the
1. **APOLLO cont’d**
   
   trial. You understand procedure. Confirm that with a just decision.

2. **ATHENA**
   
   Let us begin. (to Furies) You Furies speak first. The plaintiff always opens our proceedings. Tell us the facts. Begin at the beginning — inform us clearly of the issues here.

3. **CHORUS**
   
   There are many of us, but we’ll keep our speeches brief. (to Orestes) Answer our questions, as we put them one by one. First, tell us — did you kill your mother?

4. **ORESTES**
   
   Yes, I killed her. I never denied it.

5. **CHORUS**
   
   We take first fall. Three falls wins the match.

6. **ORESTES**
   
   You gloat, but your opponent is not yet pinned.

7. **CHORUS**
   
   Describe the murder for us. How did you kill her?

8. **ORESTES**
   
   I drew my sword and slit her throat.

9. **CHORUS**
   
   What persuaded you to do this?

10. **ORESTES**
    
    The orders of this god. He is my witness.

11. **CHORUS**
    
    The prophet ordered you to kill your mother?

12. **ORESTES**
    
    He did. And to this moment I have no regrets.

13. **CHORUS**
    
    But if the verdict lays its hands on you, you will change your story soon enough.

14. **ORESTES**
    
    I am confident. My father from his grave will send the help I need.

15. **CHORUS**
    
    So you trust the dead, and yet you killed your mother?

16. **ORESTES**
    
    I do, for she was guilty of two crimes.

17. **CHORUS**
    
    How so? Inform the judges on this point.

18. **ORESTES**
    
    She killed her husband and my father.

19. **CHORUS**
    
    But her death evens out the score for her. You are still living.

20. **ORESTES**
    
    When she was still alive, you did not hound her into exile. Why?

21. **CHORUS**
    
    She and her victim shared no common blood.
1. ORESTES  And my mother and I, we do?

2. CHORUS  How else could she sustain you in her womb, you murderer? Do you now reject the closest bond there is?

3. ORESTES  [turning to Apollo] You must give evidence, Apollo. Take the lead for me. Did I kill her justly?

4. APOLLO  Allow me to address this high court of Athena. Men of this tribunal, what I have to say will proceed from justice. I am a prophet. I cannot lie. And never yet, when I have been seated in my oracle, have I said anything in prophecy concerning woman, man, or city state, that Olympian father Zeus did not command. Make sure you understand how powerful his justice is. I urge you now — obey the will of Zeus, our father. No oath has greater strength than Zeus.

5. CHORUS  Then, Zeus, according to your reasoning, told your oracle to command Orestes to avenge his father’s death, ignoring any rights his mother had.

6. APOLLO  Yes. For these two things are not the same. He died a noble man, who bore the staff of kingship given by the gods — an honored king who die by murder at a woman’s hand — not in battle as with the Amazons — but in a way that I will describe for you, Athena, and those here ready to decide this case.

7.  
He had just returned from a long and harsh campaign, where in the eyes of loyal citizens he had triumphed beyond all expectation. She welcomed him. Then, he took his bath. As he stepped out — still on the outer rim — she threw a cloak, his shroud, around him, like a tent. She caught him in that robe, whose endless folds enclosed him like a net. Then she struck him down. That is how the great commander of a thousand ships went to his death. As for that woman, I speak of her to rouse a sense of shame in those men chosen here to judge this case.

8. CHORUS  So you claim that Zeus holds a father’s death more significant? But Zeus chained up his own father, Cronus. Does that not contradict your assertion? I ask you judges to take note of this.

9. APOLLO  You monsters! How all the gods detest you! Zeus has power to smash those chains apart and other ways to set him free. But once a mortal’s blood has drained into the dust, the man is dead, and unable to return. My father Zeus
1. APOLLO cont’d has made no charms for that, though he can change all other things without pausing for breath.

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

3. APOLLO I’ll speak to that, as well. Make sure you note how right my answer is. That word “mother”— we give it to the one who bears the child. However, she is no parent, just a nurse to that new life embedded in her. The parent is the one who plants the seed, the father. Like a stranger for a stranger, she preserves the growing life, unless god injures it.

4. And I can offer proof for what I say — a man can have a child without a mother. My evidence is present in this room — Athena, child of Olympian Zeus. No dark womb nursed her. She sprang full grown from the head of her father. No mother, human or divine, can claim her.

5. Athena, as I know so many other things, I will make your city and your people great. That is why I sent this man a suppliant to your shrine, so he might prove himself, then place eternal trust in you, and you could win a new ally in him and his descendants, and thus create an everlasting bond with your people and his.

6. ATHENA Has each side said enough? Shall I now instruct the judges to cast their votes on the side of justice as they see it?

7. CHORUS Though we have already shot our final arrow, we will stay to hear the outcome.

8. ATHENA So be it. Now, as for you defendants, what can I do to avoid your censure?

9. APOLLO You have heard what you have heard. (to jurors) My friends, as you cast your ballots, make sure your hearts respect that oath you made.

10. ATHENA You citizens of Athens, you judges at the first trial ever held for murder, hear what I decree.

11. Now and forever this court of judges will convene here to serve Aegaeus’ people. This place, this Mount of Ares, is where Amazons once marched in force, enraged at Theseus. Here they pitched their tents. Then they built a new city on the heights, with lofty walls to match his own,
1. ATHENA cont’d making a sacrifice to Ares, god of war, from whom this rock derives its name, the Mount of Ares.

2. From this hill, Reverence and Fear, two kindred rulers of my people, will protect my people against injustice night and day, unless the citizens corrupt the laws with evil innovations. Once limpid waters are tainted with mud, there is nothing fit to drink.

3. My people, avoid both anarchy and tyranny. I urge you to uphold this principle. Show it due respect. As for terror, do not banish it completely from the city. What mortal man is truly honest without fear of reprisal from the law? With citizens who respect justice, your country and your city will be safe, stronger than anything possessed by men in Pelops’ country or in Scythia.

4. So here I now establish this tribunal, incorruptible, magnificent, swift in punishment — it stands above you, your country’s guardian as you sleep. I have gone through this at length to urge you on, my citizens, today and in the future. But now you must rise, cast your ballots, decide this case, while honoring your oath. I have finished — that is all I have to say.

5. SOUND MURMURING CITIZENS CAST BALLOT-STONES INTO URNS, UNDER:

6. CHORUS Have a care, Apollo. Show us no disrespect. For our united power can crush your land.

7. APOLLO Let me remind you — fear the oracles, not just mine, but those of Zeus the Father. let them not be fruitless.

8. CHORUS You meddle in our labor which is none of your affair. Your oracles are tainted.

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

10. CHORUS Argue all you want. But in this judgment if I do not prevail, this country will suffer.

11. APOLLO Among all gods, old and new alike, you have no honor. I will triumph here.

12. CHORUS Just as you triumphed in the house of Pheres, persuading the Fates to free a man from death.
1. APOLLO Is it wrong to help a votary, especially when his need is
great?

2. CHORUS You got those ancient goddesses drunk on wine, then had
them into suspend the oldest rule of order we possess.

3. APOLLO You will soon lose this case as well. Then you can spew
your venom and no one will be harmed.

4. CHORUS In your youthful indiscretion, you would slight my age. But
I will await the verdict, see where this trial ends and see
whether or not to visit my anger on this city.

5. ATHENA Now, members of the jury, do your job. Shake the ballots
from the urns — and quickly.

6. SOUND JUDGES EMPTY URNS, COUNT BALLOT STONES,
UNDER:

7. ORESTES APOLLO
Phoebus Apollo, how did they vote? Shake out all ballots, friends.
Count them fairly.

8. CHORUS Divide them with due care.
Black mother Night, are you watching this? Make no mistakes.
Mere errors in reckoning can bring disaster.

9. ORESTES A single ballot cast can save this house.
Now the result. Either the noose or the light.

10. CHORUS For us, either ruin or honor.

11. SOUND VOTE COUNTER WHISPERS RESULTS TO ATHENA.

12. ATHENA The division of the votes are equal. It is now my task to
break the tie. And I award my ballot to Orestes.

13. CROWD REACTS.

14. Thus, this man stands now acquitted.

15. SOUND SENSATION IN THE CROWD.

16. ORESTES Pallas Athena, you have saved my house. I lost my
homeland, and you have returned it back to me. Now all
Greece can say, “This man is once again an Argive,
restored to his people and his property, thanks to Pallas,
thanks to Apollo, and most of all to all powerful Zeus, third
god in this affair.” Faced with these advocates of my
mother’s cause, he chose my father’s.
1. **ORESTES cont’d**
   
   Now I must turn toward home. But first I make this oath to your land and people for all time to come — Never will an Argive force march to this place with spears arrayed against you. If any man among my people violates this oath, I will bring his efforts to naught and destroy him, though I must rise from the grave to do it.

2. 
   
   But all those who keep this oath and honor Athena’s city for all time — allies who fight on its behalf — such citizens will receive great favor.

3. 
   
   And so, farewell to you, Athena! Farewell to you, Athenians! May you always prove victorious against your foes, safe from harm and glorious in battle!

4. **SOUND**
   
   **VANISHING EFFECT.**

5. **CHORUS**
   
   You younger gods have wrenched the age-old laws out of my grasp, then trampled them underfoot. On us you heap dishonor and contempt. Now my anger turns against this land. How it will pay when I release my venom to ease my grief? I will saturate this ground. It won’t survive. Contagion will stream from it, infecting greenery and children. That is justice! Blight will spread across the land, contaminate the soil, destroy the people.

6. 
   
   Should I just weep? Lick my wounds? This city has made us a mockery, a laughing stock! How can we endure such humiliation? We, Furies, daughters of Night, are dishonored, shamed, our powers cast aside!

7. **ATHENA**
   
   But you’ve lost no honor here You are goddesses. Let not your anger lead you to excess, to blast this land of men past remedy. I trust in Zeus. Need I say that I am the only god who knows the keys to the storehouse for his lightning bolt. But there is no need for that.

8. 
   
   Rather accept my argument. Hurl no rash threats against this soil, turning it to a wasteland. Let your bitter, angry waves recede. Live here with me, receiving all honors. The first fruits of this fertile land are yours forever, all those offerings for heirs, for marriages — from this day forward they are yours. With all these things before you, you will agree that I am right.

9. **CHORUS**
   
   That I should suffer thus! My ancient wisdom driven underground in contempt and shame. Rage consumes me! What agony is this that sinks into my ribs and pierces my
1. CHORUS cont’d

heart? — O mother Night! The cunning of those gods, too sharp to overcome, steals all my ancient powers, and leaves me nothing.

2. ATHENA

I will bear with your rage, for you are older, and thus your wisdom far exceeds my own. But Zeus gave me a fine intelligence as well. So let me tell you this — if you should go from here, a time will come when you will feel a lover’s yearning for this place. By and bye, my citizens will grow in men’s esteem. And you shall have your throne of honor before the house of Erechtheus. And such throngs will come to pay you homage as seen nowhere else in all the world.

3. 

Loose no hail of bloodshed on this my realm. Do not befoul the hearts of our youth, intoxicating them with wine-like rage — nor plant the hearts of fighting cocks in the people’s breasts, compelling them to war among themselves. Let them battle in foreign lands where they’ll find foes enough who lust for glory. I want no birds who fight in their own nest.

4. 

That is what I offer you. Confer blessings and we will bless you. Take your honored place in a land the gods all love.

5. CHORUS

That I should suffer thus! My ancient wisdom driven underground in contempt and shame. Rage consumes me! What agony is this that sinks into my ribs and pierces my heart? — O mother Night! The cunning of those gods, too sharp to overcome, steals all my ancient powers, and leaves me nothing.

6. ATHENA

I shall never tire of telling you of the gifts that await you here, so you can never say that I, a newer god, or the men who hold this land, failed to revere such ancient deities and barred our gates against you. No. But if you respect Persuasion — that sacred power whose soothing spell sits on my tongue — then you should stay. If you do not wish to do so, then you would do wrong to vent your anger on this city and injuring its people out of a spiteful rage. It is your choice. Take your just portion of this land, and full entitlement of honor.

7. CHORUS

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

8. ATHENA

One free of pain and care. Why not accept?
1. CHORUS
   If I do, what honors would be mine?

2. ATHENA
   Without your blessing, no house could thrive.

3. CHORUS
   You grant me that much power?

4. ATHENA
   I do. Together we will enrich the lives of all our votaries.

5. CHORUS
   This promise you make for all time?

6. ATHENA
   Yes. I keep my promises in full.

7. CHORUS
   Your magic is working on me, it seems — I feel my rage waning.

8. ATHENA
   Then stay. You will never lack adherents in this land.

9. CHORUS
   A strong desire has come upon me to bless this place. Tell me what to say.

10. ATHENA
    Speak nothing of brutal victories — only of bounty from the earth, the ocean depths, the skies. Let gusting zephyrs caress the land in radiant sunlight, our herds and harvests overflow with plenty, so they never fail our people. May their seed endure forever. May they prosper in measure to the honor they bestow upon you. Love these virtuous men, the way a gardener loves his growing plants, keep this race free of strife. These things are yours to give.

11. 
    For my part, I will give this city triumph and fame in deadly contests where men seek glory, so that everyone celebrates victorious Athens.

12. CHORUS
    Then we accept this home and will dwell here with Athena. We will protect this place, which she and Ares and all-powerful Zeus hold as a divine bastion and glorious sanctuary for all the Grecian gods. I make this prayer for Athens, predicting fine things for her — bounteous harvests bursting from the earth, beneath a radiant sun.

13. ATHENA
    My citizens, I have providently set these goddesses among you — powerful divinities, implacable — whose purpose is to guide all mortal striving. He who has met them in their wrath knows not where the blows arise that assail his life. For the offences of his ancestors hale him before them — his destruction is silent but grinds him to dust, for all his loud talk, under the Furies’ anger.
1. **CHORUS**

   Hear me speak my blessing — let no winds destroy your trees nor scorching desert heat shrinkle budding plants, no festering blight kill off the fruit. May Pan foster the fertility of the flocks, to every ewe twin lambs, all born in season. And may the fruit of the earth, the embedded lode, yield bountiful treasure, gift of the gods.

2. **ATHENA**

   Do you hear that, you guardians of my city? The blessings they will bring? They are powerful, the Furies, among immortal gods, among the dead below. Among living men they work their ends for all to see — for some a life of song, for others a life of tears.

3. **CHORUS**

   I forbid those deadly accidents that cut men down before their time. And all you gods with rightful powers, let our young girls all find husbands. Hear our prayers, you sacred Fates, our sisters, you children of the Night, who apportion all things justly, who have a place in every home, who bear a weight in every time, most honored everywhere among the gods.

4. **ATHENA**

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

5. **CHORUS**

   I pray that man-killing faction may never roar aloud within the city. May its dust not drink the dark blood of our people, nor passions for revenge incite those civil wars that destroy the state. May they give joy for joy, united by their common love, united in their enmities — for that cures all human ills.

6. **ATHENA**

   Behold how they seek the road of gracious speech! From these fearful countenances I see great boons for my citizens. So treat them kindly, just as they are kind. Worship them forever. Thus you will keep your land and city on the path of justice, and thrive in everything you do.

7. **CHORUS**

   Rejoice! Rejoice amidst the prosperity you deserve! Rejoice, you who dwell with Zeus, who love the virgin goddess, as she loves you. You manifest wisdom in your generation, sheltered under Athena’s wings, while Zeus looks on in awe.

8. **ATHENA**

   And you too rejoice. I shall lead the way and show you to your chambers, by sacred torchlight carried by your escort.
1. **ATHENA cont’d**

Solemn offerings go with you as you hasten under the earth. Hold down the forces of destruction and send above the bearers of good fortune, that our city may ever prove victorious. And now you citizens, you children of Cranaus, king of this rock, lead our new residents for life away. May all citizens look on with favor at those who bring such favors to them.

2. **CHORUS**

Farewell, all those gods and men who live in the city of Pallas. Venerate our sojourn among you and you will never chafe against life’s misfortunes.

3. **SOUND**

ESCORT GATHERS UNDER:

4. **ATHENA**

My gratitude to you for these words of blessing. Now I shall guide you down by blazing torchlight to your homes beneath the earth. With us goes this escort of women charged to guard my statue. It is only fitting. Let the most precious part of Theseus’ land come forth — a noble assemblage of maidens, matrons and elders.

5. **MUSIC**

PROCESSIONAL UP, CONTINUE UNDER:

6. **ATHENA**

(to Escort) Vest these Furies with crimson robes and pay them homage. Then, follow with your torches, so these Eumenides, these Benevolent Ones, in the love they bear this land, can ever more bring our city strength and great good fortune.

7. **ESCORT**


8. 

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

9. 

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

10. 

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

2. MUSIC UP AND CONCLUDE.