

CHOEPHORI



For Juliet

The cover photo was taken during a performance of
Choephoroi in the Greek Theatre, Syracuse, in 2008

ORESTEIA

THE ORESTES TETRALOGY

PART 2

CHOEPHORI

BY AESCHYLUS

Translated by ANDREW WILSON

The Greek title is ΧΟΗΦΟΡΟΙ – whether transliterated (Khoephoroi, Choephoroi) or translated ("The Libation Bearers", "The Jug-carriers") makes little sense to a non-specialist! It refers to Elektra and palace slave-women who are soon to be seen bringing jugs containing offerings of wine to the tomb of Agamemnon. The text depends on a single 10th century AD MS, hence it's very hard to be sure what Aeschylus actually wrote. Some passages, especially choral ones, are almost impossible to emend convincingly.

Characters

ORESTES, son of Agamemnon

PYLADES, son of Strophios, his friend

ELEKTRA, Orestes' sister

12 WOMEN, palace slaves, the CHORUS

A slave, doorkeeper of the palace.

KLYTAIMESTRA (Clytemnestra), Queen of Argos, mother of Orestes and Elektra

KILISSA, an elderly woman, once wet-nurse to Orestes

AIGISTHOS, lover, now husband of Klytaimestra and King of Argos.

Scene

ARGOS. The action begins at the tomb of Agamemnon and continues in front of the doors to the royal palace. No change of scene: the tomb is in the foreground, with the palace behind.

Enter Orestes and Pylades

ORESTES

Hermes, Death's guide, who watch my father's land;¹

I ask: be on my side and keep me safe.

For I have reached this place; I have come home.

And on this mound, his grave, I call upon

My father: hear me, listen <to my prayers>.

5

I cut this lock of hair for Inakhos²

Who raised me, and this second one for grief.

Father, I was not there to mourn your death,

Nor reach my hand out at the funeral.

What's this I see? What does it mean. This troop

10

Of women heading here all cloaked in black?

Has something bad occurred? That's what I'd guess.

Some new calamity that's hit the house?

Or am I right to think they bring libations

For my father, offering comfort to the dead?

It must be that. And yes, I think I see her

Coming, my sister Elektra. She looks

So sad. O Zeus, allow me to avenge

My father's death. Choose to be on my side.

Pylades, let's get out of sight, so I

20

Can learn what this parade of women means.

¹ The opening lines are missing in the MS – it's uncertain how many of them. Helpfully, Orestes' opening speech was quoted by Aristophanes (Frogs 1126-6, 1172-3)

² The god of Argos' river. Dedicating a lock of hair to a river was a coming-of-age ritual. The second lock, for grief, he places on his father's tomb.

Enter Elektra and the Chorus of palace slave-women, carrying jugs.

Parodos 22-83

CHORUS

*Strophe 1*³

As ordered, I came from the house	2ia	
To bring libations here: I smack my head in time.	3ia	
You see my face reddened with blood	2ia	
From the furrows newly ploughed into my cheeks;	2ia ⁴	
Throughout my life my heart's	ba cr	
Always been nurtured on grief,	lec	
The woven linen of my dress	2ia	
All torn apart, to show my pain,	2ia	
Folds tucked over my breasts; my clothing in tatters:	5dac	30
Joy in life for me struck out.	lec	

Antistrophe 1

For screeching Fear with hair erect,		
The dream-weaver, ⁵ breathed through sleep		
Its nightmare-rage; spoke of the dread		
That came from deep inside the house,		
The women's private space,		
Falling as a crushing blow.		
The analysts who translate dreams,		
God-prompted, gave their message out:		
Powers under the Earth are violently outraged		40
Blaming those who've taken life ⁶ .		

³ The chorus of palace women, made slaves when their towns were destroyed, reveal that they were compelled to perform their task. They perform the painful ritual signs of mourning – beating the head, scratching the face and tearing their clothes – mechanically, masochistically.

⁴ Resolved thus: ~~~~~|~~~~-

⁵ Not clear who – not Apollo. Fear itself is a good suggestion.

⁶ Klytaimestra and Aigisthos – but the vagueness of the phrase brings to mind earlier killings.

Strophe 2

This is the 'favour' she (no favour, Mother Earth!)	3ia	
Hiding her evil mind, deranged, insane, the god-loathed	do ia ba	
Woman sends me out to do;	lec	
I'm afraid to mouth the words.	lec	
What cleansing can there be once blood has soaked the ground?	3ia	
Such grief! The hearth, the home, disgraced!	2ia	
Such grief! A devastated house!	2ia	50
The sun no longer shines, and dark	2ia	
To spite mankind blankets the house:	ia cho	
Consequence of a lord's death.	pher	

Antistrophe 2

Respect for one ⁷ unbeaten, unconquered, unbowed		55
Was one time ingrained in people's speech and thinking:		
Now it is no more. And so		
Fear has come. Prosperity		
Is like a god to men, more than a god; alert		60
Is Justice though: the scales can shift –		
For those in daylight change is swift,		
For those in twilight it's delayed,		
But hits them hard: others there are		
Wrapped in murkiest darkness...		

Strophe 3

When blood 's absorbed into the bosom of the earth,	3ia	
It clots, congeals: blood, for the avenger, does not fade.	3ia	
The guilty suffers agony awaiting doom,	ba sp lec	
Till the sickness ends in death	lec	70

⁷ A war-hero like Agamemnon

Antistrophe 3

The penetration of a virgin's privacy
Can't be undone. If all the rivers join in one
Their surge is futile to wash away the blood
Which stains the perpetrator's hands.

Epode

The gods hit me with the fate mandatory	a 2cr	75
For captured towns, took me from my homeland	ia cr ba	
To future as a slave. I cannot help but	ba 2tr	
Take good and bad from my captors	ia tr	
Since I am trapped, swept along	ia cr	
By violence, trying to keep my bitter hate	ia lec	80
Within bounds. Thus I weep beneath my veil	2ba ia	
To see his unwelcome fate:	ba ia	
Inside I'm frozen, chilled with secret sympathy.	3ia	

ELEKTRA

You're slaves, but women too, who run the house,
And since you're here to help me carry out
This ritual, I'd value your advice:
What words while pouring out these offerings?
What would sound right? How shall I pray to father?
Should I explain they're from a loving woman to
A man she loves, with love from her, my mother? 90
That would be insincere! I brought this jug
For father's grave – but can't think what to say.
So should I give this speech, the usual one:
"Give those who send these gifts in turn a gift,
One they deserve" - for the evil they have done!

Or shall I pour these offerings on the ground,
In silence, shamefully, the way he died,
My father, and then throw the jug away
With eyes averted, as one throws out trash?
Share this decision with me, friends: we share
A common hatred for the ones at home.
Don't hide your thoughts for fear of anyone!
Fate lies in wait for both the free man, and
The one who's at another's beck and call.
If you've other ideas than these, please say.

LEADER

I venerate your father's grave, it's like
An altar. I shall speak my mind, as asked.

ELEKTRA

You venerate my father's grave. Please speak.

LEADER

Pour it, and say something his friends would like.

ELEKTRA

Which are the friends I should be mentioning?

LEADER

Yourself, to start! All who hate Aigisthos.

ELEKTRA

These prayers, you mean, will be for me and you?

LEADER

You've worked it out yourself, you don't need me!

ELEKTRA

Who else should I be adding to this list?

LEADER

Mention Orestes, though he's far from home.

ELEKTRA

Well said. Most welcome words and good advice.

100

110

LEADER

Those guilty of the murder, mention that...

ELEKTRA

That what? Explain to one who's struggling!

LEADER

That someone's coming for them, god or man...

ELEKTRA

To be their judge, or give them punishment?

120

LEADER

Just tell them one who'll kill them in their turn.

ELEKTRA

And do the gods approve my doing this?

LEADER

Of course! Returning evil to an enemy?

ELEKTRA

Great go-between of gods above and gods

Below, Hermes, Death's guide, call up for me

The powers below the earth, those guardians of

My father's house, and Earth herself who brings

To birth all things, and having nourished them,

Welcomes her offspring back, to hear my prayers.

And as I pour these offerings for the dead.,

I call upon my father, "Pity me,

130

Orestes, too, relight our family's fire!

Sold by our mother we now drift along

Somehow, while she has bought herself

A man, Aigisthos, plotter of your death.

I am a virtual slave, while Orestes

Is barred from his estate, and they

Conspicuously enjoy the wealth you made.

My prayer to you, and, father, hear me, is

That by some chance Orestes come this way,
And for myself, that I become much wiser 140
Than mother and, in deeds, more virtuous.
These prayers for us: and for our enemies
I ask for some avenger to appear,
Justice, and kill the killers in their turn.
I'm putting this inside my prayer for good,
Just as for them I make this prayer for harm.
Be driver of good things for us up here,
With gods' help, Earth's and righteous victory's."
To complement these prayers I pour these gifts.
It's now for you to let your grief burst out, 150
Chanting aloud the dead man's battle-song.

CHORUS *astrophic lyric*

Pour your tears let them splash let them sink where they fall — 2tr (cr 3ba)
For our king, fallen king — 2cr
Into this fortress of the good, 2ia
Which cancels evil's toxic stench, 2ia
Now the libation's done. do
Listen to me, my lord. Listen, my master, though 2do
Your senses may be frail. do
Ototototototoi! do
May one skilled with spears, one who can purge the house, do ia 160
Come with a bow in hand, curved one from Skythia, 2do
Some Ares clear to be seen grasping a sword ba 2cr (?)
Hand ready on the hilt, his blade raised to fight. 2do

The Recognition 164 -245

ELEKTRA

My father has the offerings. They've soaked through
The ground. But this is new! Let's take a look.

LEADER

Tell me. My heart is pounding anxiously.

ELEKTRA

I see a length of hair there on the grave!

LEADER

A man's? Or could it be a girl's perhaps?

ELEKTRA

There is a clue that anyone could guess.

170

LEADER

I am too old. Could someone young explain?

ELEKTRA

There's no one could have cut it off but me...

LEADER

Those who'd have cut their hair are not our friends.

ELEKTRA

And yes, to look at, it's quite similar...

LEADER

Whose hair is it? That's what I want to know.

ELEKTRA

To look at, it is very like my own.

LEADER

It couldn't be Orestes' secret offering?

ELEKTRA

It does indeed seem very like his hair.

LEADER

Yet how could he have dared to travel here?

ELEKTRA

He cut some hair and sent it for his father.

180

LEADER

What you have said makes me just as upset,

If he will never tread upon this soil.

ELEKTRA

A wave of nausea clutches my heart too,

I'm hit; it's gone straight through me like a dart,

And from my eyes stream tears unceasingly –

Like winter floods, they can't be stopped,

When I look at these strands. Could I believe

Its owner could be someone else from here?

The murderess, no way on earth that she,

My mother, would have cut her hair. Mother?

190

Whose thoughts towards her children brim with hate?

Can I accept outright, convince myself

This lovely thing comes from the human I

Love most, Orestes? Hope's uplifting me. *She sighs*

If only, like a herald, it could talk,

So that my thoughts would not be split two ways,

But it could tell me straight "Forget the hair!

Snipped from the head of one who's not a friend!"

Or "It came from someone close, a relative,

In father's honour to adorn the tomb."

200

But we shall call upon the gods – they know

The storms in which like those at sea we're tossed

This way and that. But if we find we're saved,

Then may a big tree grow from this small seed...

And look there! Footprints! Further evidence –

The same as mine, they match mine perfectly!

Yes, here's the outlines of two sets of prints:

One of his, and one a fellow traveller's.

The heels, the instep when I measure them,

Agree exactly with my own foot-shape!

210

My inside's churning, can't think straight...

Orestes and Pylades emerge

ORESTES

Inform the gods your prayers have been fulfilled:

Ask that your future prayers may turn out well.

ELEKTRA

What is it that I've won then thanks to gods?

ORESTES

You're looking at what you prayed for just now!

ELEKTRA

And do you know the man whom I prayed for?

ORESTES

I know Orestes made you passionate!

ELEKTRA *irritated*

Then In what way has my prayer been fulfilled?

ORESTES

I'm here. Don't look for any closer friend.

ELEKTRA

Dear stranger, what's the point in tricking me?

220

ORESTES

I'm paying tricks then on myself, if so.

ELEKTRA

I am all upset, and you make it a joke.

ORESTES

The joke's on me, if I'm upset as well

ELEKTRA

I'm really talking to Orestes then?

ORESTES

Seeing me in the flesh you barely know me!

But when you saw this offered hair,

And then looked at the tracks which I had made, 228

Your heart grew wings: you thought you had seen me! 227

Put this lock of hair where it was cut and judge: 230

It is your brother's, just the same as yours! 229

Look at this cloth, the work of your own hands, 231

The tapestry needle holes, the embroidered animals...

Stay calm! Don't let your joy outpace good sense;

The family are, I know, hostile to us.

ELEKTRA

My dearest, darling of our father's house,

Hope wept-for, seed of our security,

With the strength you have, you'll take back father's house!

O precious face, my four best loves⁸ in one,

It's only natural that I should call

You father, shift the feelings I should have 240

For mother on to you — I'm right to hate her —

And for my sister cruelly sacrificed.

A loyal brother brings my status back;

May Power and Justice and, the third and most

Important, Zeus be with me on my side.

ORESTES

Zeus, Zeus, be with us in these things we do,

See the eagle's nestling robbed of its father

Whose life was lost entangled in the vile

Coils of a writhing snake. Its orphaned chicks

Are left to starve; they are not old enough 250

⁸ Proverbial for a beloved person: mother, father, brother, husband.

To carry home the prey their father caught.
 Just so, it's possible for you to see
 Elektra here, and me as fatherless,
 Both of us sharing exile from our home.
 If you destroy the nestlings of the father
 Who sacrificed to you, so honoured you,
 Then who will fund your costly feasts like him?
 If you destroy the eagle's brood, you could
 Not send persuasive messages to man,
 Nor once the ancient root is all dried up,
 Will it feed altars on ox-killing days.
 Protect it. You may raise a mighty house
 From a small seed, now fallen though it seems.

260

CHORUS

You children, saviours of your father's home,
 Be quiet, my dears, for fear someone find out,
 And idly chatting, convey all this news
 To our leaders whom I'd like to see one day
 Die soaked in pitch and bubbling in the flames!

ORESTES

It won't prove false, Apollo's powerful
 Oracle telling me to face this test;
 Repeating shrill advice, and trumpeting
 Cold threats that chilled my fiery heart within,
 If I should not pursue my father's killers,
 And kill them in return as they killed him.
 He said I'd pay in person with my life
 For this, be punished savagely —not just
 With loss of wealth — a fate entirely black⁹.

270

⁹ The mss read *taouremenon*, being made into a bull. Less obscure would be the emendation *mauouremenon*, being made black, destroyed.

He went on, exposing to mankind the wrath
 Of the cruel ones below the earth, and told of
 Diseases rotting flesh, and sores that eat 280
 Away the normal skin insatiably,
 As on the ulcer white threads propagate;
 He then described the Erinyes' other
 Visitations aroused by fathers' blood.
 The victim's blind; the avenger picks him out;¹⁰
 For the weapon of the dead is hard to see, it comes
 From fallen family pleading for revenge,
 It's madness, an unfocused fear at night,
 It goads, it shocks, it drives out from the city
 His stricken body with a whip of bronze.¹¹ 290
 For such as him there is no sharing of
 The wine with friends, no offerings to pour,
 Their father's concealed rage drives them away
 From altars; none may host them, let them in.
 All friends, all honour lost, he dies at last
 In pain, a desiccated withered husk."
 Oracles like this one surely has to trust?
 Even if I don't, the deed has to be done!
 Multiple motives all merge into one:
 The god's commands, and father's suffering, 300
 And, yes, missing the estate, all urge me on:
 Men of the best known city in the world,
 The proud and fearless Conquerors of Troy,
 Should not be subject to a pair of women!
 You are a woman. If not, prove me wrong.

¹⁰ Attempts to make sense of this line (285) in the Greek have not worked. This is my guess at the sense.

¹¹ "Whip of bronze" is an ancient guess at the meaning of the phrase.

The kommos (306-478)**SECTION 1**

CHORUS

Anapaests

Now o you mighty Fates, acting for Zeus,
 Make an end of it here,
 Where what is right may reside for good.
 For the voice of hate let the voice of hate
 Find retribution. Justice cries out,
 Demanding the payment of all debts.
 For the murderous blow, let a murderous blow
 Be struck in return. Who did the deed must pay,
 Three generations tell this tale.

310

Strophe 1

ORESTES

Father, dear father of wretchedness, *ibycean (2da cr)*
 What to say, or what do, *ith (cr ba)*
 To lure you from afar, where you *glyc*
 Rest in your bed, to this place? *arist (cho ba)*
 The light is opposed to dark: *tel*
 Nevertheless it's obvious: *+arist*
 A splendid lamentation makes *glyc*
 Atreus's house delighted. *arist*

320

Strophe 2

CHORUS

My son, the ravening jaw of fire cannot subdue *3ia*
 Noble spirits – not after death, *+glyc*
 Their wrath surfaces later. *pher*
 And the one who is dead is wept for, *anacr*
 And his power to harm is made clear, *anacr*
 The lament for sons and fathers *anacr*
 Which is right and strong, once moving, *anacr*
 Wide awake, has a nose for vengeance. *hipp*

330

Antistrophe 1

ELEKTRA

Hear us then, father, as each in turn,
Shows you our tears and sadness.
Our grief here at your grave rings out,
Both of your children chanting.
Your tomb has received not just
Suppliants; exiles also.
What's good here? What is without pain?
Won't Ruin be defeated?

CHORUS

Anapaests

But yet out of this could the god if he wished
Bring about songs that are more melodious,
In the place of dirges intoned by the tomb,
Let the victory song accompany wine
New-mixed for the halls of the palace.

340

Strophe 3

ORESTES

Would that at Ilion,
Father, you had been smitten by
A spear, hacked down by Trojan warriors.
You would have left for your house just glory,
And family whose life made
Them turn heads when passing;
A tomb in a land overseas you'd
Have had, and a splendid one your
House would have found less painful,

do

glyc

ba cr ba

ia cr ba

2ba

+2ba

paroemiac

hagesichorean

+arist

350

Antistrophe 2

CHORUS

A friend to friends of his who had good deaths at Troy,
Shining still in the world below

Honoured, prized as a king still,
 An associate to the greatest
 Of the rulers there in Hades.
 You were king throughout your lifetime,
 In your hands was what fate gave you:
 Your sceptre, to persuade the people.

360

Antistrophe 3

ELEKTRA

No, to your dying there,
 Father, under the walls of Troy,
 With other legions killed by spear-thrust,
 And no to that burial by Skamandros¹²!
 Instead those who killed him
 Should have been despatched thus,
 So one could have learned from a distance
 That fate had them dealt the death-blow,
 Spared the distress we've suffered.

370

CHORUS

Anapaests

These things you say you want, my child, are
 Rarer than gold, greater than that great luck
 The Hyperboreans enjoy! You can wish!
 Put simply: the sound of a double-crack
 Of the whip¹³ has reached him. The help that's theirs
 Is already below ground¹⁴: but the evil
 Hands are strong; what's more detestable
 For the children than this state of things?

¹² I.e. at Troy, Skamandros (Scamander) being one of Troy's rivers.

¹³ The laments of the two children, Orestes and Elektra. Text and meaning dubious!

¹⁴ Because Agamemnon is dead, they've already got all the help they're going to get.

Strophe 4

ORESTES

What you have said has gone straight	hemiepes	380
Into my ear like a dart.	hemiepes	
Zeus, Zeus, from down below send up,	sp ia sp	
Late, the avenging demon	arist	
Against wicked and reckless mortals'	hipp	
Crimes. But my father will have his payment.	Alcaic decasyllable (da cho ba)	

Strophe 5

CHORUS

To sing out loud the piercing death-chant –	ba ith (cr ba)	
That is my wish – the man's been	+arist	
Killed and the woman's dead. Why	arist	
Hide what is flying round my	+arist	
Mind and insists on making	+arist	
It tremble? A harsh gale of anger	3ba	390
Rages before the prow of my heart,	2cho	
Passionately furious.	lec	

Antistrophe 4

ELEKTRA

When is all-powerful Zeus		
Going to lift up his hand –		395
Not soon! - and split apart their skulls?		
Make to the land a promise -		
I ask, instead of wrong, for justice!		
Earth and your revered powers, hear me!		

CHORUS

Anapaests

Yes, it's the law when the blood of a murdered		400
Victim drips on the ground to ask for		
Blood from another. For murder summons		
The Erinyes who heap further ruin on		

Ruin, evoked by the souls of the dead.

Strophe 6

ORESTES

Popoi da!¹⁵ Monarchs of the world beneath;

ba lec

Avengers, powered by Death, won't you look at me

2do

And won't you see Atreus' family's sad remains

ia lec

And how we toil, robbed of honour in our house?

la lec

Where to turn to, o Zeus?

cr ba (ith)

Antistrophe 5

CHORUS

In turn my own poor heart is shaken

410

Listening to this anguish

Sometimes I have no hope left

Darkness invades my spirit

Hearing the words you utter.

¹⁶But when I reflect on our allies

Confidence trumps all my distress

Everything bodes well once more.

Antistrophe 6

ELEKTRA

To break through, what to tell him? Should it be

All that we suffered – and that at our mother's hands?

She wags her tail¹⁷: but we can't erase the pain;

420

Just like a wolf's, my heart cannot be appeased

Raging at my mother.

¹⁵ A cry of horror and despair

¹⁶ The text of these three lines is "beyond restoration". I've guessed. Allies would be the tomb, and powers below.

¹⁷ Like a dog, trying to ingratiate itself

SECTION 2

Strophe 7

CHORUS

To show my grief I beat my breast in Persian style	3ia	
And mourned just like a Kissian.	2ia	
And you could see the blood spray as I smacked myself		3ia
And pulled my hair, my hands stretched high, high up		3ia
To pound my scalp, and my poor smarting head		3ia
Reverberated with the noise as it was struck.		3ia

Strophe 8

ELEKTRA

Io! io! Merciless	ia cr	
And brutal mother, in that brutal funeral,	+3ia	430
You had a nerve, burying	ia cr	
A husband, king, none to grieve	+ia cr	
No people there, none to mourn his passing	la ith	

Strophe 9

ORESTES

All that you've said speaks of it: dishonour.	la ith
She'll pay for how she dishonoured father:	ia ith
With help from gods, also with	ia cr
The help of these hands of mine.	ia cr
When I've killed her , let me face my own end.	ia ith

Antistrophe 9

CHORUS

Know this; he was mutilated vilely,	
And she who thus buried him was acting	440
From need to make how he died	
Ensure your lives' wretchedness.	
Your father's disgraceful torments: you've heard.	

Antistrophe 7

ELEKTRA

You talk about our father's death. I stood alone
Dishonoured, and of no account,
Confined to quarters like a dangerous dog,
There'd be no laughter any more; just tears I had;
Hidden away, I wept, and sobbed my sad lament.
You've heard this. Now imprint it on your mind.

450

Antistrophe 8

CHORUS

Imprint it. And through your ears
Absorb the message, root in calmly in your mind;
What went before all have grasped,
What's next himself¹⁸ longs to know;
Your role's to come home with steadfast courage

Strophe 10

ORESTES

I summon you, join your friends now, father, please

[1a lec](#)

ELEKTRA

And I as well add my voice, through falling tears

[1a lec](#)

CHORUS

And our group here shout approval, all of them

[1a lec](#)

Come to the light and hear our cry

[21a](#)

Be with us in our battle.

[Arist](#) 460

Antistrophe 10

ORESTES

Now might with might, right with right's the struggle

ELEKTRA

Make clear what's right, do what's right, you gods, now.

¹⁸ Agamemnon

CHORUS

A shudder unnerves me when you're praying
Long time ago your fate was fixed:
Soon, as you pray, it may come.

Strophe 11

Family breaking down,	do	
Jarring, discordant music,	arist	
Blood-spattered stroke of ruin!	arist	
Io! Too heavy, wretched burdens!	hipp	
Io! Pain and no way to staunch it.	Hipp	470

Antistrophe 11

It's for the family,
Not for outsiders, to be
Treating this septic ulcer
Themselves, with savage Strife, the blood-stained.
This hymn's sung by the gods below earth.

Anapaests

Listen now, blessed gods of the earth, send
Your support and good will for those who pray,
For the children, and for their victory.

ORESTES

Father, you did not die the way a king should.
I beg you give me power to rule your house. 480

ELEKTRA

And, father, this is my request of you:
Get me a husband¹⁹: fix Aigisthos' death.

ORESTES

For this the normal feasts would be set up

¹⁹ Line is corrupt. This plausible suggestion balances Orestes' plea.

For you: or else among the well-dined dead,
No honour when the offerings here are burned.

ELEKTRA

And I from my inheritance shall bring
Wedding libations from the family home,
Your tomb I shall revere before all else.

ORESTES

O Earth, send father up to watch the fight!

ELEKTRA

Persephone, give us his winner's power!

490

ORESTES

Think of the bath that you were murdered in!

ELEKTRA

Think of the throwing-net they improvised!

ORESTES

Yes, trapped as if in chains - no need for bronze!

ELEKTRA

A garment they devised to bring you shame.

ORESTES

Do these reproofs arouse you yet, father?

ELEKTRA

And do you lift your head, so dear to us?

ORESTES

So now ask Justice to stand by your friends,
And get them in the holds they had you in,
That's if you want to win the return bout.

ELEKTRA

And, father listen to this last appeal.

500

Seeing these nestlings perched upon your tomb,
Pity the female's cry, the male's as well

ORESTES

Do not wipe out this hope²⁰ of Pelops' race:
This way you are not dead, though you have died.

ELEKTRA

If a man's children keep his name alive
When he is dead; like corks they keep the net
Afloat, and pull the lines up from the deep.

ORESTES

Listen, these pleas are all on your behalf:
Then heed our argument and save yourself!

CHORUS

Well you two certainly have said it all, 510
Offset the lack of grieving at the tomb.
However, now your mind is fixed on action,
Perhaps it's time to put fate to the test.

ORESTES

It will be. But it's not off track to ask
Just why she sent the jugs and why she tried
Too late to make up for her deadly act.
Why would she send this futile gift to one
Who so detested her? It makes no sense!
Against such evil, gifts have no effect.
To spend your all to pay for just one act 520
Of bloodshed? Futile, senseless as they say.
I'd like to hear if you know more of this.

CHORUS

I know, my son, for I was there. She sent
The offerings, the hateful wife, shaken
By dreams and night-marauding fears.

²⁰ *sperma*, seed in Greek. But some suggest this line and Elektra's reply are an interpolation.

ORESTES

And do you know the dream? Can you say more?

CHORUS

She gave birth to a snake, that's what she said.

ORESTES

How does it end? What's the significance?

CHORUS

It anchors Justice in a baby's shawl.²¹

ORESTES

The new born viper, what food did it want?

530

CHORUS

She offered it her breast, that was her dream.

ORESTES

How was her breast not hurt by this foul thing?

CHORUS

It was. The clots of blood curdled the milk.

ORESTES

This serpent seems to cause her much distress!

CHORUS

Startled from sleep, the horror made her scream.

And many braziers the dark had snuffed

Lit up the house, to please the mistress' whim.

It's then she sends these offerings, poured out

In hopes she can excise, thus cure the hurt.

ORESTES

I pray to this earth and my father's tomb,

540

That this dream may come true for me. Indeed,

The way I see it, it fits perfectly.

If the snake was wrapped in baby-clothes like mine,²²

²¹ Swaddling-clothes. .

²² Line 544 is corrupt. I've guessed at the sense.

Ans sucked upon the breast that nourished me,
And mixed her precious milk with clots of blood,
And she in terror screamed feeling the pain,
Then she, who nursed the monstrous thing, must die,
And violently. I'll be in serpent's form,
A snake, to kill her and fulfil the dream.

550

CHORUS

I grasp your skill in dream-interpreting -
And may it turn out so. You friends then; tell
Each one what they should do, or should not do.

ORESTES

The plan is simple. She's to go indoors.
While you must keep my mission to yourselves,
So they who killed a noble man through guile,
Get caught by guile themselves, dead, trapped
The same way Loxias foretold, the lord
Apollo, prophet who has never lied.

So, like a traveller, all properly

560

Equipped. I'll reach the gates, with Pylades,
A traveller linked by friendship²³ to the house.
We both will sound like men from Parnassus
By putting on a Phocian way of speech.

Suppose no gate-guard warmly welcomes us -
The house is spooked from all the bad it's seen -
We'll stand there so one passing by the house
Will draw conclusions, and have this to say:

"Why ever is Aigisthos barring visitors²⁴?

He knows there's someone waiting at the gate!"

570

If once I get inside and past his gates,

²³ A guest-friendship. that is (xenia), with implied military obligations.

²⁴ A suppliant, if you prefer

And find him sitting on my father's throne,
 Or he comes in – be sure he'll summon me,
 Face me – before he says "Who's this?" I'll make
 Him dead. My sword kicks out, I'm on to him.
 The Fury then has not gone short of blood:
 This undiluted drink will be her third.

To Elektra

So, you, keep careful watch inside the house;
 It's vital that these plans all interlock.

580

To the chorus

I urge you all say nothing out of turn
 Be silent and speak only when appropriate.
 For the rest, I ask **him**²⁵ to look after us,
 Directing both my ordeal, and my sword. *Exeunt Orestes and Pylades*

First stasimon [585 – 651]

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Earth, for one, nourishes	2cr	585
Many fearsome miseries;	+lec	
Ocean's coves cultivate multiform	3cr	
Behemoths that menace life.	mol ia	
Also harm comes from lightnings in the sky	cr lec	
Meteors that flash and burn,	+lec	
Birds on the wing and the creatures that crawl, who may warn of the	5da	
Gusty rage of hurricanes.	lec	

²⁵ Hermes (who guided O to the tomb. Though other suggestions include Pylades, Agamemnon and Apollo.

Antistrophe 1

Who could, though, put in words 594
Reckless pride that men display,
Passionate ruthlessness women's hearts
Are fed on – the same that nourishes
Madness which drags to ruin human lives?
Love that is not love at all 600
Overpowers women and gives women power over marriage,
Couplings of both beasts and men.

Strophe 2

Know now, you whose thoughts aren't in the air, sp lec
Think of this and learn, "iambo-trochaic pentameter"
How she, Thestius' daughter²⁶, killer of her son cruelly planned sp cr lec cr
How she'd burn a glowing log lec
Watch it blaze in the fire, log that mirrored +2cr tr
Accurately In age her son glyc
His contemporary, right pher
From the time of his birth until glyc 610
That day fate was in waiting pher

Antistrophe 2

There's one other²⁷ in a tale to hate,
Woman stained with blood,
Who for enemies killed a man who was a friend, tempted by
A Cretan's necklace crafted with
Gold, the gift Minos used, so persuasive;
She cut Nisus' immortal lock
While he all unaware, snored 620
Deep in slumber, the heartless bitch.

²⁶ Althaia, mother of Meleagros.

²⁷ Skylla cut off her father Nisos' immortal lock of hair, bribed with a necklace by Minos, king of Crete.

He's in Hermes' possession²⁸.

*Strophe 3*²⁹

Since I've recalled suffering that had no end,	ia lec	
I shall deplore also marriage that was loathed,	ia lec	
Never welcomed by the house,	+lec	
Conspiracy strategized by female minds ³⁰	+ ia lec	
Against a man bearing arms	ia cr	
A man who brought honour, due respect, to all.	ia lec	
But I prefer houses that are homes where no	ia lec	
Desires flare, woman's lust is quietened.	ba ith	630

Antistrophe 3

The Lemnian³¹ crime's the story that's best known;
And folk exclaim how detestable it was
 Horrors now are still compared
By some to what happened with the Lemnians.
Because of sin gods abhor,
Dishonoured by all, their race exists no more.
No one respects what is hated by the gods.
Of these tales, which does not belong here?

Strophe 4

The sword-blade up against the ribs	2ia	
Its sharp point piercing, incisive, cuts through	ba ia ba	640
Because of Justice, and what's right, -	2ia	
Kicked and trampled under foot,	lec	
And stabs the ones who have not shown	2ia	
Due respect towards Zeus.	+ith	

²⁸ Dead. Guided to the underworld by Hermes.

²⁹ "The text of this strophe is corrupt, and its sense and connection to what precedes and what follows is obscure and disputed" (Garvie) Some want to transpose the strophe and antistrophe.

³⁰ Unclear whether it refers to Klytaimestra, Aigisthos – or both.

³¹ The Lemnian women (except Hypsipyle who spared her father) killed all the men on Lemnos.

Antistrophe 4

Justice's roots are planted deep,

The swordsmith, Fate, makes the weapons early;

A child of older bloody crime's

Introduced into the house

To pay for them, when it is time:

650

Furies' plans are deep ones.

Enter Orestes and Pylades, thinly disguised. Orestes shouts.

ORESTES

Boy! Boy! D'you hear me knocking at the door? *Pause*

Boy! Boy! Again! Who's home? Who's in? *Pause*

Three times I've called for someone to come out!

Isn't Aigisthos keen to welcome guests?

SERVANT'S VOICE *from inside*

OK, I hear! What kind of guest? Where from?

ORESTES

Announce me to the owners of the house:

I've come to see them, and I bring them news.

Be quick: the murky chariot of night

660

Is on its way. It's time for travellers

To drop anchor where visitors are liked.

Let someone in authority come out –

The lady of the house, or, rather, the man.

Discussing business with a woman can

Be awkward. Men who speak with other men

Are confident their message gets across.

The doors open to reveal KLYTAIMESTRA, attended

KLYTAIMESTRA

You travellers, tell me what you require.

We've all facilities a palace boasts!

Hot baths, and comfortable beds

670

For rest, and helpful faces everywhere!

If you need to discuss anything else,

This is the man's affair. I'll let him know.

ORESTES

I've come from Phokis, I'm a Daulian.

I had set out for Argos and was on

My way, carrying my own bags, myself,

When one who was unknown to me,

As I to him, fell in with me and talked.

Having explained the route and made it clear –

The Phocian, Strophios – as he revealed,

"Since you're already on your way," he said,

680

"To Argos, tell his parents something they've

A right to know: he's dead, Orestes is.

Promise me this: If family thinks to bring

Him home, or let him stay forever in

A foreign grave, convey their wishes back.

For now, his ashes are inside an urn

Of bronze. He had a decent funeral."

I've told you what I heard. I do not know

If I am speaking to someone in charge,

Some relative: his parents though should know.

690

KLYTAIMESTRA

I'm numb. Your words completely knock me out.

Curse! What a brutal grip you have on us!

Though distant, you ensure so much works out!

Struck down by well-aimed arrows from afar,

Poor me, you strip me of the ones I love.

And now Orestes ... though the plan was good,

To keep his foot out of the mire of death:

Now Hope, physician to this evil house
Of madness ... mark her down for treachery!

ORESTES

I would have wanted to be known to such 700
Well-favoured hosts and find a welcome here
For having brought good news. For what bond is
More meaningful than that of host and guest?
It would though have been wrong if I had opted
Not to deliver such important news
For friends I'd promised and who took me in.

KLYTAIMESTRA

There's no way you'd get less than you deserve,
Nor find yourself less of a friend to us.
Some other person would have brought this news.
Now's time for guests who've spent a long day on 710
The road to have the normal courtesies.

To a slave

Escort him to the palace guest-suite, with
His servants³² and his fellow traveller,
And let them there have all the normal things.
Please do it well. I've got my eye on you!

To Orestes

I shall communicate these things with those
Who rule the house. I am not short of friends
And we'll discuss this terrible event.

Exeunt Orestes, Pylades and servants (?) with the slave.

CHORUS

Anapaests

What now, fellow maids, friends of the family?
When can we open our

720

³² Incompatible with 675. No explanation is convincing!

Mouths showing our support of Orestes?
Blessed Earth, and you blessed mound of the
Tomb who now lie on top of the corpse
Of the king who commanded the sea-force,
Now you must hear us, now you must help us.
Now is the time for cunning Persuasion
To come to their aid, Underworld Hermes
The dark one to show them the way to address
The contest that ends with a death by the sword.

It seems the traveller's causing an upset!

730

I see Orestes' nurse here all in tears;
Where are you off to through the gates, Kilissa?
The pain, unbargained for, shows in your face.

NURSE/KILISSA, *entering*

The mistress ordered me to call Aigisthos
For the visitors, "Quick as you can!", so he
Could come and hear this latest news, a man
From a man. Before the servants she presents
A face screwed up with grief, all while she smirks
In private at the things that have occurred:

For her all good, but heartbreak for this house,

740

Due to the news the visitors announced.

Of course that man will celebrate inside,
Soon as he hears the news. Poor wretched me!
There's so much pain they cause inside me,
The old disasters to the House of Atreus
A painful mixed-up jumble, hard to bear.
But a pain like this I never yet endured.

The other things I stomached patiently,

But dear Orestes! How he wore me out!

His mother passed him on to me to feed.

750

Those summonses at all hours of the night³³ –

The troubles I went through – and all of them

For nought. What can't yet think, like any creature,

Must have - what else? - a thoughtful nurse's care.

A child still in its swaddling clothes can't say

It's hungry, thirsty, or it wants a pee.

A baby's tum's a law unto itself!

I was alert to all such things, but even so

I often got it wrong, and baby's things

Were cleaned by nurse – the washerwoman too!

760

So both these forms of drudgery I took

On from his mother, as his father wished.

But now I learn he's dead. I'm broken up.

I'm off to him, the master of this house

Of doom. How glad he'll be to hear the news.

LEADER

How does she though tell him to come. What with?

NURSE

What? How? I don't get what you're trying to say.

LEADER

Come with his bodyguard or by himself?

NURSE

The order is to bring his guards, with spears.

LEADER

Don't give this message to your hated master!

770

Say come alone. Your words won't make him nervous

If you just smile and say "Quick as you can!"

³³ A line is thought to have dropped out here.

The messenger makes a twisted message straight.

NURSE

So are you happy with this latest news?

LEADER

But if Zeus means that our bad luck will change...

NURSE

How so? With Orestes, the family's hope has gone.

LEADER

Not yet; That's what a bad prophet would say!

NURSE

What do you mean? Have you some different news?

LEADER

Go, give the message, do what you've been told.

What is the gods' concern, concerns the gods.

780

NURSE

The I'll be off, I shall do what you said.

With gods' blessing may all be for the best.

Second stasimon 713-837³⁴

CHORUS

Strophe 1

We beseech you, O Zeus, Father of

3cr

Gods, Olympus' residents,

+lec

May the right rulers find

2cr

Good luck falls to those who want

lec

Order to come at last.

do

Justice lies in every word I spoke:

cr do

Zeus, may you protect it.

lth

³⁴ The text of the second stasimon is horribly corrupt. Almost every reading is disputed.

Mesode 1

Oh! Oh! Put the man who's in the house	sp ion anap	790
Head to head, Zeus, with his rivals. If you choose to	3ion	
Make him great you will receive	lec	
Double and triple payment	arist	

Antistrophe 1

Picture this: Chariot, yoked to it,
Shaky colt: you loved his sire.
Grief and pain dog his course:
Make his suffering bearable,
Give him the pace, the rhythm,
Let us see how he can cover the ground
Striding out to victory.

Strophe 2

Gods who dwell inside the house,	lec	800
You whose care guards the wealth that's its joy,	3cr	
Think of us and hear our prayer.	lec	
Come, now,< join us, be on our side.>	2tr	
Blood from all those ancient crimes?	lec	
Scrub out, brand-new justice cleanses it.	sp lec	
It must not breed – aged bloodshed in this house.	ia lec	

Mesode 2

You whose home's in the great cavern's entrance ³⁵	2cr ion	
Grant the house of this man may look upwards	2cr ion	
May he see brightness of freedom	hemiepes	
Shine, with his welcoming eyes	hemiepes	810
Out of the terrible gloom of darkness.	Alcaic decasyllable	

³⁵ Editors seem to agree that this might be what the words mean. But the references are obscure, as it ought to refer to Apollo, otherwise not mentioned.

Antistrophe 2

May the son of Maia too
Offer help, as is right, bringing, as
He does, the enterprise success.
Much that's dark he wants to show us:
Sometimes though he seems obscure,
Darkness, in the night, he drapes before
Our eyes, but is no more lucid in the day!

Strophe 3

Then indeed we shall sing	2cr	
In our high-pitched female voice,	lec	820
Once the wind has veered to fair,	lec	
Songs to hail freedom from streaming blood ³⁶ ,	3cr	
Because our ship is sailing ³⁷ well.	2ia	
Mine's the gain, this success will profit me:	cr lec	
Ruin stays clear of our friends.	+lec	

Mesode 3

You must be strong when the time comes for the action	3ion	
When you hear her crying to you	2ion	
"You're my son!", shout "I'm my father's!"	2ion	
Finishing off your righteous vengeance.	cr ith	830

Antistrophe 3

Perseus' strength of will
Fix now firmly in your heart:
And for friends below the earth³⁸,
And above³⁹ do what they long to see:
The Gorgon, that malignancy
Lurks inside : you make sure you seal her doom

³⁶ Reading χυτῶν αἱμάτων for κλυτὸν δωμάτων

³⁷ Reading πλεῖ for πόλει. This has nothing to do with the city.

³⁸ Agamemnon

³⁹ Electra and the Chorus themselves

And uproot the evil at its source.

Enter Aigisthos from the palace.

AIGISTHOS

I'm here. I got a message, and I come as called.

I understand some visitors arrived with some

New information, not entirely pleasing,

840

About Orestes' death. This would impose

A fearful burden for the house to bear,

Wounded and savaged by the recent death.

How to decide if this is true and really so?

Or if it's frightened women's words,

That waft with the wind, and idly fade away?

What say to this to clarify my thoughts?

LEADER

It's what we've heard – but come inside and hear

It from the guests. No messenger is better than

What 's heard in person from the horse's mouth⁴⁰.

850

AIGISTHOS

I want to interrogate the messenger.

Was he there near the dying man himself?

Or did he repeat some vague report he'd heard?

He won't deceive a mind that's vigilant.

Exit Aigisthos through the double doors into the palace.

CHORUS

Anapaests

Zeus, Zeus, what to say? Where should I start from,

Offering these prayers, and addressing the gods,

Driven by loyalty,

⁴⁰ Assuming that a proverbial expression underlies the difficult Greek text.

And having spoken how to fittingly end?
 For now polluted with blood, sharp blades
 Of the man-slaughtering cleavers are either
 On the point of erasing Agamemnon's
 House and wiping it out for all time,
 Or lighting the beacon for freedom, he
 Will attain power as the city's commander,
 And will have the great wealth of his forefathers.
 Godlike Orestes will take on the pair
 Who won the last bout in the wrestling ring.
 And may the victory be his.

860

Aigisthos' screams are heard from behind the doors

AIGISTHOS

E! e! Otototoi!

CHORUS

What's up? What's that again?

do 870

What's happening ? How's it gone, in the house?

3ia

Let's not get caught up with what's being done,

Let's not be seen entangled in these bad

Actions. The battle has been fought and won.

A servant's desperate shouts are heard from behind the door

SERVANT⁴¹

O fuck! O fucking hell! The master's down!

And fuck! Again. I've said it now three times -

Aigisthos is dead! Open up at once, be quick!

It's urgent. Go! Open the women's doors,

Undo the bolts. We need the tough guy now!

880

Not that he'd help a man who's dead. No way.

⁴¹ Maybe one of Aigisthos' slaves.

He continues shouting to unseen slaves within.

Hello! Hello!

Are you all deaf, or fast asleep? Am I

Wasting my breath? Where's Klytaimestra, what's

She doing? She's in danger! Likely she

Will have her head cut off. And rightly so.

The doors open and a dishevelled Klytaimestra emerges. The servant remains unseen.

KLYTAIMESTRA *as she enters*

What now ? What's all this shouting in the house?

SERVANT

The dead, I say! They come to kill the living!

KLYTAIMESTRA

A riddle, yes? Sadly I've got the message.

We'll die by trickery, just as we killed,

Quick! Someone get an axe, the man-killer!

Let's see if we shall win or face defeat.

890

Orestes and Pylades enter from the palace, their swords still wet with blood

Here comes the crucial moment in this mess.

ORESTES

It's you I'm looking for. He's had enough.

KLYTAIMESTRA

I'm done. You're dead, my joy and strength, Aigisthos.

ORESTES

You love the man? You'll sleep together in

The tomb. Don't give him up because he's dead!

KLYTAIMESTRA

Stop there my son; my baby, think of this.

My breast, from here your gentle lips took milk

To make you strong as you sucked sleepily.

ORESTES

Help! Pylades! Shaming! To kill my mother?

PYLADES

What future for Apollo's prophecies,

900

His oracles, his faithful promises?

Make enemies of all men, not the gods!

ORESTES

You win, I say, and your advice is good.

[To Klytaimestra] This way, I want to kill you next to him.

You chose him living rather than my father!

Now sleep with him in death, because you love

This man, and hate the one you should have loved.

KLYTAIMESTRA

I nursed you: I want you with me when I'm old...

ORESTES

You, in my house, my father's murderer?

KLYTAIMESTRA

It's Fate, my son, responsible for this.

ORESTES

Then it was "Fate" who served him⁴² up his fate.

910

KLYTAIMESTRA

My child, do you not fear a mother's curse?

ORESTES

You had me, then flung me to misery.

KLYTAIMESTRA

I "flung" you to a guest-friend's home!

ORESTES

Disgracefully you sold a free man's son!

KLYTAIMESTRA

Then where's the price I got for selling you?

⁴² Aigisthos, of course

ORESTES

I'm embarrassed to shame you so explicitly!⁴³

KLYTAIMESTRA

Admit your father's weakness was the same!⁴⁴

ORESTES

You sat at home! Don't blame the warrior!

KLYTAIMESTRA

It's tough for a woman left without a man.

920

ORESTES

The labour of the man feeds those at home.

KLYTAIMESTRA

My son, it seems you're set to kill your mother...

ORESTES

Not me, the one who kills you is yourself.

KLYTAIMESTRA

Beware the fury of the mother's hounds.

ORESTES

How'd I escape my father's if I quit?

KLYTAIMESTRA

I live, but seems tears wet my tomb in vain.

ORESTES

My father's death propels you to this fate.

KLYTAIMESTRA *shrieks*

When I bore him I gave birth to a snake.

The dream that scared me prophesied too well.

ORESTES

You killed; you wronged.: accept your taste of wrong.

930

⁴³ I.e. her payoff was Aigisthos.

⁴⁴ I.e. Cassandra

With this, Orestes and Pylades usher Klytimestra back through the doors at sword-point.

CHORUS

On one hand I lament this pair's demise.

Now brave Orestes has finished spilling

Their blood, however, this becomes my choice:

The light that guides the house must not go out.⁴⁵

Third stasimon 935 – 971

Strophe 1

She came Justice did, to Priam's house, the price	2do	
Heavier to pay with time;	do	
They came, reached the house, where Agamemnon ruled,	2do	
The pair of lions, the pair at war.	2ia	
One man saw it through,	do	
The exile who thanks to god	ia cr	940
Was fired by the oracle's excellent guiding words.	2do	

Mesode 1

You cried out with joy the day the tyrants' house	2do
Won its release from pain, and theft of its property	2do
By the vile infected pair –	lec
Journey of grief.	do

Antistrophe 1

And she came, the one loving a covert fight,	
Devious Punishment.	
And she held his hand helping throughout the fight	
The one who truly is the child of Zeus	
(Justice, as known to all	950
The race of men – rightly too)	
Stirring up ruinous hate for his enemies.	

⁴⁵ Lit "The eye of the house not to fall into total ruin."

*Strophe 2*⁴⁶

Her ⁴⁷ it was Loxias, owner of mighty tracts	2do	
Of Parnassus' cleft ⁴⁸ , declared— no deceit! –	2do	
Waits, hurt by Deceit,	do	
Till time has gone by, then makes her attack.	2do	
Victory's always god's, somehow, and that is why	2do	
I never aid the bad.	do	
It's right, reverencing the ones who rule in heaven	2do	960

Mesode 2

The light! It is here to see! Huge is the thing that's gone:	2do
Curb-chain that choked the house.	do
Now house, up once more! For far too much time	2do
You lay sprawled in the dirt.	do

Antistrophe 2

That Time, now fulfilled, soon will be moving out -	
Out of the exit door, when all the toxic shame	
Has been exorcised,	
And it's been purified, by rites to banish doom.	
The palace's residents ⁴⁹ , aliens as they were,	970
Shall turn out Kindly Ones, their faces now fair to see.	

The ekkyklema revolves to reveal Orestes (and Pylades?) with the corpses of Aigisthos and Klytaimnestra.

ORESTES

Observe the land's two headed tyranny,
My father's murderers, thieves of my home.
Serenely once they sat upon their thrones:

⁴⁶ This strophe is extremely corrupt

⁴⁷ Punishment, Justice

⁴⁸ I.e. Apollo's oracle at Delphi

⁴⁹ The μέτοικοι (resident aliens) are the Erinyes, who will become the "Kindly Ones" at the end of the trilogy. Garvie, summarising numerous attempts to edit the "very difficult sentence" admits that "the correct solution remains to be discovered".

They're lovers even now, if one may guess
 Their fate⁵⁰; their pledges bind them still.
 As one they swore to bring my father death,
 And die as one themselves. That oath's fulfilled!
 Observe more yet, hear of these shocking things, 980
 The apparatus used to hobble him,
 The manacles, paired fetters for his legs. 982
 Now I can honour him in person, now I weep, 1014
 As I speak to the "thing" that killed my father. 1015
 What name for it? What normal word is there? ⁵¹ 997
 A hunting-net? A full-length bathing tent
 Used as a shroud? Rather a web, you'd say,
 A mesh, or too-long robe that trips one up. 1000
 The sort of thing a crook would get himself,
 Planning to live dishonestly by mugging,
 And stealing cash from people: with this "gear".
 The more he killed the happier he'd be. 1004
 Now spread it out, stand in a circle round, 984
 Display the man-wrapping, so father sees –
 Not mine, but he who keeps an eye on all
 My mother's unclean acts, the Sun: so he
 May be my witness to what's just, one day,
 That justly I committed to taking
 My mother's life. Aigisthos' fate? No words.
 Adulterers are punished by the law! 990
 She planned this act of hate against her husband,
 Whose children she'd had growing in her womb,
 Once loved, then loathed as toxic enemies.
 What d'you think? Were she a viper or a moray eel,

⁵⁰ In the Underworld? Or as suggestively positioned on the ekkyklema.

⁵¹ Lines 997 -1004 seem better if transposed her, as some editors have suggested.

She'd poison you without the need to bite,
 She's so aggressive, unrestrained, so wild. 996
 I would not wish to have a wife like her 1005
 Sharing my house! I would die childless first.

CHORUS *Anapaests*

Aiai aiai! Horror of what's done!
 Her end was a hideous death!
 Aiai aiai!
 He now waits ... for her suffering to flower.⁵²

ORESTES
 She did the deed or did she not? This cloak
 Tells me Aigisthos's sword stained it. The cloth
 Has been discoloured by the oozing blood,
 Though time, too, helped the deep-dyed fabric fade. 1013
 I mourn – her deeds, her pain, the family's: 1016
 The win I have's unenvied and unclean.

CHORUS *Anapaests*

No mortal could ever spend his entire
 Life without blame, not having to answer.
 Aiai aiai!
 Trouble is here and there's trouble to come. 1020

ORESTES
 You have to know: I cannot see the end,
 I'm like a charioteer yanked off the track
 Horses and all. My wilful wits drag me,
 I can't resist. Next to my heart, Fear starts
 To sing; set dancing to its angry beat.
 But while my wits are still intact, I tell
 You friends it was not wrong to kill my mother,

⁵² ie Orestes' punishment is coming...

Stained with my father's blood, and loathed by the gods.

The foremost inspiration for this deed:

Apollo's oracle, informing me 1030

That if I did this, I'd be free of blame:

I omit the penalty for saying no;

Don't guess at how much pain could hit the mark.

And now you see how well equipped I am,

With my branch that's wrapped with wool to move towards

The temple of the central navel-stone,

Apollo's ground, and the eternal fire,

And freedom from the family blood. Apollo's

Instructions were to head for nowhere else.

And why these dreadful deeds were done, I shall 1040

In time call all the Argives to be witnesses, 1041

<And Menelaos to endorse when home>.⁵³

And now a wanderer, banished from this land, 1042

Alive or dead, I leave behind this name: 1043

<Assassin, his own mother's murderer.>⁵⁴

CHORUS

No, you did well! Do not bad mouth⁵⁵ yourself! 1044

Don't say such awful things about yourself!

You liberated all the Argives when

You struck off with such ease two serpents' heads.

ORESTES

A! a!

Look there! Those ghastly females gorgon-like,

Sombrely-shrouded, and enwreathed, encoiled

With writhing snakishness. I can't stay here! 1050

⁵³ 1040-41 are corrupt. Some editors suggest a line is missing.

⁵⁴ Another lacuna is assumed after line 1043, otherwise we don't know what the "name" is!

⁵⁵ In use since 1941 (orig US slang)

CHORUS

You, father's best-beloved, what fantasies
Bestorm your mind? Stop, do not fear! You won!

ORESTES

To me they are not troubled fantasies,
It's clear they are my mother's furious dogs.

CHORUS

The blood upon your hands is fresh, still fresh:
That's why this madness is affecting you. 1056

ORESTES

But you can not see them, I clearly can! 1061
And from their eyes seep ugly drops of blood! 1058

CHORUS

One way to cleanse yourself: touched by
Apollo – he will make you free from pain. 1060

ORESTES

O lord Apollo, there are swarms of them! 1057
I'm driven out, and I can stay no more. 1062

CHORUS

Then fare you well, and may a caring god
Guide and protect you: be there when it counts.

Anapaests

I say this is the third hurricane to afflict
This household of kings.
Blowing regeneration⁵⁶: now it is done.
Eating of children came first; it began
The dreadful events.
Second the pain of a king and a husband, 1070
The Achaian commander-in-chief who died

⁵⁶ The word γονίᾱς occurs only here. Its meaning is obscure. I've guessed.

Killed in his bath-tub,
And then now there' its saviour from somewhere,
Or should my words say its doom?
Where then will it end, and when will the power
Of ruin grow sleepy and leave us?

Marshfield Woods, December 31st 2022