

Aeschylus : The Libation Bearers

[The Choephoroi] 458 BC

translation by Ian Johnston

Dramatis Personae

ORESTES: son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra. **CHORUS:** slave women captured at Troy and serving the royal palace at Argos. **ELECTRA:** daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, sister of Orestes. **SERVANT:** house slave serving in the royal palace. **CLYTAEMNESTRA:** widow of Agamemnon, lover of Aegisthus, mother of Orestes and Electra. **PYLADES:** friend of Orestes. **CILISSA:** Orestes' old nurse, a servant in the palace. **AEGISTHUS:** son of Thyestes (brother of Atreus, father of Agamemnon), lover of Clytaemnestra. **ATTENDANTS** on Orestes and Pylades and Aegisthus.

Scene: Argos, the tomb of Agamemnon some years after his murder by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. Behind the tomb stands the royal palace of the sons of Atreus.

[Enter Orestes and Pylades. They have just arrived in Argos]

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

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

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

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

What's this I see? What's this crowd of women coming here, all wearing black in public? What does it mean? What new turn of fate? Has some fresh sorrow struck the house? Or am I right to think they bring libations here to honour you, my father, to appease the dead below? That must be it. I see my sister there, Electra. That's her approaching with them. She's grieving—in great pain—that's obvious. O Zeus, let me avenge my father's death. Support me as my ally in this fight. Pylades, let's stand over there and hide, so I can find out what's taking place, what brings these suppliant women here.

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

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

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

O Earth, my mother Earth, to protect herself from harm that godless woman sends me here with gifts, with loveless gifts. But I'm too scared to speak her words, the prayer she wishes me to say. What can atone for blood once fallen on the ground? Alas for the grief-

filled hearth, Alas for the buried home! Sunless darkness grips the house which all men hate, for now their master's murdered.

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

The nurturing earth drinks blood, she drinks her fill. That gore, which cries out for revenge, will not dissolve or seep away. The guilty live in utter desperation— madness preys upon their minds infecting them completely.

The man who violates a virgin's bed cannot be redeemed. All rivers flow into one stream to cleanse his hand of black blood which defiles him. Such waters flow in vain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ELECTRA Who else should I then add to join with us?

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

ELECTRA That's good. You give me excellent advice.

CHORUS LEADER Remember, too, the guilty murderers. 150

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

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

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

CHORUS LEADER Pronounce these words—and clearly— "Someone who'll pay back life by taking life."

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

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

ELECTRA Oh Hermes, mighty herald, moving between earth above and earth below, messenger to the dead, assist me now— summon the spirits there beneath the ground who guard my father's house, to hear my prayers. And call on Earth herself, who, giving birth and nurturing all things, in due course takes back the swollen tide of their increasing store. As I pour out these offering to the dead, I call upon my father, "Pity me— 170 [130] and dear Orestes, too! How can we rule in our own home? We're beggars now, as if our mother traded us away, exchanged us for her mate, Aegisthus, her partner in your murder. For now I live just like a slave. Orestes lives in exile, far from his estates. In their arrogance, those two squander all the wealth you worked for. And so I pray to you—dear father, let good fortune bring Orestes home! 180 Father, hear me. Make me more self-controlled, [140] than mother, my hand more righteous! Those are my prayers for us. Our enemies— for them, my father, I pray someone will come as your avenger, then kill your killers, in retribution, as is just. As I pray for our well being, I include this curse— may they be caught by their own evil. Bring us your blessing to the earth above, with help from gods, and Earth, and Justice, 190 all combined to bring us victory."

[Electra pours out her libation on the tomb]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHORUS How so? Let your youth instruct your elders.

ELECTRA No one but me could have cut this off.

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

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

CHORUS Like whose? I want to know.

ELECTRA Like mine. It looks identical.

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

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

CHORUS But how could he come back?

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

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

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

[Electra notices footprints in the dirt around the tomb]

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

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

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

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

ELECTRA What? The gods? What have they given me?

ORESTES You've come to see the person you've been praying for all this time. 270

ELECTRA Then you know the man I was calling for?

ORESTES I know your sympathies are with Orestes.

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

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

ELECTRA No, stranger. You're weaving a net, a trick to trap me. [220]

ORESTES If so, I plot against myself as well.

ELECTRA You just want to laugh at my distress.

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

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

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

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

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

ELECTRA You dearest member of your father's house. the seed of hope through all our weeping— trust to your own strength and win back again your father's home. How my eyes rejoice! To me you are four different loves—fate declares that I must call you father, and on you falls the love I ought to feel 300 [240] towards my mother, who's earned my hate. Then there's the love I bore my sister, Iphigeneia, that cruel sacrifice— and you're my faithful

brother. You alone sustained my sense of honour. May Power and Justice stand with us now, our allies— and may almighty Zeus make up the third.

ORESTES O Zeus, Zeus, look down on what we do! See the abandoned fledglings of the eagle, whose father perished in the viper's coils, 310 that deadly net. Orphans now, we bear the pangs of hunger, not yet mature enough [250] to bring our father's quarry to the nest. See us like this—I mean me and Electra— children without a father, both outcasts, banished from our home. If you wipe out these fledglings, what respect will you receive at feasts from hands like his, their father's, who offered you such wealthy sacrifice? Kill off the eagle's brood, then who will trust 320 the signs you send? If this royal stock decays, [260] it cannot consecrate your altars with sacrificial oxen in the morning. Stand by us. You can elevate our house from its debased condition, make it great, though now it seems completely ruined.

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

ORESTES Apollo's great oracle surely will defend me. Its orders were that I should undertake this danger. [270] It cried out in prophecy, foretelling many winters of calamity would chill my hot heart, if I did not take revenge on those who killed my father. It ordered me to murder them the way they murdered him, insisting they could not pay the penalty 340 with their possessions. The oracle declared, "If not, you'll pay the debt with your own life, a life of troubles." It spoke a revelation, making known to men the wrath of blood guilt— from underneath the earth, infectious plagues, leprous sores which gnaw the flesh, fangs chewing [280] living tissue, festering white rot in the sores. It mentioned other miseries as well— attacks by vengeful Furies, stemming from a slaughtered father's blood, dark bolts 350 from gods below, aroused by murdered kinsmen calling for revenge, frenzied night fits. Such terrors plague the man—he sees them all so clearly, eyeballs rolling in the dark. Then he's chased in exile from the city, his body scourged by bronze-tipped whips. [290] A man like this can never share the wine bowl, no libations mixed with love. We don't see his father's anger, but it casts him out— no access to an altar. There's no relief, 360 and no one takes him in, until at last, universally despised, without a friend, he wastes in all-consuming pain and dies. Am I not right to trust such oracles? Even if I don't, the work must still be done. Many feelings lead to one conclusion— the gods' decree, my keen paternal grief, [300] the weight of poverty I bear. Besides, my countrymen, most glorious of men, whose courageous spirit brought down Troy, 370 should not be subject to a pair of women. For Aegisthus is at heart a woman— if not, we'll learn about it soon enough.

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

ORESTES Oh my unhappy father, what can I say for you or do, to send you, where you rest so far away, some light to drive away your darkness? But nonetheless some joy [320] comes from a funeral lament 390 for glorious sons of Atreus, who once possessed the house.

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

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

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

ORESTES My father, if only you had died 420 hit by some Lycian spear at Troy! You'd have left your glory with your children in their home. In their dealings with the world men would now honour them. [350] You'd have won a tomb raised high in lands across the seas, a death your home could bear with ease.

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

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

CHORUS Children, these things you say are merely your desires, finer than gold, greater still than the great happiness of those who live in bliss beyond the northern wind. But wishing is an easy thing. Still, now it's striking home, that double whip—for now 460 protectors underneath the earth are helping us. Our masters are unholy creatures with polluted hands. The children win the day!

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

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

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

CHORUS It's the law—once drops of blood [400] are shed upon the ground they cry out for still more blood. Slaughter calls upon the Furies of those who have been killed. Thus, hard on murder's heels destruction comes again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ELECTRA Through these tears I join his call.

CHORUS In unison, our voices blend as one— hear us. Return into the light. Join us against our enemies. [460]

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

ELECTRA Dear gods, let justice choose what's right.

CHORUS I hear these prayers and shudder. 580 This doom's been long delayed, but it does come for those who pray.

Oh, family bred for torments, for the bloody strokes of harsh discordant ruin, for pains beyond enduring, grief that can't be staunched. [470]

For all this evil there's a remedy, not from some stranger, someone outside the house, 590 but from within, the cure that blood strife brings, their savage bloody fight. To gods beneath the ground we sing this hymn.

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

ORESTES Father, you may not have perished like a king, 600 but, in answer to my prayer, make me [480] the master of your house.

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

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

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

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

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

ORESTES My father, remember that bath where you were slaughtered.

ELECTRA Remember the net in which they killed you.

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

ELECTRA They covered you with their deceit and shame.

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

ELECTRA Will you raise that beloved head of yours upright?

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

ELECTRA Father, listen to my last appeal— 630 [500] see your children huddled at your tomb. Take pity on them, your son and daughter.

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

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

ORESTES Hear us! We're making our lament on your behalf. Honour our request and save yourself. 640

CHORUS LEADER There's nothing wrong expanding your lament. [510] For that will honour this neglected tomb. But since your heart is rightly set to act, it's time to test your fortune, time to start.

ORESTES You're right. But first we might ask this question: Why did that woman send out these libations? What did she have in mind, trying so late to heal a crime which cannot be forgiven? What she sent here was paltry tribute to the unforgiving dead. I don't see 650 what she intends. The gift's too trivial for her offence. As the old saying runs, "Pour out all you've got to make amends [520] for bloodshed, your work is all in vain." If you know her reason, tell me now. I'd like to hear.

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

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

CHORUS LEADER She'd given birth, 660 but to a snake. That's what she told me.

ORESTES How did the dream end up? What happened?

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

ORESTES And that newborn snake, what did it want for nourishment? [530]

CHORUS LEADER She dreamt she offered it her breasts.

ORESTES Didn't the monster bite her nipple?

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

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

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

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

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

ORESTES My plan is simple. First, Electra here must go inside. I'm instructing her to keep this bond with me a secret. The two in there deceived a noble man, then killed him. So we'll use deceit on them. They'll die in the same net. Lord Apollo, who's never wrong in what he prophesies, has ordered this. I'll approach the outer gates, [560] pretending I'm a stranger, prepared for anything. Pylades goes with me, 700 as guest and ally of the house. We two will speak Parnassian dialect of Phocis. If no one at the gate is in the mood to let us in,

alleging that the house is haunted by some evil demon, we'll wait there so any passer-by will be intrigued and say, "What's going on? Why does Aegisthus shut his doors like this [570] against a suppliant? Is he at home? Is he aware of this?" If I get past the gate, 710 across the outer threshold, then find that man seated on my father's throne or meet him face to face, his eyes will shift and fall, I promise you. Before he's had time to ask, "Stranger, what country are you from?" I'll kill him quickly with my sword. Our Fury never lacked for blood— for her third draught she'll drink his pure. Now, Electra, keep a close watch in there, check what's going on inside the house. 720 We'll need to work on this together. [580] You women, be careful what you say— keep quiet—speak only when you have to. As for the rest, I invoke Apollo to cast his eyes down here and be my guide when the time comes to fight it out with swords.

[Orestes, Pylades, and Electra leave together]

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

But who of us can speak about the arrogance of men or women's reckless passion beyond all self-control, so they become conspirators 740 in all our lethal woes? Passionate desire wins out— it gains a fatal victory in every woman. It ends all married love [600] in men and beasts.

A man with any sense should recognize these things, once he recalls Althaea, ruthless child of Thestius, 750 who planned her own son's ruin. She burned the fatal torch, knowing that Meleager's life, from the time he first appeared howling from his mother's womb, depended on that wood. And so it was—he stayed alive [610] until her fire doomed him.

Another story of a hateful girl tells of that murderous Scylla, 760 who killed her father, brought to it by his enemies. Tempted by a gift from Minos, a golden necklace made in Crete, she plucked out her father's hair, the one which made Nisus immortal. As he lay peacefully asleep, [620] then died, murdered by that bitch, and Hermes led him off.

As I recall these stories 770 of savagery without remorse, it's time to speak of marriages in which there was no love, which laid a curse upon the house, schemes devised by woman's cunning against her warrior lord, a man his enemies have cause to honour. I value hearth and home where passions do not rule, where women's spirits 780 rein in their waywardness. [630]

Of all such tales of crime, the worst concerns the isle of Lemnos, where all the women killed their men. At that story people moan— they weep for that abomination. When some new troubles come men measure them by Lemnos. Horror at that deed brought on the hatred of the gods, and thus, 790 cast out by humankind and in disgrace, that women's race dies out. No man can hold in reverence what gods abhor. So of these tales which one can I not justly cite?

Justice wields her sword. She thrusts it home— hungry and sharp, [640] it slices deep, right by the lungs— 800 and so the lawlessness of those who flout what's right, who violate the majesty of Zeus, lies trampled underfoot.

The anvil of Justice now holds firm. Fate hammers out her sword— she forges it in time. At last the brooding Fury comes, famous spirit of revenge— leading a child inside the house, 810 to cleanse the stain of blood, [650] the family curse from long ago.

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

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

SERVANT *[from within]* All right. All right. I hear you. Stranger, what country are you from? Who are you?

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

[Clytaemnestra and Electra enter through the palace doors]

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

ORESTES I'm a stranger—a Daulian from Phocis— coming to Argos on private business, carrying this pack. I need to pause and rest. On my way here I ran into a man— 840 we'd never met before. He told me where he was going and asked my route. As we talked, I learned his name—Strophius. He came from Phocis, too. And he said this, "Well, friend, since you're heading off to Argos, [680] here's a message for Orestes' parents, something they've a right to know, so please remember it: Orestes is dead. Don't forget. Then, when you return, you can tell me whether his family wants to bring him back 850 or have him buried here in Phocis, where he's a stranger, forever outcast. Right now his ashes sit in a bronze urn. The man was truly mourned." That's my message. That's what I heard. At this point I'm not sure whether I'm telling this to anyone who cares, but Orestes' parent ought to be informed. [690]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Enter Orestes' Nurse, Cilissa, in tears]

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

NURSE My mistress ordered me to fetch Aegisthus to meet the strangers—and to hurry up— so he can find out clearly, man to man, the news that's just arrived. With servants she puts on her gloomy face, but deep down her eyes are laughing at how well all this has

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

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

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

CHORUS LEADER Did she tell him to come with guards or unattended?

NURSE She said he should bring his spearmen with him. 950

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

NURSE What? Does your heart feel good about this news?

CHORUS LEADER Why not, if Zeus turns evil into good?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Apollo, you who dwell in that massive well-built cavern, grant that this man's house may raise its head once more, so with loving eyes we see the veil of darkness yield [810] to freedom's light.

May Hermes, Maia's son, support him in what's right. 1010 He sends the finest winds to hold an enterprise on course, when that's his will— and when he so desires, he will make

known much hidden from our view, or speak in riddles in the night, darkening men's eyes, which see no better by the light of day.

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

But you, Orestes, do your part— when your moment comes, be brave. When she cries out "My son!" 1030 cry in return "My father's son!" Then murder her in innocence. [830]

In your heart maintain the heart of Perseus. Satisfy the rage of those you love under the earth, and here above. With blood murder inside the house 1040 eradicate the cause of all our blood-guilt.

[Enter Aegisthus]

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

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

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

[Exit Aegisthus into the palace]

CHORUS Zeus, O Zeus, what do I say? How do I start appealing to the gods in prayer? How from a loyal heart can I find what to say, matching words with deeds? Now blood-stained blades 1070 are slicing men to death [860] and totally destroy forever Agamemnon's house, or else with freedom's blazing light Orestes wins the throne, and all his father's riches. The ambush now is set— noble Orestes by himself must face two enemies. Let him emerge the victor! 1080

[Aegisthus screams in pain from inside the palace]

CHORUS MEMBERS *[speaking separately]* Listen! [870] What was that? What's going on, in there, inside the palace?

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

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

[A servant emerges through the palace doors]

It's over. Whatever the result, the fighting's over.

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

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

Come on! Come on! Open this door! Hurry! 1090 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. [880] Come on! Am I shouting to the deaf, or are you all asleep?

[The servant gives up pounding on the side door]

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

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the main palace doors]

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

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

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

[Exit servant into the palace]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ORESTES You bore me, then threw me out to misery.

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

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

CLYTAEMNESTRA What's the price I charged for you?

ORESTES That's too shameful to declare in public.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Orestes pushes Clytaemnestra inside the palace doors. Pylades goes with them. The doors close behind them] CHORUS LEADER The fate of these two victims makes me grieve. But long-suffering Orestes rides the crest of so much bloodshed, we'd prefer he triumph— 1160 the bright eyes of this house must never fade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Look at this again, all those of you [980] who pay attention to this house's troubles. This robe they used to trap my helpless father. With it they tied his hands and lashed his feet. Spread it out. Stand round here in a group— put it on display, my father's death shroud, so that the Father (not mine—the one who sees everything, the Sun) can see my mother's sacrilege. Then he will come 1230 on the day when I am judged, to testify that I pursued

and even killed my mother in a just cause. About Aegisthus' death there's nothing I need say. As an adulterer, [990] he dies—our law's just punishment. But as for her who planned this evil act against her husband, a man whose children she carried in her womb—I loved her once, but she became my bitter enemy, as you can see. What do you make of her? 1240 If she'd been born a viper or sea snake, she wouldn't need to bite—her very touch would make men rot, so evil is her heart, so reckless.

[Orestes stoops and picks up the bloody robe]

What do I call this? What fine words will do? A snare for some wild beast? A corpse's shroud? The curtain from a bath wrapped round his legs? No. It's a hunting net. That name sounds right—robes to trap a man, [1000] entangling his feet, something a highway thief might use to trick and rob a stranger. 1250 With such a net he'd take so many lives, his pleasure in the work would warm his heart. May I never live with such a woman. Before that, let the gods destroy me— let me die without a child.

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

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

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

ORESTES *[starting to break down]* But still, you need to understand . . . I don't know how this will end . . . I feel like some chariot racer lashing on my team, but we're way off track . . . My mind is racing . . . it's lost control. Something's overpowering me . . . carrying me off . . . Deep in my heart, fear prepares its furious song and dance. 1280 So while I still have my wits about me, to all my friends I publicly proclaim I killed my mother not without just cause. She was guilty of my father's murder, a woman gods despised. What drove me on? I cite as my chief cause the Delphic prophet, [1030] Apollo's priest, who said this to me, "If you carry out this act, you'll go free— no charge of evil. But if you refuse . . ." I won't describe the punishment— 1290 no arrow fired from a bow could reach the top of so much pain.

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

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

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

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

ORESTES No . . . They're here . . . Look, you women . . . over there . . . like Gorgons draped in black . . . their heads hundreds of writhing snakes . . . [1050] I can't stand it here . . .

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

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

CHORUS LEADER Your hands are still blood stained— that's made your mind disordered.

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

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

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

[Orestes runs off. Pylades follows him]

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

CHORUS The third storm has broken on the palace, then run its course across the royal clan. First, came the torments of those children 1330 slaughtered for Thyestes' food. Next came [1070] the suffering of a man, our warrior lord, Achaea's king. And now the third— do I call him our saviour or our doom? When will all this cease? When will murder, its fury spent, rest at last in sleep?