

ORESTEIA

THE ORESTES TETRALOGY

PART 1

# AGAMEMNON

By AESCHYLUS

Translated by ANDREW WILSON

The cover picture is Klytaimestra in the 2008 production of *Agamemnon* in the Greek Theatre, Syracuse.

## **Characters**

WATCHMAN

TWELVE OLD MEN OF ARGOS, the CHORUS

KLYTAIMESTRA (Clytemnestra), daughter of Leda. Queen of Argos

HERALD

AGAMEMNON, son of Atreus. King of Argos

KASSANDRA (Cassandra) a captive, formerly princess of TROY

AIGISTHOS (Aegisthus) son of Thyestes

## **Scene**

Argos, the palace of Agamemnon

The line numbers are identical to those in OCT. The lyric passages substitute Greek makron with an English stressed syllable. For the complete metrical scheme see Raeburn & Thomas, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (Oxford 2011), Appendix: Sound and Rhythm.

*Moments before dawn. A sentry is discovered on the palace roof<sup>1</sup>.*

SENTRY

Please gods, relieve me from this tedious task,  
This years-long sentry-shift. Trying to sleep —  
Hunched on the Atreidai's roof — curled like a dog —  
I'm expert on the night sky's map of stars,  
Our shining masters, twinkling up in space:  
Which forecast storms to mankind, which heatwaves,  
Discovering when they rise and when they set.  
And now I'm watching for a beacon's light,  
A flash of fire that brings from Troy the news,  
The words, "It's fallen". Such the power of this  
Woman's ambitious masculinised mind.  
I have a bed of nightmares, damp with dew,  
There's no protection even in my dreams  
For me. My friend alongside is not sleep, but fear:  
What if I closed my eyes and nodded off!  
If ever I think I'll sing or hum a bit,  
Trying a stimulant to ward off sleep,  
I cry over the downfall of this house,  
Which was so excellently run before.  
Fortune would now relieve me from this task,  
If fire bringing good news shone through the dark!  
*Pause. A beacon-fire (the rising sun?) shows suddenly on the horizon*

A lantern in the night! Welcome! You bring  
Daylight and dancing crowds in every street  
In Argos, showing thanks for fortune's gift.  
lou! lou! *[Two cheers!]*

22

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<sup>1</sup> The stage building only recently introduced. An exciting innovation!

I'm telling Agamemnon's wife direct:  
 She must get out of bed at once and go  
 To lead the house the celebration of  
 This light, if Troy, the city, has indeed  
 Been taken, as the blaze seems to announce.  
 I, I myself will be the first to dance:  
 I'll count their lordships' win as one of mine  
 This beacon-fire's a triple six for me!  
 Now may the master of the house come home  
 And shake this hand of mine with his dear hand!  
 I say no more. A big ox just sat on  
 My tongue. The house itself, if it could talk,  
 Would tell it in the clearest way. Makes sense  
 To those who know, and none to those who don't.

### **Parodos [40-257]**

CHORUS

*Anapaests [40-82] The mission of the Atreidai. As the chorus appear and circle the orchestra.*

|                                                          |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| A decade <sup>2</sup> has gone by since the duo set out, | 40 |
| To oppose Priamos:                                       |    |
| Menelaos, the king with Agamemnon,                       |    |
| Two thrones, two sceptres, a strong pair sent            |    |
| By Zeus, —the Atreidai, launching a fleet                |    |
| Of a thousand sea-borne Argive men,                      |    |
| Pride of our country,                                    |    |
| Task-force of spearmen, warriors,                        |    |
| Stridently calling, with fury, on Ares;                  |    |
| In the manner of vultures, who wheel and soar,           |    |
| Way up high, immeasurable their grief                    | 50 |

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<sup>2</sup> The war was prophesied to last ten years (*Iliad* 2.239)

Over their children,  
 Their wings catching the sky like an oared ship,  
 Wasted the effort  
 They spent guarding their chicks on the nest;  
 Way up high some Apollo, Pan, or Zeus,  
 Hearing the piercing, screeching bird-cries,  
 Whining mews from their heavenly neighbours<sup>3</sup>,  
 Sends an avenger<sup>4</sup>,  
 Late but effective against the offenders.  
 Thus, the almighty Zeus, god of guest-friends,  
 Sends Atreus's sons against Alexandros<sup>5</sup>,  
 Over a woman who's had many husbands,  
 Prescribing alike for Trojans and Greeks  
 Much grappling, limb-strength sapping,  
 Knees buckling in the dust, and the spear-shafts  
 Snapping, as the first of the victims fall  
 As the fighting begins. Things are now as they are.  
 They will turn out according to fate.  
 No burnt offerings no libations  
 At the altars neglected,  
 Will assuage their violent passions.  
 We though, unhonoured, with our aged frames,  
 Unenlisted then to be part of the force,  
 Linger behind,  
 Supporting a baby's strength on our sticks.  
 Our hearts may feel young, but Inside our chests  
 Palpitate wildly,

60

70

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<sup>3</sup> Greek *metoikoi*, "resident aliens" who had a special legal status in Athens. In the sky they have as it were a right of appeal to the gods, their rulers.

<sup>4</sup> *Erinyes*. The *Erinyes* are terrifying agents used by the Olympian gods to punish serious crimes, especially murder, or to fulfil curses. They are a significant background element throughout *Oresteia*, and of course become the Chorus in the third play, where they undergo conversion to become the Kindly Ones, the *Eumenides*. Their authority stems from *Moirai* more than just "Fate".

<sup>5</sup> Paris

Just as old men's do – Ares is not  
 At his post – and we geriatrics walk,  
 We withered leaves, with a cane as a third leg, 80  
 Vigour no more than a boy's, shuffling along,  
 Like a dream exposed to the daylight.

*Still anapaests [83-103]. The Chorus face the palace – but Klytaimestra does not appear.*

You now Tyndareus' 83  
 Daughter, our queen, you, Klytaimestra,  
 What's new? What's the matter? And what do you know?  
 What has persuaded you  
 To order the burning of offerings?  
 All of the gods, the city's defenders,  
 Sky gods, earth-gods,  
 Personal gods and gods of the market,  
 All of their altars ablaze with gifts!  
 One then another, a torch propels  
 Flames sky-high,  
 Fuelled by the soft and gentle unguents,  
 The queen's cosmetic reserve, by  
 Oil from the palace boudoir.  
 Explain these things, say what you can,  
 What you're allowed to,  
 Be a physician to cure our worry:  
 Which looms, now as darkly desperate,  
 And now again, in the light of the offerings,  
 Hope banishes the thoughts of doom,  
 Gnawing away at our hearts. 103

*Dactylic verse gives a Homeric touch, as the Chorus return to the narrative. [104-159]*

*Strophe 1*

104

Able am I to describe that great display at the roadside —  
 Those men of power! The gods still allow me to utter  
 Songs to bring courage, veterans' words are persuasive! —  
 Just how it was the Achaeans' dual kings, thinking as one,  
 Leaders of young Greece,  
 Came to be sent holding spears and grudges,  
 Off to the Troad, through a bird's anger,  
 Kings of the fleet by the kings of the birds<sup>6</sup>, one  
 All-over black and one with a white tail,  
 Appearing beside the palace, on the right, on the spear-side,  
 Conspicuous on their perches,  
 Gorging themselves on the young of a hare just about to produce them,  
 Ending their future, their running.  
 Agony, agony cry! But give good the victory!

*Antistrophe 1*

122

Seer<sup>7</sup> to the army, thoughtful, looked at the war-mad Atreidai,  
 Two in two minds, and he knew they were eating the hare,  
 Lords of the raiders; he explained it like this saying:  
 "In time, yes, this invasion captures the city of Priam,  
 And then brutally  
 Fate will prey on its towers and the teeming  
 Livestock its people prize in such numbers.  
 Only may no god's jealousy tarnish  
 That fine bridle they've forged for the Trojans—  
 The troops. Because innocent Artemis, brim-full of pity  
 Condemns father's sky-dogs,  
 Rending a cowering hare and her children who are in her womb still:  
 She cannot bear the eagles' meal.

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<sup>6</sup> *Eagles (not vultures). The Black Eagle is called the hare-killer by Aristotle.*

<sup>7</sup> *Kalkhas*

Agony, agony cry! But give good the victory!

*Epode*

So sympathetic Artemis

To cubs of fierce lions, who've been abandoned, 141

And to the unweaned offspring of wild things,

Nature's children she takes delight in!

Now she demands an equivalent victim.

Some of the omens are good, the rest less so. 145

I pray, become healer for us, Apollo!

May she not conjure up winds against Greece, any

Contrary, ship-stalling, stubborn

Gales, to promote a new sacrifice: lawless, no music, no feasting – 150

Destined to be the creator of conflicts who shows no

Fear of a man. There's a cunning, fearsome, resurgent

House-supervisor who waits, Rage, mindful avenger of child-death." 155

Mixed with much that was good, such things were made public by Kalkhas,

Bad news – sent by the roadside birds for the kings in the palace,

Echoing these words:

Agony, agony cry! But give good the victory! 159

*Solemn trochees as the Chorus invoke Zeus [160 – 183]*

*Strophe 2*

Zeus, whoever Zeus is, if it is 160

Fine for him to be called this,

This the name I call him by.

When I 've balanced everything,

There is no alternative

Other than Zeus, if I genuinely have to reject 165

Pointless worry from my mind.

*Antistrophe 2*

Not who once was great in former times,  
Full of bold aggressiveness,  
Not a mention: he's no more. 170  
And the next, he's also gone<sup>8</sup>,  
Having met the wrestling king<sup>9</sup>.  
Anyone sensibly cheering the winner as Zeus:  
He hits the bullseye of sense,

*Strophe 3*

Zeus who taught man to be wise 176  
Zeus who laid this down as true:  
"Learning comes from suffering."  
Pain keeps coming back, it worms its way  
Into sleeping hearts; so wisdom then  
Sneaks in unobtrusively.  
Grace is somehow violent from  
High gods on the steering deck. 183

*The chorus revert to the narrative again [184 – 257]. The metre is dominated by syncopated iambs.*

*Antistrophe 3*

So then; leader of the Greek 184  
Navy, that important man,  
Did not criticise his seer,  
Keeping pace with the flow of fate.  
With his men, dejected, stuck ashore,  
Running out of food, he holds  
Crowded beaches facing Khalkis,  
Aulis with its crazy tides.

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to Zeus's predecessors, his grandfather Ouranos, and his father Kronos.

<sup>9</sup> Literally "the wrestler who throws his opponent three times"

*Strophe 4*

And winds then blew straight from Thrace, from Strymon, 192  
And brought them sloth, hunger, moorings battered,  
Troops' depression,  
Timbers, and ropes relentlessly decaying  
— and time , too much by far — that witnessed  
The bloom on Greece rubbed away by boredom.  
Then, as well, the army-seer  
Blazoned another storm-cure,  
Weightier one for the high-ups  
Naming, as his authority:  
"Artemis!" Made the Atreidai  
Drum with their sticks pounding the dirt,  
Unable to hold tears back.

*Antistrophe 4*

Then he, the king, man in charge, spoke these words: 205  
"To disobey? Absolute disaster!  
Disaster too  
To butcher her – my family's joy, my daughter!  
To foul a father's hands with rivulets  
Of young girl's blood, sacrificed before the  
Altar? Bad either way.  
How could I be a deserter?  
Let the alliance down?  
They are on fire, desperate for  
Stopping the winds by killing a girl,  
Decency though, cries out against.  
Let's hope that it turns out all right!"

*Strophe 5*

There was no choice: shoulder the yoke<sup>10</sup>? He had to. 218  
At once his mind veered as if a foul wind  
A bitter one was blowing him  
To dare what was unthinkable before.  
Wretched delusion, architect of sorrow  
Emboldens men, bends their thoughts to evil...  
Whatever... He braced himself to  
    Slaughter his daughter, to enable  
    War in revenge for a woman,  
The blessing that let the fleet sail.

*Antistrophe 5*

Her pleas, the cries of "Father!" she kept making, 228  
The fact she was just a girl meant nothing  
To war-lovers who'd chosen war.  
Her father instructed servants, praying,  
To hold her up like a kid-goat would be  
Above the slab face down, while she clung to  
His clothing so desperately,  
    And, with a gag, to stop her mouth —  
    Stifling her radiant smile —  
Harming the house with curses, 237

*Strophe 6*

Her brutally-muzzled screams can't be heard.  
Her saffron-dyed dress slid off and dropped down,  
While she struck all taking part —  
    Eyes discharging melting shafts of pity —

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<sup>10</sup> "He put on the halter of necessity"

As beautiful like a painting, with no voice —  
 That voice she needed, voice she'd used  
 Often to sing, charming halls where men feast,  
 A heifer unbullied obeying father's call.  
 How sweetly she sang the paeon when they  
     Poured the wine three times for luck. 247

*Antistrophe 6*

What followed I neither saw nor can tell.  
 Kalkhas the seer's expertise stood the test.  
 But Justice weights scales towards  
     Learning for the suffering. The future?  
 When it should come, you would hear. To celebrate  
 Too soon would be as bad as tears.  
 For "when the sun rises all becomes clear..."  
 Whatever... may what occurs after this turn out well,  
 As it desires, this tower of strength — close to us — *[Klytaimestra is revealed]*  
     Sole defence over Argos. 257

**First Episode [258-354]**

LEADER

Klytaimestra, I come in awe of you. 258  
 Your power. It's right to pay a ruler's wife  
 Respect, when a throne is vacant, left unmanned.  
 I should be pleased to hear from you, whether  
 You sacrifice because you've heard good news,  
 Or because you hope you might. Your silence I'll accept. 263

KLYTAIMESTRA

May dawn bring welcome news, the proverb says,  
 From night who is her kind and gentle mother.  
 You'll hear of joy more than you hoped to hear.

Priam's city: the Greeks have taken it!

LEADER

What say? Can't take it in! Impossible!

KLYTAIMESTRA

The Greeks hold Troy. Is s that now clear enough?

LEADER

The joy I'm feeling makes me want to weep!

KLYTAIMESTRA

Your wish for tears confirms your loyalty.

LEADER

What proof is there? Have you some evidence?

KLYTAIMESTRA

Of course! Unless the god's deceiving me.

LEADER

You've been persuaded by a dream. That's it?

KLYTAIMESTRA

Rehash a snoozing mind's ideas? Not me!

LEADER

Or has some half-baked rumour egged you on?

KLYTAIMESTRA

You mock my insight. I am not a girl.

LEADER

How long ago then was the city sacked?

KLYTAIMESTRA

During the night which brought this day to birth.

LEADER

What messenger could get here at such speed?

280

KLYTAIMESTRA

Hephaistos sent this dazzling light from Ida,

As beacon flashed to beacon, relay-race

of fire; Ida to Hermes's crag upon

Lemnos<sup>11</sup>; and, from this island, Athos, peak  
 Of Zeus, received the third great torch,  
 A massive blaze, so that the fish leapt from  
 The waves enraptured by the travelling light;  
 The golden glow sped on, a special sunrise,  
 Passing its message to Makistos' rocks<sup>12</sup>:  
 Not wasting time, nor irresponsibly  
 Taking a nap, he played the runner's role.  
 From afar the beacon's glare informs the guards  
 At Messapion<sup>13</sup> that it's reached the straits  
 Of Euripus, who set alight a pile  
 Of dried heather and flash the message on.  
 The torch glows brighter, never weakening,  
 And vaults across Asopus' plain, just like  
 A glistening moon, towards Kithairon's peak,  
 To rouse a new recipient of the fire.  
 The watch did not ignore the travel-worn  
 Firebrand, but fed their flames more than was planned!  
 Light streaked above the marsh of Gorgopis<sup>14</sup>,  
 And reaching Aigi planktos' height<sup>15</sup>, confirmed  
 Their mission not to let their fire die down: 304  
 They spare no effort making it blaze forth  
 Launching a mighty beard of flame to flood  
 The cape that oversees the Saronic Gulf  
 With brilliant light; then swooped, then caught  
 Arachne's mount<sup>16</sup>, our nearest lookout point.  
 And then it struck the Atreidai's halls right here,

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<sup>11</sup> *In the myth the Lemnian women killed all but one of their menfolk.*

<sup>12</sup> *"The tallest": Unknown, but presumably in the north of Euboea, from which it is apparently possible to see Arthos 100 miles away.*

<sup>13</sup> *Hills in Boeotia opposite Euboea*

<sup>14</sup> *Unknown*

<sup>15</sup> *Unknown – probably a mountain near Corith*

<sup>16</sup> *Spider mountain, in sight of Argos*

This light, grandfathered by the Idaian fire.  
Such were my rules for passing on the flame,  
Each fed in relay by another's torch.  
Who runs the first leg wins just like the last.  
Here is the proof and evidence you need —  
Despatched from Troy by my husband for me.

316

LEADER

I 'll give praise to the gods, my dear, quite soon;  
I want to hear your news, and be amazed  
Again! Could you please tell it all once more?

KLYTAIMESTRA

The Achaeans have Troy! This day, today!  
In Troy I think you'd hear two kinds of noise:  
Put vinegar and oil in the same jar,  
They separate —you wouldn't say they're friends!  
Now you can hear two sounds, the conquerors.  
The conquered: two viewpoints, but one event.  
One side is prostrate, having thrown themselves  
On husbands', brothers' corpses, children on  
The bodies of parents who gave them life:  
Their voices are no longer even free  
To grieve, to mourn the deaths of those they loved.  
Battle-fatigue keeps the other side awake,  
Then lines them up hungry to make a meal  
From what the city has, no special ration-tags,  
But each gets what's allotted him by chance.  
They have already taken Trojan homes  
To squat in, keeping themselves safe from frost  
And morning dew. How happy they will be  
To sleep all night : no need for sentries now!  
If they respect the city's guardian gods,

320

338

Gods of the conquered land, and their temples,  
 Maybe they won't be conquered in their turn.  
 I dread some lust may then inspire the troops,  
 Mastered by greed, to spoil what they should not.  
 For still they have to turn and run the second  
 Leg of the two-hundred<sup>17</sup>, to get home safe.  
 But, say the force returns without offending gods,  
 The traumas of the dead might yet be found  
 Awake, should something bad eventuate.  
 My words are things a woman says, of course.  
 "May good win out" – the scales must dip that way.  
 There's much that's good. I'll make the most of it.

350

LEADER

My dear, you speak sound sense just like a man.  
 Now that I've heard —and trust — your evidence,  
 I am preparing to address the gods again.  
 Efforts have been rewarded. That is good.

### First Stasimon [355-487]

CHORUS

*anapaests*

O Zeus, our king, and Night, our friend,  
 And the architect of greatness and glory,  
 Who over the towering walls of Troy  
 Threw a web like a roof, so neither the great  
 Nor even the children could slip through the mesh  
 Of the slave-trap,  
 Mighty net of assured destruction.  
 I respect Zeus, mighty Guardian of guests,

355

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<sup>17</sup> *The diaulos – competitors ran out to a turning point and came back to the finish*

For doing this deed, stretching his bowstring  
 Long ago, Alexander his target, so  
 He would not fire his arrow in vain, not  
 Falling short and not flying beyond the stars. 366

*First strophe: mostly syncopated iambics*

From Zeus they're able to say the blow came,  
 Though more probing is still possible.  
 He acted as he had said he would do.  
 They said gods don't think it's worth noticing  
 The men by whom sacrosanct  
 Delight is trampled. They're wrong. 372  
 For daring overmuch  
 A reckoning comes to kin<sup>18</sup>  
 Of those with too much pride 375  
 Whose houses overflow with riches  
 Beyond what's best. There should be just enough,  
     Not enough to harm one  
 Who is endowed with wisdom! 380  
 When an over-rich man has  
 Kicked great Justice's altar  
 Into nothing, there cannot be  
     Anything that can save him. 384

*First antistrophe*

Persistently Persuasion, foul child  
 Of madness picks on him and goads him.  
 All remedies are useless; never hidden,  
 His ruin's plain – an evil light shining out;

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<sup>18</sup> Text of 374-8 is highly uncertain

As poorly-made bronze, through wear  
 And tear, turns black<sup>19</sup>, so he—  
 When facing justice, he's  
 A kid chasing a bird that's in flight —  
 Befouls the city with his vile stain,  
 While there's no god who answers his **prayers**;  
     Justice destroys unjust  
 Men when they turn to evil.  
 Paris was such a man who  
 Came into the Atreidai's  
 Home. House-guest who dirtied the nest,  
     Robber who stole the woman.

394

402

*Second strophe*

She left her townspeople chaos of bear-  
 ing shields, of mustering, and  
     Sailors sourcing ship-gear,  
 She brought to Ilion in lieu of dowry ruin;  
 She slipped serene through the gates:  
     She did the unthinkable. And O how they cursed,  
 The palace spokesmen, who uttered these words:  
 "Over! Finished! Poor house! Poor leaders!  
 The marriage, gone! Footprints all the harlot left<sup>20</sup>!  
 One sees, in the silences of him she left,  
     No honour, no protest, no angry words.  
 Across the sea love still pulls —  
 A phantom queen seems to haunt his palace.  
 He hates beautiful statues,  
 Charm of marble eludes him,

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<sup>19</sup> *Bronze with too much lead in it will, through use, reveal its blackness.*

<sup>20</sup> *Lit "man-loving footprints". Is the man Menelaus or Paris?*

In the emptiness of their eyes,  
Aphrodite is missing.

419

*Second antistrophe*

Distressing images appear in dreams,  
Bring empty hopes, make-believe  
Loveliness —illusions.  
It's an illusion when one sees what looks like good,  
The glimpse though slips away  
Between one's fingers, never to return along  
The path on which dreams in sleep come winging."  
Throughout the house, up and down the palace, grief  
Like this, and more grief that overshadows it.  
And now for all those who then joined the force that left from Greece,  
Heartache, anguish – plain to see  
In their houses, each of them.  
Stomachs can be upset by bad news.  
People know who they sent out:  
Substitutes for their menfolk  
Come back home to each family —  
Ashes packed in a bronze urn.<sup>21</sup>

435

*Third strophe*

But Ares, gold-broker of bodies, who  
Has his balance with him even in war  
Despatches dust from the fire  
From Troy to loved ones, a dust  
Heavy, prompting tears, the ash  
Swapped, exchanged for men, which fills

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<sup>21</sup> In the Iliad, warriors are burnt in a common pyre and their ashes buried at Troy. Sending an individual's ashes home in an urn reflects recent Athenian practice -and would have struck home after recent heavy casualties in was (460-459)

Urns made ready for this task.  
 The mourners eulogise their men:  
 How one displayed his battle skills,  
 Another died well in the fight,  
     All over someone else's wife. 448  
 These are the things the silence  
 Growls, as their scathing grudges, un-  
     nerve the Atreidai's defence.  
 Some, though, there, all around the  
 Walls – once beautiful men – hold  
 Their post: tombs in the Trojan land.  
     Soil they won is their graveyard. 455

*Third antistrophe*

The public's murmurs are harsh, full of hate,  
 The people's curse demands a debt be paid.  
 My fearfulness waits to hear  
 Of something dark, cloaked by night. 460  
 Gods don't fail to notice mass-  
     Murderers; the dark ones, Av-  
     engers<sup>22</sup>, take their time to catch  
 A lucky one who has evad-  
     ed justice: fortune now reversed,  
 His life scratched out – and still there's no  
     Safe place among the unseen souls.  
     Dangerous when one only hears  
     Flattery: Thunderbolts from Zeus  
     Rain on his house and family.  
 I'd like wealth that's not envied;

---

<sup>22</sup> Erinyes

Not be sacker of cities,  
Not be captured myself, and live  
Life subjected to someone.

474

*Epode [possibly divided between different speakers]*

Throughout the town spreads the word  
Of fire that brings welcome news,  
Fast! If it is true, who knows?  
Or whether it is some deception sent by god?

Who is so gullible or so out of his mind  
To set his heart racing at  
Some news just in brought by fire, then have to be  
Disappointed if it's wrong?

Woman in charge? Typical!  
Before it's clear what's up – thanksgiving's arranged!  
Too persuasive by half, that's women! Words spread in a very short time.  
What is quick to grow's also quick to die:  
A rumour from women's lips fizzles out.

487

**Second Episode [489-680]**

LEADER<sup>23</sup>

Soon we shall know about the handings-on  
Of flaming torches, fire, and beacon-posts,  
If really they are true, or if like dreams,  
This cheering light comes to make fools of us.  
A herald from the shore I see, look, swathed  
In olive branches. Mud – not quite - her sister,

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<sup>23</sup> *Klytaimestra in the mss*

Unwettered dust gives me the proof of this:  
That he will signal with his voice, and not  
By smoke or lighting fires on mountain-tops!  
Either his words will lead to more rejoicing,  
Or else... I'm loth to state the alternative.  
May good be added to the good we have.  
Who makes a different prayer for this city,  
May they be paid back for their mind's mistake.

502

*A dust-covered man appears.*

HERALD

At last! Ancestral soil of Argos' land,  
This day I'm back with you. Ten years it's been.  
Shattered were many hopes: lucky with one!  
I never thought I'd die on Argive soil, here,  
And share as part of her my longed-for tomb.  
How are you, land, now? Sunlight, how are you?  
Zeus, topmost of our land? Apollo, lord —  
Shoot no more arrows at us from your bow!  
Enough was your unfriendliness at Troy.  
Now, though, become our saviour, help us heal,  
Apollo, lord. I call upon the gods together,  
All of them, and my special protector,  
Hermes, beloved herald, heralds' god;  
The Heroes too, who sent us on our way,  
Glad to welcome the army's remnants back.  
At last! You palace of the kings, dear place,  
You holy seats, you gods the sun shines on,  
More than ever, with beaming faces, after  
So long, with ceremony, greet your king.  
He's come to bring out of the darkness light,  
For you, for all: Agamemnon the king.

516

Give him a mighty welcome as befits,  
The one who levelled Troy, with Zeus's tools  
Of justice, and who ground the soil to dust.  
Altars and statues of the gods are gone:  
And all the country's seed has been destroyed;  
Having put such a yoke upon Troy's neck,  
Atreus's elder son, blessed by the gods,  
Is here! The worthiest of praise of all  
Mankind. Not Paris nor the town who shares  
His guilt could say his deed was worth the pain.  
Accused of robbery with violence,  
He forfeited his rights, and cut to shreds  
His home, his ancestors, his land itself.  
The house of Priam paid a double price.

537

LEADER

Welcome home, herald of the Achaean force.

HERALD

I am well come. To die is all I ask.

LEADER

Love for your fatherland's exhausted you?

HERALD

My eyes are filled with tears of happiness.

LEADER

Such joy as this, I'm sure, can make one ill.

HERALD

How come? Explain. I don't get what you mean.

LEADER

We were struck down by love for you in turn!

HERALD

The country missed the men who're missing it?

LEADER

So much: Uneasy thoughts make me cry out.

HERALD

So when did these distressing thoughts begin?

LEADER

Long silence has protected me from harm.

HERALD

What harm? With kings away you feared someone?

LEADER

I would be happy just to die – your words.

550

HERALD

But all is well. In time to come, these things,

They'll say, some of them turned out fine,

Some could be criticised. Who, bar the gods,

Is free of suffering for all his life?

Describing the horrors, how we had to sleep,

Narrow gangways, no blankets, what

Not to hate, deprived of our necessities?

On shore it was still more deplorable:

Our bivouacs bang up against the walls,

From up above then from the ground below

The drizzle and the dew soaked us, non-stop

Annoyance, leaving clothes alive with lice.

562

Describing cold that killed the birds, icy,

Unbearable, from snow on Ida's peak...

Or that heat, when the sea relaxed, took its

Midday siesta, with no wind, no waves.

But why relive the pain? It's over, gone.

The pain is over: for the dead at least

No more the fear of waking up, for us

Survivors, what's left of the Argive force,

To win feels good, the pain can't wipe it out.

What need to count the dead – their lives are lost:  
Why need one living suffer for bad luck?  
Ill fortune has no need to hurt the living  
I choose to bid a fond goodbye to misery,  
So, it may be all right to boast, this day,  
With words that soar above the lands and seas:  
“One day the Argive army conquered Troy,  
And nailed these spoils up for the gods  
In temples throughout Greece, this ancient treasure.”  
And those who hear these things must praise the city  
And her commanders. They will celebrate  
The grace of Zeus, who did this. That is all.

582

LEADER

I'll not deny your words have conquered me.  
It's good for old men to be schooled by youth.  
Of course, these things concern the palace most,  
And Klytaimestra, but they boost me too.  
*The queen enters, unexpectedly, as the Herald is preparing to leave.*

KLYTAIMESTRA

I had my shouts of triumph long ago  
When the fire's first news arrived last night,  
Announcing Troy was captured and destroyed.  
And who said, mocking me? “Deluded by  
Some flashing lights you think that Troy's been sacked?  
Over-excited. Typical woman!”  
That's what they said - clearly, I was insane.  
I sacrificed, though, and, as women do,  
One passed the call to celebrate to others  
Till all the town rejoiced, while on the altars  
Incense spread gentle fragrance with less flame.

587

597

Enough for now. What need to tell me more?  
From the king himself I'll learn the full account.  
I'm in a hurry now to welcome my  
Beloved husband home as best I can.  
What sweeter day than this for any wife,  
Seeing her man, kept safe through war by god,  
Come through the gates? Go tell my husband this:  
The city's heartthrob: quick, be here! Come soon!  
May he find when he gets home a loyal wife,  
Exactly like the one he left, a guard-dog, friend  
To him, hostile to those intending harm,  
The same in every other thing: no seal  
He she destroyed, not one in all this time.  
But fun with someone else? Wagging of tongues?  
You'd sooner catch me smithing, testing bronze!  
All this I'm proud to say, the honest truth,  
Not boasting, spoken by a royal wife.

614

LEADER

She's had her say. A reasoned statement, though  
To learn its meaning needs decipherment.  
Menelaus, herald, now, I ask of him,  
If the beloved ruler of this land  
Is still alive and has come back with you.

HERALD

I could not give good news without untruth,  
And in the long term disappoint my friends.

LEADER

Is there a way to make good news sound true?  
These things once opened up cannot be hid.

HERALD

The man has vanished from the Achaean force,

He and his ship. I'm telling you the truth.

LEADER

Did he just vanish putting out to sea,  
Or did a storm hit you and sweep him off?

627

HERALD

Like a top archer you have hit the mark!  
You have summed up a lengthy tale of pain.

LEADER

According to the other sailors' talk  
Was Menelaus still alive – or dead?

HERALD

No one knows enough to give a clear report,  
Except the Sun who sees all life on earth.

LEADER

Can you say more about the storm which hit  
The fleet, and by what powers it was destroyed?

HERALD

It is not right to desecrate a happy day  
With ugly news. Honour the gods elsewhere.  
When a shaken army's herald brings a city  
Unwelcome news grim-faced, there is one wound,  
A public one, the city must confront,  
And one the many, men press-ganged from home:  
The twin-yoked horses Ares loves to whip,  
Two-headed ruin, pair immersed in blood.  
It's better someone loaded with such pain  
Speaks such a praise-song<sup>24</sup> to the Erinyes.  
Bringing the good news of deliverance,  
Here in a city revelling in success,

645

---

<sup>24</sup> *Paean*, normally sung to Apollo after a victory. A *paean to the Furies* is a paradox, to underline why the Herald is reluctant to deliver bad news.

How can I bear to mix good things with bad,  
Describe the storm angry gods sent the Greeks?  
Conspiracy! Before, the direst enemies,  
Lightning and sea, displayed their loyalty,  
Wrecking together the hapless Argive force.  
During the night the evil sea grew rough;  
Ships butted other ships, dispersed by winds  
From Thrace, and, tossed by violent storms –  
A hurricane with lashing, drenching rain,  
A swirl – all gone, the crazed shepherd's flock lost!  
And when the brilliant light of day returned,  
We saw the Aegean Sea abloom with bodies  
Of men from Greece, and wreckage from the ships,  
But as for us: someone sneaked us away,  
Ship too, its hull intact, or else a god -  
No human - intervened, and steered us clear;  
Fortune the Saviour was on board – much thanks! –  
So that we were not swamped while anchoring,  
Nor washed against the steep and rocky shore.  
And so having avoided death at sea,  
In daylight, not believing in our luck,  
We husbanded our thoughts, over the new  
Blow to our suffering force, so cruelly crushed.  
And now if any one of them still breathes,  
He'd think that we were dead, of course.  
And we suppose the same of them. May all  
Yet turn out for the best. Menelaus?  
Best, first of all, expect him to come home.  
At any rate, if some ray of the sun  
Finds he's alive, and Zeus, not yet determined  
To exterminate his race, has managed this,

672

There's hope he will come to his house again.

You've heard this: know you've heard the truth.

680

### **Second Stasimon (681-781)**

CHORUS

*First strophe*

Who once coined a name so

Altogether accurate?

Someone, unaware, could they have known what

Fate intended? Who displayed skill with words

To choose so apt a name - for

Sister-in-war, provocateuse, **her**:

Helena? Named her so perfectly<sup>25</sup>:

Hell-at-sea, Hellanderer, Hell-

for-the-city, off she was shipped

From the drapes, the luxury bedroom,

By the West Wind's monstrous breezes,

And then men, thousands of men, with shields, the hunters,

Pursuing the fading oars' wake,

Moor up there on the banks of the

Leafy Simois, because of

The goddess Discord, the blood-soaked.

698

*First antistrophe*

Wrath, the god whose plans don't fail,

Drove this fitly named wed-sore

All the way to Troy, chastising, in time,

Those who'd sung the bridal song,

Wedding-hymn her in-laws sang

---

<sup>25</sup> The point is the Greek root *hel-*, as in *helein*, to take, capture. The puns are thus untranslatable: *helenaus* (ship taker), *helandros* (man-taker), *heleptolis* (city-taker). The Hell idea goes back to Browning's famous 1877 version. Thanks!

Lustily: they who broke his laws: by  
Disrespecting Zeus's decrees,  
Breaking the laws of entertainment  
Disregarding the duties of hosts  
It must learn a different song now,  
Must the ancient town of Priam:  
There are dirges, I imagine, much lamenting,  
As they call him, Paris, bridegroom-  
Deathmonger, as the city,  
Endures a life of ruin  
With all its citizens bleeding.

716

*Second strophe*

He gave food when a lion cub  
Wanted milk that it could not find,  
Someone did, in his own home;  
While it was still at the start of  
Life, it was tame, and his children's  
Pet, and the old people loved it.  
Often it was cradled in their arms,  
Cuddled just like a new-born child,  
Shining eyes for the hand with food,  
Bouncing tail for its mealtimes.

726

*Second antistrophe*

As time passed, it revealed its true  
Nature: that of its parents. It  
Paid the ones who had fed it  
Back with a sheep-killing rampage  
Hosting a feast uninvited.  
Halls were bespattered with blood, a-

gony for family, no defence,  
Absolute carnage – many dead.  
Seems some priest of Destruction was  
Reared by god in the household.

735

*Third strophe*

At first, she arrived in Troy, as I might say,  
The embodiment of wind-  
less serenity, calm,  
A harmless showing-off of riches,  
Weaponised eyes, but gentle,  
Love's own blossom that eats your soul up.  
Then she turned round, set in motion  
Bitter ending for the marriage,  
Hard to live with - the Erinyes  
Who was sent by god of guest-friends,  
Zeus, swooping down to destroy  
Priam' sons, with a bride-dirge.

749

*Third antistrophe*

A hoary antique belief among mankind,  
Has been fashioned: *Wealth* that has  
Grown too large has children;  
It does not die, but creates offspring;  
Rising from perfect fortune's kin,  
Grows a misery never sated.  
My opinion disagrees with  
Other people's. It is *Crime* that  
After time breeds further misdeeds  
Showing likeness to their parents.  
For families keeping the law

Children always are lovely.

762

*Fourth strophe*

Old Violence<sup>26</sup> loves to breed

Young, renewed violence

Living in man's evil deeds,

It may be now, or it may be soon,

The birth-day of the child arrives:

The Demon too is born - invincible, un-

assailable – unholy power

Bringing home black destruction:

Children and parents – self-same.

771

*Fourth antistrophe*

But Justice shines brightly in

Hovels made black with smoke,

Venerates the decent man;

But as for mansions studded with gold,

Where hands are dirty: those she leaves,

Slinking away with a look of distaste,

Makes for the pure, despises wealth's

Power maintained by fake praise.

She shapes the end for all things.

782

**Third Episode [783-974]**

*Agamemnon enters, riding in a four-wheeled wagon drawn by mules (real ones?), accompanied by  
Kassandra, sitting either beside him or in a separate wagon behind containing the spoils of war.*

CHORUS/LEADER

*Anapaests*

---

<sup>26</sup> *Hubris*, referring to Agamemnon's desecration of Trojan shrines.

Let us know, king, Troy's city-destroyer,  
 Offspring of Atreus,  
 How to address you? How to give honour,  
 Not to exceed, nor indeed to fall short of  
 Appropriate thanks?  
 So many men show they would choose semblance  
 Over reality, spurning what's right.  
 With the one who has not done well, everyone  
 Is ready to sympathise, though they've not  
 Felt the impact of pain bite into their heart.  
 And people who seem to share one's joy,  
 Forcing their faces to simulate smiling,  
 <Find it hard also to choose the right language.>  
 But a shepherd, a wise one who knows his sheep,  
 Will not be fooled by the face of a man who  
 Intends to seem loyal, but coos over him  
 With watery insincere friendship.  
 That day when for Helen's sake you launched your fleet,  
 Back then, for me – and I will not pretend –  
 The picture you painted was ugly,  
 Your mind was adrift, you weren't steering it straight,  
 Happy for men to be killed just to bring back  
 A woman who chose promiscuity's path.  
 But - I don't say this lightly, I speak as a friend -  
 I admire those who have completed their task.  
 With the passage of time you'll find out, you will know  
 Who were the city's good care-takers,  
 Whose conduct was out of step.

800

809

AGAMEMNON

First then it's Argos and the national gods

I duly greet, who aided my return,  
And helped me do the thing I justly did  
To Priam's Troy. The gods – no argument –  
Accepted death-penalty's case and cast  
Their Troy-destroying pebbles straight into  
The urn of blood. Around the other jar  
Hope hovered, but no hand came near to fill it.  
A plume of smoke still marks the city's fall.  
The winds of ruin still blow hard, while ash  
Drops, loth to cool, spouting rich gusts of wealth.

820

I owe the gods eternal gratitude,  
Since for outrageous robbery we have  
Been recompensed, and for a woman's sake  
The Argive fang has ground the town to dust,  
The Horse's brood! The troops shields at their sides  
Leapt out - the Pleiades had set that night<sup>27</sup>.  
Vaulting the tower; the lion craving flesh,  
Raw meat lapped up its fill of tyrants' blood. *[Pause]*

My first words are intended for the gods.  
As for your thoughts, I remember what I heard:  
I say the same: you'll find that I agree.

829

This is indeed what few men can embrace:  
Praising successful friends unselfishly.  
Envy's a poison which devours one's soul,  
And aggravates the infection which one has.  
One's weighed down by one's own problems,  
And suffers seeing someone else succeed.  
I speak as one who knows, I understand  
The mirror that distorts society -

---

<sup>27</sup> Probably just a way of saying "dead of night"; "it was very dark".

Those most devoted friends? Trick of the light!

<Ajax, say or Achilles? Shadows! Ghosts!>

Only Odysseus, who'd been loth to sail,

Got down and helped me haul the chariot –

I'm talking of a man who may be dead

Or still alive. *[Pause]* What's next? About the city

844

And the gods, together we shall hold debates

In full assembly. For what is doing well,

Let's plan on how it may continue thus;

For what may need some healing medicine,

With timely cautery or surgery,

We'll try to check the onset of disease.

And now inside my halls, my palace, at

My hearth, first I'll honour the gods, who sent

Me forth and now have brought me home again.

May Victory, who's with me, stay for good.

854

*Agamemnon's grand dismount and entrance are scuppered when the palace doors open and Klytaimestra and her maids bar his way. He's forced to stay in the wagon. She does not address him!*

KLYTAIMESTRA

Elders of Argos, fellow-citizens,

I shall not feel ashamed to tell you of

My weakness: loving men. With time a person's

Shyness vanishes. I have not learned this

From others: I shall tell my own sad tale::

What my life was while he was there in Troy.

First, for a woman it's a dreadful thing

To sit alone at home without a man,

Hearing so many vicious made-up tales:

This one arrives, it's bad, and then another

Arrives to tell the house it's worse than bad.

If he had had as many wounds as possible, this man,

As rumour's chariot brought to this house,

He'd have more holes in him than any net;

If he had died - as stories flooding in declared –

He 'd have had three bodies, like a second Geryon<sup>28</sup>,

870

And claim a cloak of earth three times, that's one

For each appearance as a dying man.

Because of these repeated messages,

Others kept finding ropes around my neck,

Untying them, though I resisted hard.

That's why, you see, our child, the guarantor

Of our relationship, is not beside me

As he should be: Orestes. Never fear;

A loyal old comrade looks after him:

The Phocian, Strophios, who warned me of

Some possible problems: the risk to you

In Troy; then if a popular revolt

Might stage a coup: it is a human trait

To kick a person who has fallen down.

885

So there. Concerns like these were genuine.

Well as for me, the raging torrents

Of my tears are past: no drop remains.

My eyes are sore from staying up all night,

Cursing on your behalf the signal-fires

Always unlit. I was awakened in my dreams

By the insistent droning of a gnat,

I witnessed more torments affecting you

Then could occur during the hours of sleep.

---

<sup>28</sup> A legendary monster with three torsos who was killed by Herakles.

Now after all I've been through, I would say [*kneeling*]

In all sincerity, this man's the farm dog,

The ship's mainstay, the pillar holding up

The roof, his father's only son and heir,

A cooling stream for thirsty travellers,

Land sailors never thought they'd see,

900

A glorious day after a winter storm.

[A joy to get away from all problems]

With compliments like these I honour him:

No meanness from the gods! For we endured

So much before that's bad. So now, dear heart,

Step down then from your chariot. Don't let

The foot that trampled Troy tread on the ground.

Girls, why so slow? Spread out the robes<sup>29</sup>, finish [*Her maids begin to lay out the purple cloths*]

The job, prepare his path, the route he'll take.

So let his journey now empurpled be,

A fine surprise as Justice brings him home.

And now, my care, awake always, alert,

Will fix the rest as fated, with gods' help.

913

AGAMEMNON

Leda's daughter! My palace's defender!

Your words about my absence were just right.

You spun them out! But properly such praise –

Such honour – ought to come from someone else.

The other thing: don't try to flirt with me,

I'm not a woman! Don't writhe on the ground

Goggling and whinging like some Asian man!

And do not spread out robes and make my route

A blasphemy: such worship is reserved

---

<sup>29</sup> Not carpets – large woven and richly-embroidered rectangles, used as cloaks, robes, blankets, or to drape images of gods. It looks like a stream of blood flowing from the palace!

For gods. To trample ornate beauty<sup>30</sup> is  
For me a thing I'd be afraid to do.  
I say honour me as a man, not god.  
Foot-mats are one thing: tapestries  
Send a different message: "Do not show off" -  
God's most important gift. Success comes when  
Achievements last right to the end of life.  
If I stick to this path I need not fear.

930

KLYTAIMESTRA

Now answer, tell me what you really feel...

AGAMEMNON

Believe me, I won't alter what I think!

KLYTAIMESTRA

If in fear of a god would you have agreed?

AGAMEMNON

Yes, if an expert said it must be done<sup>31</sup>.

KLYTAIMESTRA

Would Priam, do you think, if he had won?

AGAMEMNON

I think he'd definitely walk on robes...

KLYTAIMESTRA

You'd not be nervous then of people's talk?

AGAMEMNON

Though what the people say does carry weight...

KLYTAIMESTRA

A man unenvied is a man ignored.

AGAMEMNON

It's not a woman's place to pick a fight!

KLYTAIMESTRA

---

<sup>30</sup> *But compare line 372*

<sup>31</sup> *Compare 218*

Successful men can well afford to yield!

AGAMEMNON

You need so much to win this trial of strength!

KLYTAIMESTRA

Trust me! You win if you hand victory to me!

943

AGAMEMNON

If this is what you want... then, someone, quick!

Take off my boots – good servants they have been –

And as I step upon these purple robes,

May no god cast a jealous eye on me.

I feel quite guilty spoiling with my feet

The family treasure, these expensive cloths.

So what? It's done! The foreign girl, yes her,

Give her a friendly welcome. Because god

Appreciates a gentle conqueror.

For no one wants the yoke of slavery.

She, flower of all the objects picked for me,

Accompanies me as the army's gift.

And since you tripped me, I'll yield to your wish:

When I go in, I'll tread on purple cloth.

957

KLYTAIMESTRA

The sea is there - who can deplete its wealth? -

Producing copious renewable

Supplies of costly purple dye for clothes.

Thanks to the gods your house has plenty, sir,

Of these: poverty it knows nothing of!

Many more robes I would have had be trampled,

If oracles had told the house that I

Could make sure that this man was coming home.

965

When a tree's well-rooted, foliage brings shade

To a house against the dog-star Sirius.

When you come back home to your palace hearth,  
 Warmth comes, though it be wintertime.  
 And when Zeus turns the verjuice into wine,  
 There's chill already to refresh the house:  
 The man of the moment's reached his journey's end! [*Agamemnon finally enters the palace*]  
 Reverend Zeus, attend to what I pray.  
 For on what you intend, all now depends. 974

### Third stasimon [975-1034]

CHORUS

#### *First strophe*

Why, then, unremittingly,  
 Does this fear that rules my heart  
 Hover over me, revealing portents? 977  
 Tunes I don't choose, I don't want, keep on hymning predictions; 979  
 Confident persuasiveness  
 Sits no longer on its throne  
 Helping thwart songs of threat -  
     Nightmare-like inanities.  
 Much time has passed since sand went flying up, since when  
 Cables dropped from the stern,  
     On that day the sea-borne force  
 Disembarked by Ilion. 987

#### *First antistrophe*

My own eyes told me the news;  
 I saw their return myself.  
 Unaccompanied, untaught, my inmost  
 Being is chanting the dirge that the Fury insists on,  
 Lacking all the comforting  
 Confidence that hope supplies.

In my mind Justice speaks

Guts respond, as they must

My heart whirls as it churns towards the coming end...

Hope is small, yet I pray

Fears that lie collapse, prove false,

Fears of what the end may mean.

1000

*Second strophe*

It's very obvious that Health, when it's pursued

By a man who's an obsessive, is fraught.

There's only a thin wall between them:

Health and disease. And a man's fate

Sails on its course till it hits –

Suddenly – unforeseen rocks of ill luck.

If in fear one jettisons

Portions of one's property

Slings it overboard in time,

Then the house does not go down;

Loaded with excessive stuff,

The ship does not capsize.

Each year Zeus's magnificent gift, so ab-

undantly lavished on land that's been ploughed,

Beats off hunger, that disease.

1005

1014

*Second antistrophe*

However. Once, as a man dies, there is a gush

Of his dark lifeblood already, then who

Could summon him back with their chanting?

Even the one who knew best<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Asclepius – he brought men back to life and was destroyed by Zeus's thunderbolt.

How to revive those who'd died:  
Zeus put a stop to his work - and killed him.  
If this weren't the gods' design -  
"Fate already fixed excludes  
Someone's fate from getting worse",  
Heart would have outpaced the tongue,  
Eager to communicate.  
As things are, its screams are mute,  
Darkly aching, without any hope it can  
Follow the thread to its true destination,  
While the mind is burning up.

1033

#### **Fourth Episode [1035-1330]**

KLYTAIMESTRA *re-enters*

You get inside as well. Cassandra. You.  
Since Zeus has of his mercy brought you here,  
To share the cleansing ritual, to stand  
With other slaves beside the altar-stone,  
Come down from there, don't be too proud.  
They say even Alkmena's son was once  
Sold as a slave and lived on barley-bread.  
But if one has to find oneself a slave,  
A master with old money has to be a boon:  
People who never thought they'd make so much,  
Are always cruel to slaves... from us you'll get  
The treatment which is customary here.

1046

LEADER

The words she said to you are very clear,  
Trapped as you were within the net of fate:  
Obey her? *[Pause]* If you want. *[Pause]* Perhaps you don't. *[Pause]*

KLYTAIMESTRA

Unless she's like a swallow twittering  
In some strange foreign tongue she's learned,  
I will get through to her and win her round.

LEADER

Go on. Hers is the best advice you'll hear. 1054

KLYTAIMESTRA

I do not have the leisure to waste time  
Out here. The sheep are waiting all-prepared  
For slaughter at the altar-stone inside:  
A pleasure we did not expect to have.  
If you intend to do something, be quick.  
But if you're Greekless and words make no sense,  
Make some outlandish gesture, save your breath. 1061

LEADER

Our guest it seems needs an interpreter:  
She's like a wild thing just caught in a trap.  
KLYTAIMESTRA  
She's mad, controlled by thoughts in her sick mind.  
She left her just-now-captured town, arrived  
Not having learned to tolerate the bit;  
Such wildness always ends in foaming blood.  
I'll look a fool to go on wasting words.

*She goes into the palace*

LEADER

I am not furious. I pity you.  
Sad creature, come. Get off the chariot.  
You must accept the yoke. I know it's strange. 1071

*EPIRRHEMA [1072-1177]*

*Strophe 1*

KASSANDRA

*She shrieks at the top of her voice – a sound as of one who’s confronted by a sudden death  
(lamentation, surprise, and horror – Raeburn)*

Ototototoi popoi da

Apollo! Apollo!

LEADER

Why scream about the god of oracles?

He’s not the sort who welcomes shows of grief.

*Antistrophe 1*

KASSANDRA

Ototototoi popoi da

Apollo! Apollo!

LEADER

Again, she disrespects the god, and calls

On one not right to be at funerals.

1079

*Strophe 2*

KASSANDRA

Apollo! Apollo!

You mapped the path, Apollo mine.

You poleaxed<sup>33</sup> me - much easier this time.

LEADER

She’s broadcasting her troubles, as it seems.

The god’s still in her, though she is a slave.

*Antistrophe 2*

KASSANDRA

Apollo! Apollo!

You mapped the path, Apollo mine.

Arrgh! Where have you brought me to? What is this house?

LEADER

The house of the Atreidai! If you don’t know this,

I’m telling you. And you won’t prove me wrong!

1089

---

<sup>33</sup> A pun on Apollo’s name and Greek *apollumi*, I destroy

*Strophe 3*

KASSANDRA

Aaargh! Aaargh!

No! It's a god-damned place; many the evil things

It's known: the murders, hacking up of flesh:

A human abattoir, awash with blood.

LEADER

The Asian seems to have a bloodhound's nose,

Scenting the blood of those whose blood she'll find.

*Antistrophe 3*

KASSANDRA

This is the evidence! There is no room for doubt.

These babies bawling butchered and

Their roasted flesh devoured by their father!

LEADER

We do not doubt your power of second-sight

We won't be looking for interpreters.

1099

*Strophe 4*

KASSANDRA *a shriek of horrified surprise*

Io popoi! What is it being planned?

What can this new pain be? It's gross!

Gross what is planned in here. Evil!

Can't bear it, its friends can't, can't stop it, defenceless;

No help is near at hand

LEADER

I do not understand these prophecies.

I did before. The whole town then cried out.

*Antistrophe 4*

KASSANDRA

Heartless bitch. This then is what you'll do?

The husband who shares your bed,

In his bath. You washed him, How shall I tell the end?

Very quick it will be. She extends one hand first

Then reaches out with the other.

1111

LEADER

I don't yet understand. I'm baffled by

Her riddling prophecies. My mind can't focus ...

1113

#### *Strophe 5*

KASSANDRA *Each of her utterances, like this next one, begins with an exclamation, blending surprise, horror, and disgust.*

E! e! papai! papai! What is it that I can see?

It is a net of the Death-god!

The death-trap-wife shares bed, shares too

In murder. Let Strife – never enough for this clan! –

Honour a sacrifice meriting death by stones<sup>34</sup>.

1118

LEADER

Who is the Erinys she calls to make

The house rejoice? Her words do not please me,

Into my heart my blood flows pale as a saffron robe,

Just like a warrior, fallen amid the fight,

Comes to the end of life at the dying down of the sun;

Ruin comes speedily.

#### *Antistrophe 5*

KASSANDRA

*Cries of horror and disgust*

A! A! Look there! Look there! Don't let the cow get near

The bull! In robes she's caught him

Black robes, with horns, the tools of treachery.

She strikes! He falls, he's in the water-trough —

That's what I'm trying to tell you — death's treacherous crucible.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Stoning is an execution authorised and carried out by the community.*

LEADER

I would not claim to be a top expert  
In prophecies, I'd guess at bad things though.  
From prophecies what welcome news ever  
Descends to mortals? Through evil things  
Prophets' long-winded trickery makes us  
Afraid to learn the news they bring.

1135

*Strophe 6*

KASSANDRA

Io! Io! A hopeless girl's accursed fate!  
I tell of more tears to shed for the suffering I must face.  
Why have you brought me, this sad creature, here,  
Simply to share in death? What is the point?

LEADER

You are a lunatic, a god has taken your wits,  
You are singing about yourself,  
Music that is not music, like the pale brown  
Vocalist<sup>35</sup> - never quiet, heart so sad, desperate,  
Trilling "Itys Itys" for the parents' evil deeds,  
The poor nightingale.

*Antistrophe 6*

KASSANDRA

Io, io! The melody-maker's life, life of a nightingale!  
For the gods have dressed her up, in a body equipped with wings,  
Granted a life of joy, never to weep again.  
But for me, a blade with double edge awaits.

LEADER

Where do you get this angst from – never-ending,

---

<sup>35</sup> Procne punished her husband Terus for raping her sister Philomela by killing Itys her son, and serving him up to his father. The gods turned her into a nightingale to save her from Terus' revenge. Itys itys is the nightingale's song.

Insane and useless?

Why do you create songs that rouse fear?

Incomprehensible noise, all so loud, so high-pitched?

What are the limits you set, to the flow of your fearsome words,

Powered by a god?

1155

*Strophe 7*

KASSANDRA

Io! The wedding, wedding of Paris that ruined his friends!

Io! Skamander<sup>36</sup>! Troy's water I used to drink!

Those days along your sands, I poor unfortunate girl,

Was looked after, and safe.

But it seems beside Kokytos, and the banks,

Of Akheron I'll soon be forced to prophesy!

LEADER

These words you're uttering now seem very clear indeed,

An infant would understand.

I'm hit, and I'm stung, your tale has drawn blood,

As you softly weep for your pain that's to come

Traumatic for me to hear.

1166

*Antistrophe 7*

KASSANDRA

Io! The distress, distress of Troy, all utterly destroyed,

Io! My father's sacrifices he made

of grass-cropping sheep, In front of the walls. But no

Remedy then appeared

To stop the city suffering its fate.

For all my passion I'll soon fall to earth.

LEADER

This last thing that you said is back to the earlier you:

---

<sup>36</sup> *Skamander – a river at Troy: Kokytos and Akheron were rivers in the Underworld.*

Some demon, with malevolence,  
Attacking you, crushing you, makes  
You sing of these terrible sufferings leading to death.  
I cannot foresee the end.

1177

KASSANDRA

From now my prophecy will not be veiled,  
Nor peeping out like some new-wedded bride;  
It'll come like a bracing wind with the rising sun,  
As a tidal surge pushing towards the shore  
A wave of pain - greater by far than this one:  
My thoughts no more wrapped in obscurity.  
Back up my words, as I, hot on the trail  
Of evil, scent deeds done in ancient times.

1185

A choir<sup>37</sup>, in harmony but not in tune  
Has never left this house. It means no good.  
Revellers so drunk on human blood that they  
Grow bolder and remain inside its walls,  
Hard to evict – the Avenger family.

1190

They squat within the halls and sing their song,  
To introduce the madness: piece by piece ...  
They spill it: "brother's bed defiled".  
Am I wrong, or has the archer hit the mark?  
Am I a quack who goes round talking rot?  
Now tell me straight, swear you don't recognise  
The ancient crimes committed in this house!

LEADER

And if I agreed to swear an oath, how would  
Things change? But I'm surprised that you, brought up

---

<sup>37</sup> *The Erinyes (Furies)*

In a town across the sea with foreign speech,  
Can speak as if you had been here yourself.

1200

KASSANDRA

The seer Apollo gave this gift to me.

LEADER

Do you mean that, though a god, he fell in love...?

KASSANDRA

I was too shy to tell you this right out!

LEADER

Such shyness is just for the lucky ones.

KASSANDRA

He wrestled me so fiercely, breathing love...

LEADER

And did you reach the making-babies stage?

KASSANDRA

I said I would, but then I cheated him.

LEADER

Did you already have the gift of prophecy?

KASSANDRA

I told the people all they'd have to bear.

LEADER

Why did you not suffer Loxias's rage?

KASSANDRA

I paid. No one believed me, none at all.

LEADER

To us your revelations seem spot on.

1213

KASSANDRA

Iou! Iou! O! O! Evil!

Again, the ghastly chore of prophecy

Whirls me around: it starts, a fearsome start.

Look at them, sitting beside the palace walls,

Infants, like shapes appearing in a dream,  
 Children, dead by the hands – it seems – of friends,  
 Filling their hands with meat – a home-cooked meal -  
 Including offal, chitterlings – foul load –  
 They hold - clear now – and father's tasted all.  
 For this someone I say plans on revenge,  
 A gutless lion who haunts the bedroom, and,  
 Worse luck – house-sitter for my absent master.

[One has to bear the yoke of slavery.]

1226

The admiral of the fleet, Troy's nemesis,  
 Does not know how the hateful bitch's tongue,  
 Which spoke, at length, with words of cheer, seeks justice,  
 Aims secretly to ruin his good luck.  
 Such plans! The woman killer of the man!  
 She is – What dangerous beast could I  
 Compare her to? An amphisbaena<sup>38</sup> or  
 A cliff-haunting Skylla, the sailors' doom,  
 Rabid hell-mother breathing all-out war  
 Against her friends. And how she celebrated,  
 Our heroine, as if she'd won a battle!  
 She seems so pleased to see him safely back!  
 It's all the same if you are not convinced.  
 When the future comes, you'll feel sorry for me,  
 Saying "Her prophecies were all too true."

1241

LEADER

Thyestes feasting on his children's flesh:  
 I understood, with horror, and I'm gripped  
 With fear, hearing you tell the truth straight out.  
 The rest, though, has me stumbling, in the rough.

---

<sup>38</sup> A mythical snake with a head at each end. Skylla – a half female monster with six heads who snatched sailors from their ships as they passed through the straits of Messina (Odyssey 12)

KASSANDRA

What I say you'll see is Agamemnon's death.

LEADER

You can't say that, young woman! Hold your tongue!

KASSANDRA

The truth's no ailment to be made better!

LEADER

Not if it happens. My prayer is it won't.

KASSANDRA

You pray; for them though murder is the task.

LEADER

What man is masterminding this intrigue?

KASSANDRA

You've missed the point of all my prophecy!

LEADER

The killer's method, that eludes me still.

KASSANDRA

My Greek is comprehensible enough!

LEADER

And so's The Delphic oracle's – still hard!

1256

KASSANDRA

Papai!

What a fire is coming!

Ototoi!

Apollo Lykeios!<sup>39</sup> Help me!

She, lioness in human form who sleeps

With a wolf - while noble lion is away –

Will kill me, helpless. She adds extra rage

For me, as she concocts her poisonous draught.

---

<sup>39</sup> The Lycian, or the Wolf-slayer

As she is sharpening the sword, she crows  
 How the man pays with his death for bringing me.  
 Why make me a fool, then, with these props?  
 The stick, the shawl, the hangings round my neck?  
 I 'll ruin them for what they've done to me.  
 To Hell with you! Now you are off, take that!  
 Adorn another girl's downfall, not mine.  
 And look! Apollo himself stripping off  
 My prophetess's robe, observing me,  
 A laughingstock, in all this finery,  
 To friends now enemies – what was the point? 1272  
 I had to face them calling me sad, poor,  
 A scrounger, like some gypsy sorceress.  
 The prophet having failed his prophetess  
 Now leads me off to face my deathly fate.  
 A chopping-block, not father's altar, waits,  
 Still warm and bloody from my ritual slaughter.  
 Nevertheless, the gods will not ignore  
 Our deaths. There'll come our champion, a son 1280  
 Who'll kill his mother, and avenge his father;  
 A fugitive, an exile, comes back home  
 To set the capstone on his family's doom.  
 [He's sworn a mighty oath before the gods.]  
 His father, lying dead, will bring him back. 1285  
 But why do I complain so piteously?  
 Now that I've seen the city, Troy, suffer  
 What it suffered, and those who captured it -  
 By gods' decree – now faced with such a plight,  
 I'll go, I'll lead the way, I'll yield to death.  
 I greet these doors. They are the gates of Hades,  
 I pray it will be accurate, well-timed, the blow;

So I may close my eyes without a fight,  
As my life-blood flows out in peaceful death.

1294

LEADER

So much that's sad, so much that's wise, dear girl,  
You've spelt it out in full. But if you know  
Your fate for real, why stride so bravely to  
The altar like a cow for sacrifice?

KASSANDRA *has begun to move towards the doors*  
There's no escape, my friends, there's no more time.

LEADER

But one's final moment of time is precious!

KASSANDRA

It's here, the time! No gain denying it!

LEADER

You're cool, I tell you; it's because you're brave.

KASSANDRA

No one who's lucky hears this said of him!

LEADER

But death with honour's a fine thing for man.

KASSANDRA

Yes! Take your father<sup>40</sup> and his noble sons!

LEADER

What is it now? What fear makes you step back?

KASSANDRA *turning back in disgust*

Ugh! Ugh!

LEADER

Why "ugh!"? Is it too foul to comprehend?

KASSANDRA

The house reeks with the stench of bloody murder!

---

<sup>40</sup> Priam, and Hektor. Paris etc

LEADER

How so? This smell is sacrifice indoors!

KASSANDRA

To me it's like the vapours from a grave.

LEADER

It's not some perfumed offering you mean.

1313

KASSANDRA

But I shall go to mourn inside the house

Agamemnon's fate and mine. Enough of life!

Watch me, friends!

I 'm not a bird afraid what's in the bush,

Be witnesses that I go to my death,

When a woman dies in turn for this woman,

And a man in turn for a man with an evil wife.

In death I ask this of you as my friends

1320

LEADER

I weep for you, the fate that you foretold!

KASSANDRA

I still have words I want to speak and a

Lament to make – mine for myself. I ask

The sun's last rays to see my enemies

Pay for master's killing and for mine:

A slave-girl's death, no complicated thing.

O human life! One might compare a man,

If lucky, to a shadow, if unfortunate -

A dab from a wet sponge rubs out the sketch.

The lot of Man I pity more than ours.

1330

*She walks into the palace.*

CHORUS

*Anapaests*

Humankind is born with insatiable  
Need for success. There is nobody who points  
At a house and shoos it away, saying  
Words like "Keep out, no entry for you".  
So the gods gave this man a gift: capturing  
Priam's city.  
Honoured by gods he returns to his home.  
But now if he pays for his ancestors' blood,  
And pays with his death for the dead, causing  
Others to be punished with death, then who  
Of humankind Hearing this tale could  
Claim he was born to a life without trauma?

1342

#### **Fifth Episode [1343-1576]**

AGAMEMNON *within*

Help me! In here! I'm hit! I'm going to die!

LEADER

Silence! Who is screaming they've been hit and thinks they're going to die?

AGAMEMNON

Help me! That's twice! I have been hit again!

LEADER

Sounds as if the king is shouting! Seems to me the deed is done.

We must put our heads together – what's the safest thing to do?

CHOREUT 1

I'll tell you what my own opinion is:

Sound the alarm – call people to the palace here.

CHOREUT 2

I think we should burst in quick as we can.

Catch them red-handed with their swords still wet.

CHOREUT 3

I too share your opinion: my vote is

1350

To do something. There's no time to delay.

CHOREUT 4

It's clear to see. Evidence they intend

To make the town into a tyranny.

CHOREUT 5

We're wasting time. These people seize the moment,

No time to rest, no time to pause. They act.

CHOREUT 6

I do not know what plan to say to make.

To act you need a plan already made.

CHOREUT 7

That's my opinion too: I can't think of

1360

Any way to bring the dead to life with talk!

CHOREUT 8

Should we preserve our lives, and so let those

Who desecrate our palace get away with it?

CHOREUT 9

Intolerable! Better choice to die.

Death has a sweeter taste than tyranny.

CHOREUT 10

Are we quite certain from the sounds we've heard

That we should now deduce the man is dead?

CHOREUT 11

We have to know the facts before we speak.

Conjecture's not the same as clear knowledge.

CHOREUT 12

I'm drawn by all of you to praise this view:

We need to know how Agamemnon is...

1371

KLYTAIMESTRA *entering, as the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra are revealed*<sup>41</sup>

Much said before was for convenience:

I feel no shame now contradicting it.

How else when serving hate to those one hates –

Who think they're friends – than to stretch the killer nets

Too high for them to hurdle and escape?

This action of mine, long in planning, came

From a long-standing feud: but it was time.

I'm stood where I hit them: my work is done.

I did this, and I won't deny I did,

So, he could not escape, avoid his fate.

A net that could not miss, like one for fish,

I throw on him – a lavish cloak of doom.

I hit him twice, and twice he cries in pain,

As his legs give way, and then when he is down

I strike a third blow, honouring, with thanks,

Zeus of the underworld<sup>42</sup>, who guards the dead.

And fallen so, he gasps away his life

Vomiting out a violent jet of blood,

Coating me with a mist of gory dew,

Which I delight in like seeds newly sown

Needing god's gift of rain to spring to life.

This is what's done, you Argive seniors,

Rejoice, if you rejoice: the celebration's mine!

Were I to pour libation for the corpse,

This would be right, no – would be more than right.

He filled his mixing bowl with heinous crimes,

And now he's back he's drained it by himself.

1398

---

<sup>41</sup> On the *ekkyklema* - the "truck" which rolls out to reveal the scene inside

<sup>42</sup> Hades. Like the third libation to Zeus at a feast.

LEADER

I can't believe your choice of words, so frank,  
To crow over a man with such a speech!

KLYTAIMESTRA

You challenge me as if a naïve ingenue!  
I do not flinch. It is to those who know  
I speak. Praise me or blame me as you wish.  
It's all the same. Here's Agamemnon, my  
Husband, a corpse, achieved by this right hand,  
A good technician. And that's how things are.

1406

*EPIRRHEMA [1407-1576]*

CHORUS

*Strophe 1*

Madam, what evil herb  
Grown in the earth have you eaten, or have you been  
Drinking some water you fetched from the salty sea,  
Doing this murder, disdaining the people's curse  
Disregarding the citizens? You'll be deposed by them –  
Monster the city hates.

KLYTAIMESTRA

So now you sentence me to banishment,  
To earn the people's hatred and their curse,  
While doing nothing to oppose this man,  
Who without thought, as if he culled a sheep,  
A bleating lamb from his rich fleecy flocks,  
Murdered his child, my best-loved, whom I bore  
In pain - a charm to quell the wind from Thrace!  
It should have been him driven from this land:  
As payment for polluting us. You've heard my case

And judge my actions savagely. But I  
Tell you: you threaten me, but I'm prepared  
Both ways: someone may win by force and take  
Command. Or god may decide otherwise,  
And you'll be taught good sense, belatedly.

1425

#### CHORUS

##### *Antistrophe 1*

You and your insane plot!  
What an outrageous speech! Your mind is possessed  
With the compulsion to let blood flow, just as  
A trickle of blood is there, easy to see in your eyes.  
Now that you have no friends, it is for you to pay back  
Blow for the blow you struck.

#### KLYTAIMESTRA

You shall hear how my oaths are justified:  
By Fury, Rage, by Justice - now complete -  
For my daughter, for whom I killed this man.  
No thought of fear prowls through the hall,  
Whilst tending to the fire upon my hearth  
Is Aigisthos, my loyal friend thus far.  
He is my shield, great source of strength to me.  
Here lies this woman's rapist, debauchee,  
Sweetheart of Troy's bits on the side,  
And she, the captive bride. The prophetess,  
The bedmate of this man, the clairvoyante,  
The fawning floozy, keen to lend a hand  
To rowers on the pull. Your end is right:  
His is like this, while she just like a swan  
Has whistled her death-tune at last,

His lover lies with him in death. For me

An extra relish to my marriage-bed!

1447

#### CHORUS

##### *Strophe 2*

O how I wish some fate, nothing too painful - no

Anxious eyes at my bedside -

Would come to me, bringing me eternal

Sleep, never-ending - and quickly: he's dead

The one who shielded me, my best

Friend, who, through a woman's act, suffered much,

Lost his life, done to death at a woman's hand.

1454

##### *Ephymnion 1*

Io! Io!

Driven mad, Helen you

By yourself destroyed many lives, so many

Lives, lost over one, under Troy's walls.

Now you have crowned it with the lasting stain of blood,

We'll not forget: back then a well-established feud

Within the house brought your husband anguish.

1461

#### KLYTAIMESTRA

##### *Anapaests*

Do not pray for the fate of death for yourself

Weighed down by these things,

Do not focus your rage on Helen as if

She were a murderess, one who by herself

Ruined the lives of many Danaans,

Leaving a wound reluctant to heal.

1467

CHORUS

*Antistrophe 2*

Demon, you who infect palace and Tantalus'

Grandsons, pair from the same blood,

You wield your power, power which bites to my heart,

Using two women alike in evil.

And on the corpse he takes his perch

Like a vile raven whose tuneless croaks

Claim to sing songs of retribution's joy.

1474

KLYTAIMESTRA

*Anapaests*

That opinion you mouthed: you begin to make sense!

He was fed three times,

This family's demon you called on then,

As it is due to him that this urge to taste blood

Is bred in our guts. Before it can stop,

This ancient pain, more pus has to ooze.

1480

CHORUS

*Strophe 3*

Big, big indeed for the family,

And full of rage is that demon,

—Sad story, alas— no ruin

Can be ever sufficient.

And all of this because of Zeus,

The cause of all, the agent of all things.

What comes to be for mortals without Zeus?

What here isn't decreed by god's will?

1488

*Ephymnion 2*

Io! Io! O my king, o my king,  
How should I mourn you?  
What to say, from the heart that adored you?  
You lie in the web that the spider devised,  
As you met with your death from this foul crime,  
Laid low, enslaved, entangled by treachery  
Overcome by fate, a sword,  
Double-edged sword, and a hand that drove it.

1496

KLYTAIMESTRA

*Anapaests*

Do you really believe that this action was mine?  
Put that from your mind;  
Don't think of me as Agamemnon's wife.  
In the guise of the wife of the corpse lying here,  
From the past the alert Spirit of Vengeance  
For Atreus who hosted that terrible meal,  
Came and offered this man  
As a sacrifice for the young ones.

1504

CHORUS

*Antistrophe 3*

Who will you have as a witness  
Proving no guilt for this murder?  
How, how could that be? The house's  
Vengeful Spirit enticed you;  
Black Ares though presses ahead  
With family blood still streaming fast  
To where he will serve justice for the cold  
Congealed blood from the meal of boys.

1512

*Ephymnion 2*

Io! Io! O my king, o my king,  
How should I mourn you?  
What to say, from the heart that adored you?  
You lie in the web that the spider devised,  
As you met with your death from this foul crime,  
Laid low, enslaved, entangled by treachery  
Overcome by fate, a sword,  
Double-edged sword, and a hand that drove it.

1520

KLYTAIMESTRA

*Anapaests*

I do not believe that my killing this man  
Was in any way shameful;<you are not right  
To accuse me of treachery to him.>  
Didn't he too bring ruin to this house  
With treacherous acts?  
My tender plant that this man uprooted -  
I'm still in mourning -  
Iphigeneia – was she used unfairly?  
He's been fairly dealt with, so don't let him fuss  
In Hades: he's paid with death by the sword,  
Fair recompense for what he began.

1529

CHORUS

*Strophe 4*

I'm at a loss how to handle my thoughts  
Like I've been stripped of my reason.  
Which way to turn as the house collapses?  
This driving rain, this squall of blood – I dread it will  
Overwhelm the house. It's more than just a downpour.

And Fate on other sharpening-stones is sharpening  
A justice for another act of harm.

1536

*Ephymnion 3 - Anapaests*

Io! Earth! Earth! Wish you had taken me  
Before I saw this man laid low in the tub  
Owning a silver-lined bed on the ground.  
Who will bury him? Who will lament him?  
Is this a task you'd feel fit to perform,  
Having murdered your husband, now mourning his death,  
With no right to be offering thanks – no thanks! -  
To his spirit to honour his glorious deeds?  
Who on behalf of this hero will, at his grave,  
Shed tears while speaking his praise, and  
Trouble to make it sincere?

1550

KLYTAIMESTRA

*Anapaests*

You have no need for concern with this problem:  
I'm responsible.  
I gave him the blow, gave him his death, I'll  
Give him his funeral: no family shall mourn,  
But Iphigeneia his daughter will  
As is right, having  
Greeted him lovingly by the swift-flowing  
Crossing of Sorrows  
Throw her arms round him and kiss him.

1559

CHORUS

*Antistrophe 4*

We are rebuked – our rebuke is countered,

That makes it hard to decide.  
The robber's robbed; the killer pays the price.  
As long as Zeus stays enthroned, this stays too:  
Who did the deed suffers: that is his law.  
Who could root out a family curse that seeds itself?  
Ruin's embedded deep.

1566

KLYTAIMESTRA

You have delivered a prophecy, which is all true.  
I though in any case  
Say to the family's Spirit of Vengeance,  
Sealed by an oath, let him accept what's gone on,  
Hard though it be, and, as for the future  
Leave this house alone, go and induce  
Some other family to murder themselves.  
Small share of our fortune is all I shall need,  
If I can bring to an end in the palace  
This madness of killing each other.

1576

AIGISTHOS *enters*

The day of Justice dawns! Hail welcome light!  
Today confirms for me the gods above  
Do show concern for problems of mankind,  
Seeing this man, to my delight, lying  
Entangled in the robes that Vengeance wove,  
And paying for the crimes his father planned.  
His father, Atreus, ruler of this land –  
When challenged for his power, expelled Thyestes,  
Who was, you understand, my father, his  
Own brother, from his city and his house.  
He came home seeking refuge, Thyestes  
Poor wretch, and found a safe place, meaning he was

1577

Not killed, staining the family floor with his  
 Own blood. Such hospitality his father,  
 Godless Atreus, showed mine – not warmly, but  
 Effusively! He promised a meat-feast,  
 But served a banquet of his children's flesh.  
 The hands, feet, toes, fanned fingers in his portion  
 Were chopped up small before he sat to eat.  
 Not knowing it was theirs, he helped himself -  
 A meal that proved so fatal to his clan.  
 But when he realised that things weren't right  
 He yelled, fell back and puked the gobbets up,  
 Promising Pelops' kin the direst fate. 1600  
 Kicking the table over powered his curse:  
 That way should Pleisthenes' whole house collapse!  
 Because of this you see him lying dead.        *Gesturing to Agamemnon's corpse*  
 It was my right to weave the plot to kill him.  
 I, being my poor father's youngest child,  
 Was exiled with him, then a swaddled babe;  
 But now grown-up, Justice has brought me back,  
 I was not there, but set the fuse, pulling  
 The threads together of our artful plan.  
 It would be fine indeed for me to die,  
 Seeing this man enmeshed in Justice's net. 1611  
 LEADER  
 I don't like crowing over crime, Aigisthos.  
 You say that you set out to murder him,  
 You planned alone how he would cruelly die.  
 I say you will not dodge the curses nor  
 The stones the mob will rightly hurl at you.  
 AIGISTHOS  
 You say all this, sat at your oar, below

The deck, when those on top command the ship?

You're old: you'll learn how hard it is to take

A lesson at your age: subject – being wise.

Two therapies are marvellous, even

For the elderly, to heal the mind: prison

And starvation. You see this. Can't you see?

Don't kick against the pricks. You might get hurt.

1624

LEADER

Woman! House-sitting till the warriors

Returned! Fouling a man's bed while you planned

To kill the man, commander of the troops?

AIGISTHOS

And these words too can only end in tears.

You have a voice the opposite of Orpheus';

With his, through joy he led the way for all,

But you've provoked me with your stupid yelps,

And shall be led away, defeated, cowed.

1632

LEADER

So you're dictator of the Argives now!

You who, when you had planned his death,

Had not the guts to do it by yourself!

AIGISTHOS

Deception had to be a woman's work,

I'd be suspected – his old enemy.

Now thanks to this man's money, I

Shall rule the people here. If anyone

Resists, I'll strap him to a heavy yoke –

No spoiling this horse with a barley meal!

A hunger he won't like will share his stall

Of gloom and teach him to cooperate!

1642

LEADER

Then why, you coward, did you not despatch

This man in person, while with your blessing

A woman, fouling country and its gods,

Killed him? Does Orestes still live perhaps

So he may come back here, if fate is kind,

And be triumphant killer of this pair?

1648

ΑΙΓΙΣΤΗΟΣ [*Trochaic tetrameters from now to the end*]

If this is the way you choose to speak and act, then watch your step!

LEADER

Come now, men, the time has come for us to be prepared for deeds!

ΑΙΓΙΣΤΗΟΣ

Come now let each man stand to, be ready all to draw your swords!

LEADER.

My hand's also on my sword-hilt. I am not afraid to die!

ΑΙΓΙΣΤΗΟΣ

Die, you say? I hear your words and Fate will make them soon come true!

ΚΛΥΤΑΙΜΕΣΤΡΑ

No, my darling, no to that! Let's not do any more that's bad.

1654

There has been a deal of reaping done; a stressful harvest time.

We have had enough of pain, for now. Let's not shed further blood.

You are old and we respect your age: go home: accept what's done.

Something bad might happen to you. These were things we had to do,

And we did them. If that means it's over now then we are glad.

We've been trampled very harshly by the Demon's heavy hoof,

This is how a woman sees it, if there's someone cares to know.

ΑΙΓΙΣΤΗΟΣ

And allow these dotards' foolish nonsense to burst into flower?

Spewing out their dangerous words, just let them push their luck like that?

Lose all grip on decent conduct and insult their ruler too?

LEADER

It is not an Argive thing to grovel at a coward's feet

AIGISTHOS

There will be a day in future when I shall catch up with you.

LEADER

No, not if the Demon leads Orestes to return back here,

AIGISTHOS

Hope I know is what they feed on – men who're banished from their home.

LEADER

Carry on, grow fat, and spit on Justice, since you have the power.

AIGISTHOS

Be quite sure that I'll be giving just awards for foolishness.

LEADER

Crow away, enjoy yourself: the cockerel beside his hen!

KLYTAIMESTRA

Pay no heed to these men's futile pointless barking! You and I

Masters jointly of this house will see that all is managed – well.

1673

*AMW The Hut, Marshfield Woods, 28 July 2022 5.35 pm*

