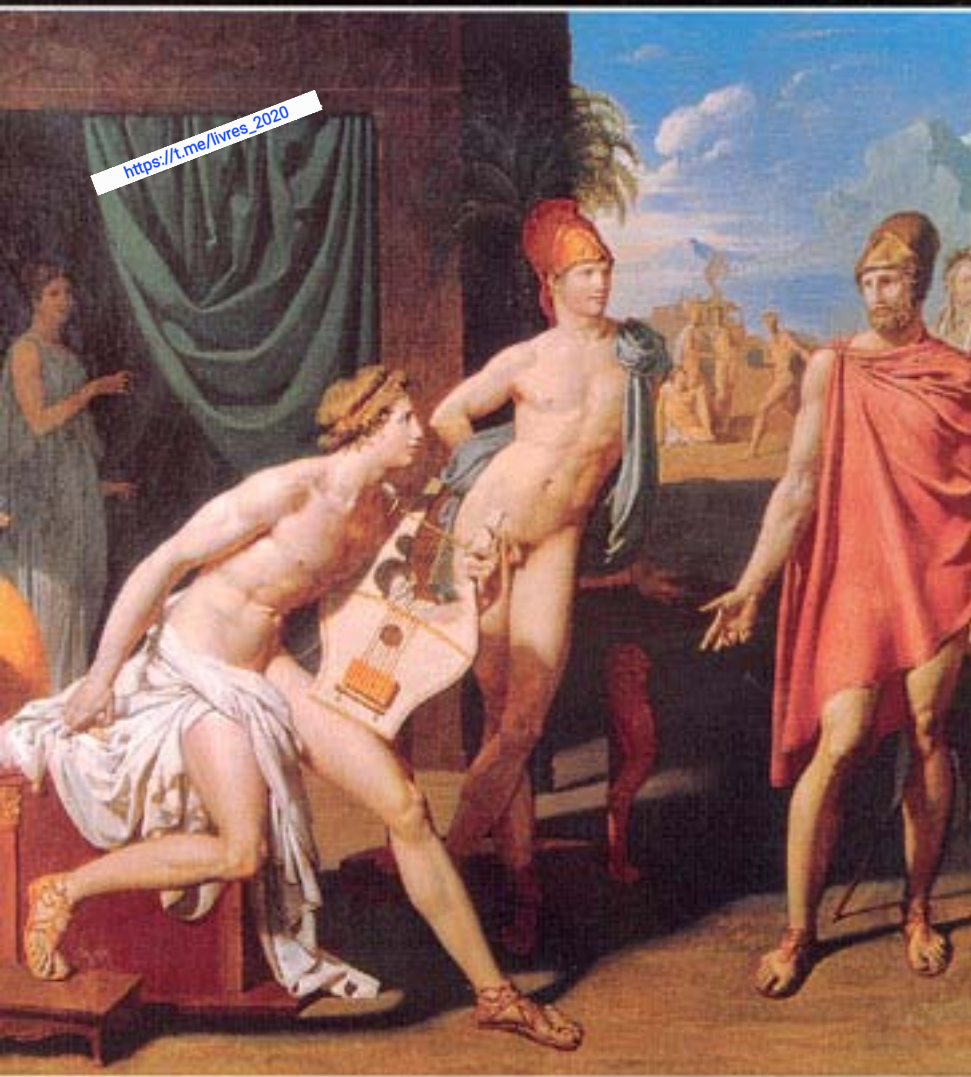


THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES



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# AESCHYLUS

Edited by David Grene & Richmond Lattimore

THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

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AESCHYLUS

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*Orestes*

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*The Suppliant Maidens; The Persians, Seven against Thebes*

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*Prometheus Bound*

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## NOTE

The translation of *Agamemnon* which is here used first appeared in *Greek Plays in Modern Translation*, edited with an Introduction by Dudley Fitts (New York: Dial Press, 1947). It is used here by kind permission of The Dial Press, Inc. Some alterations have been made, chiefly in the matter of spelling Greek names. Two sections of *Agamemnon*, "The God of War, Money Changer of Dead Bodies," and "The Achaeans Have Got Troy, upon This Very Day," first published in *War and the Poet: A Comprehensive Anthology of the World's Great War Poetry*, edited by Richard Eberhart and Selden Rodman, are used by permission of the Devin-Adair Company.

The translation of all three plays is based on H. W. Smyth's "Loeb Classical Library" text (London and New York: William Heinemann, Ltd., and G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926). A few deviations from this text occur where I have followed the manuscript readings instead of emendations accepted by Smyth.

Various editions of Greek drama divide the lines of lyric passages in various ways, but editors regularly follow the traditional line numbers whether their own line divisions tally with these numbers or not. This accounts for what may appear to be erratic line numbering in our translations, for instance, *The Eumenides* 360 and following. The line numbering in the translations in this volume is that of Smyth's text.



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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ORESTEIA

### *The Life of Aeschylus*

AESCHYLUS, the son of Euphorion, was born in the last quarter of the sixth century B.C., probably about 513 or 512 B.C. The great Persian Wars occurred during his early manhood, and he fought, certainly at Marathon (where his brother was killed in action) and probably also at Artemisium, Salamis, and Plataea. He is said to have begun at an early age to write tragedies, his first victory was in 484 B.C. In or about 476 B.C. he visited Sicily and, at the instance of Hieron of Syracuse, Pindar's friend, produced *The Women of Etna* at the new city of Etna which Hieron had founded. In 472 he produced his *Persians* at Athens, with Pericles as his choregus (or official sponsor) and re-produced it, presumably in the next year, in Sicily. Back in Athens in 468, he was defeated by the young Sophocles, but won again in 467 with a set of plays including *The Seven against Thebes*. In 458 he presented the *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*). He died in Gela, Sicily, in 456 or 455 B.C., leaving behind him an epitaph which might be rendered as follows:

Under this monument lies Aeschylus the Athenian,

Euphorion's son, who died in the wheatlands of Gela. The grove  
of Marathon with its glories can speak of his valor in battle

The long-haired Persian remembers and can speak of it too.

He left behind more than seventy plays (the exact number is uncertain), of which seven have survived. They are *The Suppliants*, *The Persians*, *The Seven against Thebes*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*. He is said to have won first prize thirteen times while he lived, but after his death his tragedies were often produced again, and in competition with living poets he won more prizes still.



It would be interesting to know how old Aeschylus was when he wrote his known and dated plays. But the date of his birth is quite uncertain, though the year 525/4<sup>1</sup> is commonly given as if it were an established fact. It is true enough that apparently independent authorities give ages at the time of Marathon and at time of death which agree with this scheme. However, the birth date may very easily be accounted for by the rule-of-thumb method, favored by Greek chronologists, of taking an important event in a man's life and counting back forty years to an estimated date of birth. Thus the traditional birth date of Thucydides is 471 (from the outbreak of the war he recorded in 431); of Aristophanes, 445 (from the production of his masterpiece, *The Frogs*, in 405). Both these dates are bad (there are many parallels), and the one for Aeschylus is no more convincing. An age of forty at his first victory is suspect, not only because it tallies so neatly with a known method of reckoning, but because it is in itself unlikely that a man who utterly eclipsed his rivals in subsequent reputation, so that they are now very little more than bare names, should have had to wait so long before scoring his first success. A less popular but more attractive tradition would make him born in 513 or 512, but here also we may be dealing with estimates based on known and dated events, such as battles and dramatic productions.

Ancient authorities also tell us a few other things about Aeschylus which would be interesting if we could believe them. It is said that he left Athens for Sicily in chagrin because he was defeated by Simonides, the great lyric poet, in a competition for writing the epitaph of the dead at Marathon, or because he was defeated by Sophocles in dramatic competition, or because he disliked Athenian politics.<sup>2</sup>

1. Athenian dates are generally fixed by the term of the *archon*, or titular chief magistrate. Since the archons changed over some time in the summer, not at our new year, such dates overlap those of our calendar. Since, however, plays came out in the spring before the change-over, a play dated to an archonship of, for instance, 485/4 will *always* fall in 484.

2. Euripides, near the end of his life, left Athens in voluntary exile and died in Macedonia at the court of King Archelaus. There is reason to believe that he left because he had constantly failed to win critical approval in Athens and because he despaired of the hopeless course which his city had been following since the time of Pericles. The biographers doubtless applied the analogy of Euripides-Athens-Arche-

The defeats are real, but they do not tally, chronologically, with the visits to Sicily; on the contrary, after losing to Sophocles, Aeschylus stayed in Athens and won first prize with *The Seven against Thebes* and its related dramas the next year, which is quite different from going off to Sicily in a huff. If one may guess at why he went to Sicily, it was because Sicily was the America of that day, the new Greek world, rich, generous, and young, with its own artists but without the tradition of perfected culture which Old Greece had built up, and it attracted Pindar, Bacchylides, Simonides, and Aeschylus much as America has attracted English men of letters from Dickens, Thackeray, and Wilde down to the present day. We do not know much about the personal character of Aeschylus and can make little critical use of what we do know. The epitaph shows he was proud of his military record, but this scarcely helps us to understand *The Persians*, *The Seven against Thebes*, or *Agamemnon*. We must approach Aeschylus, not from the biographies, but from his own plays

## *Early Tragedy*

From the time of the almost legendary Thespis, a full generation before the earliest tragedy we possess, dramatic performances of some sort had been regularly produced at Athens. In origin, they must have been a special local development of the choral lyric—sacred, occasional, provincial, public—which was alive in all the cities of Greece. But the early phases of the course by which dramatic lyric was transformed into lyric drama are now invisible to us. We can recognize certain ingredients, or essential features. Early drama was choral, and the life of Attic tragedy shows the indispensable chorus to the end, though the actors steadily invade the preserves of the chorus until, at the close of the fifth century, Euripides is using it sometimes in a most perfunctory manner, as if it were a convention he could not get rid of but might otherwise have preferred to do without. Early drama was sacred, having to do with the

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laos to Aeschylus—Athens—Hieron. But Euripides was a failure in his own lifetime, and it made him a defeatist and escapist. Of Aeschylus we can say with confidence that he was neither of these things.

cult of divinities, and particularly with the cult of Dionysus: on the formal side, it was performed to the end on ground devoted to that god and before his priest; but developed tragedy did not have to be *about* Dionysus, and seldom was. Like most choral lyric, it was given through the medium of a formal competition. The early tragic poets drew, for narrative material and for metrical forms, on an already rich and highly developed tradition of nondramatic poetry, epic and lyric. They also drew, no doubt, on the unwritten and almost inarticulate experience of a living people, on folk memory and folklore, cult and ritual and ceremony and passion play and mystery play. But tragedy did not grow out of such elements. It was made. Concerning the makers, we know little indeed about Thespis, Pratinas, Choerilus, Phrynichus. Tragedy, for us, begins with Aeschylus.

By or during the career of Aeschylus, the features of Greek tragedy become fixed. At an Athenian festival, three player-groups, each consisting of two (later three) actors and chorus, act out competitively four-drama sets. The material is based on stories told or indicated in previous Greek legend. Tragedy is heroic. The costumes are formal, physical action restrained and without violence; naturalism is neither achieved nor desired. Aeschylus himself, and his older contemporary Phrynichus before him, experimented with dramatic stories taken from contemporary history, and of these we have *The Persians*, dealing with the repulse of Xerxes and his forces. This was a success, but circumstances in this case were favorable to special occasional drama, for the defeat of Persia was the proudest achievement of Greek history. And, even here, the play is *about* the Persians, not the Greeks, the setting is Persia, and only Persian individuals are named. Remoteness from the immediate here-and-now, required by tragedy and guaranteed by legendary material, is here to a great extent achieved by placing the scene in the heart of Persia, so far away and guarded from Greeks that to the audience it might have seemed almost as legendary as the Troy of Hector or the Thebes of Oedipus.<sup>3</sup> A drama dealing directly with Themistocles and Pericles or

3. So Shakespeare drew on history and legend for his tragedies and romances, or, when these dealt with time not specifically antique, the place would be idealized by

with the war between Athens and Aegina would have been neither desired by the poet nor tolerated by his audience.

The body of legend on which Aeschylus and the other tragic poets drew was composed of the epic poems of Homer and his successors and constituted a loose and informal, but fairly comprehensive, history of the world as the Greeks knew it. Typical sources in this complex were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the "Epic Cycle," or series of subsequent epics which filled out the story of Troy and dealt in detail with its occasions and aftereffects; the epics that told the story of Thebes; and numerous other narratives either written down or transmitted through unwritten oral tradition. The dramatist rarely worked directly from the main body of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; the less authoritative minor texts were more popular. The dramatist seems not to have felt free to invent his material outright, but he could—in fact, he must—choose among variants, expand or deepen and interpret character, generally shape the story on the trend of his own imagination. In the case of Aeschylus, this process can be best reconstructed in the *Oresteia*, the trilogy or sequence of three tragedies composed of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*.

## *The Story of the House of Atreus*

The version of the legend as Aeschylus used it runs as follows. Atreus and Thyestes, the sons of Pelops, quarreled because Thyestes had seduced his brother's wife, and disputed the throne of Argos. Thyestes, defeated and driven out, returned as a suppliant with his children, and Atreus in pretended reconciliation invited him and his children to a feast. There he slaughtered the children of Thyestes (all but one) and served them in a concealing dish to their father, who ate their flesh. When it was made known to him what he had been doing, Thyestes cursed the entire house and fled with his surviving son, Aegisthus. Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus, inherited the Kingdom of Argos, and married, respectively, Clytae-

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distance and the vagueness of his audience's information: Italy, Bohemia, Illyria, Arden

mestra and Helen, the daughters of Tyndareus the Spartan. Clytaemestra bore Agamemnon three children—Iphigeneia, Electra, and Orestes. When Paris of Troy seduced Helen and carried her away, the brothers organized a great expedition to win her back. The armament, gathered at Aulis, was held there by wind and weather, Calchas the prophet divined that this was due to the anger of Artemis and, with the pressure of public opinion behind him, forced Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigeneia, in order to appease the goddess. Agamemnon with his forces sailed to Troy and in the tenth year captured it, destroyed the city and its temples, killed or enslaved the people, and set sail for home. On the sea, a great storm struck the fleet, and Agamemnon, with a single galley, made his way back to Argos, the rest of his ships being sunk or driven out of sight and knowledge. With him he brought his mistress, Cassandra, captive princess and prophetess of Troy.

Meanwhile, in Argos, Aegisthus had returned and Clytaemestra had taken him as her lover and sent Orestes out of the country. Warned of the king's approach by signal flares through which he had agreed to notify her of the fall of Troy, she made ready to receive him. She welcomed him into the house, but when he was unarmed in his bath, she pinioned him in a robe and stabbed him to death, and killed Cassandra as well. She defended her action before the people of Argos, who were helpless against Aegisthus and his bodyguard. But Orestes returned at last and was welcomed by his sister Electra, who had remained rebellious against her mother but without power to act. Orestes, disguised as a traveler and pretending to bring news of his own death, won access to the house and killed both Aegisthus and Clytaemestra. Portents and dreams had forewarned of this murder, and Orestes had been encouraged, even commanded, by Apollo to carry it through. Nevertheless, when he had displayed the bodies and defended his act, the Furies (Eumenides), or spirits of retribution, appeared to him and drove him out of Argos. Orestes took refuge with Apollo at Delphi and was at last purified of the murder, but the Furies refused to acknowledge any absolution and pursued him across the world until he took refuge on the rock of Athens before the statue of Athene. There, in the pres-

ence of Athene, Apollo and the Furies appealed to her for a decision, and she, thinking the case too difficult to be judged by a single person, even her divine self, appointed a court of Athenian jurors to hear the arguments and judge the case. When the votes of these resulted in a tie, Athene herself cast the deciding ballot in favor of Orestes. Orestes, deeply grateful to Athene and her city, returned to Argos, while Athene found it necessary to propitiate the angry Eumenides by inducing them to accept an honorable place as tutelary spirits in Athens. The law court of the Areiopagus, which had judged the case, was perpetuated as a just tribunal for homicide down through the history of man.

## *Variations of the Legend*

Such are the bare facts of the story, the raw stuff out of which Aeschylus forged three massive tragedies. The story of the murder of Agamemnon had been told by Homer in the *Odyssey*<sup>4</sup> and by the cyclic successors of Homer in the *Nostoi* ("Returns"), while the early part of the story appears in the *Cypria*. Stesichorus, the Sicilian poet, had made the fortunes of Orestes the subject of a long narrative in lyric form; and Pindar in his *Eleventh Pythian* had summarized the tale and reflected on the motives of Clytaemestra; and others, too, had touched on the story. On all these Aeschylus doubtless drew, and he had numerous variations from which to pick and choose.<sup>5</sup> The main difference between Aeschylus and Homer is to be found, however, not in details but in the whole approach to the

4. Piecemeal the plot is constantly referred to by analogy with the plot of the *Odyssey*. The principal references are i. 29-43, Zeus calls the vengeance of Orestes an example of just retribution, i. 298-300, Athene uses it as an encouragement to Telemachus, iii. 254-312, Nestor tells Telemachus of the beguiling of Clytaemestra, the wanderings of Menelaus, and the vengeance of Orestes, iv. 514-37, Menelaus tells how he heard from Proteus about the death of Agamemnon, xi. 405-34, the ghost of Agamemnon tells Odysseus how his wife and Aegisthus murdered him and Cassandra.

5. For example, Homer makes the scene of the murder (and consequently the palace of Agamemnon) Mycenae; Stesichorus and Simonides, Sparta, Pindar, Amyclae (which comes to the same thing), Aeschylus, Argos, doubtless for political reasons. Stesichorus called the nurse of Orestes Laodameia, Pindar, Arsinoë, Aeschylus, Cilissa, etc.

story, which, in turn, motivates selection, addition, or omission of detail. It is to be noted that Homer does not tell the story consecutively; he really does not tell it at all, but he draws on it for example and illustration. The homecoming of Agamemnon is played against the homecoming of Odysseus; the situations are analogous, but the characters are different and bring different results out of similar materials. The murderous suitors lurk in the house of Odysseus as did Aegisthus in that of Agamemnon, but Penelope has not joined the enemy as Clytaemestra did. Nevertheless, when Odysseus comes home, he has his warning from the ghost of Agamemnon and goes warily so as not to fall into a similar trap. As for Telemachus, the resolute activity of Orestes is set as an example against his own indecision. The parts of the story that bear on such an apposition come out, and the tendency of it varies accordingly. The story is a domestic tragedy, but, since the house is a king's house, the tragedy becomes dynastic also. It begins with the betrayal of a king and the alienation of his kingdom and ends with the rewinning of dynastic power by the rightful heir. Therefore, though the death of Agamemnon is tragic, the deaths of Aegisthus and Clytaemestra are nothing of the sort; no tragedy adheres to Orestes, he merits no compassion, only praise. It is, I think, because of this *approach* that Homer fails to mention certain aspects of the story which are prominent in Attic tragedy. Iphigeneia does not appear; her slaughter would have suggested some motive of justice mixed into the treachery of Clytaemestra. Nor do we hear of the wrongs inflicted by Atreus on Thyestes and his sons, for this would have made the murder of Agamemnon in some measure defensible as an act of retribution. Nowhere in Homer do we hear of an Orestes pursued by the Furies of his mother, whether these might be actual spirits or the remorse in his own memory. Did Homer, then, know nothing of how Orestes murdered Clytaemestra? The lines in which he speaks of her death betray him (*Od.* iii. 304-10), for, while Menelaus was still on his travels,

Seven years Aegisthus was lord in golden Mycenae,  
but in the eighth the evil came on him when great Orestes  
came back from Athens and killed his father's slayer, the crafty

Aegisthus, who had murdered his glorious father. And after he had killed him, in the Argives' presence he held a funeral for his mother, who was hateful, and for the coward Aegisthus.

This unobtrusive notice is all we have, but it makes perfectly plain the fact that the matricide was in Homer's tradition, and he could not contradict it. But he was in a position to place the emphasis wherever he chose and to tell only as much of the story, or as little, as suited his purpose. It is surely no accident that the parts which he leaves out are those which would complicate and confuse his simple picture of Aegisthus as a conspiring villain, Orestes as an avenging hero, and Clytaemestra as a woman who yielded to her weakness.

Aeschylus, on the other hand, told the whole story. *Agamemnon* takes us from the news of Troy's fall to the murder of Agamemnon and the confirmation of his murderers as despots in Argos. *The Libation Bearers* begins with the return of Orestes and ends with his flight from Argos, pursued by the Furies, after the murder of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus. *The Eumenides* finds Orestes seeking sanctuary at Delphi, takes him to Athens for his acquittal and absolution, and ends with the establishment of the Furies in their new home at Athens. Further, particularly in the first play of the trilogy, there are constant cutbacks which sweep into the drama much of the foregoing material: the banquet of Thyestes, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the siege and fall of Troy. The simple narrative which we can reconstruct from notices in Homer could not have carried the weight of a tragic trilogy.

### “*Agamemnon*”

*Agamemnon* is, first of all, a domestic tragedy. The dominant figure, Clytaemestra, is a wife estranged through the wrong her husband committed on their daughter; love for Iphigeneia, acting through the murder of Agamemnon, is on its way toward driving her to fight her love for her surviving daughter and for her son. Her paramour and partner is her husband's cousin. Behind them all is the figure of Helen, Clytaemestra's sister, wife of Agamemnon's brother, whose treachery caused the Trojan War, Iphigeneia's death, and all the estrangement and broken faith that followed. The theme



here is the *philos-aphilos* or hate-in-love, its drive is the dynamic force of contradiction.

Behind the domestic tragedy lies the tragedy of war. For the sake of Helen, whose beauty was unforgettable but whose worth could not be demonstrated by reason or defended by argument, Agamemnon drained Greece of its manhood and involved the innocent in the miseries of a bitter campaign. The Trojans welcomed Helen and her captor and so were guilty; but their punishment—the total destruction of their city, their temples, and their men; the enslavement and defiling of their women and children—was out of all proportion to any harm they had done to Greece. Neither Troy nor Greece deserved what the idea of Helen made Agamemnon do to them. For he destroyed his own country as well as Troy; many died in the years before Ilium, the survivors were drowned or scattered in the great storm on the way back; and the pomp of his entrance thinly disguises the fact that he brought home the crew of a single ship.

Because of this, with the war tragedy goes political tragedy as well. The means by which this is communicated is through the chorus, who, in so far as they function as characters in the play, represent the solid elders of Argos. These are king's men, since the king in the heroic period stands for lawful authority; they have seen that Agamemnon's expedition was wrong, and they tell him so (799-804), but they would still be loyal to him if he were a much worse man than he is. It is these sturdy citizens who tell how, as the death reports and the urns full of ashes came in from the front, the people at home began to mutter against the king and ask why the war was fought; and, though the chorus cannot take their part, they cannot deny that there is cause for such mutterings. But the people did find a champion, or so they thought, at least a leader, Aegisthus, the king's cousin. He took advantage of the disaffection among those who hated the king he hated, and so returned from exile, he won the throne by winning the queen, confirmed his seizure by contriving the murder of Agamemnon, and defended it with his tyrant's personal bodyguard.<sup>6</sup>

6 The word *tyrannos* ("tyrant") was used by the Greek prose writers in a semi-technical sense, and it only gradually became a term of reproach. The tyrant was a

Thus we come about once more to the dynastic tragedy of Homer. But the interpretations of Agamemnon's murder do not exclude one another. Aeschylus can work on several levels at once. The war tragedy and the political tragedy do not contradict, they cohere with and deepen the tragedy of persons.

On the personal level, *Agamemnon* works through a complex of collisions, not so much right against wrong as right against right, each person insisting on his right with the force of passion. Agamem-

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self-appointed despot whose career was characteristic in various places at various times in Greek history, but especially in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. The Athenian using the word would think at once of his own tyrants, Peisistratus and his son Hippias, the restoration of the latter was still a political issue when Aeschylus was a young man. The following may serve as a general description of the typical early tyrant. He was an aristocrat, but one who was likely not to be in power while the government remained stable. He posed as a representative of the underprivileged and won and used their support, but generally got his position by unconstitutional means. His policy was generally to hold more than royal power without assuming any formal title, through influence and threat. He nevertheless always attempted to found a permanent dynasty through his sons, but hardly ever succeeded. His championship of the poorer classes was generally more than a pose, and he frequently worked toward broadening the base of democracy. Thus his most persistent enemies were not the masses but his fellow-aristocrats, except for the few he could win over into his own personal following, but, because, in spite of all the good he might do, his very existence flouted all legality, those who loved law and liberty hated him too. He had to guard himself, and infallible signs of his presence were the bodyguard of professionals and the spy system. Tyranny was one of the great growing pains in the life of young democracy, and history has been unkind to the tyrant, but for solid reasons.

Tyranny actually came later than Homeric or heroic kingship, and Aeschylus probably knew very well that it was anachronistic to see in Aegisthus' usurpation a tyrant's *coup de main*. Yet he seems to have committed that anachronism. When the chorus hear Agamemnon's death cries and sense murder by the queen and her lover, one of them says (1354-55, see also 1365) "Anyone can see it, by these first steps they have taken, they purpose to be tyrants here upon our city." In speaking of tyranny (*tyrannis*) here, either Aeschylus is using the word strictly, or he is not. He might use "tyrant" loosely, as a synonym for *basileus*, "king" (Euripides does this). But then the statement would have no point whatever, for what could the chorus expect other than that the murderer would make himself king? Plainly, they fear life not only under the wrong ruler but under the wrong kind of government. Historically, the tyrant overthrew a republic (the lawful constitution), but, in the heroic age on which tragedy drew, there was no republic, the lawful constitution was kingship, therefore, the tyrant overthrew this. When Aegisthus at last appears, he has his tyrant's bodyguard. It is impossible not to connect Aegisthus' *coup de main* with the rebellious murmuring of the masses against the king and his war. But the political pattern is a submotif, not fully worked out, its main effect is to shadow the character of Aegisthus—seducer, murderer, usurper already—with the dark memory of the hated historical tyrant.

non, the king, with a king's power and pride in arms, appears briefly and is relatively simple. Pride would have driven him without hesitation to undertake the recovery of Helen, and this decision sets in motion a chain of events which becomes increasingly inescapable. The sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the persistence in besieging Troy, even the intrigue with Cassandra, follow necessarily; his pride grows on its own acts, until just before death he is a swollen vanity. He himself began the series of acts which pile up to overwhelm him, but, looking back, one cannot see where a proud king could have chosen otherwise. Clytaemestra's motives are far more complex. Homer had made her act in simple surrender and consequent betrayal. But Pindar speculated on motives which would, if admitted by Homer, have spoiled the cast of his version:

Was it Iphigeneia, who at the Euripos crossing  
was slaughtered far from home,  
that vexed her to drive in anger the hand of violence?  
Or was it couching in a strange bed  
by night that broke her will and set her awry—for young wives  
a sin most vile.<sup>7</sup>

Two motives to choose from: Iphigeneia or Aegisthus. But Pindar has already mentioned Cassandra and so implied a third alternative, mother-resentment, guilty love, or jealousy. After Pindar, we could choose A or B or C. Aeschylus ignores the "or" and takes them all. Clytaemestra has loved Agamemnon, Iphigeneia has made her hate him, she loves Aegisthus. But her love for Agamemnon was real, and enough of that love remains to waken perfectly real jealousy at the sight of Agamemnon's lovely captive. This also moves her enormous pride, which amounts to unprecedented ambition for dynastic power. The women of the heroic age are represented as people of character, with will and temper of their own; but if their men insist, they must give way. Force them and they love. Cassandra, Clytaemestra's foil and rival, has seen her city and people wiped out by Agamemnon, her father and brothers butchered by his followers, but she clings to him. So Briseis in the *Iliad* clings to Achilles, who has personally killed her husband, and so Sophocles makes his Tecmessa protest to Aias

7. Pindar *Pyth* 11 22-25, trans. Lattimore.

that she loves him, for she has no one else, since he has destroyed her home.<sup>8</sup> Not so Clytaemestra, who, like Helen her sister, chooses her own loves. Again, the code obviously allowed the warlord, married or unmarried, to have the comforts of a captive mistress on campaign. But if Clytaemestra did not like a code, she would smash it. With her "male strength of heart in its high confidence," she steps boldly from the sphere of women's action into that of men;<sup>9</sup> like a king, she handles the city in her lord's absence, and to her the hostile and suspicious chorus turns with unwilling admiration. When the chorus doubts her intelligences, again when after the murder they openly challenge her, she faces them down and silences them; and it is only on the appearance of Aegisthus, whom they despise as they cannot despise Clytaemestra, that they break out rebelliously again. Even in deceit, as in shameless defiance, she is stately (855-88, 1667). She is the born aristocrat, heiress by birth as by marriage to the power and wealth of kings, and so contemptuous of the *nouveau riche* (1042-46). Everything she does and says is in the grand manner. The chain of beacon fires linking Argos and Troy, defeating distance and time, is a characteristically grand gesture, and worthy of it are the arrogant lines in which she concludes her story of relayed signal flares (315-16):

By such proof and such symbol I announce to you  
my lord at Troy has sent his messengers to me.

Such is the spirit of her grandiose welcome to Agamemnon, the purple carpet on which he is forced to walk to his butchery, and the words in which such lavish outlay is defended, "the sea is there," with its plain implication that "the sea is ours."

Such characteristics give Clytaemestra stature, but in no sense justify her. It is not only that, in asserting her right, or at least determination, to act as freely as a man, she has taken to her bed the

8. The most detailed Attic study of the womanly woman in the heroic age is Euripides' *Andromache* in the play named after her. It is she who says (213-14). "A wife, even if she is given to a worthless man, should cling to him, not set her will up against his." It is noteworthy that her definitions of a woman's duties occur in debate with her Spartan rival, Hermione, daughter of Menelaus and Helen.

9. When she refers to herself as "a mere woman," it is with massive sarcasm (348, 590-97, 1661).

“womanish” Aegisthus The whole house has been wrong since the quarrel of Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus was hideous in murder, but this does not justify Aegisthus in murdering Agamemnon, any more than the sins of Agamemnon justified his murder by Clytaemestra, or the sins of Paris and Helen justified the obliteration of Troy. All the executioners plead that they act for just retribution, but the chain of murder has got out of hand and is perpetuating itself, until it seems no longer to come from personal purpose but has grown into a Curse, a Thing. Every correction is a blood-bath which calls for new correction.

The truth stands ever beside God's throne  
eternal he who has wrought shall pay, that is law  
Then who shall tear the curse from their blood?  
The seed is stiffened to ruin.

Clytaemestra answers, over the corpse of Agamemnon, that she has been bloody but the house is clean. No more evil need be done. Orestes is to make the same claim over the corpse of Clytaemestra herself. Both are mistaken.

The tragedy is no simple matter of right and wrong, of pride and fall, though these enter in. It is a matter of love and hate working simultaneously to force distorted action, and the situation is given depth by cross-characterization. Clytaemestra imagines before the chorus the scene in captured Troy, opening with savage satisfaction in the thought of what is going on and closing with a prayer for peace, that her husband and his men may use their victory temperately, so that no fresh wrong may follow. As she speaks these words, she is herself plotting the fresh wrong she deprecates. There is surface contradiction, but under it lies not only the fact that Clytaemestra is intensely proud of the husband she is about to murder but also the lyric imagination, akin to the diviner's gift, by which the character's mind can transcend time and distance and penetrate to a sphere of objective truth which is beyond the character's own desire and prejudice. When she tells Agamemnon and the public of the torments she went through in his absence at Troy, she is flattering him and misleading all, but by means of truth, not fiction. This is the past, and this is real.

It is evil and a thing of terror when a wife  
sits in the house forlorn with no man by.

Flattery, confession, reproach combine (through how much longing for the memory-ghost, as with Menelaus for Helen, might Clytaemestra have gone before she took Aegisthus as a lover; or even after?) Agamemnon, on the point of being entangled by flattery and dragged to his death, soberly describes himself as proof against flatterers. In a sense this is irony, it corresponds to his entrance full of the pride of capture on the heels of a warning by the chorus against pride, to the gloomy speculations of the chorus on sackers of cities that presages the return of the herald to tell of Troy's obliteration. But that is mainly a matter of timing; here the point is that Agamemnon's intelligence is partly engaged with the course he does not mean to take. He is proof against illusions except at the one point where they will be fatal to him. When Aegisthus, in the height of his dispute with the challenging chorus (1668), says of Orestes,

Exiles feed on empty dreams of hope I know it. I was one,  
the jibe turns into a flash of instantly forgotten sympathy. The actors, in particular Clytaemestra and the chorus, do not collide with purely external forces but act always against a part of their own will or sympathy which is committed to the other side, and what they kill is what they love

The action of the play in itself, of the trilogy as a whole, is thus bound inward upon itself. Its course is not logical, not even strictly dramatic sequence. After the fashion of choral lyric, it is both united to itself and given inward dimension through persistent ideas and a complex of symbols.

## *Idea and Symbol*

By "idea" I mean motive, theme of subject, or type of situation which is dominant in the dramatic action. By "symbol" I mean a particular thing, usually material, which may be taken to represent the idea. And by a "complex of symbols" I mean a group of such objects which are related to one another in their nature or use.

The exhaustive study of this technique and the detailing of its

uses is a proper study for a monograph, not for a segment of the introduction to a translation <sup>10</sup> I will content myself with illustrating the principle through the symbol-complex of the net.

A central motive in the *Oresteia* is the idea of entanglement: the taming of wild things, the subjugation of the powerful, the involvement of innocent creatures as well. It is expressed in the *curb* forged to subdue Troy (132) or Cassandra (1066); the *bit* that gags Iphigeneia (234); the *yoke* of circumstance that forces Agamemnon to his crime; the *yoke* of slavery forced on Troy (529), on Cassandra (953, 1071, 1226), on the defiant citizens (1635), even the yoke of teammates (842); the *snare* of the huntsman, in which Agamemnon captures Troy (358, 821) and Cassandra (1048) and in which he is presently captured (1115, 1375, 1611).<sup>11</sup> Curb, yoke, snare—different objects for related purposes—might have been no more than persistent and thematic metaphor, but they have one embodiment which is not metaphorical, and this is the robe or shawl in which Clytaemestra actually entangles Agamemnon in order to strike him down and which is to be displayed on stage as a murder exhibit by Orestes in *The Libation Bearers* (980–84, 997–1004) Clytaemestra anticipates herself when she tells of her dreams and imaginations of terror in Agamemnon's long absence (866–68):

Had Agamemnon taken all  
the wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me,  
he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net,

and returns to her imagery in her challenging confession of murder (1382–83):

as fishermen cast their huge circling nets, I spread  
deadly abundance of rich robes and caught him fast.

This is the idea seen in the thing and the thing embodying the idea, both in metaphor and in action. There are numerous other symbols and other ideas. Symbols are the snake (specially the viper) and the poison of the snake; the archer; the house; the ship; gold.

<sup>10</sup> Miss Barbara Hughes is at present working on such a monograph as a doctoral dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> The idea of the manhunt appears in the retributive expedition against Troy (127, 695), and in *The Eumenides* it characterizes the Furies' pursuit of Orestes.

Ideas are (in addition to entanglement) persuasion (flattery); recurrent sickness; hate-in-love; blood and sex; light in the dark; sound (of terror) in the night; dream and memory. The bare lists are not complete, and, in particular, neither symbols nor ideas are exclusive, nor does a given symbol stand toward a given idea in a one-to-one relation. The viper, who turns against his own family, whose mating is murder, stands principally for the idea of hate-in-love and, as such, might be called the prime symbol of the *Oresteia*, but its poison is involved also in the idea of recurrent sickness,<sup>12</sup> and its coils in the idea of entanglement (elsewhere signified by yoke, net, etc., as we have seen) So *The Libation Bearers*, 246-49:

Behold  
the orphaned children of the eagle-father, now  
that he has died entangled in the binding coils  
of the deadly viper.

The spider web in which Agamemnon was trapped (1492) is one more variation of entanglement, spun by another creature who murders in marriage. Entanglement may come by outright force or by seduction and surprise. Clytaemestra lures Agamemnon into it by flattery, persuasion, by her sex (1116):

Or is the trap the woman there, the murderess?

Cross-binding and coherence of idea in symbol is seen where Agamemnon recoils (he is soon to surrender) from stepping on the gorgeous robe Clytaemestra has spread at his feet (922-27)

Such state becomes the gods, and none beside.  
I am a mortal, a man; I cannot trample down  
these tinted splendors without fear thrown in my path.  
I tell you, as a man, not god, to reverence me.  
Discordant is the murmur at such treading down  
of lovely things.

On the level of discourse, the speech is moral. The male rationalism is fighting against the irrational persuasion of the woman, the Greek defends his code ("as if I were some Asiatic"), the king deprecates the

12. The word *palinkotos* might signify a sickness or poisoning which lies hidden in the system, seemingly gone, then recurs, or the viper, which re-coils upon itself, or those so close to it that they form a part of itself.



subjects' disapproval, this is colored also by lyric memory. The "treading down of lovely things" recalls Paris, who "trampled down the delicacy of things inviolable" (371) and on whom Persuasion also worked (385). Agamemnon, who punished the barbarians, is being turned barbarian in order to be punished. He is a victim of his wife's flattery and the magnificence of his own possessions. Lastly, the robe itself on which he walks prefigures the robe in which he is to be entangled and killed.

Cut anywhere into the play, and you will find such a nexus of intercrossing motives and properties. The system gives the play its inner dimension and strength. An analogous but separable principle dominates the larger structure.

## *Dramatic Structure and Lyric Dimension*

As theater, *Agamemnon* and its companion pieces are simple. The scene of *Agamemnon* is the familiar fixed position before the doors of a house, which is, as most often in subsequent drama and in the nature of things, a palace. The same setting serves for *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides* has one of those shifts of scene which are relatively rare in extant Greek tragedy, for we begin before the doors of Phoebus at Delphi and end before the doors of Athene in Athens, but this shift can easily be signified by addition or subtraction of a very few properties.

Characters are used sparingly. Aeschylus has at his disposal the three actors who were by now allotted to each poet or producer; but, far from reveling in this sober allowance, he is most reluctant to use all three at once in speaking action. Cassandra is on stage with Agamemnon and Clytaemestra, but does not speak until the other actors (not counting the chorus or chorus leader) have gone out.<sup>13</sup> Dialogue is, for the most part, just that, a passage between

13 Clytaemestra, apparently on stage at 83, does not respond to the chorus at that point and remains silent through their stasimon (ode), she speaks only when, 258-63, they address her again. In *The Libation Bearers* Pylades, present almost through the entire play, speaks only three lines (900-902), these have critical force in the action. In *Prometheus*, the titan is silent all through the first scene, where he is being fastened to the rock. We know also that Aeschylus exploited the silent character in many of

two persons, one of whom may be the chorus leader, at a time, not as in modern drama a complex in which three, four, or a dozen speaking persons participate. There are supernumeraries to be sure, handmaidens attending Clytaemestra and soldiers returning with Agamemnon, the significant bodyguard of Aegisthus, and at the close of *The Eumenides* the stage is quite full of people, and the exodus takes on the dignity of a processional. Agamemnon clearly must enter with Cassandra beside him in a horse-drawn chariot. The unrolling of the robe for Agamemnon's feet is an effective use of showy gesture. Yet, on the whole, the trilogy is physically unpretentious, relying less on staging and properties than *Prometheus* appears to do. Also, it is physically static; not much physical activity or motion is called for. The use made of materials, of what might appeal to the eye, is measured and temperate.

There is a corresponding simplicity in plot. Considering the length of *Agamemnon*, there are few events that take place, nor are the major events displayed against any variety of subplot. It therefore takes dramatic time for these events to happen. The return of Aga-

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his lost plays. On the silent characters of Aeschylus, see the scene in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes, where the ghost of Euripides challenges that of Aeschylus in the presence of Dionysus and Hades (911-22).

"Eur. First of all he would cover a character's face and make him sit on the stage there,

Achilles, maybe, or Niobe, but never show their features  
They made his tragedy look fine, but didn't mutter a syllable.

"Dion. By god, you know, they didn't at that.

"Eur. The chorus would pound out long chains  
of poetry, four one after another. The characters said nothing.

"Dion. You know, I liked them quiet that way. They gave me as much pleasure  
as the ones that gabble at us now.

"Eur. Of course. You were a half-wit  
and that's a fact.

"Dion. I know, I know. Tell me then, why did he do it?

"Eur. To lead you on, and keep the audience in suspense. They were waiting  
for Niobe to speak. Meanwhile his play was getting over.

"Dion. The dirty rat! So all that time he was cheating us out of our drama.  
(To Aesch.) Why are you frowning and looking so cross?

"Eur. I'm exposing him. He doesn't like it."

memnon, assured from the watchman's opening speech (25), does not take place until line 782 <sup>14</sup> The only other *event* of the play is his murder, which does not take place until line 1344 Audience and actors occupy the times preceding these events in a growing strain of suspense, which gives the events redoubled impact when at last they do take place. The means by which the anomaly of many lines—little action is solved are the same as the means by which action and motive are deepened. The simplicity is on the surface As, on its major plane, the action of the tragedy moves deliberately forward, in another dimension lyric memory and forecast take us, by association of ideas rather than in obedience to order in time, deep away into the past, the future, and the elsewhere.

Memory and forecast are a part of imagination, that divining spirit which takes men beyond the limits of what their senses can perceive. He who habitually, and under patronage of a god, so divines is the *mantis* or prophet. The prophet knew "all things that

14 Much unnecessary ingenuity has been wasted on the problem of "real" time in *Agamemnon*. By means of her beacons, Clytaemestra is understood to learn of Troy's capture just after the event, almost within the hour (320) The return voyage from Troy to Argos is a three or four days' sailing, hardly shortened by the hurricane that wrecked the fleet; and, further, Homer and the other sources on which tragedy drew make it plain that the Achaeans did not pick up and go home the moment Troy fell but understandably took some time getting off Therefore, the arrival of the herald, followed by Agamemnon, comes days after the first scene of the play. This is true, but creates a problem only for those unduly preoccupied with the Aristotelian unities. "Tragedy tries as far as practicable to fall within the scope of a single day, or exceeds it by only a little" (*Poetics* v 8) The statement of Aristotle is not made as if he meant to press it very hard Also it should not be necessary, but apparently is, to point out that Aeschylus had never heard of Aristotle To Aeschylus, the next thing that happened in the plot, after the arrival of the news, was the arrival of the Achaeans It would have been, to him, as pointless as it would have been ugly to have the chorus solemnly quit the stage and return after the posting of a placard saying "six days later" What he does put in is a long choral lyric in which the choristers muse on the whole train of action (though not in chronological order) from the flight of Helen to the fall of Troy, thus giving in lyric form the illusion that far more time has passed than the real time it has actually taken them to deliver their ode At l 475, after the lyric closes, they begin to speak "in character" Their mood has changed, before the ode they were utterly convinced by Clytaemestra's beacons, now they are unconvinced and sarcastic After the herald's speeches, they inform Clytaemestra that she has been right all along, and she tells them she has done her rejoicing long ago By now, we are plainly meant to understand that a lapse of time has occurred, but not encouraged to figure out just how much, or how it could have happened.

were, the things to come, and the things past" (*Iliad* i. 70); that is, he knew not only past and future, but *present*, what is occurring right now beyond that fragmentary point of space where he stands. Calchas the prophet of the Achaeans is remembered in the first ode, Cassandra the prophetess of Troy appears in person. But, apart from these formal prophets, the chorus assumes divining powers ("still by God's grace there surges within me singing magic": "why this strain unwanted, unrepaid, thus prophetic?"), and the imaginations of Clytaemestra, the herald, Agamemnon, and Aegisthus range far away. Calchas, in the memory of the chorus, goes deep into the past in order to make predictions which will be fulfilled, years away, in the subsequent action of the tragedy. Cassandra, who knows of a past she never witnessed, sees in its light the invisible network of treachery that waits for Agamemnon and her. The swan, who sings in the face of death and is helplessly dedicated to Apollo, is her symbol.

The choristers remember in their entrance chant the departure of the armament ten years ago (40-59), and it makes them see the struggle going on in Troy (60-68). They remember the portents that attended the gathering of the ships, the predictions of Calchas, and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia that was their sequel (104-257). Clytaemestra's living imagination follows the course of her beacon system, itself a device to defeat space and diminish time, as it breaks out from peak to peak on its way to her (281-316), and she sees the Achaeans in captured Troy, now, though far away (320-37). The chorus broods on the moral that Troy fallen conveys, but they think in pictures; of a man secure in wealth kicking over an altar (the audience will remember the golden Persians, their pride, sacrilege, and defeat); of Persuasion as a siren; of false fires and spurious metal gilded; of a greedy innocent child trying to catch a bird—the images, not the propositions, of delusion (367-95). This is Paris, and they fall at once to re-creating in imagination the flight of Helen (403-8). And there were *prophets* there, to be sure, who imagined the loneliness to follow for Menelaus with an empty bed and empty-eyed images of his wife, whose loveliness eluded him in dreams (408-26). But dream image is memory image, and there are others who re-

member too. The families of the common soldiers see brought back to them the ashes of their dead, transubstantiated by the money-changer, who is the god of war. They murmur against the king; their muttering is inarticulate and not clearly heard in high places but may be the symptom of a storm that waits for the returning king (427-74). *Te deum laudamus* has been transformed into foreboding, not through logical succession of ground and consequent but through a lyric succession of images whose forms melt into one another. Agamemnon's herald remembers the campaigning before Troy (551-81). At first, it is the dirty and brutal details of war-business that come out of the mist, but the sense of achievement infects him with Agamemnon's fatal pride, so that at the end the wings of his imagination take him out of the past across the present and far into the future and the days when the capture of Troy will be an antique glory of Argos. He is shaken out of this mood, however, by the questioning of the chorus leader, who wants to know what happened to the rest of the army and to Menelaus. He tells of the storm (650-70) in terms that make living things out of fire, wind, water, and rocks, and shows the wide seascape on which at dawn lay the wreckage of the Achaean fleet, torn flowers on the water.

The chorus, far now from the momentary exaltation they felt at news of the victory, now chant in terms of disaster: the sinister name of Helen, with the imagination once again of her flight to Troy (681-98), the lion's cub, the pet turned murderous (716-36), who is fatal Helen beguiling the Trojans (737-49). We remember Iphigeneia when Helen's eyes, like Iphigeneia's, sweep the beholder with soft arrows, and the victorious and guileful charmer recalls the innocent charmer who failed. The moralities which follow to prelude Agamemnon's entrance, the terms in which he is greeted, work again through images. houses gilded to hide dust, false coin, the smile of the charmer. Action follows in the public encounter of Clytaemestra and Agamemnon, but the wife's welcome brings back out of the past the fears that attended her during the years of separation (858-94). When he has gone into the house, the chorus turn uneasily from memory to forecast, and their gloom is abetted by Cassandra, who has vision on vision of the past, of the present (the intention behind

Clytaemestra's face and words, the scene preparing behind closed doors), and the far future on the day when the avengers shall punish for the crime not yet committed (1069-1330) The death cry tells the chorus only what they already know We do not see the murder take place, but we are told what happened (1381-92) In the scene that follows, where Clytaemestra faces the people, neither side can escape the memory of the hideous past which has forced these things to happen Aegisthus' defense is a recounting of the crime of Atreus (1583-1611) At the end, Clytaemestra speaks as if all were over, but we know it is not, that the future holds more violence and it is the past which has made this so

## *Lyric Tragedy*

The brief dramatic time of the play is a point of convergence for actions that come from deep in the past and project far into the future The limited stage is a pivotal point from which we can be transported far away The tragedy of Agamemnon, Cassandra, and Clytaemestra is involved with and opens into the tragedy of the children of Thyestes, of Iphigeneia, of Troy and all the Achaean army, and its action, in return, is partly dictated by the figures never enacted, remote but always present in memory, of Atreus, Iphigeneia, Paris, and Helen <sup>15</sup>

This is the form of lyric tragedy, perfected here and never since so completely realized Its manner is due partly to the historical accident in which two forms of fiction were combined. drama, still relatively primitive and naïve, with choral lyric, now, after generations of mature practice, brought to its highest point of development by Simonides and Pindar. But the direction taken by this form is due also to deliberate choice The desire is to transcend the limitations of dramatic presentation, even before these limitations have been firmly established The spirit is that of Shakespeare's chorus in *Henry V*:

15 We may compare *The Persians* The cast of actors consists only of Darius, his queen, Xerxes, messenger, and chorus The visible scene in Persia is static But the scene of the action which the play is *about* is Salamis, and then all the water and land between, the persons of this action are all the vast army of the Persians, and all the Greeks. *The Persians* is the great messenger-play

But pardon, gentles all,  
The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

It is true that Shakespeare intends to take us to the actual field of Agincourt, but principally he is aware of the impossibility of *staging* expeditions and battles adequately, and the appeal is to the imagination of the audience

For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass  
Thus with imagined wing our swift scene flies  
In motion of no less celerity  
Than that of thought

Shakespeare and Aeschylus alike forecast combinations which only the motion picture can realize visually—flashback, imaginary scene, pictorial dramatization of history, and messenger's account. Shakespeare's concern in this particular play with the fragmentary nature of staged action gives his chorus a brilliant part, but it is only a ghost of Aeschylus, for in Aeschylus the past and the elsewhere dominate present action.

But the direction in which he steered tragedy was not generally followed. Sophoclean drama prevailed, since Euripides, under protest, framed tragedy in accordance with Sophocles, not Aeschylus. Sophocles turned tragedy inward upon the principal actors, and drama becomes drama of character. His plays may open with public scenes, but, as they progress, the interest focuses hard on the hero. *Oedipus Tyrannus* begins with the plague in Thebes, but its ending is all Oedipus, and Thebes is as good as forgotten. It is true that the dead hand reaches out of the past to strike down Oedipus, Antigone, Aias, Heracles. But this is their tragedy, and theirs alone. *Agamemnon* is a play about the Trojan War, but *Antigone* is not a play about the

Theban War, though that lies in the background. In Sophocles, the choruses are commentaries on the action, not part of the larger action, and their imagery is functional to the choruses themselves but not to the tragedy as a whole. Trilogy gives way to single drama. The enormous background becomes mainly irrelevant and is screened out. Lyric tragedy gives way to actor's tragedy.

*Agamemnon* is, in fact, the culmination of lyric tragedy, because the action narrows in *The Libation Bearers*, and when in *The Eumenides* it opens out again, it is with a new kind of meaning and composition.

### “*The Libation Bearers*”

The second play of the trilogy takes place some years after the close of *Agamemnon*. The usurpers have grown secure in power. Orestes, sequestered in Phocis, is now a young man, and his sister Electra, resentful and bitter, awaits his return. The opening event is simple recognition, the identification of Orestes and the confirmation of the fact that, as Electra and the chorus hope, he means to avenge his father and regain his throne. Recognition is thus at once transformed into conspiracy. The children, with their faithful chorus, gather at Agamemnon's tomb, where Electra has gone on her mother's behalf, but without sympathy for her, to propitiate the dead king by reason of terrifying dreams which had shaken Clytaemnestra in the night. The dead king is now a hero; his arrogance and his mistakes have been annulled by death, and his grave is a center of power. Therefore, the children with the chorus turn to him, invoke his ghost to anger against his murderers, with twofold driving intention: to enchant actual power out of the spirit and the grave and to incite themselves and arm themselves with the anger that will make them do what they must do. They then plot the means for assassination. Orestes poses as a traveling merchant who brings news of the death of Orestes, Clytaemnestra, with archaic and stately courtesy, invites him in and sends for Aegisthus. As the messenger who is sent to summon him (she happens to be the slave who nursed Orestes when he was little) goes out on her errand, she encounters the chorus, who tell her not to suggest that Aegisthus should bring



his bodyguard. Orestes and Pylades kill the king, and Clytaemestra stands at their mercy. She dares Orestes to kill her, and he stands irresolute until a word from Pylades solidifies his will. The bodies are brought out and displayed, with the robe in which Agamemnon had been entrapped, and Orestes declares publicly, as Clytaemestra had done, that this act is his own and that it is justice. But his wits are going, he sees the Furies, the avenging spirits of his mother (no one else can see them), and leaves in flight. This time, even before the play is over, the assassin knows that his act was not final but has created more suffering yet to come.

Once again the plot is simple, and the dramatic actions are few. Once again, despite these facts, the texture is saved from thinness, but the factors are different from those that give *Agamemnon* its coherence. First, this is a far shorter play. Second, the emphasis and direction have changed. We have, in a sense, more plot, there is intrigue, a practical problem. In *Agamemnon* the king's murder is felt by the witnessing chorus in their bones, it happens, is mourned, and defended. The problems of Clytaemestra, *whether* she can kill the husband she has loved and *how* she will do it, are implicit, but we are not present while she is solving them. But in *The Libation Bearers*, we are present at the deliberations of Orestes as he decides whether he can kill his mother, and how the assassination is to be effected. In recognition, decision, conspiracy, and climactic action we have, in fact, the mechanism, in naive or even crude form, of that drama of revenge or play of successful action which we found in the Homeric story.

But *The Libation Bearers* is only superficially a drama of intrigue, and, in so far as it is one, it is hardly a significant specimen of its kind. The mechanism of the assassin's plot is simple, as the mechanism of recognition and identification is primitive. The emphasis lies on the mood in which the characters act.

For this is not a simple revenge play in which the young hero, long lost, returns to his sister and his kingdom to strike down the murderous and usurping villains. Orestes hardly gets a sight of his kingship before he must leave, haunted, driven, and alone. It is not until much later, near the close of *The Eumenides*, that he can speak

as a king with subjects. Also, here the emotions of Orestes and Electra are, like those of Clytaemestra, half-committed to the side against which they act; and Clytaemestra, in turn, loves the son whom she fears, who kills her, and whom she would kill if she could. It is the *philos-aphilos* still, or love-in-hate, the murder committed not against an external enemy but against a part of the self.<sup>16</sup> The hate gains intensity from the strength of the original love when that love has been stopped or rejected. Electra ("the unmarried") has love to lavish, but her mother has turned it aside. The chorus, like the captive women they are, cling to the memory of Agamemnon, who enslaved them. Orestes, together with the sense of outrage over the loss of his rightful inheritance (the dynastic motive), nurses a deep sense of jealousy against his mother for having sacrificed not only Agamemnon but *Orestes* to her love for Aegisthus. The children were the price for which she bought herself this man (132-34). It is the venom of such jealousy that spills out in the bitterly salacious mockery of the dead lovers, and jealousy on his father's behalf and his own is the theme of his last sharp dispute with his mother. Clytaemestra, when she hears the false news of her son's death, is in a temper where relief and sorrow cross, though relief wins. Her very dream of bearing and nursing the snake (symbol of ingratitude), who fixes his poisonous fangs in her breast, enacts terror through a gesture of love. Aegisthus, at the word that Orestes is dead, goes soberly back to the image of the poison and the snake.

For our house, already bitten  
and poisoned, to take this new load upon itself  
would be a thing of dripping fear and blood

The chorus consider that both the tyrants are hypocrites, but even such hypocrites know what they are doing, and to whom.

This mood of tangled motivation means that the conspirators must work strongly upon themselves before they can act. Between the recognition and the resolve to act comes a scene of incantation.

<sup>16</sup> So *Hamlet* is transformed from the vigorous revenge-intrigue drama it might have been into the tragedy it is, because Hamlet is emotionally involved with the queen and Ophelia, who are on the side of the enemy. Even the arch-enemy is close in blood and perhaps once admired.

Sister, brother, and chorus turn to invoke dead Agamemnon. They implore his blessings and aid, they set forth their grievances and his, they challenge and taunt him to action:

*Orestes*

Think of that bath, father, where you were stripped of life.

*Electra*

Think of the casting-net that they contrived for you.

*Orestes*

They caught you like a beast in toils no bronzesmith made.

*Electra*

Rather, hid you in shrouds that were thought out in shame.

*Orestes*

Will you not waken, father to these challenges?

*Electra*

Will you not rear upright that best beloved head?

But, while they are invoking a power and a tradition whose force is felt but only dimly believed, they are also lashing themselves into the fury of self-pity that will make them do what they have to do. So the theme of lyric prophecy which was at work in *Agamemnon* is altered here. There is dealing in both cases with what lies beyond the powers of perception, but there it was lyric memory and vision on the part of those who were to witness, and to suffer from, the ugly act; here those who are themselves about to commit the ugly act manipulate the unseen, in a mood more of witchcraft than of prophecy.

For this reason and because the drama focuses on the will to act, *The Libation Bearers* ties back to *Agamemnon*, but *Agamemnon* ties back to the whole world of action latent behind the beginning of the tragedy. The symbols of the earlier play are caught up and intensified, particularly viper and net. But the emphasis is changed, because we see things from the point of view of the murderers. In *Agamemnon*, vice was alluring, wearing all the captivating graces of Helen and her attendant symbols, in *The Libation Bearers*, duty becomes repulsive. Both tragedies are carried on a strong underdrift of sex, but in the second play the sex impulse, though it works, has lost its charm. Orestes at the end has done a brutal, necessary job.

Like Clytaemestra at the close of *Agamemnon*, Orestes defends his position in terms of: "I have cleared my house. It was bloody, but necessary. Now we can have peace." As for Clytaemestra, his claim is no better than a desperate challenge flung at circumstances. The blood-bath was no cleaning-out, and it means more blood. Clytaemestra had to reckon with resentment in the state and the younger generation to come. The enlightenment of Orestes, the defeat of his hollow optimism, comes without delay. "The house has been rid of snakes": and at once, on the heads of his mother's Furies, more snakes appear.

### “*The Eumenides*” (*The Furies*)

As we have seen (see above, p. 6), the last act of the trilogy finds Orestes cleared by Apollo but still pursued by the Furies. Is he clear, or not? Plainly, one divine decision has clashed with another decision which is also unquestionably divine. The fate of Orestes is referred to Athens and to a third divinity, Athene, who, reserving for herself the casting ballot, refers it to a jury of mortal men. When their vote is even and Athene has cast her deciding vote in his favor, the Furies must be propitiated by a new cult, as a new kind of goddess, in Athens. It is this episode that closes the play and the trilogy of the House of Atreus. The chorus has returned to its archaic part as chief character in the drama.

Who are the Furies, and what do they mean? And, since they stand up and identify themselves and protest their rights in the face of Apollo and Athene, we must also ask, What do these better-known Olympians represent for the purposes of Aeschylus?

As seen in the grand perspective, *Agamemnon* was only an unwilling agent in a chain of action far bigger than the fortunes of a single man. From the seduction of Atreus' wife, the murder of the children of Atreus, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia and the youth of Hellas, claim and counterclaim have been fiercely sustained, each act of blood has been avenged in a new act of blood. The problems of public good have been solved through private murder, which is no solution, until the situation has become intolerable to the forces that rule

the world, and these must intervene to see that the contestants and the impulses in nature which drive the contestants become reconciled and find their places in a scheme that will be harmonious and progressive, not purely destructive.

Behind the personal motivations in the two first dramas of the trilogy, we can, if we choose, discern a conflict of related forces. of the younger against the elder generation, of male against female; of Greek against barbarian. As the gods step out of the darkness, where, before, they could be reached only in fitful visions of the prophetic mind, and take their place on the stage, they personify these general forces, and, because they are divine and somewhat abstract, they can carry still further dimensions of meaning. The Furies are older than Apollo and Athene, and, being older, they are childish and barbarous; attached to Clytaemestra as mother, they are themselves female and represent the woman's claim to act which Clytaemestra has sustained from the beginning; in a Greek world they stand for the childhood of the race before it won Hellenic culture, the barbarian phase of pre-Hellenism, the dark of the race and of the world; they have archaic uprightness and strictness in action, with its attendant cruelty; they insist on the fact against the idea, they ignore the justifications of Orestes, for the blood on his hands means far more than the reasons why the blood is there. Apollo stands for everything which the Furies are not: Hellenism, civilization, intellect, and enlightenment. He is male and young. He despises cruelty for the fun of cruelty, and the thirst for blood, but he is as ruthless as the Furies. The commonwealth of the gods—therefore the universe—is in a convulsion of growth; the young Olympians are fighting down their own barbaric past.

But they must not fight it out of existence. In the impasse, Apollo uses every threat of arrogant force, but Athene, whose nature reconciles female with male, has a wisdom deeper than the intelligence of Apollo. She clears Orestes but concedes to the detested Furies what they had not known they wanted, a place in the affections of a civilized community of men, as well as in the divine hierarchy. There, gracious and transformed though they are, their place in the world is still made potent by the unchanged base of their character.

The new city cannot progress by exterminating its old order of life; it must absorb and use it. Man cannot obliterate, and should not repress, the unintelligible emotions. Or again, in different terms, man's nature being what it is and Fury being a part of it, Justice must go armed with Terror before it can work.

Thus, through the dilemma of Orestes and its solution, the drama of the House of Atreus has been transformed into a grand parable of progress. Persuasion (flattery), the deadly magic of the earlier plays, has been turned to good by Athene as she wins the Furies to accept of their own free will a new and better place in the world. By the time Orestes leaves the stage, he has become an issue, a Dred Scott or Dreyfus, more important for what he means than for what he is; and, when he goes, the last human personality is gone, and with it vanish the bloody entanglements of the House of Atreus, as the anonymous citizens of Athens escort their protecting divinities into the beginning of a new world.

It is appropriate, and characteristic of Aeschylus, that this final parable, with its tremendous burden of thought, should be enacted on the frame of a naïve dramatic structure, where the basis of decision on matricide is as crude as the base of Portia's decision against Shylock. The magnificence of *The Eumenides* is different from that of *Agamemnon*. The imagery—the lyric imagination in memory and magic—is gone, because we are not now merely to see but to understand. The final act comes down into the present day and seals within itself the wisdom, neither reactionary nor revolutionary, of a great man. But in its own terms *The Eumenides* is the necessary conclusion of a trilogy whose special greatness lies in the fact that it transcends the limitations of dramatic enactment on a scale never achieved before or since.



# AGAMEMNON

*Translated by*

*RICHMOND LATTIMORE*





CHARACTERS

*Watchman*

*Clytaemestra*

*Herald*

*Agamemnon*

*Cassandra*

*Aegisthus*

*Chorus of Argive Elders*

*Attendants of Clytaemestra: of Agamemnon: bodyguard  
of Aegisthus (all silent parts)*

*Time, directly after the fall of Troy*

## AGAMEMNON

SCENE *Argos, before the palace of King Agamemnon The Watchman, who speaks the opening lines, is posted on the roof of the palace. Clytaemestra's entrances are made from a door in the center of the stage; all others, from the wings*

*(The Watchman, alone )*

I ask the gods some respite from the weariness  
of this watchtime measured by years I lie awake  
elbowed upon the Atreidae's roof dogwise to mark  
the grand processions of all the stars of night  
burdened with winter and again with heat for men,  
dynasties in their shining blazoned on the air,  
these stars, upon their wane and when the rest arise.

5

I wait, to read the meaning in that beacon light,  
a blaze of fire to carry out of Troy the rumor  
and outcry of its capture, to such end a lady's  
male strength of heart in its high confidence ordains  
Now as this bed stricken with night and drenched with dew  
I keep, nor ever with kind dreams for company.  
since fear in sleep's place stands forever at my head  
against strong closure of my eyes, or any rest  
I mince such medicine against sleep failed I sing,  
only to weep again the pity of this house  
no longer, as once, administered in the grand way  
Now let there be again redemption from distress,  
the flare burning from the blackness in good augury.

10

15

20

*(A light shows in the distance )*

Oh hail, blaze of the darkness, harbinger of day's  
shining, and of processions and dance and choirs  
of multitudes in Argos for this day of grace.

Ahoy!

I cry the news aloud to Agamemnon's queen,

25

that she may rise up from her bed of state with speed  
to raise the rumor of gladness welcoming this beacon,  
and singing rise, if truly the citadel of Ilium  
has fallen, as the shining of this flare proclaims  
I also, I, will make my choral prelude, since 30  
my lord's dice cast aright are counted as my own,  
and mine the tripled sixes of this torchlit throw.

May it only happen May my king come home, and I  
take up within this hand the hand I love. The rest  
I leave to silence; for an ox stands huge upon 35  
my tongue. The house itself, could it take voice, might speak  
aloud and plain. I speak to those who understand,  
but if they fail, I have forgotten everything.

*(Exit. The Chorus enters, speaking.)*

Ten years since the great contestants 40  
of Priam's right,  
Menelaus and Agamemnon, my lord,  
twin throned, twin scepter'd, in twofold power  
of kings from God, the Atreidae,  
put forth from this shore 45  
the thousand ships of the Argives,  
the strength and the armies  
Their cry of war went shrill from the heart,  
as eagles stricken in agony  
for young perished, high from the nest 50  
eddy and circle  
to bend and sweep of the wings' stroke,  
lost far below  
the fledgelings, the nest, and the tendance.  
Yet someone hears in the air, a god, 55  
Apollo, Pan, or Zeus, the high  
thin wail of these sky-guests, and drives  
late to its mark  
the Fury upon the transgressors.  
So drives Zeus the great guest god 60

the Atreidae against Alexander.  
 for one woman's promiscuous sake  
 the struggling masses, legs tired,  
 knees grinding in dust,  
 spears broken in the onset. 65  
 Danaans and Trojans  
 they have it alike It goes as it goes  
 now. The end will be destiny.  
 You cannot burn flesh or pour unguents,  
 not innocent cool tears, 70  
 that will soften the gods' stiff anger.  
 But we; dishonored, old in our bones,  
 cast off even then from the gathering horde,  
 stay here, to prop up  
 on staves the strength of a baby. 75  
 Since the young vigor that urges  
 inward to the heart  
 is frail as age, no warcraft yet perfect,  
 while beyond age, leaf  
 withered, man goes three footed 80  
 no stronger than a child is,  
 a dream that falters in daylight.

*(Clytaemestra enters quietly. The Chorus continues to speak.)*

But you, lady,  
 daughter of Tyndareus, Clytaemestra, our queen:  
 What is there to be done? What new thing have you heard? 85  
 In persuasion of what  
 report do you order such sacrifice?  
 To all the gods of the city,  
 the high and the deep spirits,  
 to them of the sky and the market places, 90  
 the altars blaze with oblations.  
 The staggered flame goes sky high  
 one place, then another,  
 drugged by the simple soft

- persuasion of sacred unguents, 95  
the deep stored oil of the kings  
Of these things what can be told  
openly, speak.  
Be healer to this perplexity  
that grows now into darkness of thought, 100  
while again sweet hope shining from the flames  
beats back the pitiless pondering  
of sorrow that eats my heart.
- I have mastery yet to chant the wonder at the wayside  
given to kings Still by God's grace there surges within me 105  
singing magic  
grown to my life and power,  
how the wild bird portent  
hurled forth the Achaeans'  
twin-stemmed power single hearted, 110  
lords of the youth of Hellas,  
with spear and hand of strength  
to the land of Teucus.
- Kings of birds to the kings of the ships,  
one black, one blazed with silver, 115  
clear seen by the royal house  
on the right, the spear hand,  
they lighted, watched by all  
tore a hare, ripe, bursting with young unborn yet,  
stayed from her last fleet running. 120  
Sing sorrow, sorrow. but good win out in the end
- Then the grave seer of the host saw through to the hearts divided,  
knew the fighting sons of Atreus feeding on the hare  
with the host, their people.  
Seeing beyond, he spoke: 125  
"With time, thus foray  
shall stalk the castle of Priam.  
Before then, under  
the walls, Fate shall spoil

in violence the rich herds of the people 130  
 Only let no doom of the gods darken  
 upon this huge iron forged to curb Troy—  
 from inward Artemis the undefiled  
 is angered with pity  
 at the flying hounds of her father 135  
 eating the unborn young in the hare and the shivering mother.  
 She is sick at the eagles' feasting  
 Sing sorrow, sorrow, but good win out in the end

Lovely you are and kind 140  
 to the tender young of ravening lions.  
 For sucklings of all the savage  
 beasts that lurk in the lonely places you have sympathy  
 Grant meaning to these appearances  
 good, yet not without evil. 145  
 Healer Apollo, I pray you  
 let her not with cross winds  
 bind the ships of the Danaans  
 to time-long anchorage 150  
 forcing a second sacrifice unholy, untasted,  
 working bitterness in the blood  
 and faith lost For the terror returns like sickness to lurk in the  
 house;  
 the secret anger remembers the child that shall be avenged " 155  
 Such, with great good things beside, rang out in the voice of  
 Calchas,  
 these fatal signs from the birds by the way to the house of the  
 princes,  
 wherewith in sympathy  
 sing sorrow, sorrow: but good win out in the end.

Zeus: whatever he may be, if this name  
 pleases him in invocation,  
 thus I call upon him.  
 I have pondered everything  
 yet I cannot find a way,

only Zeus, to cast this dead weight of ignorance  
finally from out my brain. 165

He who in time long ago was great,  
throbbing with gigantic strength,  
shall be as if he never were, unspoken. 170

He who followed him has found  
his master, and is gone.  
Cry aloud without fear the victory of Zeus,  
you will not have failed the truth: 175

Zeus, who guided men to think,  
who has laid it down that wisdom  
comes alone through suffering.  
Still there drips in sleep against the heart  
grief of memory; against 180  
our pleasure we are temperate.  
From the gods who sit in grandeur  
grace comes somehow violent.

On that day the elder king  
of the Achæan ships, no more  
strict against the prophet's word, 185  
turned with the crosswinds of fortune,  
when no ship sailed, no pail was full,  
and the Achæan people sulked  
fast against the shore at Aulis  
facing Chalcis, where the tides ebb and surge: 190

and winds blew from the Strymon, bearing  
sick idleness, ships tied fast, and hunger,  
distraction of the mind, carelessness  
for hull and cable; 195  
with time's length bent to double measure  
by delay crumbled the flower and pride  
of Argos. Then against the bitter wind  
the seer's voice clashed out  
another medicine 200

more hateful yet, and spoke of Artemis, so that the kings  
dashed their staves to the ground and could not hold their tears.

The elder lord spoke aloud before them 205

"My fate is angry if I disobey these,

but angry if I slaughter

this child, the beauty of my house,

with maiden blood shed staining

these father's hands beside the altar. 210

What of these things goes now without disaster?

How shall I fail my ships

and lose my faith of battle?

For them to urge such sacrifice of innocent blood 215

angrily, for their wrath is great—it is right. May all be well yet."

But when necessity's yoke was put upon him

he changed, and from the heart the breath came bitter

and sacrilegious, utterly infidel, 220

to warp a will now to be stopped at nothing.

The sickening in men's minds, tough,

reckless in fresh cruelty brings daring He endured then

to sacrifice his daughter

to stay the strength of war waged for a woman, 225

first offering for the ships' sake.

Her supplications and her cries of father

were nothing, nor the child's lamentation

to kings passioned for battle. 230

The father prayed, called to his men to lift her

with strength of hand swept in her robes aloft

and prone above the altar, as you might lift

a goat for sacrifice, with guards

against the lips' sweet edge, to check 235

the curse cried on the house of Atreus

by force of bit and speech drowned in strength.

Pouring then to the ground her saffron mantle

she struck the sacrificers with 240

the eyes' arrows of pity,



lovely as in a painted scene, and striving  
to speak—as many times  
at the kind festive table of her father  
she had sung, and in the clear voice of a stainless maiden 245  
with love had graced the song  
of worship when the third cup was poured.

What happened next I saw not, neither speak it.  
The crafts of Calchas fail not of outcome.  
Justice so moves that those only learn 250  
who suffer; and the future  
you shall know when it has come; before then, forget it.  
It is grief too soon given.  
All will come clear in the next dawn's sunlight.  
Let good fortune follow these things as 255  
she who is here desires,  
our Apian land's singlehearted protectress.

*(The Chorus now turns toward Clytaemestra, and the leader  
speaks to her.)*

I have come in reverence, Clytaemestra, of your power.  
For when the man is gone and the throne void, his right  
falls to the prince's lady, and honor must be given. 260  
Is it some grace—or otherwise—that you have heard  
to make you sacrifice at messages of good hope?  
I should be glad to hear, but must not blame your silence.

*Clytaemestra*

As it was said of old, may the dawn child be born  
to be an angel of blessing from the kindly night. 265  
You shall know joy beyond all you ever hoped to hear.  
The men of Argos have taken Priam's citadel.

*Chorus*

What have you said? Your words escaped my unbelief.

*Clytaemestra*

The Achaeans are in Troy. Is that not clear enough?

*Chorus*

This slow delight steals over me to bring forth tears.

270

*Clytaemestra*

Yes, for your eyes betray the loyal heart within.

*Chorus*

Yet how can I be certain? Is there some evidence?

*Clytaemestra*

There is, there must be, unless a god has lied to me

*Chorus*

Is it dream visions, easy to believe, you credit?

*Clytaemestra*

I accept nothing from a brain that is dull with sleep

275

*Chorus*

The charm, then, of some rumor, that made rich your hope?

*Clytaemestra*

Am I some young girl, that you find my thoughts so silly?

*Chorus*

How long, then, is it since the citadel was stormed?

*Clytaemestra*

It is the night, the mother of this dawn I hailed.

*Chorus*

What kind of messenger could come in speed like this?

280

*Clytaemestra*

Hephaestus, who cast forth the shining blaze from Ida.

And beacon after beacon picking up the flare

carried it here; Ida to the Hermaean horn

of Lemnos, where it shone above the isle, and next

the sheer rock face of Zeus on Athos caught it up;

285

and plunging skyward to arch the shoulders of the sea

the strength of the running flare in exultation,

pine timbers flaming into gold, like the sunrise,

brought the bright message to Macistus' sentinel cliffs,  
 who, never slow nor in the carelessness of sleep 290  
 caught up, sent on his relay in the courier chain,  
 and far across Euripus' streams the beacon flare  
 carried to signal watchmen on Messapion.  
 These took it again in turn, and heaping high a pile  
 of silvery brush flamed it to throw the message on 295  
 And the flare sickened never, but grown stronger yet  
 outleapt the river valley of Asopus like  
 the very moon for shining, to Cithaeron's scour  
 to waken the next station of the flaming post.  
 These watchers, not contemptuous of the far-thrown blaze, 300  
 kindled another beacon vaster than commanded.  
 The light leaned high above Gorgopis' staring marsh,  
 and striking Aegyplanctus' mountain top, drove on  
 yet one more relay, lest the flare die down in speed.  
 Kindled once more with stintless heaping force, they send 305  
 the beard of flame to hugeness, passing far beyond  
 the promontory that gazes on the Saronic strait  
 and flaming far, until it plunged at last to strike  
 the steep rock of Arachnus near at hand, our watchtower.  
 And thence there fell upon this house of Atreus' sons 310  
 the flare whose fathers mount to the Idaean beacon.  
 These are the changes on my torchlight messengers,  
 one from another running out the laps assigned.  
 The first and the last sprinters have the victory.  
 By such proof and such symbol I announce to you 315  
 my lord at Troy has sent his messengers to me.

*Chorus*

The gods, lady, shall have my prayers and thanks straightway.  
 And yet to hear your story till all wonder fades  
 would be my wish, could you but tell it once again.

*Clytaemestra*

The Achaeans have got Troy, upon this very day. 320  
 I think the city echoes with a clash of cries.

Pour vinegar and oil into the selfsame bowl,  
 you could not say they mix in friendship, but fight on.  
 Thus variant sound the voices of the conquerors  
 and conquered, from the opposition of their fates 325  
 Trojans are stooping now to gather in their arms  
 their dead, husbands and brothers, children lean to clasp  
 the aged who begot them, crying upon the death  
 of those most dear, from lips that never will be free.  
 The Achaeans have their midnight work after the fighting 330  
 that sets them down to feed on all the city has,  
 ravenous, headlong, by no rank and file assigned,  
 but as each man has drawn his shaken lot by chance  
 And in the Trojan houses that their spears have taken  
 they settle now, free of the open sky, the frosts 335  
 and dampness of the evening, without sentinels set  
 they sleep the sleep of happiness the whole night through  
 And if they reverence the gods who hold the city  
 and all the holy temples of the captured land,  
 they, the despoilers, might not be despoiled in turn. 340  
 Let not their passion overwhelm them, let no lust  
 seize on these men to violate what they must not  
 The run to safety and home is yet to make, they must turn  
 the pole, and run the backstretch of the double course  
 Yet, though the host come home without offence to high 345  
 gods, even so the anger of these slaughtered men  
 may never sleep Oh, let there be no fresh wrong done!  
 Such are the thoughts you hear from me, a woman merely  
 Yet may the best win through, that none may fail to see.  
 Of all good things to wish this is my dearest choice. 350

*Chorus*

My lady, no grave man could speak with better grace.  
 I have listened to the proofs of your tale, and I believe,  
 and go to make my glad thanksgivings to the gods.  
 This pleasure is not unworthy of the grief that gave it.

- O Zeus our lord and Night beloved, 355  
 bestower of power and beauty,  
 you slung above the bastions of Troy  
 the binding net, that none, neither great  
 nor young, might outleap  
 the gigantic toils 360  
 of enslavement and final disaster.  
 I gaze in awe on Zeus of the guests  
 who wrung from Alexander such payment.  
 He bent the bow with slow care, that neither  
 the shaft might hurdle the stars, nor fall 365  
 spent to the earth, short driven.
- They have the stroke of Zeus to tell of.  
 This thing is clear and you may trace it.  
 He acted as he had decreed. A man thought  
 the gods deigned not to punish mortals 370  
 who trampled down the delicacy of things  
 inviolable. That man was wicked.  
 The curse on great daring  
 shines clear; it wrings atonement 375  
 from those high hearts that drive to evil,  
 from houses blossoming to pride  
 and peril. Let there be  
 wealth without tears; enough for  
 the wise man who will ask no further. 380  
 There is not any armor  
 in gold against perdition  
 for him who spurns the high altar  
 of Justice down to the darkness.
- Persuasion the persistent overwhelms him, 385  
 she, strong daughter of designing Ruin.  
 And every medicine is vain; the sin  
 smolders not, but burns to evil beauty.  
 As cheap bronze tortured 390  
 at the touchstone relapses

to blackness and grime, so this man  
 tested shows vain  
 as a child that strives to catch the bird flying  
 and wins shame that shall bring down his city. 395  
 No god will hear such a man's entreaty,  
 but whoso turns to these ways  
 they strike him down in his wickedness.  
 This was Paris he came  
 to the house of the sons of Atreus, 400  
 stole the woman away, and shamed  
 the guest's right of the board shared. ✱

She left among her people the stir and clamor  
 of shields and of spearheads, 405  
 the ships to sail and the armor.  
 She took to Ilium her dowry, death.  
 She stepped forth lightly between the gates  
 daring beyond all daring And the prophets  
 about the great house wept aloud and spoke:  
 "Alas, alas for the house and for the champions, 410  
 alas for the bed signed with their love together  
 Here now is silence, scorned, unreprouched  
 The agony of his loss is clear before us  
 Longing for her who lies beyond the sea  
 he shall see a phantom queen in his household. 415  
 Her images in their beauty  
 are bitterness to her lord now  
 where in the emptiness of eyes  
 all passion has faded."

Shining in dreams the sorrowful 420  
 memories pass; they bring him  
 vain delight only.  
 It is vain, to dream and to see splendors,  
 and the image slipping from the arms' embrace  
 escapes, not to return again, 425  
 on wings drifting down the ways of sleep.

Such have the sorrows been in the house by the hearthside;  
 such have there been, and yet there are worse than these.  
 In all Hellas, for those who swarmed to the host  
 the heartbreaking misery 430  
 shows in the house of each.

Many are they who are touched at the heart by these things.  
 Those they sent forth they knew;  
 now, in place of the young men  
 urns and ashes are carried home 435  
 to the houses of the fighters.

The god of war, money changer of dead bodies,  
 held the balance of his spear in the fighting,  
 and from the corpse-fires at Ilium 440  
 sent to their dearest the dust  
 heavy and bitter with tears shed  
 packing smooth the urns with  
 ashes that once were men.

They praise them through their tears, how this man 445  
 knew well the craft of battle, how another  
 went down splendid in the slaughter:  
 and all for some strange woman.

Thus they mutter in secrecy,  
 and the slow anger creeps below their grief 450  
 at Atreus' sons and their quarrels.

There by the walls of Ilium  
 the young men in their beauty keep  
 graves deep in the alien soil  
 they hated and they conquered. 455

The citizens speak: their voice is dull with hatred.  
 The curse of the people must be paid for.  
 There lurks for me in the hooded night  
 terror of what may be told me. 460

The gods fail not to mark  
 those who have killed many.  
 The black Furies stalking the man

fortunate beyond all right  
wrench back again the set of his life 465  
and drop him to darkness There among  
the ciphers there is no more comfort  
in power And the vaunt of high glory  
is bitterness; for God's thunderbolts  
crash on the towering mountains 470  
Let me attain no envied wealth,  
let me not plunder cities,  
neither be taken in turn, and face  
life in the power of another.

*(Various members of the Chorus, speaking severally.)*

From the beacon's bright message 475  
the fleet rumor runs  
through the city If this be real  
who knows? Perhaps the gods have sent some lie to us.

Who of us is so childish or so reft of wit  
that by the beacon's messages 480  
his heart flamed must despond again  
when the tale changes in the end?

It is like a woman indeed  
to take the rapture before the fact has shown for true

They believe too easily, are too quick to shift 485  
from ground to ground; and swift indeed  
the rumor voiced by a woman dies again.

Now we shall understand these torches and their shining,  
the beacons, and the interchange of flame and flame. 490

They may be real; yet bright and dreamwise ecstasy  
in light's appearance might have charmed our hearts awry.

I see a herald coming from the beach, his brows  
shaded with sprigs of olive, and upon his feet  
the dust, dry sister of the mire, makes plain to me 495  
that he will find a voice, not merely kindle flame  
from mountain timber, and make signals from the smoke,



but tell us outright, whether to be happy, or—  
but I shrink back from naming the alternative.  
That which appeared was good; may yet more good be given. 500

And any man who prays that different things befall  
the city, may he reap the crime of his own heart.

*(The Herald enters, and speaks.)*

Soil of my fathers, Argive earth I tread upon,  
in daylight of the tenth year I have come back to you.  
All my hopes broke but one, and this I have at last. 505  
I never could have dared to dream that I might die  
in Argos, and be buried in this beloved soil.  
Hail to the Argive land and to its sunlight, hail  
to its high sovereign, Zeus, and to the Pythian king.  
May you no longer shower your arrows on our heads. 510  
Beside Scamandrus you were grim; be satisfied  
and turn to savior now and healer of our hurts,  
my lord Apollo. Gods of the market place assembled,  
I greet you all, and my own patron deity  
Hermes, beloved herald, in whose right all heralds 515  
are sacred; and you heroes that sent forth the host,  
propitiously take back all that the spear has left.  
O great hall of the kings and house beloved, seats  
of sanctity; divinities that face the sun:  
if ever before, look now with kind and glowing eyes 520  
to greet our king in state after so long a time.  
He comes, lord Agamemnon, bearing light in gloom  
to you, and to all that are assembled here.  
Salute him with good favor, as he well deserves,  
the man who has wrecked Ilium with the spade of Zeus 525  
vindictive, whereby all their plain has been laid waste.  
Gone are their altars, the sacred places of the gods  
are gone, and scattered all the seed within the ground.  
With such a yoke as this gripped to the neck of Troy  
he comes, the king, Atreus' elder son, a man 530

fortunate to be honored far above all men  
 alive, not Paris nor the city tied to him  
 can boast he did more than was done him in return  
 Guilty of rape and theft, condemned, he lost the prize  
 captured, and broke to sheer destruction all the house  
 of his fathers, with the very ground whereon it stood.  
 Twice over the sons of Priam have atoned their sins

535

*Chorus*

Hail and be glad, herald of the Achæan host

*Herald*

I am happy, I no longer ask the gods for death

*Chorus*

Did passion for your country so strip bare your heart?

540

*Herald*

So that the tears broke in my eyes, for happiness

*Chorus*

You were taken with that sickness, then, that brings delight.

*Herald*

How? I cannot deal with such words until I understand.

*Chorus*

Struck with desire of those who loved as much again.

*Herald*

You mean our country longed for us, as we for home?

545

*Chorus*

So that I sighed, out of the darkness of my heart

*Herald*

Whence came this black thought to afflict the mind with fear?

*Chorus*

Long since it was my silence kept disaster off

*Herald*

But how? There were some you feared when the kings went  
 away?

*Chorus*

So much that as you said now, even death were grace.

550

*Herald*

Well: the end has been good And in the length of time  
 part of our fortune you could say held favorable,  
 but part we cursed again And who, except the gods,  
 can live time through forever without any pain?  
 Were I to tell you of the hard work done, the nights 555  
 exposed, the cramped sea-quarters, the foul beds—what part  
 of day's disposal did we not cry out loud?  
 Ashore, the horror stayed with us and grew. We lay  
 against the ramparts of our enemies, and from  
 the sky, and from the ground, the meadow dew came out 560  
 to soak our clothes and fill our hair with lice. And if  
 I were to tell of winter time, when all birds died,  
 the snows of Ida past endurance she sent down,  
 or summer heat, when in the lazy noon the sea  
 fell level and asleep under a windless sky— 565  
 but why live such grief over again? That time is gone  
 for us, and gone for those who died. Never again  
 need they rise up, nor care again for anything.  
 Why must a live man count the numbers of the slain,  
 why grieve at fortune's wrath that fades to break once more? 570  
 I call a long farewell to all our unhappiness.  
 For us, survivors of the Argive armament,  
 the pleasure wins, pain casts no weight in the opposite scale.  
 And here, in this sun's shining, we can boast aloud,  
 whose fame has gone with wings across the land and sea: 575  
 "Upon a time the Argive host took Troy, and on  
 the houses of the gods who live in Hellas nailed  
 the spoils, to be the glory of days long ago."  
 And they who hear such things shall call this city blest  
 and the leaders of the host; and high the grace of God 580  
 shall be exalted, that did this. You have the story.

*Chorus*

I must give way; your story shows that I was wrong.  
 Old men are always young enough to learn, with profit.

But Clytaemestra and her house must hear, above  
others, this news that makes luxurious my life.

585

*(Clytaemestra comes forward and speaks)*

I raised my cry of joy, and it was long ago  
when the first beacon flare of message came by night  
to speak of capture and of Ilum's overthrow.  
But there was one who laughed at me, who said. "You trust  
in beacons so, and you believe that Troy has fallen?  
How like a woman, for the heart to lift so light."  
Men spoke like that, they thought I wandered in my wits,  
yet I made sacrifice, and in the womanish strain  
voice after voice caught up the cry along the city  
to echo in the temples of the gods and bless  
and still the fragrant flame that melts the sacrifice.

590

595

Why should you tell me then the whole long tale at large  
when from my lord himself I shall hear all the story?

But now, how best to speed my preparation to  
receive my honored lord come home again—what else  
is light more sweet for woman to behold than this,  
to spread the gates before her husband home from war  
and saved by God's hand?—take this message to the king:  
Come, and with speed, back to the city that longs for him,  
and may he find a wife within his house as true  
as on the day he left her, watchdog of the house  
gentle to him alone, fierce to his enemies,  
and such a woman in all her ways as this, who has  
not broken the seal upon her in the length of days.  
With no man else have I known delight, nor any shame  
of evil speech, more than I know how to temper bronze

600

605

610

*(Clytaemestra goes to the back of the stage.)*

**Herald**

A vaunt like this, so loaded as it is with truth,  
it well becomes a highborn lady to proclaim.

*Chorus*

Thus has she spoken to you, and well you understand, 615  
words that impress interpreters whose thought is clear.  
But tell me, herald; I would learn of Menelaus,  
that power beloved in this land. Has he survived  
also, and come with you back to his home again?

*Herald*

I know no way to lie and make my tale so fair 620  
that friends could reap joy of it for any length of time.

*Chorus*

Is there no means to speak us fair, and yet tell the truth?  
It will not hide, when truth and good are torn asunder.

*Herald*

He is gone out of the sight of the Achaean host,  
vessel and man alike. I speak no falsehood there. 625

*Chorus*

Was it when he had put out from Ilium in your sight,  
or did a storm that struck you both whirl him away?

*Herald*

How like a master bowman you have hit the mark  
and in your speech cut a long sorrow to brief stature.

*Chorus*

But then the rumor in the host that sailed beside, 630  
was it that he had perished, or might yet be living?

*Herald*

No man knows. There is none could tell us that for sure  
except the Sun, from whom this earth has life and increase.

*Chorus*

How did this storm, by wrath of the divinities,  
strike on our multitude at sea? How did it end? 635

*Herald*

It is not well to stain the blessing of this day  
with speech of evil weight. Such gods are honored apart.

And when the messenger of a shaken host, sad faced,  
brings to his city news it prayed never to hear,  
this scores one wound upon the body of the people; 640  
and that from many houses many men are slain  
by the two-lashed whip dear to the War God's hand, this turns  
disaster double-bladed, bloodily made two  
The messenger so freighted with a charge of tears  
should make his song of triumph at the Furies' door. 645  
But, carrying the fair message of our hopes' salvation,  
come home to a glad city's hospitality,  
how shall I mix my gracious news with foul, and tell  
of the storm on the Achaeans by God's anger sent?  
For they, of old the deepest enemies, sea and fire, 650  
made a conspiracy and gave the oath of hand  
to blast in ruin our unhappy Argive army.  
At night the sea began to rise in waves of death.  
Ship against ship the Thracian stormwind shattered us,  
and gored and split, our vessels, swept in violence 655  
of storm and whirlwind, beaten by the breaking rain,  
drove on in darkness, spun by the wicked shepherd's hand.  
But when the sun came up again to light the dawn,  
we saw the Aegaeon Sea blossoming with dead men,  
the men of Achaea, and the wreckage of their ships. 660  
For us, and for our ship, some god, no man, by guile  
or by entreaty's force prevailing, laid his hand  
upon the helm and brought us through with hull unscarred.  
Life-giving fortune deigned to take our ship in charge  
that neither riding in deep water she took the surf 665  
nor drove to shoal and break upon some rocky shore.  
But then, delivered from death at sea, in the pale day,  
incredulous of our own luck, we shepherded  
in our sad thoughts the fresh disaster of the fleet  
so pitifully torn and shaken by the storm. 670  
Now of these others, if there are any left alive  
they speak of us as men who perished, must they not?  
Even as we, who fear that they are gone. But may

it all come well in the end. For Menelaus: be sure  
 if any of them come back that he will be the first 675  
 If he is still where some sun's gleam can track him down,  
 alive and open-eyed, by blessed hand of God  
 who willed that not yet should his seed be utterly gone,  
 there is some hope that he will still come home again.  
 You have heard all; and be sure, you have heard the truth. 680

*(The Herald goes out.)*

*Chorus*

Who is he that named you so  
 fatally in every way?  
 Could it be some mind unseen  
 in divination of your destiny  
 shaping to the lips that name 685  
 for the bride of spears and blood,  
 Helen, which is death? Appropriately  
 death of ships, death of men and cities  
 from the bower's soft curtained 690  
 and secluded luxury she sailed then,  
 driven on the giant west wind,  
 and armored men in their thousands came,  
 huntsmen down the oar blade's fading footprint 695  
 to struggle in blood with those  
 who by the banks of Simoeis  
 beached their hulls where the leaves break.

And on Ilium in truth  
 in the likeness of the name 700  
 the sure purpose of the Wrath drove  
 marriage with death for the guest board  
 shamed, and Zeus kindly to strangers,  
 the vengeance wrought on those men  
 who graced in too loud voice the bride-song 705  
 fallen to their lot to sing,  
 the kinsmen and the brothers.  
 And changing its song's measure

the ancient city of Priam  
 chants in high strain of lamentation,  
 calling Paris him of the fatal marriage;  
 for it endured its life's end  
 in desolation and tears  
 and the piteous blood of its people. 710  
 715

Once a man fostered in his house  
 a lion cub, from the mother's milk  
 torn, craving the breast given.  
 In the first steps of its young life 720  
 mild, it played with children  
 and delighted the old.  
 Caught in the arm's cradle  
 they pampered it like a newborn child,  
 shining eyed and broken to the hand 725  
 to stay the stress of its hunger.

But it grew with time, and the lion  
 in the blood strain came out; it paid  
 grace to those who had fostered it  
 in blood and death for the sheep flocks, 730  
 a grim feast forbidden.  
 The house reeked with blood run  
 nor could its people beat down the bane,  
 the giant murderer's onslaught.  
 This thing they raised in their house was blessed 735  
 by God to be priest of destruction.

And that which first came to the city of Ilium,  
 call it a dream of calm  
 and the wind dying,  
 the loveliness and luxury of much gold, 740  
 the melting shafts of the eyes' glances,  
 the blossom that breaks the heart with longing.  
 But she turned in mid-step of her course to make  
 bitter the consummation, 745



whirling on Priam's people  
to blight with her touch and nearness.  
Zeus hospitable sent her,  
a vengeance to make brides weep.

It has been made long since and grown old among men, 750  
this saying: human wealth  
grown to fulness of stature  
breeds again nor dies without issue.  
From high good fortune in the blood 755  
blossoms the quenchless agony.  
Far from others I hold my own  
mind; only the act of evil  
breeds others to follow,  
young sins in its own likeness. 760  
Houses clear in their right are given  
children in all loveliness.

But Crime aging is made  
in men's dark actions  
ripe with the young pride 765  
late or soon when the dawn of destiny  
comes and birth is given  
to the spirit none may fight nor beat down,  
sinful Daring; and in those halls  
the black visaged Disasters stamped 770  
in the likeness of their fathers.

And Righteousness is a shining in  
the smoke of mean houses.  
Her blessing is on the just man. 775  
From high halls starred with gold by reeking hands  
she turns back  
with eyes that glance away to the simple in heart,  
spurning the strength of gold  
stamped false with flattery. 780  
And all things she steers to fulfilment.

(*Agamemnon enters in a chariot, with Cassandra beside him. The Chorus speaks to him*)

Behold, my king: sacker of Troy's citadel,  
own issue of Atreus.  
How shall I hail you? How give honor 785  
not crossing too high nor yet bending short  
of this time's graces?  
For many among men are they who set high  
the show of honor, yet break justice.  
If one be unhappy, all else are fain 790  
to grieve with him: yet the teeth of sorrow  
come nowise near to the heart's edge  
And in joy likewise they show joy's semblance,  
and torture the face to the false smile  
Yet the good shepherd, who knows his flock, 795  
the eyes of men cannot lie to him,  
that with water of feigned  
love seem to smile from the true heart  
But I: when you marshalled this armament  
for Helen's sake, I will not hide it, 800  
in ugly style you were written in my heart  
for steering aslant the mind's course  
to bring home by blood  
sacrifice and dead men that wild spirit.  
But now, ~~an~~ love drawn up from the deep heart, 805  
not skimmed at the edge, we hail you.  
You have won, your labor is made gladness.  
Ask all men: you will learn in time  
which of your citizens have been just  
in the city's sway, which were reckless. 810

*Agamemnon*

To Argos first, and to the gods within the land,  
I must give due greeting; they have worked with me to bring  
me home; they helped me in the vengeance I have wrought  
on Priam's city. Not from the lips of men the gods  
heard justice, but in one firm cast they laid their votes 815

within the urn of blood that Ilium must die  
 and all her people; while above the opposite vase  
 the hand hovered and there was hope, but no vote fell.  
 The stormclouds of their ruin live; the ash that dies  
 upon them gushes still in smoke their pride of wealth. 820  
 For all this we must thank the gods with grace of much  
 high praise and memory, we who fenced within our toils  
 of wrath the city; and, because one woman strayed,  
 the beast of Argos broke them, the fierce young within  
 the horse, the armored people who marked out their leap 825  
 against the setting of the Pleiades A wild  
 and bloody lion swarmed above the towers of Troy  
 to glut its hunger lapping at the blood of kings

This to the gods, a prelude strung to length of words.  
 But, for the thought you spoke, I heard and I remember 830  
 and stand behind you. For I say that it is true.  
 In few men is it part of nature to respect  
 a friend's prosperity without begrudging him,  
 as envy's wicked poison settling to the heart  
 piles up the pain in one sick with unhappiness, 835  
 who, staggered under sufferings that are all his own,  
 winces again to the vision of a neighbor's bliss.  
 And I can speak, for I have seen, I know it well,  
 this mirror of companionship, this shadow's ghost,  
 these men who seemed my friends in all sincerity. 840  
 One man of them all, Odysseus, he who sailed unwilling,  
 once yoked to me carried his harness, nor went slack.  
 Dead though he be or living, I can say it still.

Now in the business of the city and the gods  
 we must ordain full conclave of all citizens 845  
 and take our counsel. We shall see what element  
 is strong, and plan that it shall keep its virtue still.  
 But that which must be healed—we must use medicine,  
 or burn, or amputate, with kind intention, take  
 all means at hand that might beat down corruption's pain. 850

So to the King's house and the home about the hearth  
I take my way, with greeting to the gods within  
who sent me forth, and who have brought me home once more.  
My prize was conquest; may it never fail again.

*(Clytaemestra comes forward and speaks.)*

Grave gentlemen of Argolis assembled here, 855  
I take no shame to speak aloud before you all  
the love I bear my husband In the lapse of time  
modesty fades, it is human.

What I tell you now  
I learned not from another, this is my own sad life  
all the long years this man was gone at Ilium. 860  
It is evil and a thing of terror when a wife  
sits in the house forlorn with no man by, and hears  
rumors that like a fever die to break again,  
and men come in with news of fear, and on their heels  
another messenger, with worse news to cry aloud 865  
here in this house Had Agamemnon taken all  
the wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me,  
he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net.  
If he had died each time that rumor told his death,  
he must have been some triple-bodied Geryon 870  
back from the dead with threefold cloak of earth upon  
his body, and killed once for every shape assumed.  
Because such tales broke out forever on my rest,  
many a time they cut me down and freed my throat 875  
from the noose overslung where I had caught it fast.  
And therefore is your son, in whom my love and yours  
are sealed and pledged, not here to stand with us today,  
Orestes. It were right; yet do not be amazed.  
Strophius of Phocis, comrade in arms and faithful friend 880  
to you, is keeping him. He spoke to me of peril  
on two counts; of your danger under Ilium,  
and here, of revolution and the clamorous people  
who might cast down the council—since it lies in men's

nature to trample on the fighter already down. 885  
Such my excuse to you, and without subterfuge.

For me. the running springs that were my tears have dried  
utterly up, nor left one drop within. I keep  
the pain upon my eyes where late at night I wept  
over the beacons long ago set for your sake, 890  
untended left forever. In the midst of dreams  
the whisper that a gnat's thin wings could winnow broke  
my sleep apart. I thought I saw you suffer wounds  
more than the time that slept with me could ever hold.

Now all my suffering is past, with griefless heart 895  
I hail this man, the watchdog of the fold and hall;  
the stay that keeps the ship alive; the post to grip  
groundward the towering roof; a father's single child;  
land seen by sailors after all their hope was gone;  
splendor of daybreak shining from the night of storm; 900  
the running spring a parched wayfarer strays upon.  
Oh, it is sweet to escape from all necessity!

Such is my greeting to him, that he well deserves.  
Let none bear malice; for the harm that went before  
I took, and it was great.

Now, my beloved one, 905  
step from your chariot; yet let not your foot, my lord,  
sacker of Ilium, touch the earth. My maidens there!  
Why this delay? Your task has been appointed you,  
to strew the ground before his feet with tapestries.  
Let there spring up into the house he never hoped  
to see, where Justice leads him in, a crimson path. 910

In all things else, my heart's unsleeping care shall act  
with the gods' aid to set aright what fate ordained.

*(Clytaemestra's handmaidens spread a bright carpet  
between the chariot and the door.)*

*Agamemnon*

Daughter of Leda, you who kept my house for me,  
there is one way your welcome matched my absence well. 915

You strained it to great length. Yet properly to praise  
me thus belongs by right to other lips, not yours.  
And all this—do not try in woman's ways to make  
me delicate, nor, as if I were some Asiatic  
bow down to earth and with wide mouth cry out to me, 920  
nor cross my path with jealousy by strewing the ground  
with robes Such state becomes the gods, and none beside.  
I am a mortal, a man; I cannot trample upon  
these tinted splendors without fear thrown in my path.  
I tell you, as a man, not god, to reverence me. 925  
Discordant is the murmur at such treading down  
of lovely things; while God's most lordly gift to man  
is decency of mind. Call that man only blest  
who has in sweet tranquillity brought his life to close.  
If I could only act as such, my hope is good 930

*Clytaemestra*

Yet tell me this one thing, and do not cross my will.

*Agamemnon*

My will is mine. I shall not make it soft for you

*Clytaemestra*

It was in fear surely that you vowed this course to God.

*Agamemnon*

No man has spoken knowing better what he said.

*Clytaemestra*

If Priam had won as you have, what would he have done? 935

*Agamemnon*

I well believe he might have walked on tapestries.

*Clytaemestra*

Be not ashamed before the bitterness of men.

*Agamemnon*

The people murmur, and their voice is great in strength.

*Clytaemestra*

Yet he who goes unenvied shall not be admired.

*Agamemnon*

Surely this lust for conflict is not womanlike?

940

*Clytaemestra*

Yet for the mighty even to give way is grace.

*Agamemnon*

Does such a victory as this mean so much to you?

*Clytaemestra*

Oh yield! The power is yours. Give way of your free will.

*Agamemnon*

Since you must have it—here, let someone with all speed  
take off these sandals, slaves for my feet to tread upon.

945

And as I crush these garments stained from the rich sea  
let no god's eyes of hatred strike me from afar.

Great the extravagance, and great the shame I feel  
to spoil such treasure and such silver's worth of webs.

So much for all this. Take this stranger girl within  
now, and be kind. The conqueror who uses softly  
his power, is watched from far in the kind eyes of God,  
and this slave's yoke is one no man will wear from choice  
Gift of the host to me, and flower exquisite  
from all my many treasures, she attends me here.

950

955

Now since my will was bent to listen to you in this  
my feet crush purple as I pass within the hall

*Clytaemestra*

The sea is there, and who shall drain its yield? It breeds  
precious as silver, ever of itself renewed,  
the purple ooze wherein our garments shall be dipped.  
And by God's grace this house keeps full sufficiency  
of all. Poverty is a thing beyond its thought.  
I could have vowed to trample many splendors down

960

had such decree been ordained from the oracles  
 those days when all my study was to bring home your life. 965  
 For when the root lives yet the leaves will come again  
 to fence the house with shade against the Dog Star's heat,  
 and now you have come home to keep your hearth and house  
 you bring with you the symbol of our winter's warmth;  
 but when Zeus ripens the green clusters into wine 970  
 there shall be coolness in the house upon those days  
 because the master ranges his own halls once more  
 Zeus, Zeus accomplisher, accomplish these my prayers  
 Let your mind bring these things to pass It is your will

*(Agamemnon and Clytaemestra enter the house Cassandra  
 remains in the chariot The Chorus speaks )*

Why must this persistent fear 975  
 beat its wings so ceaselessly  
 and so close against my mantic heart?  
 Why this strain unwanted, unrepaid, thus prophetic?  
 Nor can valor of good hope 980  
 seated near the chambered depth  
 of the spirit cast it out  
 as dreams of dark fancy, and yet time  
 has buried in the mounding sand  
 the sea cables since that day 985  
 when against Ilium  
 the army and the ships put to sea  
 Yet I have seen with these eyes  
 Agamemnon home again.  
 Still the spirit sings, drawing deep 990  
 from within this unlyric threnody of the Fury.  
 Hope is gone utterly,  
 the sweet strength is far away  
 Surely this is not fantasy 995  
 Surely it is real, this whirl of drifts  
 that spin the stricken heart  
 Still I pray; may all this



expectation fade as vanity  
into unfulfilment, and not be. 1000

Yet it is true: the high strength of men  
knows no content with limitation   Sickness  
chambered beside it beats at the wall between.  
Man's fate that sets a true 1005  
course yet may strike upon  
the blind and sudden reefs of disaster.

But if before such time, fear  
throw overboard some precious thing  
of the cargo, with deliberate cast, 1010  
not all the house, laboring  
with weight of ruin, shall go down,  
nor sink the hull deep within the sea.  
And great and affluent the gift of Zeus  
in yield of ploughed acres year on year 1015  
makes void again sick starvation.

But when the black and mortal blood of man  
has fallen to the ground before his feet, who then 1020  
can sing spells to call it back again?

Did Zeus not warn us once  
when he struck to impotence  
that one who could in truth charm back the dead men?  
Had the gods not so ordained 1025  
that fate should stand against fate  
to check any man's excess,

my heart now would have outrun speech  
to break forth the water of its grief  
But this is so; I murmur deep in darkness 1030  
sore at heart; my hope is gone now  
ever again to unwind some crucial good  
from the flames about my heart

*(Clytaemestra comes out from the house again  
and speaks to Cassandra.)*

Cassandra, you may go within the house as well, 1035  
since Zeus in no unkindness has ordained that you

must share our lustral water, stand with the great throng  
of slaves that flock to the altar of our household god  
Step from this chariot, then, and do not be so proud  
And think—they say that long ago Alcmena's son 1040  
was sold in bondage and endured the bread of slaves  
But if constraint of fact forces you to such fate,  
be glad indeed for masters ancient in their wealth  
They who have reaped success beyond their dreams of hope  
are savage above need and standard toward their slaves. 1045  
From us you shall have all you have the right to ask.

*Chorus*

What she has spoken is for you, and clear enough.  
Fenced in these fatal nets wherein you find yourself  
you should obey her if you can, perhaps you can not

*Clytaemestra*

Unless she uses speech incomprehensible, 1050  
barbarian, wild as the swallow's song, I speak  
within her understanding, and she must obey.

*Chorus*

Go with her What she bids is best in circumstance  
that rings you now. Obey, and leave this carriage seat.

*Clytaemestra*

I have no leisure to stand outside the house and waste 1055  
time on this woman At the central altarstone  
the flocks are standing, ready for the sacrifice  
we make to this glad day we never hoped to see.  
You if you are obeying my commands at all, be quick.  
But if in ignorance you fail to comprehend, 1060  
speak not, but make with your barbarian hand some sign.

*Chorus*

I think this stranger girl needs some interpreter  
who understands. She is like some captive animal.

*Clytaemestra*

No, she is in the passion of her own wild thoughts.  
Leaving her captured city she has come to us 1065

untrained to take the curb, and will not understand  
until her rage and strength have foamed away in blood.  
I shall throw down no more commands for her contempt

*(Clytaemestra goes back into the house)*

*Chorus*

I, though, shall not be angry, for I pity her.  
Come down, poor creature, leave the empty car. Give way 1070  
to compulsion and take up the yoke that shall be yours

*(Cassandra descends from the chariot and cries out loud.)*

Oh shame upon the earth!  
Apollo, Apollo!

*Chorus*

You cry on Loxias in agony? He is not  
of those immortals the unhappy supplicate. 1075

*Cassandra*

Oh shame upon the earth!  
Apollo, Apollo!

*Chorus*

Now once again in bitter voice she calls upon  
this god, who has not part in any lamentation.

*Cassandra*

Apollo, Apollo! 1080  
Lord of the ways, my ruin.  
You have undone me once again, and utterly.

*Chorus*

I think she will be prophetic of her own disaster.  
Even in the slave's heart the gift divine lives on.

*Cassandra*

Apollo, Apollo! 1085  
Lord of the ways, my ruin.  
Where have you led me now at last? What house is this?

*Chorus*

The house of the Atreidae. If you understand  
not that, I can tell you, and so much at least is true.

*Cassandra*

No, but a house that God hates, guilty within 11090  
of kindred blood shed, torture of its own,  
the shambles for men's butchery, the dripping floor.

*Chorus*

The stranger is keen scented like some hound upon  
the trail of blood that leads her to discovered death.

*Cassandra*

Behold there the witnesses to my faith. 11095  
The small children wail for their own death  
and the flesh roasted that their father fed upon.

*Chorus*

We had been told before of this prophetic fame  
of yours: we want no prophets in this place at all.

*Cassandra*

Ah, for shame, what can she purpose now? 11100  
What is this new and huge  
stroke of atrocity she plans within the house  
to beat down the beloved beyond hope of healing?  
Rescue is far away.

*Chorus*

I can make nothing of these prophecies. The rest 11105  
I understood, the city is full of the sound of them

*Cassandra*

So cruel then, that you can do this thing?  
The husband of your own bed  
to bathe bright with water—how shall I speak the end?  
This thing shall be done with speed. The hand gropes now, and  
the other 11110  
hand follows in turn.

*Chorus*

No, I am lost. After the darkness of her speech  
I go bewildered in a mist of prophecies.

*Cassandra*

No, no, see there! What is that thing that shows?  
Is it some net of death?  
Or is the trap the woman there, the murderess?  
Let now the slakeless fury in the race  
rear up to howl aloud over this monstrous death.

1115

*Chorus*

Upon what demon in the house do you call, to raise  
the cry of triumph? All your speech makes dark my hope.  
And to the heart below trickles the pale drop  
as in the hour of death  
timed to our sunset and the mortal radiance.  
Ruin is near, and swift.

1120

*Cassandra*

See there, see there! Keep from his mate the bull.  
Caught in the folded web's  
entanglement she pinions him and with the black horn  
strikes. And he crumples in the watered bath.  
Guile, I tell you, and death there in the caldron wrought.

1125

*Chorus*

I am not proud in skill to guess at prophecies,  
yet even I can see the evil in this thing.  
From divination what good ever has come to men?  
Art, and multiplication of words  
drifting through tangled evil bring  
terror to them that hear.

1130

1135

*Cassandra*

Alas, alas for the wretchedness of my ill-starred life.  
This pain flooding the song of sorrow is mine alone.  
Why have you brought me here in all unhappiness?  
Why, why? Except to die with him? What else could be?

*Chorus*

You are possessed of God, mazed at heart  
to sing your own death 1140  
song, the wild lyric as  
in clamor for Itys, Itys over and over again  
her long life of tears weeping forever grieves  
the brown nightingale. 1145

*Cassandra*

Oh for the nightingale's pure song and a fate like hers.  
With fashion of beating wings the gods clothed her about  
and a sweet life gave her and without lamentation.  
But mine is the sheer edge of the tearing iron.

*Chorus*

Whence come, beat upon beat, driven of God, 1150  
vain passions of tears?  
Whence your cries, terrified, clashing in horror,  
in wrought melody and the singing speech?  
Whence take you the marks to this path of prophecy  
and speech of terror? 1155

*Cassandra*

Oh marriage of Paris, death to the men beloved!  
Alas, Scamandrus, water my fathers drank.  
There was a time I too at your springs  
drank and grew strong. Ah me,  
for now Beside the deadly rivers, Cocytus 1160  
and Acheron, I must cry out my prophecies.

*Chorus*

What is this word, too clear, you have uttered now?  
A child could understand.  
And deep within goes the stroke of the dripping fang  
as mortal pain at the trebled song of your agony 1165  
shivers the heart to hear.

*Cassandra*

O sorrow, sorrow of my city dragged to uttermost death.  
O sacrifices my father made at the wall.

Flocks of the pastured sheep slaughtered there.  
 And no use at all  
 to save our city from its pain inflicted now  
 And I too, with brain ablaze in fever, shall go down.

1170

*Chorus*

This follows the run of your song.  
 Is it, in cruel force of weight,  
 some divinity kneeling upon you brings  
 the death song of your passionate suffering?  
 I can not see the end.

1175

*Cassandra*

No longer shall my prophecies like some young girl  
 new-married glance from under veils, but bright and strong  
 as winds blow into morning and the sun's uprise  
 shall wax along the swell like some great wave, to burst  
 at last upon the shining of this agony.  
 Now I will tell you plainly and from no cryptic speech;  
 bear me then witness, running at my heels upon  
 the scent of these old brutal things done long ago.  
 There is a choir that sings as one, that shall not again  
 leave this house ever, the song thereof breaks harsh with menace.  
 And drugged to double fury on the wine of men's  
 blood shed, there lurks forever here a drunken rout  
 of ingrown vengeful spirits never to be cast forth.  
 Hanging above the hall they chant their song of hate  
 and the old sin; and taking up the strain in turn  
 spit curses on that man who spoiled his brother's bed.  
 Did I go wide, or hit, like a real archer? Am I  
 some swindling seer who hawks his lies from door to door?  
 Upon your oath, bear witness that I know by heart  
 the legend of ancient wickedness within this house.

1180

1185

1190

1195

*Chorus*

And how could an oath, though cast in rigid honesty,  
 do any good? And still we stand amazed at you,

reared in an alien city far beyond the sea,  
how can you strike, as if you had been there, the truth. 1200

*Cassandra*

Apollo was the seer who set me to this work.

*Chorus*

Struck with some passion for you, and himself a god?

*Cassandra*

There was a time I blushed to speak about these things.

*Chorus*

True; they who prosper take on airs of vanity. 1205

*Cassandra*

Yes, then, he wrestled with me, and he breathed delight.

*Chorus*

Did you come to the getting of children then, as people do?

*Cassandra*

I promised that to Loxias, but I broke my word.

*Chorus*

Were you already ecstatic in the skills of God?

*Cassandra*

Yes; even then I read my city's destinies. 1210

*Chorus*

So Loxias' wrath did you no harm? How could that be?

*Cassandra*

For this my trespass, none believed me ever again.

*Chorus*

But we do; all that you foretell seems true to us

*Cassandra*

But this is evil, see!  
Now once again the pain of grim, true prophecy  
shivers my whirling brain in a storm of things foreseen. 1215



Look there, see what is hovering above the house,  
 so small and young, imaged as in the shadow of dreams,  
 like children almost, killed by those most dear to them,  
 and their hands filled with their own flesh, as food to eat 1220  
 I see them holding out the inward parts, the vitals,  
 oh pitiful, that meat their father tasted of. . . .  
 I tell you. There is one that plots vengeance for this,  
 the strengthless lion rolling in his master's bed,  
 who keeps, ah me, the house against his lord's return, 1225  
 my lord too, now that I wear the slave's yoke on my neck  
 King of the ships, who tore up Ilium by the roots,  
 what does he know of this accursed bitch, who licks  
 his hand, who fawns on him with lifted ears, who like  
 a secret death shall strike the coward's stroke, nor fail? 1230  
 No, this is daring when the female shall strike down  
 the male What can I call her and be right? What beast  
 of loathing? Viper double-fanged, or Scylla witch  
 holed in the rocks and bane of men that range the sea;  
 smoldering mother of death to smoke relentless hate 1235  
 on those most dear. How she stood up and howled aloud  
 and unashamed, as at the breaking point of battle,  
 in feigned gladness for his salvation from the sea!  
 What does it matter now if men believe or no?  
 What is to come will come And soon you too will stand 1240  
 beside, to murmur in pity that my words were true

*Chorus*

Thyestes' feast upon the flesh of his own children  
 I understand in terror at the thought, and fear  
 is on me hearing truth and no tale fabricated.  
 The rest. I heard it, but wander still far from the course. 1245

*Cassandra*

I tell you, you shall look on Agamemnon dead.

*Chorus*

Peace, peace, poor woman; put those bitter lips to sleep.

*Cassandra*

Useless; there is no god of healing in this story.

*Chorus*

Not if it must be; may it somehow fail to come.

*Cassandra*

Prayers, yes; they do not pray, they plan to strike, and kill 1250

*Chorus*

What man is it who moves this beastly thing to be?

*Cassandra*

What man? You did mistake my divination then

*Chorus*

It may be; I could not follow through the schemer's plan

*Cassandra*

Yet I know Greek; I think I know it far too well

*Chorus*

And Pythian oracles are Greek, yet hard to read. 1255

*Cassandra*

Oh, flame and pain that sweeps me once again! My lord,  
 Apollo, King of Light, the pain, aye me, the pain!  
 This is the woman-lioness, who goes to bed  
 with the wolf, when her proud lion ranges far away,  
 and she will cut me down; as a wife mixing drugs 1260  
 she wills to shred the virtue of my punishment  
 into her bowl of wrath as she makes sharp the blade  
 against her man, death that he brought a mistress home.  
 Why do I wear these mockeries upon my body,  
 this staff of prophecy, these flowers at my throat? 1265  
 At least I will spoil you before I die. Out, down,  
 break, damn you! This for all that you have done to me.  
 Make someone else, not me, luxurious in disaster. .  
 Lo now, this is Apollo who has stripped me here  
 of my prophetic robes. He watched me all the time 1270

wearing this glory, mocked of all, my dearest ones  
 who hated me with all their hearts, so vain, so wrong;  
 called like some gypsy wandering from door to door  
 beggar, corrupt, half-starved, and I endured it all  
 And now the seer has done with me, his prophethess, 1275  
 and led me into such a place as this, to die.

Lost are my father's altars, but the block is there  
 to reek with sacrificial blood, my own. We two  
 must die, yet die not vengeless by the gods For there  
 shall come one to avenge us also, born to slay 1280  
 his mother, and to wreak death for his father's blood.  
 Outlaw and wanderer, driven far from his own land,  
 he will come back to cope these stones of inward hate  
 For this is a strong oath and sworn by the high gods,  
 that he shall cast men headlong for his father felled. 1285

Why am I then so pitiful? Why must I weep?  
 Since once I saw the citadel of Ilum  
 die as it died, and those who broke the city, doomed  
 by the gods, fare as they have fared accordingly,  
 I will go through with it I too will take my fate. 1290  
 I call as on the gates of death upon these gates  
 to pray only for this thing, that the stroke be true,  
 and that with no convulsion, with a rush of blood  
 in painless death, I may close up these eyes, and rest.

*Chorus*

O woman much enduring and so greatly wise, 1295  
 you have said much. But if this thing you know be true,  
 this death that comes upon you, how can you, serene,  
 walk to the altar like a driven ox of God?

*Cassandra*

Friends, there is no escape for any longer time.

*Chorus*

Yet longest left in time is to be honored still. 1300

*Cassandra*

The day is here and now; I can not win by flight.

*Chorus*

Woman, be sure your heart is brave; you can take much.

*Cassandra*

None but the unhappy people ever hear such praise.

*Chorus*

Yet there is a grace on mortals who so nobly die.

*Cassandra*

Alas for you, father, and for your lordly sons.

1305

Ah!

*Chorus*

What now? What terror whirls you backward from the door?

*Cassandra*

Foul, foul!

*Chorus*

What foulness then, unless some horror in the mind?

*Cassandra*

That room within reeks with blood like a slaughter house.

*Chorus*

What then? Only these victims butchered at the hearth.

1310

*Cassandra*

There is a breath about it like an open grave.

*Chorus*

This is no Syrian pride of frankincense you mean.

*Cassandra*

So. I am going in, and mourning as I go  
my death and Agamemnon's. Let my life be done.

Ah friends,

1315

truly this is no wild bird fluttering at a bush,  
nor vain my speech. Bear witness to me when I die,  
when falls for me, a woman slain, another woman,

and when a man dies for this wickedly mated man  
Here in my death I claim this stranger's grace of you.

1320

*Chorus*

Poor wretch, I pity you the fate you see so clear.

*Cassandra*

Yet once more will I speak, and not this time my own  
death's threnody I call upon the Sun in prayer  
against that ultimate shining when the avengers strike  
these monsters down in blood, that they avenge as well  
one simple slave who died, a small thing, lightly killed

1325

Alas, poor men, their destiny. When all goes well  
a shadow will overthrow it If it be unkind  
one stroke of a wet sponge wipes all the picture out;  
and that is far the most unhappy thing of all.

1330

*(Cassandra goes slowly into the house)*

*Chorus*

High fortune is a thing slakeless  
for mortals There is no man who shall point  
his finger to drive it back from the door  
and speak the words: "Come no longer."  
Now to this man the blessed ones have given  
Priam's city to be captured  
and return in the gods' honor  
Must he give blood for generations gone,  
die for those slain and in death pile up  
more death to come for the blood shed,  
what mortal else who hears shall claim  
he was born clear of the dark angel?

1335

1340

*(Agamemnon, inside the house)*

Ah, I am struck a deadly blow and deep within!

*Chorus*

Silence: who cried out that he was stabbed to death within  
the house?

*Agamemnon*

Ah me, again, they struck again. I am wounded twice.

1345

*Chorus*

How the king cried out aloud to us! I believe the thing is done.  
Come, let us put our heads together, try to find some safe way  
out.

*(The members of the Chorus go about distractedly,  
each one speaking in turn )*

Listen, let me tell you what I think is best to do.  
Let the herald call all citizens to rally here.

No, better to burst in upon them now, at once,  
and take them with the blood still running from their blades.

1350

I am with this man and I cast my vote to him.  
Act now. This is the perilous and instant time.

Anyone can see it, by these first steps they have taken,  
they purpose to be tyrants here upon our city.

1355

Yes, for we waste time, while they trample to the ground  
deliberation's honor, and their hands sleep not.

I can not tell which counsel of yours to call my own.  
It is the man of action who can plan as well.

I feel as he does, nor can I see how by words  
we shall set the dead man back upon his feet again.

1360

Do you mean, to drag our lives out long, that we must yield  
to the house shamed, and leadership of such as these?

No, we can never endure that; better to be killed  
Death is a softer thing by far than tyranny.

1365

Shall we, by no more proof than that he cried in pain,  
be sure, as by divination, that our lord is dead?

Yes, we should know what is true before we break our rage.  
Here is sheer guessing and far different from sure knowledge.

From all sides the voices multiply to make me choose  
this course; to learn first how it stands with Agamemnon. 1370

*(The doors of the palace open, disclosing the bodies of  
Agamemnon and Cassandra, with Clytaemestra  
standing over them )*

*Clytaemestra*

Much have I said before to serve necessity,  
but I will take no shame now to unsay it all.  
How else could I, arming hate against hateful men  
disguised in seeming tenderness, fence high the nets 1375  
of ruin beyond overleaping? Thus to me  
the conflict born of ancient bitterness is not  
a thing new thought upon, but pondered deep in time.  
I stand now where I struck him down. The thing is done.  
Thus have I wrought, and I will not deny it now. 1380  
That he might not escape nor beat aside his death,  
as fishermen cast their huge circling nets, I spread  
deadly abundance of rich robes, and caught him fast.  
I struck him twice. In two great cries of agony  
he buckled at the knees and fell. When he was down 1385  
I struck him the third blow, in thanks and reverence  
to Zeus the lord of dead men underneath the ground.  
Thus he went down, and the life struggled out of him;  
and as he died he spattered me with the dark red  
and violent driven rain of bitter savored blood 1390  
to make me glad, as gardens stand among the showers  
of God in glory at the birthtime of the buds.

These being the facts, elders of Argos assembled here,  
be glad, if it be your pleasure; but for me, I glory.  
Were it religion to pour wine above the slain, 1395  
this man deserved, more than deserved, such sacrament.  
He filled our cup with evil things unspeakable  
and now himself come home has drunk it to the dregs.

*Chorus*

We stand here stunned. How can you speak this way, with mouth  
so arrogant, to vaunt above your fallen lord? 1400

*Clytaemestra*

You try me out as if I were a woman and vain;  
 but my heart is not fluttered as I speak before you.  
 You know it. You can praise or blame me as you wish;  
 it is all one to me. That man is Agamemnon,  
 my husband; he is dead, the work of this right hand 1405  
 that struck in strength of righteousness And that is that.

*Chorus*

Woman, what evil thing planted upon the earth  
 or dragged from the running salt sea could you have tasted now  
 to wear such brutality and walk in the people's hate?  
 You have cast away, you have cut away. You shall go homeless  
 now, 1410  
 crushed with men's bitterness.

*Clytaemestra*

Now it is I you doom to be cast out from my city  
 with men's hate heaped and curses roaring in my ears.  
 Yet look upon this dead man, you would not cross him once  
 when with no thought more than as if a beast had died, 1415  
 when his ranged pastures swarmed with the deep fleece of flocks,  
 he slaughtered like a victim his own child, my pain  
 grown into love, to charm away the winds of Thrace.  
 Were you not bound to hunt him then clear of this soil  
 for the guilt stained upon him? Yet you hear what I 1420  
 have done, and lo, you are a stern judge. But I say to you:  
 go on and threaten me, but know that I am ready,  
 if fairly you can beat me down beneath your hand,  
 for you to rule; but if the god grant otherwise,  
 you shall be taught—too late, for sure—to keep your place. 1425

*Chorus*

Great your design, your speech is a clamor of pride.  
 Swung to the red act drives the fury within your brain  
 signed clear in the splash of blood over your eyes.  
 Yet to come is stroke given for stroke  
 vengeless, forlorn of friends. 1430



*Clytaemestra*

Now hear you this, the right behind my sacrament:  
 By my child's Justice driven to fulfilment, by  
 her Wrath and Fury, to whom I sacrificed this man,  
 the hope that walks my chambers is not traced with fear  
 while yet Aegisthus makes the fire shine on my hearth, 1435  
 my good friend, now as always, who shall be for us  
 the shield of our defiance, no weak thing, while he,  
 this other, is fallen, stained with this woman you behold,  
 plaything of all the golden girls at Ilum;  
 and here lies she, the captive of his spear, who saw 1440  
 wonders, who shared his bed, the wise in revelations  
 and loving mistress, who yet knew the feel as well  
 of the men's rowing benches Their reward is not  
 unworthy He lies there, and she who swanlike cried  
 aloud her lyric mortal lamentation out 1445  
 is laid against his fond heart, and to me has given  
 a delicate excitement to my bed's delight.

*Chorus*

O that in speed, without pain  
 and the slow bed of sickness  
 death could come to us now, death that forever 1450  
 carries sleep without ending, now that our lord is down,  
 our shield, kindest of men,  
 who for a woman's grace suffered so much,  
 struck down at last by a woman.  
 Alas, Helen, wild heart 1455  
 for the multitudes, for the thousand lives  
 you killed under Troy's shadow,  
 you alone, to shine in man's memory  
 as blood flower never to be washed out Surely a demon then 1460  
 of death walked in the house, men's agony.

*Clytaemestra*

No, be not so heavy, nor yet draw down  
 in prayer death's ending,

neither turn all wrath against Helen  
for men dead, that she alone killed 1465  
all those Danaan lives, to work  
the grief that is past all healing.

*Chorus*

Divinity that kneel on this house and the two  
strains of the blood of Tantalus,  
in the hands and hearts of women you steer 1470  
the strength tearing my heart.  
Standing above the corpse, obscene  
as some carrion crow she sings  
the crippled song and is proud.

*Clytaemestra*

Thus have you set the speech of your lips 1475  
straight, calling by name  
the spirit thrice glutted that lives in this race  
From him deep in the nerve is given  
the love and the blood drunk, that before  
the old wound dries, it bleeds again 1480

*Chorus*

Surely it is a huge  
and heavy spirit bending the house you cry;  
alas, the bitter glory  
of a doom that shall never be done with;  
and all through Zeus, Zeus, 1485  
first cause, prime mover  
For what thing without Zeus is done among mortals?  
What here is without God's blessing?  
O king, my king  
how shall I weep for you? 1490  
What can I say out of my heart of pity?  
Caught in this spider's web you lie,  
Your life gasped out in indecent death,  
struck prone to this shameful bed

by your lady's hand of treachery 1495  
and the stroke twin edged of the iron

*Clytaemestra*

Can you claim I have done this?  
Speak of me never  
more as the wife of Agamemnon  
In the shadow of this corpse's queen 1500  
the old stark avenger  
of Atreus for his revel of hate  
struck down this man,  
last blood for the slaughtered children

*Chorus*

What man shall testify 1505  
your hands are clean of this murder?  
How? How? Yet from his father's blood  
might swarm some fiend to guide you  
The black ruin that shoulders  
through the streaming blood of brothers 1510  
strides at last where he shall win requital  
for the children who were eaten

O king, my king  
how shall I weep for you?  
What can I say out of my heart of pity? 1515  
Caught in this spider's web you lie,  
your life gasped out in indecent death,  
struck prone to this shameful bed  
by your lady's hand of treachery  
and the stroke twin edged of the iron. 1520

*Clytaemestra*

No shame, I think, in the death given  
this man And did he not  
first of all in this house wreak death  
by treachery?  
The flower of this man's love and mine, 1525

Iphigeneia of the tears  
 he dealt with even as he has suffered.  
 Let his speech in death's house be not loud.  
 With the sword he struck,  
 with the sword he paid for his own act.

*Chorus*

My thoughts are swept away and I go bewildered. 1530  
 Where shall I turn the brain's  
 activity in speed when the house is falling?  
 There is fear in the beat of the blood rain breaking  
 wall and tower. The drops come thicker.  
 Still fate grinds on yet more stones the blade 1535  
 for more acts of terror.

Earth, my earth, why did you not fold me under  
 before ever I saw this man lie dead  
 fenced by the tub in silver? 1540  
 Who shall bury him? Who shall mourn him?  
 Shall you dare this who have killed  
 your lord? Make lamentation,  
 render the graceless grace to his soul 1545  
 for huge things done in wickedness?  
 Who over this great man's grave shall lay  
 the blessing of tears  
 worked soberly from a true heart? 1550

*Clytaemestra*

Not for you to speak of such tendance.  
 Through us he fell,  
 by us he died; we shall bury.  
 There will be no tears in this house for him.  
 It must be Iphigeneia 1555  
 his child, who else,  
 shall greet her father by the whirling stream  
 and the ferry of tears  
 to close him in her arms and kiss him.

*Chorus*

Here is anger for anger Between them 1560  
 who shall judge lightly?  
 The spoiler is robbed; he killed, he has paid.  
 The truth stands ever beside God's throne  
 eternal he who has wrought shall pay, that is law  
 Then who shall tear the curse from their blood? 1565  
 The seed is stiffened to ruin.

*Clytaemestra*

You see truth in the future  
 at last. Yet I wish  
 to seal my oath with the Spirit  
 in the house I will endure all things as they stand 1570  
 now, hard though it be Hereafter  
 let him go forth to make bleed with death  
 and guilt the houses of others.  
 I will take some small  
 measure of our riches, and be content  
 that I swept from these halls 1575  
 the murder, the sin, and the fury.

*(Aegisthus enters, followed at a little distance by his  
 armed bodyguard.)*

*Aegisthus*

O splendor and exaltation of this day of doom!  
 Now I can say once more that the high gods look down  
 on mortal crimes to vindicate the right at last,  
 now that I see this man—sweet sight—before me here 1580  
 sprawled in the tangling nets of fury, to atone  
 the calculated evil of his father's hand.  
 For Atreus, this man's father, King of Argolis—  
 I tell you the clear story—drove my father forth,  
 Thyestes, his own brother, who had challenged him 1585  
 in his king's right—forth from his city and his home.  
 Yet sad Thyestes came again to supplicate  
 the hearth, and win some grace, in that he was not slain

nor soiled the doorstone of his fathers with blood spilled.  
 Not his own blood. But Atreus, this man's godless sire, 1590  
 angrily hospitable set a feast for him,  
 in seeming a glad day of fresh meat slain and good  
 cheer, then served my father his own children's flesh  
 to feed on. For he carved away the extremities,  
 hands, feet, and cut the flesh apart, and covered them 1595  
 served in a dish to my father at his table apart,  
 who with no thought for the featureless meal before him ate  
 that ghastly food whose curse works now before your eyes.  
 But when he knew the terrible thing that he had done,  
 he spat the dead meat from him with a cry, and reeled 1600  
 spurning the table back to heel with strength the curse:  
 "Thus crash in ruin all the seed of Pleisthenes"  
 Out of such acts you see this dead man stricken here,  
 and it was I, in my right, who wrought this murder, I  
 third born to my unhappy father, and with him 1605  
 driven, a helpless baby in arms, to banishment.  
 Yet I grew up, and justice brought me home again,  
 till from afar I laid my hands upon this man,  
 since it was I who pieced together the fell plot.  
 Now I can die in honor again, if die I must, 1610  
 having seen him caught in the cords of his just punishment

*Chorus*

Aegisthus, this strong vaunting in distress is vile,  
 You claim that you deliberately killed the king,  
 you, and you only, wrought the pity of this death  
 I tell you then: There shall be no escape, your head 1615  
 shall face the stones of anger from the people's hands.

*Aegisthus*

So loud from you, stooped to the meanest rowing bench  
 with the ship's masters lordly on the deck above?  
 You are old men; well, you shall learn how hard it is  
 at your age, to be taught how to behave yourselves. 1620  
 But there are chains, there is starvation with its pain,

excellent teachers of good manners to old men,  
wise surgeons and exemplars. Look! Can you not see it?  
Lash not at the goads for fear you hit them, and be hurt.

*Chorus*

So then you, like a woman, waited the war out 1625  
here in the house, shaming the master's bed with lust,  
and planned against the lord of war this treacherous death?

*Aegisthus*

It is just such words as these will make you cry in pain.  
Not yours the lips of Orpheus, no, quite otherwise,  
whose voice of rapture dragged all creatures in his train. 1630  
You shall be dragged, for baby whimperings sobbed out  
in rage. Once broken, you will be easier to deal with.

*Chorus*

How shall you be lord of the men of Argos, you  
who planned the murder of this man, yet could not dare  
to act it out, and cut him down with your own hand? 1635

*Aegisthus*

No, clearly the deception was the woman's part,  
and I was suspect, that had hated him so long.  
Still with his money I shall endeavor to control  
the citizens. The mutinous man shall feel the yoke  
drag at his neck, no cornfed racing colt that runs 1640  
free traced; but hunger, grim companion of the dark  
dungeon shall see him broken to the hand at last.

*Chorus*

But why, why then, you coward, could you not have slain  
your man yourself? Why must it be his wife who killed,  
to curse the country and the gods within the ground? 1645  
Oh, can Orestes live, be somewhere in sunlight still?  
Shall fate grown gracious ever bring him back again  
in strength of hand to overwhelm these murderers?

*Aegisthus*

You shall learn then, since you stick to stubbornness of mouth and hand.

Up now from your cover, my henchmen: here is work for you to do

1650

*Chorus*

Look, they come! Let every man clap fist upon his hilted sword.

*Aegisthus*

I too am sword-handed against you, I am not afraid of death.

*Chorus*

Death you said and death it shall be; we take up the word of fate.

*Clytaemestra*

No, my dearest, dearest of all men, we have done enough. No more

violence. Here is a monstrous harvest and a bitter reaping time.

1655

There is pain enough already. Let us not be bloody now.

Honored gentlemen of Argos, go to your homes now and give way

to the stress of fate and season. We could not do otherwise than we did. If this is the end of suffering, we can be content broken as we are by the brute heel of angry destiny.

1660

Thus a woman speaks among you. Shall men deign to understand?

*Aegisthus*

Yes, but think of these foolish lips that blossom into leering gibes, think of the taunts they spit against me daring destiny and power, sober opinion lost in insults hurled against my majesty.

*Chorus*

It was never the Argive way to grovel at a vile man's feet.

1665

*Aegisthus*

I shall not forget this; in the days to come I shall be there.



*Chorus*

Nevermore, if God's hand guiding brings Orestes home again.

*Aegisthus*

Exiles feed on empty dreams of hope. I know it. I was one.

*Chorus*

Have your way, gorge and grow fat, soil justice, while the  
power is yours.

*Aegisthus*

You shall pay, make no mistake, for this misguided insolence.

1670

*Chorus*

Crow and strut, brave cockerel by your hen; you have no  
threats to fear.

*Clytaemestra*

These are howls of impotent rage; forget them, dearest; you  
and I

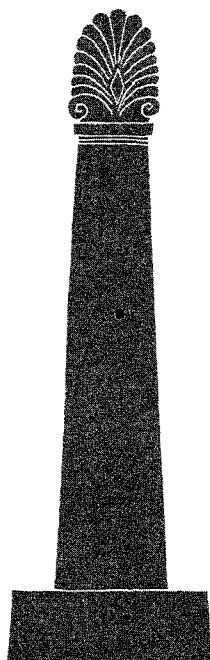
have the power; we two shall bring good order to our house  
at least.

*(They enter the house. The doors close. All persons leave the stage.)*

THE  
LIBATION  
BEARERS

*Translated by*

*RICHMOND LATTIMORE*



## CHARACTERS

*Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytaemestra*

*Pylades, his friend*

*Electra, his sister*

*Chorus, of foreign serving-women*

*A servant (doorkeeper)*

*Clytaemestra, now wife of Aegisthus, queen of Argos*

*Cilissa, the nurse*

*Aegisthus, now king of Argos*

*A follower of Aegisthus*

*Various attendants of Orestes, Clytaemestra, Aegisthus (silent parts)*

## THE LIBATION BEARERS

SCENE: *Argos. The first part of the play (1-651) takes place at the tomb of Agamemnon: the last part (652 to the end) before the door of Clytaemestra's palace. No mechanical change of scene is necessary. The altar or tomb of Agamemnon should be well down stage. The door to the house should be in the center, back.*

*(Enter, as travelers, Orestes and Pylades.)*

*Orestes*

Hermes, lord of the dead, who watch over the powers  
of my fathers, be my savior and stand by my claim.  
Here is my own soil that I walk. I have come home;  
and by this mounded gravebank I invoke my sire  
to hear, to listen.

5

Here is a lock of hair for Inachus, who made  
me grow to manhood. Here a strand to mark my grief.  
I was not by, my father, to mourn for your death  
nor stretched my hand out when they took your corpse away.

*(The chorus, with Electra, enter from the side.)*

But what can this mean that I see, this group that comes  
of women veiled in dignities of black? At what  
sudden occurrence can I guess? Is this some new  
wound struck into our house? I think they bring these urns  
to pour, in my father's honor, to appease the powers  
below. Can I be right? Surely, I think I see  
Electra, my own sister, walk in bitter show  
of mourning Zeus, Zeus, grant me vengeance for my father's  
murder. Stand and fight beside me, of your grace.

10

15

Pylades, stand we out of their way. So may I learn  
the meaning of these women; what their prayer would ask.

20

*Chorus*

I came in haste out of the house  
to carry libations, hurt by the hard stroke of hands.

My cheek shows bright, ripped in the bloody furrows  
of nails gashing the skin. 25

This is my life: to feed the heart on hard-drawn breath.  
And in my grief, with splitting weft  
of ragtorn linen across my heart's  
brave show of robes  
came sound of my hands' strokes 30  
in sorrows whence smiles are fled.

Terror, the dream diviner of  
this house, belled clear, shuddered the skin, blew wrath  
from sleep, a cry in night's obscure watches,  
a voice of fear deep in the house, 35  
dropping deadweight in women's inner chambers.  
And they who read the dream meanings  
and spoke under guarantee of God  
told how under earth  
dead men held a grudge still 40  
and smoldered at their murderers.

On such grace without grace, evil's turning aside  
(Earth, Earth, kind mother!)  
bent, the godless woman 45  
sends me forth. But terror  
is on me for this word let fall.  
What can wash off the blood once spilled upon the ground?  
O hearth soaked in sorrow,  
o wreckage of a fallen house. 50  
Sunless and where men fear to walk  
the mists huddle upon this house  
where the high lords have perished.

The pride not to be warred with, fought with, not to be beaten  
down 55  
of old, sounded in all men's  
ears, in all hearts sounded,  
has shrunk away. A man  
goes in fear. High fortune,

this in man's eyes is god and more than god is this. 60

But, as a beam balances, so  
sudden disasters wait, to strike  
some in the brightness, some in gloom  
of half dark in their elder time.

Desperate night holds others. 65

Through too much glut of blood drunk by our fostering ground  
the vengeful gore is caked and hard, will not drain through  
The deep-run ruin carries away  
the man of guilt. Swarming infection boils within. 70

For one who handles the bridal close, there is no cure.  
All the world's waters running in a single drift  
may try to wash blood from the hand  
of the stained man; they only bring new blood guilt on. 75

But as for me: gods have forced on my city  
resisted fate. From our fathers' houses  
they led us here, to take the lot of slaves.  
And mine it is to wrench my will, and consent  
to their commands, right or wrong, 80  
to beat down my edged hate.

And yet under veils I weep  
the vanities that have killed  
my lord; and freeze with sorrow in the secret heart.

*Electra*

Attendant women, who order our house, since you  
are with me in this supplication and escort 85  
me here, be also my advisers in this rite.

What shall I say, as I pour out these outpourings  
of sorrow? How say the good word, how make my prayer  
to my father? Shall I say I bring it to the man  
beloved, from a loving wife, and mean my mother? I 90  
have not the daring to say this, nor know what else  
to say, as I pour this liquid on my father's tomb.  
Shall I say this sentence, regular in human use:

“Grant good return to those who send to you these flowers  
of honor: gifts to match the . . . evil they have done.” 95

Or, quiet and dishonored, as my father died  
shall I pour out this offering for the ground to drink,  
and go, like one who empties garbage out of doors,  
and turn my eyes, and throw the vessel far away.

Dear friends, in this deliberation stay with me. 100  
We hold a common hatred in this house Do not  
for fear of any, hide your thought inside your heart.  
The day of destiny waits for the free man as well  
as for the man enslaved beneath an alien hand.  
If you know any better course than mine, tell me. 105

*Chorus*

In reverence for your father's tomb as if it were  
an altar, I will speak my heart's thought, as you ask.

*Electra*

Tell me then, please, as you respect my father's grave.

*Chorus*

Say words of grace for those of good will, as you pour.

*Electra*

Whom of those closest to me can I call my friend? 110

*Chorus*

Yourself first; all who hate Aegisthus after that.

*Electra*

You mean these prayers shall be for you, and for myself?

*Chorus*

You see it now; but it is you whose thought this is.

*Electra*

Is there some other we should bring in on our side?

*Chorus*

Remember Orestes, though he wanders far away. 115

*Electra*

That was well spoken; you did well reminding me.

*Chorus*

Remember, too, the murderers, and against them . . .

*Electra*

What shall I say? Guide and instruct my ignorance.

*Chorus*

Invoke the coming of some man, or more than man.

*Electra*

To come to judge them, or to give them punishment?

120

*Chorus*

Say simply: "one to kill them, for the life they took."

*Electra*

I can ask this, and not be wrong in the gods' eyes?

*Chorus*

May you not hurt your enemy, when he struck first?

*Electra*

Almighty herald of the world above, the world  
below: Hermes, lord of the dead, help me; announce  
my prayers to the charmed spirits underground, who watch  
over my father's house, that they may hear Tell Earth  
herself, who brings all things to birth, who gives them strength,  
then gathers their big yield into herself at last.

125

I myself pour these lustral waters to the dead,  
and speak, and call upon my father: Pity me;  
pity your own Orestes. How shall we be lords  
in our house? We have been sold, and go as wanderers  
because our mother bought herself, for us, a man,  
Aegisthus, he who helped her hand to cut you down.  
Now I am what a slave is, and Orestes lives  
outcast from his great properties, while they go proud  
in the high style and luxury of what you worked

130

135



to win. By some good fortune let Orestes come  
back home Such is my prayer, my father. Hear me; hear.  
And for myself, grant that I be more temperate 140  
of heart than my mother; that I act with purer hand.

Such are my prayers for us; but for our enemies,  
father, I pray that your avenger come, that they  
who killed you shall be killed in turn, as they deserve.  
Between my prayer for good and prayer for good I set 145  
this prayer for evil; and I speak it against Them.

For us, bring blessings up into the world Let Earth  
and conquering Justice, and all gods beside, give aid.

Such are my prayers; and over them I pour these drink  
offerings. Yours the strain now, yours to make them flower 150  
with mourning song, and incantation for the dead.

*Chorus*

Let the tear fall, that clashes as it dies  
as died our fallen lord;  
die on this mound that fences good from evil,  
washing away the death stain accursed 155  
of drink offerings shed. Hear me, oh hear, my lord,  
majesty hear me from your dark heart; oh hear.  
Let one come, in strength  
of spear, some man at arms who will set free the house 160  
holding the Scythian bow backbent in his hands,  
a barbarous god of war spattering arrows  
or closing to slash, with sword hilted fast to his hand.

*Electra*

Father, the earth has drunk my offerings poured to you.  
Something has happened here, my women. Help me now. 165

*Chorus*

Speak, if you will. My heart is in a dance of fear.

*Electra*

Someone has cut a strand of hair and laid it on  
the tomb.

*Chorus*

What man? Or was it some deep-waisted girl?

*Electra*

There is a mark, which makes it plain for any to guess. 170

*Chorus*

Explain, and let your youth instruct my elder age.

*Electra*

No one could have cut off this strand, except myself.

*Chorus*

Those others, whom it would have become, are full of hate.

*Electra*

Yet here it is, and for appearance matches well . . .

*Chorus*

With whose hair? Tell me. This is what I long to know. . . . 175

*Electra*

With my own hair. It is almost exactly like.

*Chorus*

Can it then be a secret gift from Orestes?

*Electra*

It seems that it must be nobody's hair but his.

*Chorus*

Did Orestes dare to come back here? How could this be?

*Electra*

He sent this severed strand, to do my father grace. 180

*Chorus*

It will not stop my tears if you are right. You mean  
that he can never again set foot upon this land.

*Electra*

The bitter wash has surged upon my heart as well.  
I am struck through, as by the cross-stab of a sword,

and from my eyes the thirsty and unguarded drops 185  
 burst in a storm of tears like winter rain, as I  
 look on this strand of hair. How could I think some other  
 man, some burgess, could ever go grand in hair like this?  
*She* never could have cut it, she who murdered him  
 and is my mother, but no mother in her heart 190  
 which has assumed God's hate and hates her children. No.  
 And yet, how can I say in open outright confidence  
 this is a treasured token from the best beloved  
 of men to me, Orestes? Does hope fawn on me?  
 Ah  
 I wish it had the kind voice of a messenger 195  
 so that my mind would not be torn in two, I not  
 shaken, but it could tell me plain to throw this strand  
 away as vile, if it was cut from a hated head,  
 or like a brother could have mourned with me, and been  
 a treasured splendor for my father, and his grave. 200  
 The gods know, and we call upon the gods; they know  
 how we are spun in circles like seafarers, in  
 what storms But if we are to win, and our ship live,  
 from one small seed could burgeon an enormous tree.  
 But see, here is another sign Footprints are here. 205  
 The feet that made them are alike, and look like mine  
 There are two sets of footprints: of the man who gave  
 his hair, and one who shared the road with him I step  
 where he has stepped, and heelmarks, and the space between  
 his heel and toe are like the prints I make. Oh, this 210  
 is torment, and my wits are going.

*(Orestes comes from his place of concealment.)*

*Orestes*

Pray for what is to come, and tell the gods that they  
 have brought your former prayers to pass. Pray for success.

*Electra*

Upon what ground? What have I won yet from the gods?

*Orestes*

You have come in sight of all you long since prayed to see.

215

*Electra*

How did you know what man was subject of my prayer?

*Orestes*

I know about Orestes, how he stirred your heart.

*Electra*

Yes; but how am I given an answer to my prayers?

*Orestes*

Look at me. Look for no one closer to you than I.

*Electra*

Is this some net of treachery, friend, you catch me in?

220

*Orestes*

Then I must be contriving plots against myself.

*Electra*

It is your pleasure to laugh at my unhappiness.

*Orestes*

I only mock my own then, if I laugh at you.

*Electra*

Are you really Orestes? Can I call you by that name?

*Orestes*

You see my actual self and are slow to learn. And yet  
you saw this strand of hair I cut in sign of grief  
and shuddered with excitement, for you thought you saw  
me, and again when you were measuring my tracks.

225

Now lay the severed strand against where it was cut  
and see how well your brother's hair matches my head.

230

Look at this piece of weaving, the work of your hand  
with its blade strokes and figured design of beasts. No, no,  
control yourself, and do not lose your head for joy.

I know those nearest to us hate us bitterly.

*Electra*

O dearest, treasured darling of my father's house, 235  
 hope of the seed of our salvation, wept for, trust  
 your strength of hand, and win your father's house again  
 O bright beloved presence, you bring back four lives  
 to me. To call you father is constraint of fact,  
 and all the love I could have borne my mother turns 240  
 your way, while she is loathed as she deserves; my love  
 for a pitilessly slaughtered sister turns to you.  
 And now you were my steadfast brother after all.  
 You alone bring me honor; but let Force, and Right,  
 and Zeus almighty, third with them, be on your side. 245

*Orestes*

Zeus, Zeus, direct all that we try to do Behold  
 the orphaned children of the eagle-father, now  
 that he has died entangled in the binding coils  
 of the deadly viper, and the young he left behind  
 are worn with hunger of starvation, not full grown 250  
 to bring their shelter slain food, as their father did.  
 I, with my sister, whom I name, Electra here,  
 stand in your sight, children whose father is lost We both  
 are driven from the house that should be ours If you  
 destroy these fledgelings of a father who gave you 255  
 sacrifice and high honor, from what hand like his  
 shall you be given the sacred feast which is your right?  
 Destroy the eagle's brood, and you have no more means  
 to send your signs to mortals for their strong belief;  
 nor, if the stump rot through on this baronial tree, 260  
 shall it sustain your altars on sacrificial days  
 Safe keep it: from a little thing you can raise up  
 a house to grandeur, though it now seem overthrown.

*Chorus*

O children, silence! Saviors of your father's house,  
 be silent, children. Otherwise someone may hear 265  
 and for mere love of gossip carry news of all

you do, to those in power, to those I long to see  
some day as corpses in the leaking pitch and flame.

*Orestes*

The big strength of Apollo's oracle will not  
forsake me. For he charged me to win through this hazard, 270  
with divination of much, and speech articulate,  
the winters of disaster under the warm heart  
were I to fail against my father's murderers;  
told me to cut them down in their own fashion, turn  
to the bull's fury in the loss of my estates. 275  
He said that else I must myself pay penalty  
with my own life, and suffer much sad punishment;  
spoke of the angers that come out of the ground from those  
beneath who turn against men; spoke of sicknesses,  
ulcers that ride upon the flesh, and cling, and with 280  
wild teeth eat away the natural tissue, how on this  
disease shall grow in turn a leprous fur. He spoke  
of other ways again by which the avengers might  
attack, brought to fulfilment from my father's blood.  
For the dark arrow of the dead men underground 285  
from those within my blood who fell and turn to call  
upon me; madness and empty terror in the night  
on one who sees clear and whose eyes move in the dark,  
must tear him loose and shake him until, with all his bulk  
degraded by the bronze-loaded lash, he lose his city. 290  
And such as he can have no share in the communal bowl  
allowed them, no cup filled for friends to drink. The wrath  
of the father comes unseen on them to drive them back  
from altars None can take them in nor shelter them.  
Dishonored and unloved by all the man must die 295  
at last, shrunk and wasted away in painful death.

Shall I not trust such oracles as this? Or if  
I do not trust them, here is work that must be done.  
Here numerous desires converge to drive me on:  
the god's urgency and my father's passion, and 300

with these the loss of my estates wears hard on me;  
the thought that these my citizens, most high renowned  
of men, who toppled Troy in show of courage, must  
go subject to this brace of women; since his heart  
is female; or, if it be not, that soon will show.

305

*Chorus*

Almighty Destinies, by the will  
of Zeus let these things  
be done, in the turning of Justice.  
For the word of hatred spoken, let hate  
be a word fulfilled. The spirit of Right  
cries out aloud and extracts atonement  
due: blood stroke for the stroke of blood  
shall be paid. Who acts, shall endure. So speaks  
the voice of the age-old wisdom.

310

*Orestes*

Father, o my dread father, what thing  
can I say, can I accomplish  
from this far place where I stand, to mark  
and reach you there in your chamber  
with light that will match your dark?  
Yet it is called an action  
of grace to mourn in style for the house,  
once great, of the sons of Atreus.

315

320

*Chorus*

Child, when the fire burns  
and tears with teeth at the dead man  
it can not wear out the heart of will.  
He shows his wrath in the after-  
days. One dies, and is dirged.  
Light falls on the man who killed him.  
He is hunted down by the deathsong  
for sires slain and for fathers,  
disturbed, and stern, and enormous.

325

330

*Electra*

Hear me, my father; hear in turn  
all the tears of my sorrows.  
Two children stand at your tomb to sing  
the burden of your death chant. 335  
Your grave is shelter to suppliants,  
shelter to the outdriven.  
What here is good; what escape from grief?  
Can we outwrestle disaster?

*Chorus*

Yet from such as this the god, if he will, 340  
can work out strains that are fairer.  
For dirges chanted over the grave  
the winner's song in the lordly house;  
bring home to new arms the beloved.

*Orestes*

If only at Ilum, 345  
father, and by some Lycian's hands  
you had gone down at the spear's stroke,  
you would have left high fame in your house,  
in the going forth of your children  
eyes' admiration; 350  
founded the deep piled bank of earth  
for grave by the doubled water  
with light<sup>•</sup> lift for your household;

*Chorus*

loved then by those he loved  
down there beneath the ground 355  
who died as heroes, he would have held  
state, and a lord's majesty,  
vassal only to those most great,  
the Kings of the under darkness.  
For he was King on earth when he lived 360  
over those whose hands held power of life  
and death, and the staff of authority.



*Electra*

No, but not under Troy's  
 ramparts, father, should you have died,  
 nor, with the rest of the spearstruck hordes 365  
 have found your grave by Scamandrus' crossing  
 Sooner, his murderers  
 should have been killed, as he was,  
 by those they loved, and have found their death,  
 and men remote from this outrage 370  
 had heard the distant story.

*Chorus*

Child, child, you are dreaming, since dreaming is a light  
 pastime, of fortune more golden than gold  
 or the Blessed Ones north of the North Wind  
 But the stroke of the twofold lash is pounding 375  
 close, and powers gather under ground  
 to give aid. The hands of those who are lords  
 are unclean, and these are accursed.  
 Power grows on the side of the children.

*Orestes*

This cry has come to your ear 380  
 like a deep driven arrow.  
 Zeus, Zeus, force up from below  
 ground the delayed destruction  
 on the hard heart and the daring  
 hand, for the right of our fathers. 385

*Chorus*

May I claim right to close the deathsong  
 chanted in glory across  
 the man speared and the woman  
 dying. Why darken what deep within me forever  
 flitters? Long since against the heart's 390  
 stem a bitter wind has blown  
 thin anger and burdened hatred.

*Electra*

May Zeus, from all shoulder's strength,  
pound down his fist upon them, 395  
ohay, smash their heads.  
Let the land once more believe.  
There has been wrong done. I ask for right.  
Hear me, Earth. Hear me, grandeurs of Darkness.

*Chorus*

It is but law that when the red drops have been spilled 400  
upon the ground they cry aloud for fresh  
blood. For the death act calls out on Fury  
to bring out of those who were slain before  
new ruin on ruin accomplished.

*Orestes*

Hear me, you lordships of the world below. 405  
Behold in assembled power, curses come from the dead,  
behold the last of the sons of Atreus, foundering  
lost, without future, cast  
from house and right. O god, where shall we turn?

*Chorus*

The heart jumped in me once again 410  
to hear this unhappy prayer.  
I was disconsolate then  
and the deep heart within  
darkened to hear you speak it.  
But when strength came back hope lifted 415  
me again, and the sorrow  
was gone and the light was on me.

*Electra*

Of what thing can we speak, and strike more close,  
than of the sorrows they who bore us have given?  
So let her fawn if she likes. It softens not. 420  
For we are bloody like the wolf  
and savage born from the savage mother.

*Chorus*

I struck my breast in the stroke-style of the Arian,  
the Cissian mourning woman,  
and the hail-beat of the drifting fists was there to see 425  
as the rising pace went in a pattern of blows  
downward and upward until the crashing strokes  
played on my hammered, my all-stricken head.

*Electra*

O cruel, cruel  
all daring mother, in cruel processional 430  
with all his citizens gone,  
with all sorrow for him forgotten  
you dared bury your unbewept lord.

*Orestes*

O all unworthy of him, that you tell me.  
Shall she not pay for this dishonor 435  
for all the immortals,  
for all my own hands can do?  
Let me but take her life and die for it.

*Chorus*

Know then, they hobbled him beneath the armpits,  
with his own hands. She wrought so, in his burial 440  
to make his death a burden  
beyond your strength to carry.  
The mutilation of your father. Hear it.

*Electra*

You tell of how my father was murdered. Meanwhile I 445  
stood apart, dishonored, nothing worth,  
in the dark corner, as you would kennel a vicious dog,  
and burst in an outrush of tears, that came that day  
where smiles would not, and hid the streaming of my grief.  
Hear such, and carve the letters of it on your heart. 450

*Chorus*

Let words such as these  
drip deep in your ears, but on a quiet heart.  
So far all stands as it stands;  
what is to come, yourself burn to know.  
You must be hard, give no ground, to win home.

455

*Orestes*

I speak to you. Be with those you love, my father.

*Electra*

And I, all in my tears, ask with him.

*Chorus*

We gather into murmurous revolt. Hear  
us, hear. Come back into the light.  
Be with us against those we hate.

460

*Orestes*

Warstrength shall collide with warstrength, right with right.

*Electra*

O gods, be just in what you bring to pass.

*Chorus*

My flesh crawls as I listen to them pray.  
The day of doom has waited long.  
They call for it. It may come.

465

O pain grown into the race  
and blood-dripping stroke  
and grinding cry of disaster,  
moaning and impossible weight to bear.  
Sickness that fights all remedy.

470

Here in the house there lies  
the cure for this, not to be brought  
from outside, never from others  
but in themselves, through the fierce wreck and bloodshed.  
Here is a song sung to the gods beneath us.

475

Hear then, you blessed ones under the ground,  
and answer these prayers with strength on our side,  
free gift for your children's conquest.

*Orestes*

Father, o King who died no kingly death, I ask  
the gift of lordship at your hands, to rule your house.

480

*Electra*

I too, my father, ask of you such grace as this:  
to murder Aegisthus with strong hand, and then go free.

*Orestes*

So shall your memory have the feasts that men honor  
in custom. Otherwise when feasts are gay, and portions  
burn for the earth, you shall be there, and none give heed.

485

*Electra*

I too out of my own full dowership shall bring  
libations for my bridal from my father's house.  
Of all tombs, yours shall be the lordliest in my eyes.

*Orestes*

O Earth, let my father emerge to watch me fight.

*Electra*

Persephone, grant still the wonder of success.

490

*Orestes*

Think of that bath, father, where you were stripped of life.

*Electra*

Think of the casting net that they contrived for you.

*Orestes*

They caught you like a beast in toils no bronzesmith made.

*Electra*

Rather, hid you in shrouds that were thought out in shame.

*Orestes*

Will you not waken, father, to these challenges?

495

*Electra*

Will you not rear upright that best beloved head?

*Orestes*

Send out your right to battle on the side of those  
you love, or give us holds like those they caught you in.  
For they threw you. Would you not see them thrown in turn?

*Electra*

Hear one more cry, father, from me. It is my last. 500  
Your nestlings huddle suppliant at your tomb: look forth  
and pity them, female with the male strain alike.  
Do not wipe out this seed of the Pelopidae.  
So, though you died, you shall not yet be dead, for when  
a man dies, children are the voice of his salvation 505  
afterward. Like corks upon the net, these hold  
the drenched and flaxen meshes, and they will not drown.  
Hear us, then. Our complaints are for your sake, and if  
you honor this our argument, you save yourself.

*Chorus*

None can find fault with the length of this discourse you drew 510  
out, to show honor to a grave and fate unwept  
before. The rest is action. Since your heart is set  
that way, now you must strike and prove your destiny.

*Orestes*

So. But I am not wandering from my strict course  
when I ask why she sent these libations, for what cause 515  
she acknowledges, too late, a crime for which there is  
no cure. Here was a wretched grace brought to a man  
dead and unfeeling. This I fail to understand.  
The offerings are too small for the act done. Pour out  
all your possessions to atone one act of blood, 520  
you waste your work, it is all useless, reason says.  
Explain me this, for I would learn it, if you know.

*Chorus*

I know, child, I was there. It was the dreams she had.  
The godless woman had been shaken in the night  
by floating terrors, when she sent these offerings.

525

*Orestes*

Do you know the dream, too? Can you tell it to me right?

*Chorus*

She told me herself. She dreamed she gave birth to a snake.

*Orestes*

What is the end of the story then? What is the point?

*Chorus*

She laid it swathed for sleep as if it were a child.

*Orestes*

A little monster. Did it want some kind of food?

530

*Chorus*

She herself, in the dream, gave it her breast to suck.

*Orestes*

How was her nipple not torn by such a beastly thing?

*Chorus*

It was. The creature drew in blood along with the milk.

*Orestes*

No void dream this. It is the vision of a man.

*Chorus*

She woke screaming out of her sleep, shaky with fear,  
as torches kindled all about the house, out of  
the blind dark that had been on them, to comfort the queen.  
So now she sends these mourning offerings to be poured  
and hopes they are medicinal for her disease.

535

*Orestes*

But I pray to the earth and to my father's grave  
that this dream is for me and that I will succeed.

540

See, I divine it, and it coheres all in one piece.  
 If this snake came out of the same place whence I came,  
 if she wrapped it in robes, as she wrapped me, and if  
 its jaws gaped wide around the breast that suckled me, 545  
 and if it stained the intimate milk with an outburst  
 of blood, so that for fright and pain she cried aloud,  
 it follows then, that as she nursed this hideous thing  
 of prophecy, she must be cruelly murdered. I  
 turn snake to kill her. This is what the dream portends. 550

*Chorus*

I choose you my interpreter to read these dreams.  
 So may it happen. Now you must rehearse your side  
 in their parts. For some, this means the parts they must not play.

*Orestes*

Simple to tell them. My sister here must go inside.  
 I charge her to keep secret what we have agreed, 555  
 so that, as they by treachery killed a man of high  
 degree, by treachery tangled in the self same net  
 they too shall die, in the way Loxias has ordained,  
 my lord Apollo, whose word was never false before.  
 Disguised as an outlander, for which I have all gear, 560  
 I shall go to the outer gates with Pylades  
 whom you see here. He is hereditary friend  
 and companion-in-arms of my house. We two shall both assume  
 the Parnassian dialect and imitate the way  
 they talk in Phocis. If none at the door will take us in 565  
 kindly, because the house is in a curse of ills,  
 we shall stay there, till anybody who goes by  
 the house will wonder why we are shut out, and say:  
 "why does Aegisthus keep the suppliant turned away  
 from his gates, if he is hereabouts and knows of this?" 570  
 But if I once cross the doorstone of the outer gates  
 and find my man seated upon my father's throne,  
 or if he comes down to confront me, and uplifts  
 his eyes to mine, then lets them drop again, be sure,



before he can say: "where does the stranger come from?" I 575  
shall plunge my sword with lightning speed, and drop him dead.  
Our Fury who is never starved for blood shall drink  
for the third time a cupful of unwatered blood.

Electra, keep a careful eye on all within 580  
the house, so that our plans will hold together. You,  
women. I charge you, hold your tongues religiously.  
Be silent if you must, or speak in the way that will  
help us. And now I call upon the god who stands  
close, to look on, and guide the actions of my sword.

*(Exeunt Orestes and Pylades. Exit separately, Electra )*

*Chorus*

Numberless, the earth breeds 585  
dangers, and the sober thought of fear.

The bending sea's arms swarm  
with bitter, savage beasts.  
Torches blossom to burn along  
the high space between ground and sky 590  
Things fly, and things walk the earth.  
Remember too  
the storm and wrath of the whirlwind.

But who can recount all  
the high daring in the will 595  
of man, and in the stubborn hearts of women  
the all-adventurous passions  
that couple with man's overthrow.

The female force, the desperate  
love crams its resisted way 600  
on marriage and the dark embrace  
of brute beasts, of mortal men

Let him, who goes not on flimsy wings  
of thought, learn from her,  
Althaea, Thestius'  
daughter: who maimed her child, and hard 605  
of heart, in deliberate guile

set fire to the bloody torch, her own son's  
 agemate, that from the day he emerged  
 from the mother's womb crying  
 shared the measure of all his life 610  
 down to the marked death day.

And in the legends there is one more, a girl  
 of blood, figure of hate  
 who, for the enemy's 615  
 sake killed one near in blood, seduced by the wrought  
 golden necklace from Crete,  
 wherewith Minos bribed her. She sundered  
 from Nisus his immortal hair  
 as he all unsuspecting 620  
 breathed in a tranquil sleep. Foul wretch,  
 Hermes of death has got her now.

Since I recall cruelties from quarrels long  
 ago, in vain, and married love turned to bitterness  
 a house would fend far away 625  
 by curse; the guile, treacheries of the woman's heart  
 against a lord armored in  
 power, a lord his enemies revered,  
 I prize the hearth not inflamed within the house,  
 the woman's right pushed not into daring. 630

Of all four things legends tell the Lemnian  
 outranks, a vile wizard's charm, detestable  
 so that man names a hideous  
 crime "Lemnian" in memory of their wickedness  
 When once the gods loathe a breed 635  
 of men they go outcast and forgotten.  
 No man respects what the gods have turned against.  
 What of these tales I gather has no meaning?

The sword edges near the lungs.  
 It stabs deep, bittersharp, 640  
 and right drives it. For that which had no right

lies not yet stamped into the ground, although  
one in sin transgressed Zeus' majesty. 645

Right's anvil stands staunch on the ground  
and the smith, Destiny, hammers out the sword. *h*  
Delayed in glory, pensive from  
the murk, Vengeance brings home at last 650  
a child, to wipe out the stain of blood shed long ago.

(*Enter Orestes and Pylades*)

*Orestes*

In there! Inside! Does anyone hear me knocking at  
the gate? I will try again. Is anyone at home?  
Try a third time. I ask for someone to come from the house, 655  
if Aegisthus lets it welcome friendly visitors.

*Servant (inside)*

All right, I hear you. Where does the stranger come from, then?

*Orestes*

Announce me to the masters of the house. It is  
to them I come, and I have news for them to hear.  
And be quick, for the darkening chariot of night 660  
leans to its course; the hour for wayfarers to drop  
anchor in some place that entertains all travelers.  
Have someone of authority in the house come out,  
the lady of the place or, more appropriately,  
its lord, for then no delicacy in speaking blurs 665  
the spoken word. A man takes courage and speaks out  
to another man, and makes clear everything he means.

(*Enter Clytaemestra*)

*Clytaemestra*

Friends, tell me only what you would have, and it is yours.  
We have all comforts that go with a house like ours,  
hot baths, and beds to charm away your weariness 670  
with rest, and the regard of temperate eyes. But if  
you have some higher business, more a matter of state,  
that is the men's concern, and I will tell them of it.

*Orestes*

I am a Daulian stranger out of Phocis. As  
 I traveled with my pack and my own following 675  
 making for Argos, where my feet are rested now,  
 I met a man I did not know, nor did he know  
 me, but he asked what way I took, and told me his.  
 It was a Phocian, Strophius; for he told me his name  
 and said: "Friend, since in any case you make for Argos, 680  
 remember carefully to tell Orestes' parents  
 that he is dead; please do not let it slip your mind.  
 Then, if his people decide to have him brought back home,  
 or bury him where he went to live, all outlander  
 forever, carry their requests again to me. 685  
 For as it is the bronze walls of an urn close in  
 the ashes of a man who has been deeply mourned."

So much I know, no more. But whether I now talk  
 with those who have authority and concern in this  
 I do not know. I think his father should be told. 690

*Clytaemestra*

Ah me. You tell us how we are stormed from head to heel.  
 Oh curse upon our house, bitter antagonist,  
 how far your eyes range. What was clean out of your way  
 your archery brings down with a distant deadly shot  
 to strip unhappy me of all I ever loved. 695  
 Even Orestes now! He was so well advised  
 to keep his foot clear of this swamp of death. But now  
 set down as traitor the hope that was our healer once  
 and made us look for a bright revel in our house.

*Orestes*

I could have wished, with hosts so prosperous as you, 700  
 to have made myself known by some more gracious news  
 and so been entertained by you. For what is there  
 more kindly than the feeling between host and guest?  
 Yet it had been abuse of duty in my heart

had I not given so great a matter to his friends, 705  
being so bound by promise and the stranger's rights

*Clytaemestra*

You shall not find that your reception falls below  
your worth, nor be any the less our friend for this.  
Some other would have brought the news in any case.  
But it is the hour for travelers who all day have trudged 710  
the long road, to be given the rest that they deserve.  
Escort this gentleman with his companion and  
his men, to where our masculine friends are made at home.  
Look after them, in manner worthy of a house  
like ours; you are responsible for their good care. 715  
Meanwhile, we shall communicate these matters to  
the masters of the house, and with our numerous friends  
deliberate the issues of this fatal news.

*(Exeunt all but the Chorus)*

*Chorus*

Handmaidens of this house, who help our cause,  
how can our lips frame 720  
some force that will show for Orestes?  
O Lady Earth, Earth Queen, who now  
ride mounded over the lord of ships  
where the King's corpse lies buried,  
hear us, help us. 725  
Now the time breaks for Persuasion in stealth  
to go down to the pit, with Hermes of death  
and the dark, to direct  
trial by the sword's fierce edge.  
I think our newcomer is at his deadly work; 730  
I see Orestes' old nurse coming forth, in tears.

*(Enter Cilissa.)*

Now where away, Cilissa, through the castle gates,  
with sorrow as your hireless fellow-wayfarer?

*Cilissa*

The woman who is our mistress told me to make haste  
 and summon Aegisthus for the strangers, "so that he  
 can come and hear, as man to man, in more detail 735  
 this news that they have brought." She put a sad face on  
 before the servants, to hide the smile inside her eyes  
 over this work that has been done so happily  
 for her—though on this house the curse is now complete 740  
 from the plain story that the stranger men have brought.  
 But as for that Aegisthus, oh, he will be pleased  
 enough to hear the story. Poor unhappy me,  
 all my long-standing mixture of misfortunes, hard  
 burden enough, here in this house of Atreus, 745  
 when it befell me made the heart ache in my breast.  
 But never yet did I have to bear a hurt like this.  
 I took the other troubles bravely as they came:  
 but now, darling Orestes! I wore out my life  
 for him. I took him from his mother, brought him up. 750  
 There were times when he screamed at night and woke me from  
 my rest; I had to do many hard tasks, and now  
 useless; a baby is like a beast, it does not think  
 but you have to nurse it, do you not, the way it wants.  
 For the child still in swaddling clothes can not tell us 755  
 if he is hungry or thirsty, if he needs to make  
 water. Children's young insides are a law to themselves.  
 I needed second sight for this, and many a time  
 I think I missed, and had to wash the baby's clothes.  
 The nurse and laundrywoman had a combined duty 760  
 and that was I. I was skilled in both handicrafts,  
 and so Orestes' father gave him to my charge.  
 And now, unhappy, I am told that he is dead  
 and go to take the story to that man who has  
 defiled our house; he will be glad to hear such news. 765

*Chorus*

Did she say he should come back armed in any way?

*Cilissa*

How, armed? Say it again. I do not understand.

*Chorus*

Was he to come with bodyguards, or by himself?

*Cilissa*

She said to bring his followers, the men-at-arms.

*Chorus*

Now, if you hate our master, do not tell him that,  
but simply bid him come as quickly as he can  
and cheerfully. In that way he will not take fright.  
It is the messenger who makes the bent word straight.

770

*Cilissa*

But are you happy over what I have told you?

*Chorus*

Perhaps: if Zeus might turn our evil wind to good.

775

*Cilissa*

How so? Orestes, once hope of the house, is gone.

*Chorus*

Not yet. It would be a poor seer who saw it thus.

*Cilissa*

What is this? Have you some news that has not been told?

*Chorus*

Go on and take your message, do as you were bid.  
The gods' concerns are what concern only the gods.

780

*Cilissa*

I will go then and do all this as you have told  
me to. May all be for the best. So grant us god.

(Exit *Cilissa*.)

*Chorus*

Now to my supplication, Zeus,  
father of Olympian gods,

grant that those who struggle hard to see  
temperate things done in the house win their aim  
in full. All that I spoke  
was spoken in right. Yours, Zeus, to protect. 785

Zeus, Zeus, make him who is now  
in the house stand above those who  
hate. If you rear him to greatness,  
double and three times  
and blithely he will repay you. 790

See the colt of this man whom you loved  
harnessed to the chariot  
of suffering. Set upon the race he runs  
sure control. Make us not see him break  
stride, but clean down the course  
hold the strain of his striding speed. 795

You that, deep in the house  
sway their secret pride of wealth,  
hear us, gods of sympathy.  
For things done in time past  
wash out the blood in fair-spoken verdict.  
Let the old murder in  
the house breed no more. 800

And you, who keep, magnificent, the hallowed and huge  
cavern, o grant that the man's house lift up its head  
and look on the shining of daylight  
and liberty with eyes made  
glad with gazing out from the helm of darkness. 810

And with right may the son  
of Maia lend his hand, strong to send  
wind fair for action, if he will.  
Much else lies secret he may show at need. 815  
He speaks the markless word, by  
night hoods darkness on the eyes  
nor shows more plainly when the day is there.



Then at last we shall sing  
for deliverance of the house 820  
the woman's song that sets the wind  
fair, no thin drawn and grief  
struck wail, but this: "The ship sails fair."  
My way, mine, the advantage piles here, with wreck  
and ruin far from those I love. 825

Be not fear struck when your turn comes in the action  
but with a great cry *Father*  
when she cries *Child* to you  
go on through with the innocent murder. 830

Yours to raise high within  
your body the heart of Perseus  
and for those under the ground you loved  
and those yet above, exact  
what their bitter passion may desire; make 835  
disaster a thing of blood inside the house;  
wipe out the man stained with murder.

(*Enter Aegisthus*)

*Aegisthus*

It is not without summons that I come, but called  
by messenger, with news that there are strangers here  
arrived, telling a story that brings no delight: 840  
the death of Orestes. For our house, already bitten  
and poisoned, to take this new load upon itself  
would be a thing of dripping fear and blood. Yet how  
shall I pass upon these rumors? As the living truth?  
For messages made out of women's terror leap 845  
high in the upward air and empty die. Do *you*  
know anything of this by which to clear my mind?

*Chorus*

We heard, yes. But go on inside and hear it from  
the strangers. Messengers are never quite so sure  
as a man's questions answered by the men themselves. 850

*Aegisthus*

I wish to question, carefully, this messenger  
and learn if he himself was by when the man died  
or if he heard but some blind rumor and so speaks.  
The mind has eyes, not to be easily deceived.

*(Exit Aegisthus.)*

*Chorus*

Zeus, Zeus, what shall I say, where make 855  
a beginning of prayer for the gods' aid?  
My will is good  
but how shall I speak to match my need?  
The bloody edges of the knives that rip  
man-flesh are moving to work It will mean 860  
utter and final ruin imposed  
on Agamemnon's  
house: or our man will kindle a flame  
and light of liberty, win the domain  
and huge treasure again of his fathers. 865  
Forlorn challenger, though blessed by god,  
Orestes must come to grips with two,  
so wrestle. Yet may he throw them.

*(A cry is heard from inside the house.)*

Listen, it goes 870  
but how? What has been done in the house?  
Stand we aside until the work is done, for so  
we shall not seem to be accountable in this  
foul business For the fight is done, the issue drawn.

*(Enter a follower of Aegisthus )*

*Follower*

O sorrow, all is sorrow for our stricken lord. 875  
Raise up again a triple cry of sorrow, for  
Aegisthus lives no longer. Open there, open  
quick as you may, and slide back the doorbars on the women's  
gates. It will take the strength of a young arm, but not  
to fight for one who is dead and done for. What use there? 880

Ahoy!

My cry is to the deaf and I babble in vain  
at sleepers to no purpose. Clytaemestra, where  
is she, does what? Her neck is on the razor's edge  
and ripe for lopping, as she did to others before.

(Enter Clytaemestra)

*Clytaemestra*

What is this, and why are you shouting in the house?

885

*Follower*

I tell you, he is alive and killing the dead.

*Clytaemestra*

Ah, so. You speak in riddles, but I read the rhyme.  
We have been won with the treachery by which we slew.  
Bring me quick, somebody, an ax to kill a man

(Exit follower.)

and we shall see if we can beat him before we  
go down—so far gone are we in this wretched fight.

890

(Enter Orestes and Pylades with swords drawn)

*Orestes*

I want you also: the other one has had enough.

*Clytaemestra*

Beloved, strong Aegisthus, are you dead indeed?

*Orestes*

You love your man, then? You shall lie in the same grave  
with him, and never be unfaithful even in death.

895

*Clytaemestra*

Hold, my son. Oh take pity, child, before this breast  
where many a time, a drowsing baby, you would feed  
and with soft gums sucked in the milk that made you strong.

*Orestes*

What shall I do, Pylades? Be shamed to kill my mother?

*Pylades*

What then becomes thereafter of the oracles  
declared by Loxias at Pytho? What of sworn oaths?  
Count all men hateful to you rather than the gods

*Orestes*

I judge that you win. Your advice is good.  
(*To Clytaemestra.*)

Come here.

My purpose is to kill you over his body.  
You thought him bigger than my father while he lived.  
Die then and sleep beside him, since he is the man  
you love, and he you should have loved got only your hate.

*Clytaemestra*

I raised you when you were little. May I grow old with you?

*Orestes*

You killed my father. Would you make your home with me?

*Clytaemestra*

Destiny had some part in that, my child.

*Orestes*

Why then  
destiny has so wrought that this shall be your death.

*Clytaemestra*

A mother has her curse, child. Are you not afraid?

*Orestes*

No. You bore me and threw me away, to a hard life.

*Clytaemestra*

I sent you to a friend's house. This was no throwing away.

*Orestes*

I was born of a free father. You sold me.

*Clytaemestra*

So? Where then is the price that I received for you?

*Orestes*

I could say It would be indecent to tell you

*Clytaemestra*

Or if you do, tell also your father's vanities.

*Orestes*

Blame him not. He suffered while you were sitting here at home.

*Clytaemestra*

It hurts women to be kept from their men, my child.

920

*Orestes*

The man's hard work supports the women who sit at home.

*Clytaemestra*

I think, child, that you mean to kill your mother.

*Orestes*

No.

It will be you who kill yourself. It will not be I.

*Clytaemestra*

Take care. Your mother's curse, like dogs, will drag you down.

*Orestes*

How shall I escape my father's curse, if I fail here?

925

*Clytaemestra*

I feel like one who wastes live tears upon a tomb.

*Orestes*

Yes, this is death, your wages for my father's fate.

*Clytaemestra*

You are the snake I gave birth to, and gave the breast.

*Orestes*

Indeed, the terror of your dreams saw things to come  
clearly. You killed, and it was wrong. Now suffer wrong.

930

(*Orestes and Pylades take Clytaemestra inside the house*)

*Chorus*

I have sorrow even for this pair in their twofold  
downfall. But since Orestes had the hardiness  
to end this chain of bloodlettings, here lies our choice,  
that the eyes' light in this house shall not utterly die.

Justice came at the last to Priam and all his sons 935  
and it was heavy and hard,  
but into the house of Agamemnon returned  
the double lion, the double assault,  
and the Pythian-steered exile  
drove home to the hilt 940  
vengeance, moving strongly in guidance sent by the god.

Raise up the high cry o over our lordships' house  
won free of distress, free of its fortunes wasted  
by two stained with murder,  
free of its mournful luck. 945

He came back; his work lay in the secret attack  
and it was stealthy and hard  
but in the fighting his hand was steered by the very daughter  
of Zeus: Right we call her,  
mortals who speak of her and name her well. Her wind 950  
is fury and death visited upon those she hates.

All that ~~Loxias~~ <sup>Loxias</sup>, who on Parnassus holds  
the huge, the deep cleft in the ground, shrilled aloud,  
by guile that is no guile 955  
returns now to assault the wrong done and grown old.  
Divinity keeps, we know not how, strength to resist  
surrender to the wicked.  
The power that holds the sky's majesty wins our worship. 960

Light is here to behold.  
The big bit that held our house is taken away.  
Rise up, you halls, arise; for time grown too long  
you lay tumbled along the ground.

Time brings all things to pass Presently time shall cross 965  
 the outgates of the house after the stain is driven  
 entire from the hearth  
 by ceremonies that wash clean and cast out the furies.  
 The dice of fortune shall be thrown once more, and lie  
 in a fair fall smiling 970  
 up at the new indwellers come to live in the house.

*(The doors of the house open, to show Orestes standing over the  
 bodies of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus. His attendants display  
 the robe in which Clytaemestra had entangled Agamem-  
 non and which she displayed after his murder.)*

Orestes

Behold the twin tyrannies of our land, these two  
 who killed my father and who sacked my house. For a time  
 they sat upon their thrones and kept their pride of state, 975  
 and they are lovers still. So may you judge by what  
 befell them, for as they were pledged their oath abides  
 They swore together death for my unhappy sire  
 and swore to die together. Now they keep their oath.

Behold again, o audience of these evil things, 980  
 the engine against my wretched father they devised,  
 the hands' entanglement, the hobbles for his feet.  
 Spread it out. Stand around me in a circle and  
 display this net that caught a man. So shall, not my  
 father, but that great father who sees all, the Sun, 985  
 look on my mother's sacrilegious handiwork  
 and be a witness for me in my day of trial  
 how it was in all right that I achieved this death,  
 my mother's: for of Aegisthus' death I take no count:  
 he has his seducer's punishment, no more than law. 990

But she, who plotted this foul death against the man  
 by whom she carried the weight of children underneath  
 her zone, burden once loved, shown hard and hateful now,  
 what does she seem to be? Some water snake, some viper

whose touch is not even to him who felt no fang  
strike, by that brutal and wrong daring in her heart. 995

And this thing: what shall I call it and be right, in all  
eloquence? Trap for an animal or winding sheet  
for dead man? Or bath curtain? Since it is a net,  
robe you could call it, to entangle a man's feet. 1000

Some highwayman might own a thing like this, to catch  
the wayfarer and rob him of his money and  
so make a living. With a treacherous thing like this  
he could take many victims and go warm within.

May no such wife as she was come to live with me. 1005  
Sooner, let God destroy me, with no children born.

*Chorus*

Ah, but the pitiful work.  
Dismal the death that was your ending.  
He is left alive; pain flowers for him.

*Orestes*

Did she do it or did she not? My witness is 1010  
this great robe. It was thus she stained Aegisthus' sword.  
Dip it and dip it again, the smear of blood conspires  
with time to spoil the beauty of this precious thing.  
Now I can praise him, now I can stand by to mourn  
and speak before this web that killed my father; yet 1015  
I grieve for the thing done, the death, and all our race.  
I have won; but my victory is soiled, and has no pride.

*Chorus*

There is no mortal man who shall turn  
unhurt his life's course to an end not marred.  
There is trouble here. There is more to come. 1020

*Orestes*

I would have you know, I see not how this thing will end.  
I am a charioteer whose course is wrenched outside  
the track, for I am beaten, my rebellious senses



bolt with me headlong and the fear against my heart  
 is ready for the singing and dance of wrath. But while 1025  
 I hold some grip still on my wits, I say publicly  
 to my friends: I killed my mother not without some right.  
 My father's murder stained her, and the gods' disgust.  
 As for the spells that charmed me to such daring, I  
 give you in chief the seer of Pytho, Loxias. He 1030  
 declared I could do this and not be charged with wrong.  
 Of my evasion's punishment I will not speak:  
 no archery could hit such height of agony.  
 And look upon me now, how I go armored in  
 leafed branch and garland on my way to the centrestone 1035  
 and sanctuary, and Apollo's level place,  
 the shining of the fabulous fire that never dies,  
 to escape this blood that is my own Loxias ordained  
 that I should turn me to no other shrine than this  
 To all men of Argos in time to come I say 1040  
 they shall be witness, how these evil things were done.  
 I go, an outcast wanderer from this land, and leave  
 behind, in life, in death, the name of what I did.

*Chorus*

No, what you did was well done. Do not therefore bind  
 your mouth to foul speech. Keep no evil on your lips. 1045  
 You liberated all the Argive city when  
 you lopped the heads of these two snakes with one clean stroke.

*Orestes*

No!  
 Women who serve this house, they come like gorgons, they  
 wear robes of black, and they are wreathed in a tangle  
 of snakes. I can no longer stay. 1050

*Chorus*

Orestes, dearest to your father of all men  
 what fancies whirl you? Hold, do not give way to fear.

*Orestes*

These are no fancies of affliction. They are clear,  
and real, and here; the bloodhounds of my mother's hate

*Chorus*

It is the blood still wet upon your hands, that makes  
this shaken turbulence be thrown upon your sense. 1055

*Orestes*

Ah, Lord Apollo, how they grow and multiply,  
repulsive for the blood drops of their dripping eyes.

*Chorus*

There is one way to make you clean: let Loxias  
touch you, and set you free from these disturbances. 1060

*Orestes*

You can not see them, but I see them. I am driven  
from this place. I can stay here no longer.

(Exit.)

*Chorus*

May all come right for you then, and may the god look on  
you with favor and guard you in kind circumstance.

Here on this house of the kings the third  
storm has broken, with wind 1065

from the inward race, and gone its course.

The children were eaten: there was the first  
affliction, the curse of Thyestes

Next came the royal death, when a man  
and lord of Achaean armies went down 1070

killed in the bath. Third

is for the savior. He came. Shall I call

it that, or death? Where

is the end? Where shall the fury of fate 1075

be stilled to sleep, be done with?

(Exeunt)



THE  
EUMENIDES

*Translated by*

RICHMOND LATTIMORE

# CHARACTERS

*Priestess of Apollo, the Pythia*

*Apollo*

*Hermes (silent)*

*Ghost of Clytaemestra*

*Orestes*

*Athene*

*Chorus of Eumenides (Furies)*

*Second Chorus; women of Athens*

*Jurymen, herald, citizens of Athens (all silent parts)*

## THE EUMENIDES

SCENE. *For the first part of the play [1-234] the scene is Delphi, before the sanctuary of Pythian Apollo. The action of the rest of the play (235 to the end) takes place at Athens, on the Acropolis before the temple of Athene. A simple change in the backdrop will indicate the shift.*

*(Enter, alone, the Pythia.)*

*Pythia*

I give first place of honor in my prayer to her  
who of the gods first prophesied, the Earth; and next  
to Themis, who succeeded to her mother's place  
of prophecy; so runs the legend; and in third  
succession, given by free consent, not won by force, 5  
another Titan daughter of Earth was seated here.

This was Phoebe. She gave it as a birthday gift  
to Phoebus, who is called still after Phoebe's name.  
And he, leaving the pond of Delos and the reef,  
grounded his ship at the roadstead of Pallas, then 10  
made his way to this land and a Parnassian home.

Deep in respect for his degree Hephaestus' sons  
conveyed him here, for these are builders of roads, and changed  
the wilderness to a land that was no wilderness.

He came so, and the people highly honored him, 15  
with Delphus, lord and helmsman of the country. Zeus  
made his mind full with godship and prophetic craft  
and placed him, fourth in a line of seers, upon this throne.  
So, Loxias is the spokesman of his father, Zeus.

These are the gods I set in the poem of my prayer. 20  
But Pallas-before-the-temple has her right in all  
I say. I worship the nymphs where the Corycian rock  
is hollowed inward, haunt of birds and paced by gods.  
Bromius, whom I forget not, sways this place. From here  
in divine form he led his Bacchanals in arms 25

to hunt down Pentheus like a hare in the deathtrap.  
 I call upon the springs of Pleistus, on the power  
 of Poseidon, and on final loftiest Zeus,  
 then go to sit in prophecy on the throne. May all  
 grant me that this of all my entrances shall be  
 the best by far. If there are any Hellenes here  
 let them draw lots, so enter, as the custom is.  
 My prophecy is only as the god may guide. 30

*(She enters the temple and almost immediately comes out again.)*

Things terrible to tell and for the eyes to see  
 terrible drove me out again from Loxias' house  
 so that I have no strength and cannot stand on springing  
 feet, but run with hands' help and my legs have no speed.  
 An old woman afraid is nothing: a child, no more. 35

See, I am on my way to the wreath-hung recess  
 and on the centrestone I see a man with god's  
 defilement on him postured in the suppliant's seat  
 with blood dripping from his hands and from a new-drawn  
 sword, 40

holding too a branch that had grown high on an olive  
 tree, decorously wrapped in a great tuft of wool,  
 and the fleece shone. So far, at least, I can speak clear. 45

In front of this man slept a startling company  
 of women lying all upon the chairs. Or not  
 women, I think I call them rather gorgons, only  
 not gorgons either, since their shape is not the same.  
 I saw some creatures painted in a picture once,  
 who tore the food from Phineus, only these had no  
 wings, that could be seen; they are black and utterly  
 repulsive, and they snore with breath that drives one back.  
 From their eyes drips the foul ooze, and their dress is such  
 as is not right to wear in the presence of the gods' 50  
 statues, nor even into any human house. 55

I have never seen the tribe that owns this company  
 nor know what piece of earth can claim with pride it bore

such brood, and without hurt and tears for labor given.

Now after this the master of the house must take  
his own measures: Apollo Loxias, who is very strong  
and heals by divination; reads portentous signs,  
and so clears out the houses others hold as well. 60

*(Exit. The doors of the temple open and show Orestes surrounded by the sleeping Furies, Apollo and Hermes beside him )*

*Apollo*

I will not give you up. Through to the end standing  
your guardian, whether by your side or far away,  
I shall not weaken toward your enemies. See now  
how I have caught and overpowered these lewd creatures. 65  
The repulsive maidens have been stilled to sleep, those gray  
and aged children, they with whom no mortal man,  
no god, nor even any beast, will have to do. 70

It was because of evil they were born, because  
they hold the evil darkness of the Pit below  
Earth, loathed alike by men and by the heavenly gods.  
Nevertheless, run from them, never weaken. They  
will track you down as you stride on across the long  
land, and your driven feet forever pound the earth, 75  
on across the main water and the circle-washed  
cities. Be herdsman to this hard march. Never fail  
until you come at last to Pallas' citadel.

Kneel there, and clasp the ancient idol in your arms,  
and there we shall find those who will judge this case, and words 80  
to say that will have magic in their figures. Thus  
you will be rid of your afflictions, once for all.  
For it was I who made you strike your mother down.

*Orestes*

My lord Apollo, you understand what it means to do  
no wrong. Learn also what it is not to neglect. 85  
None can mistrust your power to do good, if you will.



*Apollo*

Remember: the fear must not give you a beaten heart.  
 Hermes, you are my brother from a single sire  
 Look after him, and as you are named the god who guides, 90  
 be such in strong fact He is my suppliant. Shepherd him  
 with fortunate escort on his journeys among men.  
 The wanderer has rights which Zeus acknowledges.

*(Exit Apollo, then Orestes guided by Hermes. Enter the  
 ghost of Clytaemestra.)*

*Clytaemestra*

You would sleep, then? And what use are you, if you sleep?  
 It is because of you I go dishonored thus 95  
 among the rest of the dead. Because of those I killed  
 my bad name among the perished suffers no eclipse  
 but I am driven in disgrace I say to you  
 that I am charged with guilt most grave by these. And yet  
 I suffered too, horribly, and from those most dear, 100  
 yet none among the powers is angered for my sake  
 that I was slaughtered, and by matricidal hands.  
 Look at these gashes in my heart, think where they came  
 from. Eyes illuminate the sleeping brain,  
 but in the daylight man's future cannot be seen. 105

Yet I have given you much to lap up, outpourings  
 without wine, sober propitiations, sacrificed  
 in secrecy of night and on a hearth of fire  
 for you, at an hour given to no other god.  
 Now I watch all these honors trampled into the ground, 110  
 and he is out and gone away like any fawn  
 so lightly, from the very middle of your nets,  
 sprung clear, and laughing merrily at you. Hear me.  
 It is my life depends upon this spoken plea.  
 Think then, o goddesses beneath the ground. For I, 115  
 the dream of Clytaemestra, call upon your name

*(The Furies stir in their sleep and whimper.)*

*Clytaemestra*

Oh, whimper, then, but your man has got away and gone far. He has friends to help him, who are not like mine.

*(They whimper again )*

120

*Clytaemestra*

Too much sleep and no pity for my plight. I stand, his mother, here, killed by Orestes He is gone.

*(They moan in their sleep )*

*Clytaemestra*

You moan, you sleep. Get on your feet quickly, will you? What have you yet got done, except to do evil?

125

*(They moan again )*

*Clytaemestra*

Sleep and fatigue, two masterful conspirators, have dimmed the deadly anger of the mother-snake.

*(The Chorus start violently, then speak in their sleep.)*

*Chorus*

Get him, get him, get him, get him. Make sure.

130

*Clytaemestra*

The beast you are after is a dream, but like the hound whose thought of hunting has no lapse, you bay him on. What are you about? Up, let not work's weariness beat you, nor slacken with sleep so you forget my pain. Scold your own heart and hurt it, as it well deserves, for this is discipline's spur upon her own. Let go upon this man the stormblasts of your bloodshot breath, wither him in your wind, after him, hunt him down once more, and shrivel him in your vitals' heat and flame.

135

*(The ghost disappears, and the Chorus waken and, as they waken, speak severally.)*

*Chorus*

Waken. You are awake, wake her, as I did you. 140  
 You dream still? On your feet and kick your sleep aside.  
 Let us see whether this morning-song means vanity

*(Here they begin to howl.)*

Sisters, we have had wrong done us.  
 When I have undergone so much and all in vain.  
 Suffering, suffering, bitter, oh shame shame, 145  
 unendurable wrong.  
 The hunted beast has slipped clean from our nets and gone  
 Sleep won me, and I lost my capture.

Shame, son of Zeus! Robber is all you are.  
 A young god, you have ridden down powers gray with age, 150  
 taken the suppliant, though a godless man, who hurt  
 the mother who gave him birth.  
 Yourself a god, you stole the matricide away.  
 Where in this act shall any man say there is right?

The accusation came upon me from my dreams, 155  
 and hit me, as with goad in the mid-grip of his fist  
 the charioteer strikes,  
 but deep, beneath lobe and heart.  
 The executioner's cutting whip is mine to feel 160  
 and the weight of pain is big, heavy to bear.

Such are the actions of the younger gods. These hold  
 by unconditional force, beyond all right, a throne  
 that runs reeking blood,  
 blood at the feet, blood at the head. 165  
 The very stone centre of earth here in our eyes horrible  
 with blood and curse stands plain to see.

Himself divine, he has spoiled his secret shrine's  
 hearth with the stain, driven and hallooed the action on. 170  
 He made man's way cross the place of the ways of god  
 and blighted age-old distributions of power.

He has wounded me, but he shall not get this man away.  
 Let him hide under the ground, he shall never go free. 175  
 Cursed suppliant, he shall feel against his head  
 another murderer rising out of the same seed.

*(Apollo enters again from his sanctuary.)*

*Apollo*

Get out, I tell you, go and leave this house. Away  
 in haste, from your presence set the mantic chamber free, 180  
 else you may feel the flash and bite of a flying snake  
 launched from the twisted thong of gold that spans my bow  
 to make you in your pain spew out the black and foaming  
 blood of men, vomit the clots sucked from their veins  
 This house is no right place for such as you to cling 185  
 upon; but where, by judgment given, heads are lopped  
 and eyes gouged out, throats cut, and by the spoil of sex  
 the glory of young boys is defeated, where mutilation  
 lives, and stoning, and the long moan of tortured men  
 spiked underneath the spine and stuck on pales. Listen 190  
 to how the gods spit out the manner of that feast  
 your loves lean to The whole cast of your shape is guide  
 to what you are, the like of whom should hole in the cave  
 of the blood-reeking lion, not in oracular  
 interiors, like mine nearby, wipe off your filth. 195  
 Out then, you flock of goats without a herdsman, since  
 no god has such affection as to tend this brood.

*Chorus*

My lord Apollo, it is your turn to listen now.  
 Your own part in this is more than accessory.  
 You are the one who did it; all the guilt is yours. 200

*Apollo*

So? How? Continue speaking, until I understand.

*Chorus*

You gave this outlander the word to kill his mother.

*Apollo*

The word to exact price for his father. What of that?

*Chorus*

You then dared take him in, fresh from his bloodletting.

*Apollo*

Yes, and I told him to take refuge in this house

205

*Chorus*

You are abusive then to those who sped him here?

*Apollo*

Yes. It was not for you to come near this house,

*Chorus*

and yet

we have our duty. It was to do what we have done.

*Apollo*

An office? You? Sound forth your glorious privilege.

*Chorus*

This: to drive matricides out of their houses.

210

*Apollo*

Then

what if it be the woman and she kills her man?

*Chorus*

Such murder would not be the shedding of kindred blood.

*Apollo*

You have made into a thing of no account, no place,  
the sworn faith of Zeus and of Hera, lady  
of consummations, and Cypris by such argument  
is thrown away, outlawed, and yet the sweetest things  
in man's life come from her, for married love between  
man and woman is bigger than oaths, guarded by right  
of nature. If when such kill each other you relent  
so as not to take vengeance nor eye them in wrath,

215

220

then I deny your manhunt of Orestes goes  
with right. I see that one cause moves you to strong rage  
but on the other clearly you are unmoved to act.  
Pallas divine shall review the pleadings of this case.

*Chorus*

Nothing will ever make me let that man go free.

225

*Apollo*

Keep after him then, and make more trouble for yourselves.

*Chorus*

Do not try to dock my privilege by argument.

*Apollo*

I would not take your privilege if you gave it me.

*Chorus*

No, for you are called great beside the throne of Zeus  
already, but the motherblood drives me, and I go  
to win my right upon this man and hunt him down.

230

*Apollo*

But I shall give the suppliant help and rescue, for  
if I willingly fail him who turns to me for aid,  
his wrath, before gods and men, is a fearful thing.

*(They go out, separately. The scene is now Athens, on the  
Acropolis before the temple and statue of Athene.*

*Orestes enters and takes suppliant posture  
at the feet of the statue.)*

*Orestes*

My lady Athene, it is at Loxias' behest  
I come. Then take in of your grace the wanderer  
who comes, no suppliant, not unwashed of hand, but one  
blunted at last, and worn and battered on the outland  
habitations and the beaten ways of men.

235

Crossing the dry land and the sea alike, keeping  
the ordinances of Apollo's oracle

240

I come, goddess, before your statue and your house  
to keep watch here and wait the issue of my trial.

*(The Chorus enter severally, looking for Orestes.)*

*Chorus*

So. Here the man has left a clear trail behind; keep on, 245  
keep on, as the unspeaking accuser tells us, by  
whose sense, like hounds after a bleeding fawn, we trail  
our quarry by the splash and drip of blood. And now  
my lungs are blown with abundant and with wearisome  
work, mankilling. My range has been the entire extent  
of land, and, flown unwinged across the open water, 250  
I am here, and give way to no ship in my pursuit.  
Our man has gone to cover somewhere in this place.  
The welcome smell of human blood has told me so.

Look again, look again,  
search everywhere, let 255  
not the matricide  
steal away and escape.

*(They see Orestes.)*

See there! He clings to defence  
again, his arms winding the immortal goddess'  
image, so tries to be quit out of our hands. 260  
It shall not be. His mother's blood spilled on the ground  
can not come back again.

It is all soaked and drained into the ground and gone.  
You must give back for her blood from the living man  
red blood of your body to suck, and from your own 265  
I could feed, with bitter-swallowed drench,  
turn your strength limp while yet you live and drag you down  
where you must pay for the pain of the murdered mother,  
and watch the rest of the mortals stained with violence  
against god or guest 270

or hurt parents who were close and dear,  
each with the pain upon him that his crime deserves.  
Hades is great, Hades calls men to reckoning

there under the ground,  
sees all, and cuts it deep in his recording mind.

275

*Orestes*

I have been beaten and been taught, I understand  
the many rules of absolution, where it is right  
to speak and where be silent. In this action now  
speech has been ordered by my teacher, who is wise.  
The stain of blood dulls now and fades upon my hand.  
My blot of matricide is being washed away.  
When it was fresh still, at the hearth of the god, Phoebus,  
this was absolved and driven out by sacrifice  
of swine, and the list were long if I went back to tell  
of all I met who were not hurt by being with me.  
Time in his aging overtakes all things alike.  
Now it is from pure mouth and with good auspices  
I call upon Athene, queen of this land, to come  
and rescue me. She, without work of her spear, shall win  
myself and all my land and all the Argive host  
to stand her staunch companion for the rest of time.  
Whether now ranging somewhere in the Libyan land  
beside her father's crossing and by Triton's run  
of waters she sets upright or enshrouded foot  
rescuing there her friends, or on the Phlegræan flat  
like some bold man of armies sweeps with eyes the scene,  
let her come! She is a god and hears me far away.  
So may she set me free from what is at my back.

280

285

290

295

*Chorus*

Neither Apollo nor Athene's strength must win  
you free, save you from going down forgotten, without  
knowing where joy lies anywhere inside your heart,  
blood drained, chewed dry by the powers of death, a wraith, a  
shell.  
You will not speak to answer, spew my challenge away?  
You are consecrate to me and fattened for my feast,

300



and you shall feed me while you live, not cut down first  
at the altar. Hear the spell I sing to bind you in 305

Come then, link we our choral. Ours  
to show forth the power  
and terror of our music, declare  
our rights of office, how we conspire 310  
to steer men's lives,

We hold we are straight and just. If a man  
can spread his hands and show they are clean,  
no wrath of ours shall lurk for him.  
Unscathed he walks through his life time. 315

But one like this man before us, with stained  
hidden hands, and the guilt upon him,  
shall find us beside him, as witnesses  
of the truth, and we show clear in the end  
to avenge the blood of the murdered. 320

Mother, o my mother night, who gave me  
birth, to be a vengeance on the seeing  
and the blind, hear me. For Leto's  
youngling takes my right away,  
stealing from my clutch the prey 325  
that crouches, whose blood would wipe  
at last the motherblood away.

Over the beast doomed to the fire  
this is the chant, scatter of wits,  
frenzy and fear, hurting the heart, 330  
song of the Furies  
binding brain and blighting blood  
in its stringless melody.

This the purpose that the all-involving  
destiny spun, to be ours and to be shaken 335  
never: when mortals assume outrage  
of own hand in violence,  
these we dog, till one goes

under earth Nor does death  
set them altogether free 340

Over the beast doomed to the fire  
this is the chant, scatter of wits,  
frenzy and fear, hurting the heart,  
song of the Furies  
binding brain and blighting blood 345  
in its stringless melody

When we were born such lots were assigned for our keeping.  
So the immortals must hold hands off, nor is there 350  
one who shall sit at our feasting  
For sheer white robes I have no right and no portion.

I have chosen overthrow  
of houses, where the Battlegod 355  
grown within strikes near and dear  
down So we swoop upon this man  
here. He is strong, but we wear him down  
for the blood that is still wet on him.

Here we stand in our haste to wrench from all others 360  
these devisings, make the gods clear of our counsels  
so that even appeal comes  
not to them, since Zeus has ruled our blood dripping company 365  
outcast, nor will deal with us.

I have chosen overthrow  
of houses, where the Battlegod  
grown within strikes near and dear  
down So we swoop upon this man  
here He is strong, but we wear him down  
for the blood that is still wet on him.

Men's illusions in their pride under the sky melt  
down, and are diminished into the ground, gone  
before the onset of our black robes, pulsing 370  
of our vindictive feet against them.

For with a long leap from high  
above and dead drop of weight  
I bring foot's force crashing down  
to cut the legs from under even  
the runner, and spill him to ruin. 375

He falls, and does not know in the daze of his folly.  
Such in the dark of man is the mist of infection  
that hovers, and moaning rumor tells how his house lies  
under fog that glooms above. 380

For with a long leap from high  
above, and dead drop of weight,  
I bring foot's force crashing down  
to cut the legs from under even  
the runner, and spill him to ruin  
All holds. For we are strong and skilled;  
we have authority; we hold  
memory of evil; we are stern  
nor can men's pleadings bend us We  
drive through our duties, spurned, outcast 385  
from gods, driven apart to stand in light  
not of the sun. So sheer with rock are ways  
for those who see, as upon those whose eyes are lost.

Is there a man who does not fear  
this, does not shrink to hear 390  
how my place has been ordained,  
granted and given by destiny  
and god, absolute? Privilege  
primeval yet is mine, nor am I without place  
though it be underneath the ground 395  
and in no sunlight and in gloom that I must stand.

*(Athene enters, in full armor.)*

*Athene*

From far away I heard the outcry of your call.  
It was beside Scamandrus. I was taking seisin  
of land, for there the Achaean lords of war and first

fighters gave me large portion of all their spears  
had won, the land root and stock to be mine for all  
eternity, for the sons of Theseus a choice gift. 400

From there, sped on my weariless feet, I came, wingless  
but in the rush and speed of the aegis fold. And now  
I see upon this land a novel company 405

which, though it brings no terror to my eyes, brings still  
wonder. Who are you? I address you all alike,  
both you, the stranger kneeling at my image here,  
and you, who are like no seed ever begotten, not 410  
seen ever by the gods as goddesses, nor yet  
stamped in the likenesses of any human form.  
But no. This is the place of the just. Its rights forbid  
even the innocent to speak evil of his mates.

*Chorus*

Daughter of Zeus, you shall hear all compressed to brief 415  
measure We are the gloomy children of the night.  
Curses they call us in our homes beneath the ground.

*Athene*

I know your race, then, and the names by which you are called.

*Chorus*

You shall be told of our position presently.

*Athene*

I can know that, if one will give me a clear account. 420

*Chorus*

We drive from home those who have shed the blood of men.

*Athene*

Where is the place, then, where the killer's flight shall end?

*Chorus*

A place where happiness is nevermore allowed.

*Athene*

Is he one? Do you blast him to this kind of flight?

*Chorus*

Yes He murdered his mother by deliberate choice

425

*Athene*

By random force, or was it fear of someone's wrath?

*Chorus*

Where is the spur to justify man's matricide?

*Athene*

Here are two sides, and only half the argument

*Chorus*

He is unwilling to give or to accept an oath.

*Athene*

You wish to be called righteous rather than act right

430

*Chorus*

No. How so? Out of the riches of your wit, explain.

*Athene*

I say, wrong must not win by technicalities.

*Chorus*

Examine him then yourself Decide it, and be fair.

*Athene*

You would turn over authority in this case to me?

*Chorus*

By all means. Your father's degree, and yours, deserve as much.

435

*Athene*

Your turn, stranger. What will you say in answer? Speak,  
tell me your country and your birth, what has befallen  
you, then defend yourself against the anger of these;  
if it was confidence in the right that made you sit  
to keep this image near my hearth, a supplicant  
in the tradition of Ixion, sacrosanct.

440

Give me an answer which is plain to understand.

*Orestes*

Lady Athene, first I will take the difficult thought  
away that lies in these last words you spoke. I am  
no suppliant, nor was it because I had a stain  
upon my hand that I sat at your image. I  
will give you a strong proof that what I say is true.  
It is the law that the man of the bloody hand must speak  
no word until, by action of one who can cleanse,  
blood from a young victim has washed his blood away.  
Long since, at the homes of others, I have been absolved  
thus, both by running waters and by victims slain.

445

450

I count this scruple now out of the way. Learn next  
with no delay where I am from. I am of Argos  
and it is to my honor that you ask the name

455

of my father, Agamemnon, lord of seafarers,  
and your companion when you made the Trojan city  
of Ilium no city any more. He died  
without honor when he came home. It was my mother  
of the dark heart, who entangled him in subtle gyves  
and cut him down. The bath is witness to his death.

460

I was an exile in the time before this. I came back  
and killed the woman who gave me birth. I plead guilty.  
My father was dear, and this was vengeance for his blood.  
Apollo shares responsibility for this.

465

He counter-spurred my heart and told me of pains to come  
if I should fail to act against the guilty ones.

This is my case. Decide if it be right or wrong.

I am in your hands. Where my fate falls, I shall accept

*Athene*

The matter is too big for any mortal man  
who thinks he can judge it. Even I have not the right  
to analyse cases of murder where wrath's edge  
is sharp, and all the more since you have come, and clung  
a clean and innocent suppliant, against my doors.  
You bring no harm to my city. I respect your rights.

470

475

Yet these, too, have their work. We cannot brush them aside,  
and if this action so runs that they fail to win,  
the venom of their resolution will return  
to infect the soil, and sicken all my land to death.  
Here is dilemma. Whether I let them stay or drive  
480 them off, it is a hard course and will hurt. Then, since  
the burden of the case is here, and rests on me,  
I shall select judges of manslaughter, and swear  
them in, establish a court into all time to come.

Litigants, call your witnesses, have ready your proofs  
485 as evidence under bond to keep this case secure.  
I will pick the finest of my citizens, and come  
back. They shall swear to make no judgment that is not  
just, and make clear where in this action the truth lies.

(Exit.)

*Chorus*

Here is overthrow of all  
490 the young laws, if the claim  
of this matricide shall stand  
good, his crime be sustained.  
Should this be, every man will find a way  
to act at his own caprice;  
495 over and over again in time  
to come, parents shall await  
the deathstroke at their children's hands.

We are the Angry Ones. But we  
shall watch no more over works  
500 of men, and so act. We shall  
let loose indiscriminate death.  
Man shall learn from man's lot, forejudge  
the evils of his neighbor's case,  
see respite and windfall in storm:  
pathetic prophet who consoles  
505 with strengthless cures, in vain.

Nevermore let one who feels  
 the stroke of accident, uplift  
 his voice and make outcry, thus: 510  
 "Oh Justice!  
 Throned powers of the Furies, help!"  
 Such might be the pitiful cry  
 of some father, of the stricken  
 mother, their appeal. Now 515  
 the House of Justice has collapsed.  
 There are times when fear is good.  
 It must keep its watchful place  
 at the heart's controls. There is  
 advantage 520  
 in the wisdom won from pain.  
 Should the city, should the man  
 rear a heart that nowhere goes  
 in fear, how shall such a one  
 any more respect the right? 525  
 Refuse the life of anarchy;  
 refuse the life devoted to  
 one master.  
 The in-between has the power  
 by God's grant always, though 530  
 his ordinances vary.  
 I will speak in defence  
 of reason: for the very child  
 of vanity is violence;  
 but out of health 535  
 in the heart issues the beloved  
 and the longed-for, prosperity.  
 All for all I say to you:  
 bow before the altar of right  
 You shall not 540  
 eye advantage, and heel  
 it over with foot of force.



Vengeance will be upon you  
 The all is bigger than you.  
 Let man see this and take  
 care, to mother and father, 545  
 and to the guest  
 in the gates welcomed, give all rights  
 that befall their position.

The man who does right, free-willed, without constraint 550  
 shall not lose happiness  
 nor be wiped out with all his generation.  
 But the transgressor, I tell you, the bold man  
 who brings in confusion of goods unrightly won,  
 at long last and perforce, when ship toils 555  
 under tempest must strike his sail  
 in the wreck of his rigging.

He calls on those who hear not, caught inside  
 the hard wrestle of water.  
 The spirit laughs at the hot hearted man, 560  
 the man who said "never to me," watches him  
 pinned in distress, unable to run free of the crests.  
 He had good luck in his life. Now  
 he smashes it on the reef of Right  
 and drowns, unwept and forgotten. 565

*(Athene re-enters, guiding twelve citizens chosen as jurors  
 and attended by a herald Other citizens follow.)*

*Athene*

Herald, make proclamation and hold in the host  
 assembled. Let the stabbing voice of the Etruscan  
 trumpet, blown to the full with mortal wind, crash out  
 its high call to all the assembled populace  
 For in the filling of this senatorial ground 570  
 it is best for all the city to be silent and learn  
 the measures I have laid down into the rest of time.  
 So too these litigants, that their case be fairly tried.

*(Trumpet call. All take their places. Enter Apollo.)*

*Chorus*

My lord Apollo, rule within your own domain.  
What in this matter has to do with you? Declare.

575

*Apollo*

I come to testify. This man, by observed law,  
came to me as suppliant, took his place by hearth and hall,  
and it was I who cleaned him of the stain of blood  
I have also come to help him win his case I bear  
responsibility for his mother's murder.

(*To Athene.*)

You

580

who know the rules, initiate the trial. Preside.

*Athene (to the Furies)*

I declare the trial opened Yours is the first word  
For it must justly be the pursuer who speaks first  
and opens the case, and makes plain what the action is.

*Chorus*

We are many, but we shall cut it short. You, then,  
word against word answer our charges one by one.  
Say first, did you kill your mother or did you not?

585

*Orestes*

Yes, I killed her. There shall be no denial of that

*Chorus*

There are three falls in the match and one has gone to us.

*Orestes*

So you say. But you have not even thrown your man.

590

*Chorus*

So. Then how did you kill her? You are bound to say.

*Orestes*

I do. With drawn sword in my hand I cut her throat.

*Chorus*

By whose persuasion and advice did you do this?

*Orestes*

By order of this god, here So he testifies.

*Chorus*

The Prophet guided you into this matricide?

595

*Orestes*

Yes. I have never complained of this. I do not now.

*Chorus*

When sentence seizes you, you will talk a different way.

*Orestes*

I have no fear. My father will aid me from the grave.

*Chorus*

Kill your mother, then put trust in a corpse! Trust on.

*Orestes*

Yes. She was dirtied twice over with disgrace.

600

*Chorus*

Tell me how, and explain it to the judges here.

*Orestes*

She murdered her husband, and thereby my father too.

*Chorus*

Of this stain, death has set her free. But you still live.

*Orestes*

When she lived, why did you not descend and drive her out?

*Chorus*

The man she killed was not of blood congenital.

605

*Orestes*

But am I then involved with my mother by blood-bond?

*Chorus*

Murderer, yes. How else could she have nursed you beneath her heart? Do you forswear your mother's intimate blood?

*Orestes*

Yours to bear witness now, Apollo, and expound  
the case for me, if I was right to cut her down. 610  
I will not deny I did this thing, because I did  
do it. But was the bloodshed right or not? Decide  
and answer. As you answer, I shall state my case.

*Apollo*

To you, established by Athene in your power,  
I shall speak justly I am a prophet, I shall not 615  
lie Never, for man, woman, nor city, from my throne  
of prophecy have I spoken a word, except  
that which Zeus, father of Olympians, might command.  
This is justice. Recognize then how great its strength.  
I tell you, follow our father's will. For not even 620  
the oath that binds you is more strong than Zeus is strong.

*Chorus*

Then Zeus, as you say, authorized the oracle  
to this Orestes, stating he could wreak the death  
of his father on his mother, and it would have no force?

*Apollo*

It is not the same thing for a man of blood to die 625  
honored with the king's staff given by the hand of god,  
and that by means of a woman, not with the far cast  
of fierce arrows, as an Amazon might have done,  
but in a way that you shall hear, o Pallas and you  
who sit in state to judge this action by your vote. 630

He had come home from his campaigning. He had done  
better than worse, in the eyes of a fair judge. She lay  
in wait for him. It was the bath When he was at  
its edge, she hooded the robe on him, and in the blind  
and complex toils tangled her man, and chopped him down. 635

There is the story of the death of a great man,  
solemn in all men's sight, lord of the host of ships.

I have called the woman what she was, so that the people  
whose duty it is to try this case may be inflamed.

*Chorus*

Zeus, by your story, gives first place to the father's death. 640  
Yet Zeus himself shackled elder Cronus, his own  
father. Is this not contradiction? I testify,  
judges, that this is being said in your hearing.

*Apollo*

You foul animals, from whom the gods turn in disgust,  
Zeus could undo shackles, such hurt can be made good, 645  
and there is every kind of way to get out But once  
the dust has drained down all a man's blood, once the man  
has died, there is no raising of him up again.  
This is a thing for which my father never made  
curative spells. All other states, without effort 650  
of hard breath, he can completely rearrange.

*Chorus*

See what it means to force acquittal of this man.  
He has spilled his mother's blood upon the ground. Shall he  
then be at home in Argos in his father's house?  
What altars of the community shall he use? Is there 655  
a brotherhood's lustration that will let him in?

*Apollo*

I will tell you, and I will answer correctly. Watch.  
The mother is no parent of that which is called  
her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed  
that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she 660  
preserves a stranger's seed, if no god interfere.  
I will show you proof of what I have explained. There can  
be a father without any mother. There she stands,  
the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus,  
she who was never fostered in the dark of the womb 665  
yet such a child as no goddess could bring to birth.  
In all else, Pallas, as I best may understand,

I shall make great your city and its populace.  
 So I have brought this man to sit beside the hearth  
 of your house, to be your true friend for the rest of time, 670  
 so you shall win him, goddess, to fight by your side,  
 and among men to come this shall stand a strong bond  
 that his and your own people's children shall be friends.

*Athene*

Shall I assume that enough has now been said, and tell  
 the judges to render what they believe a true verdict? 675

*Chorus*

Every arrow we had has been shot now. We wait  
 on their decision, to see how the case has gone.

*Athene*

So then. How shall I act correctly in your eyes?

*Apollo*

You have heard what you have heard, and as you cast your votes,  
 good friends, respect in your hearts the oath that you have sworn. 680

*Athene*

If it please you, men of Attica, hear my decree  
 now, on this first case of bloodletting I have judged.  
 For Aegeus' population, this forevermore  
 shall be the ground where justices deliberate.  
 Here is the Hill of Ares, here the Amazons 685  
 encamped and built their shelters when they came in arms  
 for spite of Theseus, here they piled their rival towers  
 to rise, new city, and dare his city long ago,  
 and slew their beasts for Ares. So this rock is named  
 from then the Hill of Ares. Here the reverence 690  
 of citizens, their fear and kindred do-no-wrong  
 shall hold by day and in the blessing of night alike  
 all while the people do not muddy their own laws  
 with foul infusions. But if bright water you stain  
 with mud, you nevermore will find it fit to drink. 695

No anarchy, no rule of a single master. Thus  
 I advise my citizens to govern and to grace,  
 and not to cast fear utterly from your city. What  
 man who fears nothing at all is ever righteous? Such  
 be your just terrors, and you may deserve and have 700  
 salvation for your citadel, your land's defence,  
 such as is nowhere else found among men, neither  
 among the Scythians, nor the land that Pelops held.  
 I establish this tribunal It shall be untouched  
 by money-making, grave but quick to wrath, watchful 705  
 to protect those who sleep, a sentry on the land.

These words I have unreeled are for my citizens,  
 advice into the future All must stand upright  
 now, take each man his ballot in his hand, think on  
 his oath, and make his judgment. For my word is said. 710

*Chorus*

I give you counsel by no means to disregard  
 this company. We can be a weight to crush your land.

*Apollo*

I speak too. I command you to fear, and not  
 make void the yield of oracles from Zeus and me.

*Chorus*

You honor bloody actions where you have no right. 715  
 The oracles you give shall be no longer clean.

*Apollo*

My father's purposes are twisted then. For he  
 was appealed to by Ixion, the first murderer.

*Chorus*

Talk! But for my part, if I do not win the case,  
 I shall come back to this land and it will feel my weight. 720

*Apollo*

Neither among the elder nor the younger gods  
 have you consideration. I shall win this suit.

*Chorus*

Such was your action in the house of Pheres. Then  
you beguiled the Fates to let mortals go free from death.

*Apollo*

Is it not right to do well by the man who shows 725  
you worship, and above all when he stands in need?

*Chorus*

You won the ancient goddesses over with wine  
and so destroyed the orders of an elder time.

*Apollo*

You shall not win the issue of this suit, but shall 730  
be made to void your poison to no enemy's hurt.

*Chorus*

Since you, a young god, would ride down my elder age,  
I must stay here and listen to how the trial goes,  
being yet uncertain to loose my anger on the state.

*Athene*

It is my task to render final judgment here.  
This is a ballot for Orestes I shall cast. 735  
There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth,  
and, but for marriage, I am always for the male  
with all my heart, and strongly on my father's side.  
So, in a case where the wife has killed her husband, lord  
of the house, her death shall not mean most to me. And if 740  
the other votes are even, then Orestes wins.  
You of the jurymen who have this duty assigned,  
shake out the ballots from the vessels, with all speed.

*Orestes*

Phoebus Apollo, what will the decision be?

*Chorus*

Darkness of night, our mother, are you here to watch? 745



*Orestes*

This is the end for me. The noose, or else the light.

*Chorus*

Here our destruction, or our high duties confirmed.

*Apollo*

Shake out the votes accurately, Athenian friends.

Be careful as you pick them up. Make no mistake.

In the lapse of judgment great disaster comes. The cast  
of a single ballot has restored a house entire

750

*Athene*

The man before us has escaped the charge of blood.

The ballots are in equal number for each side.

*Orestes*

Pallas Athene, you have kept my house alive.

When I had lost the land of my fathers you gave me  
a place to live. Among the Hellenes they shall say:

755

"A man of Argos lives again in the estates  
of his father, all by grace of Pallas Athene, and  
Apollo, and with them the all-ordaining god  
the Savior"—who remembers my father's death, who looked  
upon my mother's advocates, and rescues me.

760

I shall go home now, but before I go I swear  
to this your country and to this your multitude  
of people into all the bigness of time to be,  
that never man who holds the helm of my state shall come  
against your country in the ordered strength of spears,  
but though I lie then in my grave, I still shall wreak  
helpless bad luck and misadventure upon all  
who stride across the oath that I have sworn: their ways  
disconsolate make, their crossings full of evil  
augury, so they shall be sorry that they moved.

765

But while they keep the upright way, and hold in high  
regard the city of Pallas, and align their spears  
to fight beside her, I shall be their gracious spirit.

770

And so farewell, you and your city's populace. 775  
 May you outwrestle and overthrow all those who come  
 against you, to your safety and your spears' success.

(Exit. Exit also Apollo.)

*Chorus*

Gods of the younger generation, you have ridden down  
 the laws of the elder time, torn them out of my hands.  
 I, disinherited, suffering, heavy with anger 780  
 shall let loose on the land  
 the vindictive poison  
 dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground;  
 this from itself shall breed  
 cancer, the leafless, the barren 785  
 to strike, for the right, their low lands  
 and drag its smear of mortal infection on the ground.  
 What shall I do? Afflicted  
 I am mocked by these people.  
 I have borne what can not 790  
 be borne. Great the sorrows and the dishonor upon  
 the sad daughters of night.

*Athene*

Listen to me. I would not have you be so grieved.  
 For you have not been beaten. This was the result 795  
 of a fair ballot which was even. You were not  
 dishonored, but the luminous evidence of Zeus  
 was there, and he who spoke the oracle was he  
 who ordered Orestes so to act and not be hurt.  
 Do not be angry any longer with this land 800  
 nor bring the bulk of your hatred down on it, do not  
 render it barren of fruit, nor spill the dripping rain  
 of death in fierce and jagged lines to eat the seeds.  
 In complete honesty I promise you a place  
 of your own, deep hidden under ground that is yours by right 805  
 where you shall sit on shining chairs beside the hearth  
 to accept devotions offered by your citizens.

*Chorus*

Gods of the younger generation, you have ridden down  
 the laws of the elder time, torn them out of my hands.  
 I, disinherited, suffering, heavy with anger 810  
 shall let loose on the land  
 the vindictive poison  
 dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground,  
 this from itself shall breed  
 cancer, the leafless, the barren 815  
 to strike, for the right, their low lands  
 and drag its smear of mortal infection on the ground.  
 What shall I do? Afflicted  
 I am mocked by these people.  
 I have borne what can not 820  
 be borne Great the sorrow and the dishonor upon  
 the sad daughters of night

*Athene*

No, not dishonored. You are goddesses. Do not  
 in too much anger make this place of mortal men 825  
 uninhabitable. I have Zeus behind me Do  
 we need to speak of that? I am the only god  
 who know the keys to where his thunderbolts are locked.  
 We do not need such, do we? Be reasonable  
 and do not from a reckless mouth cast on the land 830  
 spells that will ruin every thing which might bear fruit.  
 No. Put to sleep the bitter strength in the black wave  
 and live with me and share my pride of worship. Here  
 is a big land, and from it you shall win first fruits  
 in offerings for children and the marriage rite 835  
 for always. Then you will say my argument was good.

*Chorus*

That they could treat me so!  
 I, the mind of the past, to be driven under the ground  
 out cast, like dirt!  
 The wind I breathe is fury and utter hate. 840

Earth, ah, earth  
 what is this agony that crawls under my ribs?  
 Night, hear me, o Night,  
 mother. They have wiped me out 845  
 and the hard hands of the gods  
 and their treacheries have taken my old rights away.

*Athene*

I will bear your angers You are elder born than I  
 and in that you are wiser far than I Yet still  
 Zeus gave me too intelligence not to be despised. 850  
 If you go away into some land of foreigners,  
 I warn you, you will come to love this country. Time  
 in his forward flood shall ever grow more dignified  
 for the people of this city And you, in your place  
 of eminence beside Erechtheus in his house 855  
 shall win from female and from male processions  
 more than all lands of men beside could ever give.  
 Only in this place that I haunt do not inflict  
 your bloody stimulus to twist the inward hearts  
 of young men, raging in a fury not of wine, 860  
 nor, as if plucking the heart from fighting cocks,  
 engraft among my citizens that spirit of war  
 that turns their battle fury inward on themselves  
 No, let our wars range outward hard against the man  
 who has fallen horribly in love with high renown. 865  
 No true fighter I call the bird that fights at home.  
 Such life I offer you, and it is yours to take  
 Do good, receive good, and be honored as the good  
 are honored. Share our country, the beloved of god.

*Chorus*

That they could treat me so! 870  
 I, the mind of the past, to be driven under the ground  
 out cast, like dirt!  
 The wind I breathe is fury and utter hate.  
 Earth, ah, earth

what is this agony that crawls under my ribs? 875  
 Night, hear me, o Night,  
 mother. They have wiped me out  
 and the hard hands of the gods  
 and their treacheries have taken my old rights away. 880

*Athene*

I will not weary of telling you all the good things  
 I offer, so that you can never say that you,  
 an elder god, were driven unfriended from the land  
 by me in my youth, and by my mortal citizens.  
 But if you hold Persuasion has her sacred place 885  
 of worship, in the sweet beguilement of my voice,  
 then you might stay with us. But if you wish to stay  
 then it would not be justice to inflict your rage  
 upon this city, your resentment or bad luck  
 to armies Yours the baron's portion in this land 890  
 if you will, in all justice, with full privilege.

*Chorus*

Lady Athene, what is this place you say is mine?

*Athene*

A place free of all grief and pain. Take it for yours.

*Chorus*

If I do take it, shall I have some definite powers?

*Athene*

No household shall be prosperous without your will. 895

*Chorus*

You will do this? You will really let me be so strong?

*Athene*

So we shall straighten the lives of all who worship us.

*Chorus*

You guarantee such honor for the rest of time?

*Athene*

I have no need to promise what I can not do

*Chorus*

I think you will have your way with me My hate is going 900

*Athene*

Stay here, then. You will win the hearts of others, too

*Chorus*

I will put a spell upon the land. What shall it be?

*Athene*

Something that has no traffic with evil success  
 Let it come out of the ground, out of the sea's water,  
 and from the high air make the waft of gentle gales 905  
 wash over the country in full sunlight, and the seed  
 and stream of the soil's yield and of the grazing beasts  
 be strong and never fail our people as time goes,  
 and make the human seed be kept alive. Make more  
 the issue of those who worship more your ways, for as 910  
 the gardener works in love, so love I best of all  
 the unblighted generation of these upright men.  
 All such is yours for granting In the speech and show  
 and pride of battle, I myself shall not endure  
 this city's eclipse in the estimation of mankind 915

*Chorus*

I accept this home at Athene's side.  
 I shall not forget the cause  
 of this city, which Zeus all powerful and Ares  
 rule, stronghold of divinities,  
 glory of Hellene gods, their guarded altar. 920  
 So with forecast of good  
 I speak this prayer for them  
 that the sun's bright magnificence shall break out wave  
 on wave of all the happiness 925  
 life can give, across their land

*Athene*

Here are my actions In all good will  
toward these citizens I establish in power  
spirits who are large, difficult to soften.  
To them is given the handling entire 930  
of men's lives That man  
who has not felt the weight of their hands  
takes the strokes of life, knows not whence, not why,  
for crimes wreaked in past generations  
drag him before these powers Loud his voice 935  
but the silent doom  
hates hard, and breaks him to dust.

*Chorus*

Let there blow no wind that wrecks the trees  
I pronounce words of grace.  
Nor blaze of heat blind the blossoms of grown plants, nor 940  
cross the circles of its right  
place Let no barren deadly sickness creep and kill.  
Flocks fatten. Earth be kind  
to them, with double fold of fruit 945  
in time appointed for its yielding Secret child  
of earth, her hidden wealth, bestow  
blessing and surprise of gods.

*Athene*

Strong guard of our city, hear you these  
and what they portend? Fury is a high queen 950  
of strength even among the immortal gods  
and the undergods, and for humankind  
their work is accomplished, absolute, clear.  
for some, singing; for some, life dimmed  
in tears; theirs the disposition. 955

*Chorus*

Death of manhood cut down  
before its prime I forbid:

girls' grace and glory find  
 men to live life with them  
 Grant, you who have the power 960  
 And o, steering spirits of law,  
 goddesses of destiny,  
 sisters from my mother, hear,  
 in all houses implicate,  
 in all time heavy of hand 965  
 on whom your just arrest befalls,  
 august among goddesses, bestow

*Athene*

It is my glory to hear how these  
 generosities  
 are given my land. I admire the eyes 970  
 of Persuasion, who guided the speech of my mouth  
 toward these, when they were reluctant and wild.  
 Zeus, who guides men's speech in councils, was too  
 strong, and my ambition  
 for good wins out in the whole issue. 975

*Chorus*

This my prayer Civil War  
 fattening on men's ruin shall  
 not thunder in our city. Let  
 not the dry dust that drinks  
 the black blood of citizens 980  
 through passion for revenge  
 and bloodshed for bloodshed  
 be given our state to prey upon.  
 Let them render grace for grace.  
 Let love be their common will; 985  
 let them hate with single heart.  
 Much wrong in the world thereby is healed.

*Athene*

Are they taking thought to discover that road  
 where speech goes straight?



In the terror upon the faces of these	990
I see great good for our citizens.	
While with good will you hold in high honor	
these spirits, their will shall be good, as you steer	
your city, your land	
on an upright course clear through to the end	995

*Chorus*

Farewell, farewell. High destiny shall be yours	
by right Farewell, citizens	
seated near the throne of Zeus,	
beloved by the maiden he loves,	
civilized as years go by,	1000
sheltered under Athene's wings,	
grand even in her father's sight.	

*Athene*

Goddesses, farewell. Mine to lead, as these	
attend us, to where	
by the sacred light new chambers are given.	1005
Go then Sped by majestic sacrifice	
from these, plunge beneath the ground. There hold	
off what might hurt the land, pour in	
the city's advantage, success in the end.	
You, children of Cranaus, you who keep	1010
the citadel, guide these guests of the state.	
For good things given,	
your hearts' desire be for good to return.	

*Chorus*

Farewell and again farewell, words spoken twice over,	
all who by this citadel,	1015
mortal men, spirits divine,	
hold the city of Pallas, grace	
this my guestship in your land.	
Life will give you no regrets.	1020

*Athene*

Well said. I assent to all the burden of your prayers,  
and by the light of flaring torches now attend  
your passage to the deep and subterranean hold,  
as by us walk those women whose high privilege  
it is to guard my image. Flower of all the land 1025  
of Theseus, let them issue now, grave companies,  
maidens, wives, elder women, in processional.  
In the investiture of purple stained robes  
dignify them, and let the torchlight go before  
so that the kindly company of these within 1030  
our ground may shine in the future of strong men to come

*Chorus (by the women who have been forming for processional)*

Home, home, o high, o aspiring  
Daughters of Night, aged children, in blithe processional  
Bless them, all here, with silence. 1035

In the primeval dark of earth-hollows  
held in high veneration with rights sacrificial  
bless them, all people, with silence

Gracious be, wish what the land wishes, 1040  
follow, grave goddesses, flushed in the flamesprung  
torchlight gay on your journey.  
Singing all follow our footsteps.

There shall be peace forever between these people  
of Pallas and their guests. Zeus the all seeing 1045  
met with Destiny to confirm it.  
Singing all follow our footsteps.

*(Exeunt omnes, in procession )*



THE  
SUPPLIANT  
MAIDENS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

SETH G. BENARDETE



## INTRODUCTION TO *THE SUPPLIANT MAIDENS*

IT HAD always been thought by modern scholars that *The Suppliant Maidens* was the earliest Greek play still preserved, and the date of its production was given as *circa* 490 B. C. This opinion was based on stylistic considerations as well as on the fact that the protagonist of the play is the chorus itself, which Aristotle tells us to have been the early condition of the drama. A papyrus recently published, however, would seem to suggest that the trilogy, of which *The Suppliant Maidens* is the first part, was first produced after 470 B. C. Should this prove to be the case, it will be a real puzzle why Aeschylus kept the play in his drawer for twenty years, for it is hardly likely that he should have reverted to the archaism of *The Suppliant Maidens* after having written *The Persians*.

The plot of the play is simple. The fifty daughters of Danaus, descendants of the Argive Io, flee from Egypt to Argos because their Egyptian cousins wish, without their consent, to marry them. They come to a sacred grove near Argos, where the rest of the action takes place. Pelasgus, the King of Argos, is unwilling to grant them sanctuary unless the populace seconds his request, and the populace, convinced by the king and their own father, does grant it. But it is not a moment too soon; for after the maidens hear they are saved, their father informs them that the Egyptian cousins are just landing, and while he goes to bring aid, a herald of their cousins comes to take them away. Pelasgus, however, returns with an armed force, and the herald, threatening war, is forced to withdraw. Then Danaus returns again, counseling them to behave decently, and the play ends with a song of deliverance. Since the second and third parts of the trilogy are lost, and only a few scattered notices of the plot remain, we cannot be certain what Aeschylus' purpose was. In the second play the maidens were somehow forced to marry their cousins (per-

haps because Pelasgus dies), but they swear to their father to kill them on their wedding night. All except Hypermnestra fulfil their oath, while she—"splendide mendax," Horace calls her—out of love for her husband saves him. In the last play Hypermnestra is forced to stand trial because she violated her oath, and in a scene reminiscent of that in the *Eumenides*, Aphrodite herself appears and defends her. Part of her speech survives:

As the sacred heaven longs to pierce the earth,  
So love takes hold of earth to join in marriage,  
And showers, fallen from heaven brought to bed,  
Make the earth pregnant, and she in turn gives birth  
To flocks of sheep and Ceres' nourishment—  
A marriage that drenches the springtime of the woods—  
For all this I am in part responsible

*The Suppliant Maidens* is an international play. The Danaids are refugees, Greeks by descent, Egyptians in appearance (ll 234-37, 277-90, 496 ff), and according to Egyptian law they have no legal right to refuse to marry their cousins. For when Pelasgus wishes to know what right they have, the maidens in reply only declare their hatred of their cousins, implying by their evasion of the question the absence of any legal claim to his protection (ll 387-91). Thus both by nature and by law they are defenseless. If they really looked like Greeks, as well as were Greeks by an obscure genealogy, and if they had some legal justification, Pelasgus might have been willing to take up their defense without the consent of the people, but once it becomes a case of pure or natural justice independent of all legality, with the maidens' arbitrary dislike of their cousins their only motive, Pelasgus must defer to the will of the people. Since the maidens insist upon the rights of the will alone, Pelasgus allows in turn the people's will to sanction it and make it law. In the second play the oath of the Danaids becomes law, and Hypermnestra, in violating it, repeats her sisters' original defiance of Egyptian law; but as on this occasion it is not a human law that she has betrayed, a goddess must justify her conduct. Aphrodite insists upon the prerogatives of love, a force that transcends even the sacredness of

oaths. Thus the trilogy is complete. At first the Egyptians embodied law, though strangely enough lust also supported them, while the Danaids represented a freedom that was not bound by any positive enactments. But once this freedom has been approved by law, Hypermnestra alone remains outside it, and as she cannot be defended merely by a democratic procedure, a universal divine law, more authoritative than even the people's will, must rescue her. Having only the first part of the trilogy, we cannot be confident that Aeschylus' purpose was exactly this, but the claims of the city as opposed to claims still more powerful would seem to underlie the play, claims that at each stage become more contrary to one another and more difficult to resolve.

*The Suppliant Maidens* as a play is not very exciting, and we can easily see why the chorus was later abandoned as the protagonist. A chorus can convey only a lyrical mood, it can hardly support any genuine passion. The Danaids, for example, say they are frightened when the Egyptians are coming, but we do not believe them. Their songs, divided into strophe and antistrophe,\* betray their detachment, and they always talk more like commentators on their actions than like the actors themselves. Although the choruses of *The Suppliant Maidens* are some of the most beautiful Aeschylus ever wrote, the dialogue seems extremely artificial and forced, with the air of set speeches directed more to the audience than to the other actors. *The Persians*, on the other hand, suffers from the opposite fault: the speeches, even though long, are dramatic, while the choral songs are far inferior to those of *The Suppliants*. Only in the *Oresteia* did Aeschylus achieve a perfect balance between them.

\* Throughout this play and *The Persians*, strophes and antistrophes are marked by the symbols — and = respectively.

## THE SUPPLIANT MAIDENS



#### CHARACTERS

*Chorus of maidens, daughters of Danaus*

*Danaus, their father*

*Pelasgus, King of Argos*

*Herald of Egyptians, cousins to the Danaans*

## THE SUPPLIANT MAIDENS

SCENE *A sacred grove near Argos, adorned with statues of Greek gods.*

*Chorus*

Zeus Protector, protect us with care  
From the subtle sand of the Nile delta  
Our ship set sail And we deserted:  
From a holy precinct bordering Syria  
We fled into exile, condemned  
Not for murder by a city's decree,  
But by self-imposed banishment escaping  
Impious marriage with Egyptus' sons.

10

Danaus, father, adviser and lord,  
Setting the counters of hope,  
Picked the smallest pawn of grief,  
Quickly to fly through the sea,  
And find anchor at Argos,  
Whence we boast to descend,  
By the breathing caress of Zeus  
On a cow driven wild

With suppliant olive branch,  
To what kinder land could we turn?

20

Whose city, whose earth and bright water,  
Olympian gods, ancient gods below  
Possessing the tomb, and Zeus Savior,  
Keeper of pious men, receive  
(Respectful the air of this land)  
These suppliant maidens well

But that thick swarm of insolent men,  
Before ever landing in this swamp waste,  
Return them and their ship to the sea;

30

And by the winter sting of hurricane,  
Facing the wild sea, by thunder and lightning,  
By rain-winds may they die;  
Before appropriating what law protects,  
Cousins to lie on unwilling beds.

40

Now I invoke  
The calf of Zeus Avenger  
Beyond the sea:  
A child from grazing  
Cow, genetrix,  
Held by the breath of Zeus,  
Born with a fateful name:  
Epaphus, Caress. —

Him I invoke:  
In pastures here our mother  
Suffered before:  
I'll show a witness  
Faithful but unex-  
pected to natives here.  
They shall know the truth  
At last and at length. =

50

And if some neighbor here knows bird cries,  
Hearing our bitter passion he will think  
He hears the hawk-chased, sad bird Metis,  
The wife of Tereus, —

60

Who weeps with passion  
Barred from rivers and the countryside;  
Who sang a child's death-dirge, whom she killed,  
Perverse her wrath. =

Thus melancholy I  
With Ionian songs  
Eat my Nile-soft cheek,  
My heart unused to tears.  
We gather blooms of sorrow,

70

Anxious if a friend,  
Someone, will protect us,  
Exiles from a misty land —

But gods ancestral, hear!  
Behold justice kindly.

Truly hating pride  
Grant nothing undecreed

80

So just you'd be to marriage  
Even war has havens,  
Bulwark for the weary  
Exile, a respect of gods =

May his will, if it's Zeus's, be well,  
His will not easily traced.  
Everywhere it gleams, even in blackness,  
With black fortune to man —

And so certain it falls without slips,  
By sign of Zeus fulfilled  
Dark are the devices of his counsel,  
His ways blind to our sight =

90

From towered hopes  
He casts men destructive,  
No violence  
He armors.

All providence  
Is effortless throned,  
Holy and motionless,  
His will is accomplished —

100

On mortal pride  
Look down, how it waxes  
And flourishes  
By marriage  
Remorselessly:  
Intent in its frenzy,

Spur inescapable,  
 Deceived to destruction = 110  
 I sing suffering, shrieking,  
 Shrill and sad am weeping,  
 My life is dirges  
 And rich in lamentations,  
 Mine honor weeping.  
     I invoke your Apian land,  
     You know my foreign tongue  
     Often I tear my Sidonian veils — 120  
 We grant gods oblations  
 Where all is splendid  
 And death is absent  
 O toils undecipherable!  
 Where lead these billows?  
     I invoke your Apian land.  
     You know my foreign tongue  
     Often I tear my Sidonian veils = 130  
 Linen-bound ship, secure from the sea,  
 With fair winds brought me;  
 Nor do I blame.  
 May Father, timely omniscient,  
 Perfect a gracious end, that 140  
     Seeds mighty of solemn mother  
     Escape, O woe,  
     Unwed, virgin to the bed of man —  
 Daughter of Zeus pure, may she behold,  
 Who guards walls sacred,  
 Willing my will.  
 May virgin, rescuing virgins,  
 In all her power come, that 150  
     Seeds mighty of solemn mother  
     Escape, alas,  
     Unwed, virgin to the bed of man. =

But if not,  
 A sunburnt race  
 Shall go beseeching  
 To Zeus of the dead  
 (Gracious to strangers),  
 Hanging ourselves,  
 If Gods Olympian heed not. 160  
     O Zeus! Sought out by the gods,  
     By snake-hate of Io  
     I know Hera's madness  
     Conquering all  
     Winter comes by sharp winds —

Then Zeus in  
 Injustice hates  
 His son begotten,  
 And that is unjust. 170  
 Face now averted  
 Away from my prayers.  
 But would that Zeus hearken!  
     O Zeus! Sought out by the gods,  
     By snake-hate of Io  
     I know Hera's madness  
     Conquering all.  
     Winter comes by sharp winds. =

*Danaus*

Prudence, my daughters, prudently you came  
 With an aged father as your trusted pilot  
 And now, with foresight, I advise your taking  
 Care to seal my words within your mind.  
 I see dust, the silent clarion of arms, 180  
 But not in silence are the axles turned;  
 Crowds I see, armed with shield and spear,  
 Followed by horses and curvèd chariots  
 Perhaps the princes of this land have come

To meet us, informed by messenger;  
 But whether kindly purposed or provoked  
 To savageness they speed their armament,  
 Here it is best to act the suppliant,  
 This rock, this altar of assembled gods,  
 Stronger than ramparts, a shield impenetrable  
 Now quickly prepare white suppliant wreaths,  
 Sign of Zeus sacred, held in the left hand,  
 Mournful, respectful, answer needfully  
 / The strangers, tell distinctly of an exile  
 Unstained by murder! Let no boldness  
 Come from respectful eye and modest features  
 Not talkative nor a laggard be in speech.  
 Either would offend them Remember to yield:  
 You are an exile, a needy stranger,  
 And rashness never suits the weaker

190

200

*Chorus*

With prudence, father, you speak to the prudent.  
 I shall keep a watch on your discreet commands.  
 May Zeus, my ancestor, look on us.

*Danaus*

May he look then with propitious eye.

*Chorus*

Now would I wish to be near your side.

*Danaus*

Delay not.

*Chorus*

O Zeus, compassion ere we die.

210

*Danaus*

If Zeus is willing, this will end well.  
 And now that bird of Zeus invoke.

*Chorus*

Preserving rays of the sun we call.

*Danaus*

Call on Apollo, the god, who from heaven once fled.

*Chorus*

So knowing this fate, may he have compassion.

*Danaus*

Let him be compassionate, defend us with care

*Chorus*

What other gods must I invoke?

*Danaus*

I see

This trident, a god's symbol.

*Chorus*

Who brought us

Here well· may he receive us now well.

*Danaus*

And that is Hermes, by Hellenic custom.

220

*Chorus*

May he be a good herald to those who are free.

*Danaus*

All gods here at a common altar worship.

Settle on the sacred ground like doves

Clustering together, fearing the winged hawks,

Who hatefully pollute their very blood

Bird consumes bird, how could it be pure?

'How, unwilling brides, myself unwilling,

Could they be pure? Who not even in hell,

Where another Zeus among the dead (they say)

230

Works out their final punishment, can flee

Their guilt of lust? Fix your eye on that

In answer, that victory be with you well

(Enter the King of Argos and company )

*King*

Whence come these barbarians?

What shall we call you? So outlandishly



Arrayed in the barbaric luxury  
 Of robes and crowns, and not in Argive fashion  
 Nor in Greek? But at this I wonder how  
 Without a herald, without a guide, without patron,  
 You have yet dared to come, without trembling  
 The suppliant olive branch before these gods  
 You've placed (it is custom), but Greece no more  
 Than that will guess. in other things I could  
 Conjecture only, unless your voice will guide

240

*Chorus*

You did not lie about our dress But to whom  
 Do I speak? an Argive citizen, or a herald  
 With his sacred staff, or the city's head?

*King*

Answer me with trust I am Pelasgus,  
 Founder of this land, and son of Palaechthon  
 Earth-born Pelasgians bear my royal name,  
 And reap the fruits of this earth I rule the lands  
 In which the pure Strymon turns, where the sun  
 Sinks in the west, and limits the Perrhaebi,  
 Beyond the Pindus, near the Paeoni  
 And the mountain Dodona oceans bound my rule  
 I lord it over all within that frame

250

It is called Apia, after a surgeon  
 Of ancient times, the prophet Apis, son  
 To Apollo, who from Naupactus once did come,  
 And cleansed this land of deadly, monstrous  
 Serpents, that the earth, soaked in old  
 Curses of blood, had sprung and smeared in wrath  
 His remedies and herbs did work a cure  
 For Argos, and he found a monument  
 In Argive litanies There are my testaments.

260

And now you can tell your own ancestry.  
 We have no patience with long speeches.

270

*Chorus*

Brief and clear is my tale Argos we claim  
By race, the offspring of a fruitful cow.

*King*

You speak beyond my credence, strangers, claiming  
Argive birth more like Libyans you seem  
Than like to women native here; or the Nile may foster 280  
Such a likeness, or the images  
Of Cyprus, carved by native craftsmen,  
And of the camel-backed nomads I've heard,  
Neighbors to the Ethiopian,  
I should have thought you were the unwed  
Barbarous Amazons, were you armed with bows  
But I, instructed, would more exactly know,  
How your birth and ancestry is Argive 290

*Chorus*

Wasn't Io once in Argos charged  
With Hera's temple?

*King*

Io was, the tale  
Is prevalent

*Chorus*

And wasn't Zeus to a mortal  
Joined?

*King*

Which was from Hera unconcealed

*Chorus*

How ends these royal jealousies?

*King*

A goddess  
Changed a woman to a cow.

*Chorus*

And Zeus, 300  
Did he approach the hornèd cow?

*King*

Zeus

Became a bull, they say.

*Chorus*

How then did Hera answer?

*King*

She placed on her a guard, all-seeing.

*Chorus*

Who?

*King*

Argos, a son of Earth, whom Hermes slew

*Chorus*

But what did Hera appoint for ill-omened Io?

*King*

A gnatlike goad it was, or driving sting.

*Chorus*

That the Nile-dwellers call the gadfly.

*King*

That drove her from Argos.

*Chorus*

It confirms my tale.

310

*King*

And so to Canopus and to Memphis she came.

*Chorus*

Where Zeus by touch begot a son.

*King*

Who claims to be the calf of Zeus?

*Chorus*

Epaphus,

Truly named Caress.

*King*

And who from him?

*Chorus*

Libya, reaping the greatest name.

*King*

And then?

*Chorus*

Belus of two sons, my father's father

*King*

Tell me his name

*Chorus*

Danaus, whose brother

320

Fathered fifty sons

*King*

Disclose his name

Ungrudgingly

*Chorus*

Egyptus Now knowing my ancient

Lineage, might you succor an Argive band

*King*

You seem to share of old this land but how  
Did you bring yourself to leave your father's  
Home? What fortune did swoop upon you?

*Chorus*

Lord Pelasgus, shifting are the ills of men  
Nowhere is trouble seen of the same wing  
Who wished for this unexpected flight,  
To land at Argos, formerly natives here,  
Cowering in hate of the marriage bed?

330

*King*

Why have you come to these assembled gods?  
Why do you hold the fresh white olive branch?

*Chorus*

To be no household-slave to Egyptus' sons.

*King*

By hatred or by law? . . .

*Chorus*

Who buys a master

From kin?

*King*

So greater grows the strength of mortals.

*Chorus*

To desert those distressed is easy

*King*

How

With piety could I act?

*Chorus*

Deny the demand

340

Of Egyptus' sons

*King*

But hard's *your* demand to wage

A new war.

*Chorus*

But justice protects her allies.

*King*

If only she shared from the start

*Chorus*

Respect the ship of state thus crowned.

*King*

I shudder before these shaded altars

*Chorus*

Yet hard is the wrath of Zeus the protector.

Son of Palaechthon,

Listen to me with a caring heart,

Lord of Pelasgians.

Protector, behold an exile surrounded

A calf, wolf-pursued, on steep rocks,

350

Confides in the herdsman's strength,

And bleats her pains —

*King*

I see this crowd of gods assenting, each  
Shadowed by the fresh-cut olive branch  
Yet may this friendship conceal no doom,  
Nor strife for us arise in unexpected  
And unpremeditated ways

*Chorus*

Daughter of Zeus,  
Master of lots, may behold a flight  
Innocent, Themis!  
And thou from the younger, ancient in wisdom,  
Learn, . . .  
Respecting the suppliant,  
A holy man. =

360

*King*

You are not suppliants at my own hearth.  
If the city stains the commonweal,  
In common let the people work a cure  
But I would make no promises until  
I share with all the citizens

*Chorus*

You are, yes, the city, the people,  
A prince is not judged.  
The land, the hearth, the altar you rule  
With the single vote and scepter,  
Enthroned you command,  
And fill every need  
Of pollution be watchful —

370

*King*

Pollution on my enemies! Without  
Harm I cannot aid you; nor is it sensible  
To despise these your earnest prayers.  
I am at a loss, and fearful is my heart,  
To act or not to act and choose success

380

*Chorus*

Regard him, above, the protector,  
A watchdog of men  
Distressed who sit at neighboring hearths,  
But obtain no lawful justice.  
Yet anger of Zeus  
The Suppliant remains,  
Who is charmed by no pity =

*King*

If Egyptus' sons rule you by customs  
Native to your city, claiming nearest  
Of kin, who would wish in that to oppose them?  
According to laws at home you must plead,  
How over you they lack authority.

390

*Chorus*

Yet subject to men would I never be!  
I plot a course under the stars,  
Escape from a heartless marriage.  
Take as an ally justice.  
Choose the side of the gods :

*King*

The choice is not easy: choose me not as judge.  
I said before that never would I act  
Alone, apart from the people, though I am ruler;  
So never may people say, if evil comes,  
"Respecting aliens the city you destroyed."

400

*Chorus*

Both sides of related blood he sees,  
Zeus holds a sensitive balance,  
To evil and the righteous weighing  
Just and unjust fairly.  
Why fear to act justly? =

*King*

We need profound, preserving care, that plunges

Like a diver deep in troubled seas,  
 Keen and unblurred his eye, to make the end  
 Without disaster for us and for the city, 410  
 That neither strife may bring reprisals, nor,  
 If we should give you back, seated thus  
 On seats of gods, we settle the god, destructive  
 Alastor, in this land, who even in Hades  
 Never frees the dead Seem we not  
 To need preserving counsel?

*Chorus*

Take care and be,  
 Justly, the pious protector,  
 Exile betray not, 420  
 Exile pursued by,  
 Cast out by, the godless —

See me not seized,  
 From seat of gods to be seized,  
 O lord with full power  
 Know the pride of men,  
 Beware of god's anger =

Bear not to see  
 A suppliant by force 430  
 Led from these statues,  
 Seized by my garments,  
 Like a horse by the bridle. —

Do what you will,  
 Thy house remains to pay,  
 Fined in thy children.  
 Justice is equal.  
 Mark the justice of Zeus =

*King*

I have pondered, and here I'm run aground:  
 'Gainst you or them necessity is strained 440



For mighty war, as fastly drawn as ships  
 Held by the windlass. yet anchorage is never  
 Free from pain. When wealth is sacked and homes  
 Are pillaged, Zeus yet another fortune may bestow;  
 Or when the tongue has failed, a healing word  
 May spread a counter-balm. but if consanguine  
 Blood is to stay unshed, we must sacrifice  
 To slaughter many kine to many gods,  
 A cure of grief I am spent by this dispute  
 I wish an ignorance more than art of ill.  
 Against my judgment may it turn out well.

450

*Chorus*

But hear the end of my reverent prayers.

*King*

Well?

*Chorus*

Clasps and belts and bands I have.

*King*

They are doubtless proper for women.

*Chorus*

Here, you know,

Are fine devices.

*King*

Tell me.

460

*Chorus*

Unless you promise—

*King*

What would your bands accomplish?

*Chorus*

Statues with new tablets to adorn.

*King*

Speak simply.

*Chorus*

From these gods to hang.

*King*

A whip to the heart

*Chorus*

Now you understand, for eyes I gave you

*King*

Alas! everywhere I'm gripped in strangle holds,  
 And like a swollen river evils flood  
 Embarked on a sea of doom, uncrossed, abysmal,  
 Nowhere is anchorage If I leave  
 This debt unpaid, you've warned of pollution  
 That shall strike unerringly, but if  
 I stand before these walls, and bring the battle  
 To the very end against Egyptus'  
 Sons, wouldn't that become a bitter waste—  
 Men to bleed the earth for women's sake?  
 But yet the wrath of Zeus the Suppliant—  
 The height of mortal fear—must be respected  
 Now then, agèd father of these maidens,  
 Gather those wreaths in your arms, and at other  
 Altars of the native gods replace them  
 Then no one of the native people, who delight  
 In blame, by seeing proof of your arrival,  
 Could reproach me, and pity they may feel  
 For you, and hate those men's arrogance  
 May the people be gracious! Everyone,  
 To those weaker than themselves, is kind.

470

480

*Danaus*

To have found a stranger, reverent and kind,  
 We highly prize And now, let native guides,  
 To grant me safety as I go, escort me  
 To the temple altars nature made  
 My shape unlike to yours, even as the Nile  
 And the Inachus bear no resemblance  
 In their nurture Beware lest rashness burgeon  
 Into fear ignorance has often killed  
 A friend.

490

*King*

Attend. the stranger speaks well.

500

Guide him to the civil altars, the seats

Of gods; and say no more than this to whom

You meet "To the gods' hearth we bring a sailor "

(*Exit Danaus, attended* )

*Chorus*

Him you instructed, and he is gone, but I,

How shall I act? What sign of confidence

Is yours to give me?

*King*

Leave your wreaths here,

A sign of grief

*Chorus*

And here I leave them by your

Command.

*King*

Toward that grove now turn

*Chorus*

But how

Would a public grove protect me?

*King*

Never

510

To rape of birds shall we expose you

*Chorus*

But to them more hateful than heartless snakes?

*King*

Propitiated, speak auspiciously

*Chorus*

You know how fear does fret impatiently?

*King*

Excessive fear is always powerless.

*Chorus*

Soothe then my heart in word and deed.

*King*

Your father will not long desert you, and I,  
Assembling all the native people, shall  
Make the commons well disposed, and teach  
Your father all that he must say  
Now remain here, and beseech the native  
Gods with your prayers to bring what you desire  
I shall go arranging all may Persuasion  
And Fortune attend me !

520

(*Exit King*)

*Chorus*

Lord of Lords most bless'd,  
Most perfect strength of bless'd,  
Happy Zeus obey  
And let it be  
Remove the pride of men,  
Pride well hated,  
And cast in a purpled sea  
The black-benched doom —

530

Look upon our race  
Ancient of ancestor loved,  
Change to a happy tale  
Favoring us  
Remember many things,  
You touched Io  
We claim a descent from Zeus,  
And birth from this land =  
To my mother's ancient track I turned,  
In a rich pasture eating flowers  
She was seen, whence Io  
By gadfly raged  
Distraught escaped,  
Passing many races,  
Cutting in two the land,  
The raging strait defined, —

540

Through lands of Asia fast she went,  
 And across Phrygia grazing sheep,  
 And the city of Teuthras passing,  
 And Lydian vales, 550  
 Cilician hills,  
 Race Pamphylian hurried  
 Through ever-flowing streams,  
 And land of Aphrodite =  
 She came by dart distressed  
 Of a cowherd winged  
 To rich groves of Zeus,  
 A pasture fed by snow and attacked  
 By Typhon's rage, 560  
 The Nile-waters by disease untouched,  
 Herself crazed,  
 With grief, stinging pains,  
 Bacchant of Hera —  
 And men who then lived there  
 At her strangeness trembled,  
 With pale fear at heart,  
 Beheld a creature vexed, half-breed,  
 In part a cow,  
 And woman in turn, a monster marveled at 570  
 Who then charmed  
 The wretch wandering-far  
 Furious Io? =  
 Of endless sovereignty  
 Lord Zeus charmed,  
 By strength gentle of Zeus  
 And divine breaths  
 Was she cured, weeping  
 Her grievous shame,  
 Bearing the burden of Zeus, 580  
 Told without falsehood,  
 She bore a blameless child,—

Through great time bless'd,  
 All earth shouts,  
 "Of Zeus fruitful in truth  
 This race who else  
 Would cure her of sly  
 Diseases of Hera?"  
 There is the working of Zeus,  
 Here is Epaphus' race  
 Of both the truth is spoken =

Whom beside him  
 More justly would I call?  
 Father our gardener, worker, and lord,  
 A craftsman ag'd in wisdom,  
 Propitious the wind is of Zeus —

590

Stronger none rule,  
 Beneath no one enthroned,  
 Seated above he respects none below  
 His deeds are quick as words,  
 He hastens what counsel decrees =

(Enter Danaus )

*Danaus*

Take heart, my children, well are cast the people's  
 Final vote

600

*Chorus*

    O hail, my envoy, my dearest  
 Herald Tell us what end's been authorized?  
 And where the populace, by show of hands,  
 Has thrown its weight

*Danaus*

                    The Argives have decreed  
 Not doubtfully, so as to change my aging  
 Heart to youth again; so bristled thick  
 The air with hands, resolving thus the law  
 Free we are to settle here, subject

Neither to seizure nor reprisal, claimed 610  
 Neither by citizen nor foreigner.  
 But if they turn to force, whoever rich  
 In lands refuses succor, shall be stripped  
 Of offices and banished publicly  
 The king persuaded, prophesying Zeus  
 The Suppliant would fatten rich his wrath  
 To feed insatiate suffering,  
 And show itself as twin defilements, 620  
 In and outside the city. Hearing this,  
 The Argives, not even summoned, voted all.  
 They heard, and easily were convinced by supple  
 Rhetoric, but Zeus still crowned the end. |

*Chorus*

Come then, let us offer  
 For the Argives good prayers,  
 A return for good things  
 And may Zeus Stranger behold  
 From the mouth of a stranger  
 Offerings in true frankness,  
 A perfect end for all things.  
  
 And now Zeus-born gods 630  
 Might you hear our prayers,  
 When libations we pour:  
 Never slain by fire  
 This Pelasgian land,  
 Never wanton War  
 Found a danceless cry,  
 Harvesting mortals  
 In a changed harvest,  
     For compassion they showed us,  
     And voted with kindness, 640  
     Respecting Zeus's suppliants,  
     This wretched flock of sheep.—

Nor cast they their votes  
 On the side of men  
 By dishonoring us;  
 Watching Zeus Avenger  
 (Like a spy he sees)  
 Who is hard to fight·  
 Who desires his home  
 Stained in its rafters?

650

For he heavily presses  
     The suppliants of Zeus sacred,  
     Related blood, they respected.  
     Then to gods shall they be pleasing  
     With altars scoured clean. =

So out of shadowed lips let fly  
 Honorable prayers.

Never a plague

Empty the city,

660

Strife never bleed

With native dead the land

    Flower of youth may it ripen unplucked,

    And partner of Aphrodite, War,

    May he cut not their bloom.—

And laden altars, welcoming,

Set them ablaze.

Well would be ruled

Cities respecting

670

Zeus above all,

Who guides by ancient law.

    Other protectors we pray to be born

    For always, and Hecate-Artemis

    Birth by women protect =

Let no murderous plague

Come upon the city destroying,

680

Without the dance, without lute



Father of tears Ares arming,  
And the intestine war's shout.  
    May the bitter swarms of ill  
    Far from the people sit,  
    May the Lycian Apollo  
    To all the youth be kind —

And may Zeus to perfection  
Bring the fruit of each season;  
And many young in the fields  
Pasturing cattle beget.  
May they obtain from gods all.  
    May the pious songs be sung  
    At altars by minstrels;  
    May the lyre-loving voices  
    From holy lips arise. =

690

May the people who strengthen the city  
Protect its dignity well,  
Whose rule's providential in common counsel;  
And before arming Ares,  
To strangers without grief  
May they grant justice. —

700

May the gods who possess the city  
Be honored by citizens well  
With sacrificial laurel, ancestral  
For respect of one's parents  
Is third among laws  
Written by Justice =

*Danaus*

Thank you, dear children, for these modest prayers;  
But from your father tremble not to hear  
New intelligence From this outpost,  
Protector of suppliants, I spy that ship;  
Clearly it shows; nor do I fail to mark  
How its sails are trimmed and sides made fast,

710

And how her bow does seek the way with painted  
 Eye, and the ship, obedient, hears all too well  
 Her tiller's governance And the men on board  
 I see, black in limb, their clothes white linen  
 All the other ships and allied force  
 I see, but under land the lead, its sail  
 Now furling, rows with timed beat And you  
 Must, quietly and temperately facing  
 The event, ignore none of these gods.  
 And I, with advocates, shall come Perhaps  
 An envoy or a herald comes, desiring  
 To lead you away as reprisals.  
 But nothing shall happen Never fear him  
 Still it is better, if we are slow,  
 That refuge to remember Take heart  
 Surely in time the day shall come when all  
 Who had dishonored the gods shall pay.

720

730

*Chorus*

Father, I fear, as swift ships come,  
 No length of time does stand between us  
 Terror has me, excessive fear,  
 If flights of wandering profit not  
 Father, I am spent by fear.—

*Danaus*

As final was the Argive vote, my daughters,  
 Take heart: they shall fight for you, I know

740

*Chorus*

Mad is the race Egyptian, cursed,  
 In war unsated: I speak what you know.  
 Dark ships they have, and strongly built;  
 They sailed and so succeed in anger  
 With an army large and dark.=

*Danaus*

But here many shall they find, whose limbs  
 The sun's made lean in noonday heat.

*Chorus*

Leave us not behind, alone, father! I pray  
 Women are nothing alone, no Ares is in them  
 Deadly purposed and crafty minds  
 With impure hearts, just as ravens,  
 They heed no altar —

750

*Danaus*

Well that would aid us, my daughters,  
 If to the gods, as to you, they are hateful

*Chorus*

They feared not these tridents, no awe of gods,  
 Their hands they shall not keep from me, father  
 Arrogant with unholy rage,  
 Gluttonous, dog-hearted, obeying  
 In nothing the gods =

*Danaus*

A fable tells that wolves possess more strength  
 Than dogs, and reeds cannot conquer wheat

760

*Chorus*

We must guard ourselves against the rage  
 Of wanton men, monstrous and profane

*Danaus*

The reefing of a sail is never swift,  
 Nor is the anchoring, with ropes to be secured;  
 And even safe at anchorage the helmsman  
 Lacks courage, and mostly when come to harborless  
 Shores, and the sun has sneaked away to night,  
 It breeds in prudent pilots pain as sharp  
 As birth itself, nor would a host find landing  
 Easy, before each ship takes courage in  
 Her moorings But you, fearful at heart, take heed  
 Of the gods, while I, bringing aid, shall return  
 To defend you: an aged messenger the city  
 Cannot blame, youthful in eloquence.

770

(Exit Danaus.)

*Chorus*

O mountainous land, justly respected,  
 What shall befall us? Where shall we flee,  
 If in Apian lands some dark abyss somewhere?  
 Black smoke might I be  
 Bordering clouds of Zeus, 780  
 Invisible completely  
 As unseen dust might I die —

My heart without fright would no longer be;  
 Darkness flutters in my heart  
 I am seized by his warnings: I am spent by fear.  
 And willing would I be  
 Fated to die hanging,  
 Before that man should touch me: 790  
 May Hades rule me before! =

Where might there be a throne of air?  
 Against it wet clouds become snow?  
 Or smooth, steep, lonely,  
 Overhanging, distant,  
 Vulture-haunted rocks,  
 Witnessing my fall,  
 Before by force meet  
 A heart-rending marriage?—

Prey then for dogs and native birds, 800  
 A feast I shall not refuse them.  
 For death grants freedom  
 From lamentable ills  
 Let that fate before  
 My marriage-bed come  
 But where is still means  
 To free us from marriage? =

Shriek and shout a cry to heaven,  
 Perfect prayers to the gods,  
 To me relief and fulfilment; 810

And Father, seeing the battle,  
Behold with just eyes  
Violence unkindly.  
Respect your suppliants,  
Protector, omnipotent Zeus!—

Proud and heartless Egyptians—  
Men pursuing an exile,  
Intent on capturing me,  
With shouts many and wanton  
But you completely,  
Zeus, hold the beam of  
The balance. What without you  
Is brought to completion for men? =

820

*(Enter Herald of Egyptians, attended)*

Cry! O woe! Alas!  
Here, this ravisher from the ship!  
Before that, ravisher, would you die!  
I see this beginning of my woes.  
Alas! O woe! Escape!  
Stern-hearted in insolence,  
Hard to bear on land, at sea,  
Lord of the land, protect us!

830

*Herald*

Hurry!  
Hasten to the boats  
Fast as you are able  
Lest torn and pricked,  
Pricked and scratched you'll be,  
Bloody and bloodstained,  
Your heads cut off!  
Hurry, hasten, curses! curses! to the boats!

840

*Chorus*

On the flowing salt-path  
With your masterful pride

With your bolted ship  
Would you had died!

*Herald*

Cease your cries Leave your seats.  
Go to the ships. You without honor,  
You without city, I cannot respect.—

850

*Chorus*

Never fruitful water  
Might I see again, whence  
Grows the living root—  
Murder!—and blooms.

*Herald*

I shall lead—I am brave—  
Down to the ship, up on the ladder  
Willing, unwilling, you shall go =

860

*Chorus*

Oh, alas, woe  
Oh, would that you had helpless died  
By the sea-washed grove  
Wandering at Sarpedon's tomb,  
Piled up with sand  
Among wet breezes

870

*Herald*

Shriek and shout and call the gods.  
You shall not jump the Egyptian ship.  
Bewail and shout and mourn with sorrow —

*Chorus*

Oh, alas, woe  
Outrage! when you howl off-shore,  
With your boasts overflow,  
Whom the great Nile might behold  
Raging in your pride,  
And drown your violence.

880

*Herald*

Board the swift boat at once!  
Let no one falter: I'll have no awe  
Of precious curls when I shall drag you.=

*Chorus*

Alas, father, to the sea he leads me;  
Like a spider, step by step,  
A dream, a black dream,  
Cry, O woe, cry!  
Earth, Mother Earth,  
Avert his fearful cry.  
O son, son of Earth, O Zeus.

890

*Herald*

I do not fear these gods before me they  
Did not nurse me, their nursing did not age me.—

*Chorus*

A two-footed serpent quivers near,  
Like a viper, bites my foot,  
A poisonous thing.  
Cry, O woe, cry!  
Earth, Mother Earth,  
Avert his fearful cry.  
O son, son of Earth, O Zeus.

900

*Herald*

Your finery I shall not pity, if  
None will go to the ship resignedly =

*Chorus*

We perish, lord, we suffer pain!

*Herald*

O many lords, Egyptus' sons, you soon  
Will see—take heart!— and blame no anarchy!

*Chorus*

O first commanders, undone am I!

*Herald*

Methinks I shall resort to dragging you:  
My words you clearly have not listened to.

910

*(Enter the King, attended )*

*King*

You there! What is done? By what insolence  
Dare you insult this land of Pelasgian men?  
Think you you have come to a woman's land? You are  
Barbarians, and you trifle insolently  
With Greeks, and, off the mark in everything,  
In nothing upright stand.

*Herald*

How did I err?

What do I do without justice?

*King*

You know

Not how to be a stranger.

*Herald*

Though finding what I lost?

*King*

To what patron did you speak?

*Herald*

To Hermes the Searcher,

920

The greatest patron.

*King*

You speak of gods but have

No reverence.

*Herald*

The Nile deities I revere.

*King*

And these gods are nothing?

*Herald*

I'll lead them away,

If no one prevents me.



*King*

You shall regret it,

If you touch them.

*Herald*

You speak unkindly to strangers

*King*

The thieves of gods I shall not befriend.

*Herald*

I shall tell Egyptus' sons.

*King*

What's that to me that I should yield my flock?

*Herald*

But if I knew, more clearly could I tell—

930

A herald should report exactly each

Particular. What shall I say? And who

Does rob me of these cousins? Yet war does give

Its verdict without witnesses, nor in silver's

Grip does it quit its suit, before many

Are thrown and kick off life

*King*

Why must you tell a name?

In time you and your companions will know,

Though, were these willing, with good will of heart,

You could lead them away, if pious speech

940

Persuaded them: thus unanimous the vote

Decreed, never to surrender them to force

Joined, doweled, and bolted stays this law,

That neither scratched on tablets, nor book-sealed,

You hear announced by the tongue of freedom's voice.

Now get out of my sight!

*Herald*

We seem to wage new wars

950

May victory and conquest fall to men!

*King*

And men is what you'll find here, who don't  
Guzzle a brew of barley-beer!

(*Exit Herald*)

Now all of you, attended by your maids,  
Take heart and go to the well-protected city,  
Locked by towers in dense array And many  
Homes there are of public property, and I  
Am also housed with a lavish hand, there you may  
With many others live, or if it pleases  
More, you may live alone Of these the best  
And most agreeable choose Myself and all  
The citizens protect you, whose voted will  
Is now fulfilled Why wait for those with more  
Authority?

960

*Chorus*

In return for good things,  
May good things teem,  
Best of Pelasgians!  
Kindly escort my father here,  
Danaus, prudent, brave and wise  
His is the counsel where to dwell,  
Kindly disposed the place with good  
Fame and repute among the people  
Everyone's quick to blame the alien.  
May it be for the best!

970

(*Exit King Enter Danaus, attended*)

*Danaus*

My children, to Argives it is meet to pour  
Libations, pray and sacrifice as to gods  
Olympian, who unhesitant preserved us  
What had been done, for native friends kindly,  
Bitterly against your cousins, they heard,  
And gave these armed attendants as a meed  
Of honor, that no spear-wielded fate be mine

980

In dying, lest I burden on the land  
 An ever-living grief You must be grateful  
 Even more than I for what I have obtained 990  
 Above my other counsels cut this wisdom  
 Time becomes the touchstone of the alien,  
 Who bears the brunt of every evil tongue,  
 The easy targe of calumny. I beg  
 You not to bring me shame, you who have  
 That bloom which draws men's eyes: there is no simple  
 Guard for fruit most delicate, that beasts  
 And men, both winged and footed, ravage: 1000  
 So Venus heralds harvests lush with love,  
 And all, at the sleek comeliness of maidens,  
 Do shoot enchanted arrows from their eyes,  
 Overcome by desire Let no shame for us,  
 But pleasure for our enemies, be done,  
 For which, in great toil, great seas were ploughed.  
 We have the choice (mere luck) of living either  
 With Pelasgus, or at the city's cost. 1010  
 Only regard this command of your father:  
 Honor modesty more than your life.

*Chorus*

All else may gods Olympian bless; but, father,  
 Be not anxious for our summer's blush,  
 For, lest the gods deliberate anew,  
 We'll hold to the course our past intent has set.

*Chorus A (of maidens)*

Come now to the city,  
 Praising blessed lord gods,  
 Who shelter the city  
 And about the Erasinus dwell 1020  
 Take up and accompany,  
 Servants, the song, and praise  
 For the city, no longer the Nile,  
 Respect with your psalms,—

But streams, that with quiet  
Through the land fulness pour,  
And gladden this earth with  
Waters brilliant and rich  
May Artemis sacred see,  
Pitying us by force  
Of Aphrodite no marriage come,  
A prize for the hated =

1030

*Chorus B (of servants)*

But careless not of Cypris this gracious song  
With power equal to Hera nearest to Zeus,  
Honored the goddess sly-intent  
In rites sacred and solemn;  
Which share with a fond mother  
Desire and, to whom no denial,  
Persuasion; and Aphrodite  
A province to Concord bestowed,  
And Eros whispering wanton.—

1040

But bitter winds, and harsh and evil grief,  
And battles bloody and deadly I fear before.  
How did they sail so easily  
In swift-winged pursuit?  
'Whatever is doomed becomes.'  
Infinite the mind is of Zeus,  
Who cannot be bypassed.  
To many a woman before  
Has marriage come as an ending.=

1050

*Chorus A*

May great Zeus ward off  
An Egyptian marriage for me.

*Chorus B*

That would be best.

*Chorus A*

Would you charm the intractable?

*Chorus B*

But the future you know not —

*Chorus A*

But Zeus's mind profound,  
How am I to plumb?

*Chorus B*

Pray for the mean

1060

*Chorus A*

What limit do you teach me now?

*Chorus B*

Ask the gods nothing excessive =

*Chorus*

Lord Zeus may he deprive us  
Of an ill marriage  
And a bad husband,  
As Io was released from ill,  
Protected by a healing hand,  
Kind might did cure her —  
And strength may he assign us.  
I am content if ill  
Is one-third my lot,  
And justly, with my prayers,  
Beside the saving arts of god,  
To follow justice. =

1070

(*Exit all.*)

# THE PERSIANS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

SETH G. BENARDETE



## INTRODUCTION TO *THE PERSIANS*

*The Persians* was produced at Athens in 472 B.C., eight years after the naval battle at Salamis, which the play celebrates. We learn from its Argument that it was modeled on a lost play, *The Phoenissae* of Phrynichus, but that Phrynichus had announced at once the defeat of Xerxes, whereas Aeschylus presents a chorus of old men who voice their hopes and fears, by themselves and with Xerxes' mother, before the news of the defeat comes. This delay of course makes the Persians' defeat so much the greater, as it heightens the magnificence of their doom. The Queen then invokes her dead husband Darius (at whose tomb the scene is laid), who had led an unsuccessful expedition against Greece ten years before. He consoles the Queen and Chorus but predicts another disaster at Plataea (479 B.C.) Soon afterward, Xerxes, his garments torn, returns alone, and he and the Chorus conclude the play with a lament.

*The Persians* is unique in several ways. It is the only extant Greek tragedy that is not mythical but based on a contemporary event. The daring of such a presentation is easy to imagine. To show sympathetically, *sine ira et studio*, on the stage at Athens the defeat of her deadliest enemy testifies to the humanity of Aeschylus and the Athenians. No other tragedian we know of, of any country at any time, has ever dared to go so far in sympathizing with his country's foe. It is the more remarkable when we consider that Aeschylus himself and almost all of his audience fought at Salamis or Plataea and that the war, moreover, was between freedom and slavery. Here are the Persians, having started an unjust war and suffering a deserved defeat, presented not as criminals but rather as great and noble, dying deaths that are to be as much pitied as the deaths of Athenians. To praise the Athenians at Athens, Socrates remarks, or the Spartans at Sparta is not very difficult, but to praise the Atheni-

ans at Sparta or the Spartans at Athens demands great rhetorical skill, and for Aeschylus to praise before their conquerors the Persians, the enemies of all Greece, is without precedent and without imitation.

Although *The Persians* is historical in substance, Aeschylus deliberately introduced what the entire audience must have known to be false. He makes up Persian names, very few of which correspond to the generals we know to have been at the battle; his figures for the size of Xerxes' fleet at Salamis are greatly exaggerated; the Persians call upon Greek gods, though everyone knew that their gods were different, the Queen performs a Greek sacrifice at the tomb of Darius, neither the Chorus (except once) nor Darius mention the Persians' defeat at Marathon only ten years before; and perhaps what is most striking, Aeschylus invokes from the past Darius, so that his presence, being both ghostly and real, might transform an ugly reality into a poetic past. By thus changing many details of the real story, Aeschylus removes the Persian War to the realm of myth, where the memory of his audience is prevented from confirming or denying at every point the truth of what he says.

The contemporary is almost perforce untragic, for excessive attention to detail (and the contemporary must be shown accurately) stifles poetry and does not allow the poet to alter his subject; whereas tragedy, being abstracted from the present, is given a free rein, unhampered by what the audience knows to be so, to mold the story to its own demands. Just as verse is an abstraction from prose, reducing it to order, so tragedy abstracts from history and brings necessity out of chance.

If Aeschylus addressed his play specifically to his Athenian countrymen, how can he also speak to us, who are not Athenians, across the reach of time? This certainly must be said. The Persian War was not merely one parochial war among others, in which the issues of right and wrong are ambiguous, as was the case in the Peloponnesian War. The Persian War was a war of liberty versus despotism, and all free men of all times in reading *The Persians* will identify their cause with the cause of the Greeks. In this sense, then, we are



Athenians ourselves, and thus our sympathies and understanding become sufficiently enlarged to comprehend the merits of our foes

Since the doom of the Persians is impressed upon us by the regular meters of the chorus, which convey even to our ears the effect of marching or lament, I have tried, so far as English would allow, to reproduce them in such a way that the reader can "hear" the mood of each song. I hope that, after a little practice on his part, the rhythm will become clear.

## THE PERSIANS

CHARACTERS

*Chorus of Persian elders*

*Queen of Persia, wife of Darius,  
mother of Xerxes*

*Persian Herald*

*Ghost of Darius*

*Xerxes*

## THE PERSIANS

SCENE *In the background the palace of Xerxes at Sousa, in the center foreground the tomb of Darius.*

### *Chorus*

Of the Persians gone  
To the land of Greece  
Here are the trusted.  
As protectors of treasure  
And of golden thrones  
We were chosen by Xerxes—  
Emperor and king,  
Son of Darius—  
In accord with age  
Guards of the country.

For the king's return  
With his troops of gold  
Doom is the omen  
In my heart convulsed,  
As it whines for its master,  
For all Asia is gone:  
To the city of Persians  
Neither a herald nor horseman returns.

And some Agbatana  
And some Sousa and  
Ancient Kissa leaving,  
Both on horse and on ship  
And on foot displayed  
Legions of battle:  
Artaphrenes, Megabates,  
Astaspes, Amistres,

10

20

Leaders of Persians, kings,  
Who are slaves of the greatest of kings,  
Guarding the legions they rush,  
And as bowman and knight,  
With their temper resolved,  
Fearful in aspect,  
Dreadful in battle.

And exultant in horses  
Artembares, Masistres,  
The brave archer Imaeus,  
And Pharandakas,  
And the driver of horses  
Sousthenes.

30

And others were sent  
By the flourishing Nile:  
Egyptian-born Sousiscanes,  
Pegastagon, great Arsames  
Ruler of sacred Memphis,  
And Ariomardus  
Governing ancient Thebes;  
And who dwelling by marshes  
Are rowers of ships,  
Skilful and countless

40

And the Lydians soft  
Who inhabit the coast  
Follow commanders and kings.  
Metrogathes and brave Arkteus,  
And golden Sardis send  
Many charioteers,  
Horses by threes and by fours,  
Fearful the sight to behold.

And the neighbors of Tmolus—  
They threaten to yoke

In servitude Hellas,  
And the Mysian lancers,  
Tharybis, Mardon,  
Anvils of battle  
And golden Babylon  
Pours forth her crowds—  
Borne by their ships—  
Who in drawing the bow  
Rely on their boldness.  
And the tribes from all Asia  
Who carry the sword  
Follow beneath the  
Awesome parade of their king.

50

Thus of the Persian land  
Of her men the flower is gone,  
Nursed by the earth, and all Asia  
Laments, consumed by desire;  
And parents and wives  
Counting the days  
Tremble at lengthening time.

60

The destroyer of cities now,  
That kingly army, has gone  
Over the strait to the land  
On linen-bound pontoons—  
Tightly was clamped the way—  
Helle of Athamas crossing,  
Yoking the neck of the sea.—

70

And the furious leader the herd  
Of populous Asia he drives,  
Wonderful over the earth,  
And admirals stern and rough  
Marshals of men he trusts:  
Gold his descent from Perseus,  
He is the equal of god =

80

In his eyes lazuli flashing  
Like a snake's murderous glances,  
With his mariners, warriors, many,  
And his Syrian chariot driving,  
Hard on the glorious spearmen  
The archer Ares he leads.—

To the great torrent of heroes  
There is none worthily equal,  
Who resist, by defenses securèd,  
The unconquerable billows of ocean:  
Persians are never defeated,  
The people tempered and brave.=

90

For divine fate has prevailed since  
It enjoined Persians to wage wars,  
Which destroy towers and ramparts,  
And the glad tumult of horsemen,  
And cities overthrown.—

102

When the vast ocean was foaming,  
By the winds boisterous whitened,  
Then they learned, trusting to cables  
And to pontoons which convey men,  
To scan the sacred sea.=

113

Deceitful deception of god—  
What mortal man shall avoid it?  
With nimbleness, deftness, and speed,  
Whose leaping foot shall escape it?  
Benign and coaxing at first  
It leads us astray into nets which  
No mortal is able to slip,  
Whose doom we never can flee.

93

101

Thus sable-clad my heart is torn,  
Fearful for those Persian arms,

Lest the city hear, alas!

That reft of men is Sousa,—

And lest the city Kissa shall,

When the crowds of women cry,

Sing antiphonal, alas!

120

And rend their garb of mourning.=

All the horse and infantry

Like a swarm of bees have gone

With the captain of the host,

Who joined the headlands of either land,

Crossing the yoke of the sea.—

130

Beds with longing fill with tears,

Persian wives in softness weep;

Each her armèd furious lord

Dismissed with gentle love and grief,

Left all alone in the yoke.=

But come, Persians,

140

Let us in this ancient palace sit,

And deep and wisely found our thoughts:

How does King Xerxes fare, Darius' son,

How fare his people? Has arrows' hail

Or strength of spear conquered?

150

But lo! she comes,

A light whose splendor equals eyes of gods,

The mother of our king, I kneel.

Now all must address and salute her.

(Enter Queen )

O most majestic Queen of Persians

In ample folds adorned,

Hail, agèd Xerxes' mother,

Consort of Darius, hail!

Mistress of the god of Persians,

Mother of a god thou art,



Unless the fortune of their arms  
Now at last has altered.

*Queen*

Leaving my gold-clad palace, marriage-  
Chamber of Darius, and my own,  
His queen I'm come. Care quite grates my heart,  
I fear, my friends, though not fearful for myself,  
Lest great wealth's gallop trip prosperity—  
Exalted by Darius and some god—  
In its own dust But, unexpectedly,  
That dread has doubled: sums of cowardly  
Wealth do court contempt, and indigence  
Quenches ambition's flame, even if there's strength.  
Though wealth we have unstinted; yet fear  
Is for mine eye, Xerxes, whose presence here  
I count the palace-eye So things stand thus.  
Advise my reason, Persians, old sureties:  
All my gains with your counsel lie.

160

170

*Chorus*

O Queen of Persia, be assured that never  
Twice hast thou to tell us word or deed,  
Which our willing strength can guide; for we  
Are loyal, whom thou dost call thy counselors.

*Queen*

With frequent, constant, and nocturnal dreams  
I have lived, as soon as my son, gathering  
His host had gone, his will to pillage Greece;  
But never a more vivid presence came  
Than yesternight's.  
Two women as an apparition came,  
One in Persian robes instructed well,  
The other Doric, both in splendor dressed,  
Who grand and most magnificent excelled  
Us now, their beauty unapproached, spotless;

180

Sisters they, who casting for their father's land,  
 She Greece received, she Asia, where to dwell.  
 Then strife arose between them, or so I dreamed,  
 And my son, observing this, tries to check 190  
 And soothe them, he yokes them to a chariot,  
 Bridles their necks and one, so arrayed, towers  
 Proud, her mouth obedient to reins;  
 But the other stamps, annoyed, and rends apart  
 Her trappings in her hands, unbridled, seizes  
 The car and snaps its yoke in two,  
 My son falls, and his father, pitying,  
 Stands by his side, but at whose sight Xerxes  
 Tears his robes Thus in the night these visions  
 Dreamed. but when, arisen, I touched the springs' 200  
 Fair-flowing waters, approached the altar, wishing  
 To offer sacrifice religiously  
 To guardian deities, whose rites these are,  
 Then to Phoebus' hearth I saw an eagle fleeing  
 Dumb in dread I stood. a falcon swooped  
 Upon him, its wings in flight, its claws plucked  
 At his head. he did no more than cower, hare-like  
 Those were my terrors to see, and yours to hear. 210  
 My son, should he succeed, would be admired,  
 But if he fails, Persia cannot hold him  
 To account Whichever comes, safe returned, sovereign  
 He shall rule

*Chorus*

Queen mother, excessive fear  
 Or confidence we do not wish to give thee.  
 If thy dreams were ominous, approach  
 The gods with supplications, pray that these  
 Be unfulfilled, and blessings be fulfilled  
 For thee, thy son, thy city, and thy friends.  
 Next thou must libations pour to Earth

And dead, and beg Darius, of whom thou didst dream, 220  
 Send thee those blessings from the nether world  
 To light, for thee and for thy son; and hide  
 In darkness evils contrary, retained  
 Within the earth. Propitious be thy prayers.  
 We, prophetic in our spirit, kindly  
 Counsel thee: all will prosper

*Queen*

Ah, loyally have answered the first expounders  
 Of my dreams May these blessings ripen!  
 And all, as you enjoin, I'll sacrifice  
 To nether gods and friends, as soon as I  
 Return. But one thing more I wish to know: 230  
 My friends, where is Athens said to be?

*Chorus*

Far toward the dying flames of sun

*Queen*

Yet still my son lusts to track it down?

*Chorus*

Then all Hellas would be subject to the king.

*Queen*

So rich in numbers are they?

*Chorus*

So great a host  
 As dealt to Persians many woes

*Queen*

Are bow-plucked shafts their armament?

*Chorus*

Pikes wielded-close and shielded panoplies.

*Queen*

What else besides? Have they sufficing wealth? 240

*Chorus*

Their earth is veined with silver treasures.

*Queen*

Who commands them? Who is shepherd of their host?

*Chorus*

They are slaves to none, nor are they subject.

*Queen*

But how could they withstand a foreign foe?

*Chorus*

Enough to vanquish Darius' noble host.

*Queen*

We mothers dread to calculate—

*Chorus*

But soon thou'lt know all: a Persian runner comes,  
Bearing some fresh report of weal or woe.

(*Enter Herald*)

*Herald*

O cities of Asia, O Persian land,  
And wealth's great anchorage!  
How at a single stroke prosperity's  
Corrupted, and the flower of Persia falls,  
And is gone Alas! the first herald of woe,  
He must disclose entire what befell.  
Persians, all the barbarian host is gone

250

*Chorus*

O woe! woeful evil,  
Novel and hostile.  
Alas! Persians weep  
Hearing this woe,—

*Herald*

How all has been destroyed, and I behold  
The unexpected light of my return.

260

*Chorus*

Oh long seems our aged  
Life to us elders,

Alas! hearing woe  
Unexpected. =

*Herald*

And since I was witness, deaf to rumor's tales,  
I can indicate what sorrows came

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe, in vain  
The crowd of arrows, massed,  
Came on the hostile land —

270

*Herald*

The lifeless rotting corpses glut the shore,  
And adjacent fields of Salamis

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe, of friends  
The sea-dyed corpses whirl  
Vagrant on craggèd shores =

*Herald*

The bow protected none, but all the host,  
Defeated in the naval charge, was lost.

*Chorus*

Raise a mournful, doleful cry  
For Persians wretched.  
All they made all woe  
Alas! the host destroyed. —

280

*Herald*

O most hateful name of Salamis!  
O woe! how I mourn recalling Athens.

*Chorus*

Athens hateful to her foes  
Recall how many  
Persians widowed vain,  
And mothers losing sons. =

*Queen*

Long am I silent, alas! struck down  
By disasters exceeding speech and question.  
Yet men perforce god-sent misfortunes must  
Endure Speak, disclose entire what  
Befell, quietly, though you grieve  
Who did not die? For whom of the captains  
Shall we lament? Whose sceptered death drained his ranks  
Manless?

290

*Herald*

Xerxes lives to behold the light, but—

*Queen*

O for my palace a greater light,  
And after blackest night a whiter day.

300

*Herald*

Artembares, captain of ten thousand  
Horse, was dashed against Silenia's  
Rugged shore, and satrap Dadakes,  
Spear-struck, did lightly tumble from his ship;  
And native-born Tenagon, the bravest  
Bactrian, still haunts sea-buffeted  
Ajax' isle; and Lilaëus, Arsames,  
And Argestes, conquered near the island  
Where doves do thrive, beat a stubborn coast,  
And neighbors of Egyptian Nile-waters,  
Adeues, Arkteus, and, third, shielded  
Pharnouchus, from a single ship  
Were drowned; and Matallus, satrap of Chrysa,  
Dying, leader of a thousand horse,  
Changed to richest red his thickset flowing  
Beard, and dipped his skin in crimson dyes;  
And Magian Arabus and Bactrian  
Artabes, all aliens in a savage  
Country, perished; Amphistreus, who wielded

310

The much-belaboring spear, and Amistris,  
 Brave Ariomardus, all made Sardis weep;  
 And Mysian Seisames, Tharybis,  
 Commander of five times fifty ships,  
 His race Lyrnaean, fair to look upon  
 (His fortune was not), dead he lies;  
 And the leader of Cilicians single-handed  
 Taxed the enemy with toil, and nobly  
 Died. So many of the rulers I  
 Recall, but of the many woes, report  
 But few.

320

330

*Queen*

Alas! I hear the greatest  
 Of misfortunes, shame of Persians, and shrill  
 Lament. But tell me, returning to your tale,  
 What was the number of the Grecian ships,  
 That thought themselves a match for Persian  
 Arms in naval combat?

*Herald*

Had numbers counted,  
 The barbarian warships surely would have won;  
 The Greeks but numbered thirty tens, and ten  
 Apart from these a chosen squadron formed;  
 But Xerxes, and this I know full well, a thousand  
 Led; and seven and two hundred ranked  
 As queens in swiftmess. The count stood so  
 Seemed we unequal? Some deity destroyed  
 Our host, who weighing down the balance swung  
 The beam of fortune. The gods saved the city  
 Of the goddess.

340

*Queen*

What? Athens still  
 Stands unsacked?

*Herald*

As long as there are men

The city stands

*Queen*

What was the beginning

350

Of disaster? Tell me. Who began?

The Greeks? My son—exultant in his numbers?

*Herald*

Either an avenger or a wicked

God, my Lady (whence it came I know not),

Began the whole disaster. From Athenian

Ranks a Greek approached, addressing Xerxes

Thus: "When the gloom of blackest night

Will fall, the Greeks will not remain, but leap

To rowing-bench, and each by secret course

Will save his life." And he your son, upon

360

His hearing this, in ignorance of Greek

Guile and the jealousy of gods,

Harangued his captains publicly: "As soon

As sunlit rays no longer burn the earth,

And darkness sweeps the quarters of the sky,

Rank the swarm of ships in three flotillas,

Guard they the entrances, the straits sea-pound,

And girdle others round Ajax' isle;

But if the Greeks escape their evil doom,

370

Contriving secret flight, all your heads

Will roll. I warrant it." So he spoke

In humored pride: of the god-given future

Nothing he knew. And, having supped, they set

Themselves in order, each heart obedient;

And sailors bound a thong about each oar.

When the glare of sunlight died, and night

Came on, every man was at his oar,

Every man at arms who knew them.



Rank encouraged rank, and long-boats sailed 380  
 To stations each had been assigned.  
 All night the captains kept the fleet awake;  
 And night ran on No Grecian army set  
 Secret sail but when the steeds of day,  
 White and luminous, began to cross  
 The sky, a song-like, happy tumult sounded  
 From the Greeks, and island rocks returned 390  
 The high-pitched echo Fear fell among us,  
 Deceived in hope; for they (and not as if to flee)  
 A solemn paean chanted, and to battle  
 Rushed with fervent boldness trumpets flared,  
 Putting every Greek aflame At once  
 Concordant strokes of oars in dissonance  
 Slapped the waters' depths. soon we saw  
 Them all: first the right wing led in order,  
 Next advanced the whole armada; 400  
 A great concerted cry we heard. "O Greek  
 Sons, advance! Free your fathers' land,  
 Free your sons, your wives, the sanctuaries  
 Of paternal gods, the sepulchers  
 Of ancestors Now the contest's drawn.  
 All is at stake!" And babel Persian tongues  
 Rose to meet it no longer would the action  
 Loiter. Warships struck their brazen beaks  
 Together: a Grecian man-of-war began  
 The charge, a Phoenician ornamented stern 410  
 Was smashed; another drove against another  
 First the floods of Persians held the line,  
 But when the narrows choked them, and rescue hopeless,  
 Smitten by prows, their bronze jaws gaping,  
 Shattered entire was our fleet of oars  
 The Grecian warships, calculating, dashed  
 Round, and encircled us; ships showed their belly:  
 No longer could we see the water, charged

With ships' wrecks and men's blood.  
 Corpses glutted beaches and the rocks  
 Every warship urged its own anarchic  
 Rout, and all who survived that expedition,  
 Like mackerel or some catch of fish,  
 Were stunned and slaughtered, boned with broken oars  
 And splintered wrecks' lamentations, cries  
 Possessed the open sea, until the black  
 Eye of evening, closing, hushed them The sum  
 Of troubles, even if I should rehearse them  
 For ten days, I could not exhaust Rest  
 Content never in a single day  
 So great a number died

*Queen*

Alas! a sea of troubles breaks in waves  
 On the Persians and barbarian tribes

*Herald*

But what we've told would scarcely balance woes  
 Untold: misfortune came upon them, which  
 Swung the beam to weigh them double these

*Queen*

But what greater hatred could fortune show?  
 What misfortune came upon the soldiers,  
 Swinging the beam of troubles to greater woes?

*Herald*

All the Persians, who were in nature's prime,  
 Excellent in soul, and nobly bred to grandeur,  
 Always first in trust, met their death  
 In infamy, dishonor, and in ugliness.

*Queen*

Oh, wretched am I, alas! What doom  
 Destroyed them?

*Herald*

There is an island fronting Salamis,

Small, scarce an anchorage for ships,  
 Where the dancer Pan rejoices on the shore;  
 Whither Xerxes sent those men to kill 450  
 The shipwrecked enemies who sought the island  
 As a refuge (easily, he thought,  
 The Grecian arms would be subdued);  
 He also bid them rescue friends He conned  
 The future ill. For when a god gave Greeks  
 The glory, that very day, fenced in bronze,  
 They leaped ashore, and drew the circle tight  
 At every point mewed up, we could not turn.  
 Many rattled to the ground, whom stones  
 Had felled, and arrows, shot by bowstring, 460  
 Others killed; and in a final rush,  
 The end: they hacked, mangled their wretched limbs,  
 Until the life of all was gone  
 Xerxes mourned, beholding the lowest depths  
 Of woe, who, seated on a height that near  
 The sea commanded all his host, his robes  
 Destroying (and his lamentations shrill),  
 Dispatched his regiments on land: they fled 470  
 Orderless. Now you may lament their fate,  
 Added to the others' summed before.

*Queen*

O hateful deity! how the Persians  
 You deceived! Bitter was the vengeance  
 Which my son at famous Athens found:  
 She could not sate her appetite with those  
 Whom Marathon had made the Persians lose  
 For these my son, exacting as requital  
 Punishment (or so he thought)  
 Called on himself so numerous  
 A train of woes. Tell me, what ships escaped?  
 Where are they now? Can you clearly tell?

*Herald*

Who captained the remaining ships set sail 480  
 Before the wind, fleeing in disorder,  
 But the army perished in Boeotia: some,  
 In want of precious water, were racked with thirst,  
 And some, gasping empty on air,  
 Crossed to Phocis, Locria, the Malian  
 Gulf, where Spercheian waters kindly drench  
 The plain, and thence Achaea and Thessaly  
 Received us, wanting: there most died 490  
 In hunger and in thirst: both we felt.  
 To Magnesia and Macedonia we came,  
 The River Axius, the reedy marsh  
 Of Bolba, the mountain Pangaeon,  
 And Thrace There in the night a god  
 Roused winter out of season: all, who had  
 Believed the gods were naught, sang their chants,  
 To earth and sky obeisance made  
 When we ceased invoking gods, we tried 500  
 Waters that had turned to ice:  
 Who~~ever~~ started before Apollo's rays  
 Spread and scattered in the sky, he  
 Was saved. Soon the brilliant orb of sun,  
 Its rays aflame, melts the river's midst  
 One falls upon the next: happy he whose life  
 Was first cut short! The rest did make their way 510  
 But painfully through Thrace: not many fled  
 To hearth and home. Thus the city of Persians  
 May lament, regretting the loss of youth.  
 Truthful I have been, but omit many  
 Of the woes a god has hurled against  
 The Persians.

*(Exit Herald.)*

*Chorus*

O toilsome deity! how heavily  
You leaped upon all Persia!

*Queen*

Alas! woe is me, the host destroyed.  
O bright night's spectacle of dreams,  
How clearly you foresaw my woe,  
And you, my counselors, how poorly judged. 520  
But yet, as you counseled thus,  
First to the gods I'll offer prayer, and then  
To Earth and dead I'll come to offer gifts,  
A sacrificial cake. I know I pray  
For what is done and gone, but a brighter  
Fortune, in time to come, may there be  
And you, worthy of trust, exchange worthy counsel;  
My son, should he return before my own  
Return, comfort and escort him home.  
I fear to woes he'll add more woe 530

(*Exit Queen*)

*Chorus*

O! royal Zeus destroyed  
The multitudinous, proud  
Host of the Persian men,  
And the cities of Sousa  
And of Agbatana  
Concealed in the darkness of grief.

Many with delicate hands  
Rending their veils,  
Drenching their breasts,  
Swollen with tears, 540  
Sharing their woe,  
Ladies of Persia  
Softly are weeping,  
Desiring each

Him to behold  
 Wedded but lately,  
 Couches forsaking,  
 Soft as their coverlets  
 (Youth was voluptuous),  
 Their sorrows, insatiate woe  
 And I the pæan's song recite,  
 Doom of the gone,  
 Woe upon woe

Now all Asia  
 Desolate, void,  
 Sighs lament:  
 Xerxes led, 550  
 Alas,  
 Xerxes lost,  
 O woe,  
 Xerxes heedless all discharged  
 With ocean argosies  
 Why was Darius so long without harm,  
 Archery's captain of citizens,  
Loved Sousa's lord?—

Armies, navies  
 Lazuli-eyed,  
 Linen-winged 560  
 Warships led,  
 O woe,  
 Warships rammed destructively  
 By Grecian arms.  
 Scarcely escaped was the leader alone  
 (So we have heard) in the Thracian  
 Plains, bitter ways =

They of the first death,  
 Alas,

Left by necessity,  
 Woe,  
 Round by Kychraean shores, 570  
 Oh,  
 Moan in your anguish,  
 Cry to the heavens your grief,  
 Oh,  
 Wail long-weeping  
 Mournful cries.—

Torn in the sea-swirl,  
 Alas,  
 Mangled by voiceless,  
 Woe,  
 Fish of the unstained sea.  
 Oh,  
 Houses deprived grieve,  
 Sonless, to heavens their grief, 580  
 Oh,  
 Elders mourning,  
 Hear all woe.=

They throughout the Asian land  
 No longer Persian laws obey,  
 No longer lordly tribute yield,  
 Exacted by necessity;  
 Nor suffer rule as suppliants,  
 To earth obeisance never make:  
 Lost is the kingly power.— 590

Nay, no longer is the tongue  
 Imprisoned kept, but loose are men,  
 When loose the yoke of power's bound,  
 To bawl their liberty.  
 But Ajax' isle, spilled with blood  
 Its earth, and washed round by sea,  
 Holds the remains of Persia.=

(Enter Queen)

*Queen*

My friends, whoever's wise in ways of evil  
 Knows how, when a flood of evil comes,  
 Everything we grow to fear; but when  
 A god our voyage gladdens, we believe  
 Always that fortune's never-changing wind  
 Will blow. As my eyes behold all things  
 As fearful visitations of the gods,  
 So my ears already ring with cureless songs:  
 Thus consternation terrifies my sense.

600

Therefore I departed from the palaces,  
 Alone returning, unaccompanied  
 By chariots, by pomp and ceremony.

To the father of my son I bring

Propitious offerings, libations

610

For the dead: a milk-sweet draught of sacred kine  
 Unblemished; and resplendent liquors of the honey-  
 Working bee, with liquid droplets of a maiden  
 Stream are mingled; and this elixir

Of an antique vine, whose mother is

~~The wild~~ fields; and golden-green the fruit

Of fragrant olive trees, always flourishing

Their leafy age; and plaited flowers, children

Of the fecund earth. My friends, recite

Your ~~chants~~ and threnodies; recall

Darius' demon over these libations

620

To the dead, sepulchral honors, which

I lavish on the nether gods.

*Chorus*

O Queen of the Persians,

To the dark chambers

Libations pour;

While, kindness imploring

Of the gods, the conductors,



We offer prayer:  
 Ye sacred divinities,  
 Earth and King Hermes, 630  
 Conduct him to light  
 Up from the dead,  
 Who alone of all mortals,  
 A remedy knowing,  
 May show us the end

Hearest thou, blessèd king  
 Equal to god,  
 As I proclaim now  
 Chantings unpleasant  
 Barbarous mournful  
 Clear and diverse?  
 Miserable sorrows  
 I shall cry out,  
 Below dost thou hearken?—

Earth and the other gods 640  
 Leaders of dead,  
 Glorious demon  
 Him let arise thence,  
 God of the Persians  
 Sousa his mother;  
 Send up the man whom  
 Never surpassed  
 The Persian land buried =

Loved is the man, loved his tomb  
 Hiding his loving ways.  
 Aedoneus conductor,  
 Would that Aedoneus send 650  
 Lord Darius alone:—

Never by war wasted his men,  
 Never infatuate,

Called a god in wisdom,  
God in wisdom he was,  
Ruled his people well =

Padshah, ancient Padshah,  
Appear on the height of thy tomb,  
Raise thy slipper saffron-dyed,  
Flash the lappets of thy crown:  
Father Darius, Oh hither come, woe —

660

Hear the recent sorrows,  
O master of masters appear.  
Stygian gloom doth flit about,  
All the youth hath perished now.  
Father Darius, Oh hither come, woe. =

670

Oh, alas, Oh!  
O much-lamented by his friends in death.  
The ships with triple banks of oars are gone

680

(*The Ghost of Darius rises.*)

*Darius*

O faithful followers, companions  
Of my youth! O Persian counselors!  
What burden's burdening the city, which  
In lamentation moans, and makes the plains  
Tremble? And terrified I saw my wife  
Beside my tomb, and graciously received  
Her offerings; and you lamented, standing  
Near my tomb, with cries of resurrection  
Calling piteously. Ascent is not easy.  
The chthonic deities more readily  
Receive than give; but I, a potentate  
Among them, came: be quick, that I be un-  
Reproached for being late What recent woe  
Upon the Persians weighs?

690

*Chorus*

I'm shamed to behold thee,  
I'm shamed to address thee,  
Who was anciently feared.—

*Darius*

Since I have risen obeying  
Lamentations, lengthen not  
Your tale, but speak succinctly,  
Recounting all. Lay aside your  
Reverence toward me.

*Chorus*

I tremble to please thee,  
I tremble to tell thee  
What is loth to be told.=

700

*Darius*

As an ancient fear obstructs your sense,  
You, agèd consort of my marriage,  
Noble Queen, cease your weeping, tell me  
Clearly: many woes arise by sea, many  
Come by land, the longer life is racked.

*Queen*

O King, exceeding mortal happiness  
By happy fate! How, as long as you beheld  
The eyes of sun, you spent, how envied! a blessed  
Life like god's; and now I envy you  
Your dying, ere you saw this depth of woe.  
Everything, Darius, you will hear  
Succinctly: Persia is destroyed.

710

*Darius*

How? A lightning-bolt of hunger? Civil  
Strife within the city?

*Queen*

No, but all  
The host's destroyed at Athens.

*Darius*

Who among  
My sons was general? Tell me.

*Queen*

Furious Xerxes, who drained the plain manless.

*Darius*

By foot or warship was his vain attempt?

*Queen*

By both: a double front of doubled hosts.

720

*Darius*

But how did so great an army cross the strait?

*Queen*

Devices, yoking Helle's strait, a path  
Afforded.

*Darius*

He accomplished this? To close  
Great Bosphorus?

*Queen*

So it was; some god  
Contrived it.

*Darius*

Alas! a great divinity  
Deceived his sense.

*Queen*

The evil end he made  
Is present to the eye.

*Darius*

What befell them  
That you thus lament?

*Queen*

The naval host,  
Destroyed, destroyed the landed host.

*Darius*

Thus all the people spears destroyed

*Queen*

Thus Sousa groans desolate.

730

*Darius*

Alas! the goodly host! Alas! defenders!

*Queen*

All the Bactrians destroyed, no youth remains

*Darius*

O woe! the youth of allies gone

*Queen*

Xerxes

Alone with few they say.

*Darius*

Perished how?

Perished where?

*Queen*

To the joyous bridge

They came, the yoke of continents.

*Darius*

He was saved? Can this be true?

*Queen*

Yes, a clear report without dispute.

*Darius*

Alas! that prophecy was quick to act!

Zeus hurled against my son its lightning-end,

While I expected after many years

The gods would make an end, but when a man's

Willing and eager, god joins in. The spring

Of evil's found: my son in ignorance

Discovered it, by youthful pride, who hoped

To check the sacred waters of the Hellespont

By chains, just as if it were a slave He smoothed

His way, yoking Neptune's flowing Bosphorus

With hammered shackles. Mortal though he was,

740

By folly thought to conquer all the gods  
And Neptune Had not my son diseased his sense?  
I fear my labored wealth will fall the prey  
Of conquerors

750

*Queen*

Wicked men counseled this, furious  
Xerxes learned, saying you acquired wealth  
By spear, while he, in cowardice, played  
The warrior at home, and multiplied  
By nothing his ancestral wealth. So often  
These wicked men reproached him, until he  
Did plot his martial way toward Greece.

*Darius*

So their great, eternal deed is done!  
Never had anyone before made this  
Sousa so empty and so desolate,  
Since Zeus, our Lord, bestowed that honor:  
One man to wield his rod's authority  
Over all of Asia, rich in flocks.  
First was Medus leader of the host;  
~~Next his~~ son fulfilled the office well,  
Whose reason was the helmsman to his spirit;  
Third was Cyrus, fortunate, whose rule  
Brought peace to all: the Lydian people  
And the Phrygian he acquired,  
And marched his might against Ionia:  
No god resented him, for he was wise;  
And fourth was Cyrus' son, who shamed his country  
And ancestral throne; but Artaphrenes  
(Aided by his guile) and his friends,  
Whose task this was, slew him in his palace.  
After him, I, willing, drew the lot  
To rule, and often led a mighty host;  
But never did I cast so great a woe

760

770

780

Upon my city. Xerxes, my son, as young  
In age as sense, ignored my wisdom. Know  
This well, my comrades old as I, all of us  
Who held these powers, never wrought so many  
Woes.

*Chorus*

To what end, my Lord Darius, dost thou  
Harp on this? How could we, the Persian  
People, fare the best?

*Darius*

If you lead  
No expedition to the land of Greece,  
Not even if the Median host be more;  
For Grecian soil is their own ally.

790

*Chorus*

What dost thou intend by that, "their own ally"?

*Darius*

It starves to death excessive numbers.

*Chorus*

But, be sure, we'll raise a well-equipped  
And chosen host.

*Darius*

But even they, who now  
Remain in Greece, shall find no safe return.

*Chorus*

What? Shall not all the host return  
Across the strait of Helle?

*Darius*

Few of many,  
If the oracles of gods are credited:  
As we gaze at what has passed, no half  
Prophecy succeeds, but either all  
Or none. If we credit them, he leaves

800

Behind, his empty hopes persuading, chosen  
 Numbers of his host, who now are stationed  
 Where Asopus floods the plain, its rich sap  
 Kind to Boeotia; here await them  
 The lowest depths of woe to suffer, payment  
 For his pride and godless arrogance.  
 They, invading Greece, felt no awe,  
 They did not hesitate to plunder images  
 Of gods, and put temples to the torch;  
 Altars were no more, and statues, like trees,  
 Were uprooted, torn from their bases  
 In all confusion Thus their wickedness  
 Shall no less make them suffer:  
 Other woes the future holds in store,  
 And still the fount of evils is not quenched,  
 It wells up, and overflows: so great will be  
 The sacrificial cake of clotted gore  
 Made at Plataea by Dorian spear  
 And corpses, piled up like sand, shall witness,  
 Mute, even to the century to come,  
 Before the eyes of men, that never, being  
 Moral, ought we cast our thoughts too high  
 Insolence, once blossoming, bears  
 Its fruit, a tasseled field of doom, from which  
 A weeping harvest's reaped, all tears.  
 Behold the punishment of these! remember  
 Greece and Athens! lest you disdain  
 Your present fortune, and lust after more,  
 Squandering great prosperity.  
 Zeus is the chastener of overboastful  
 Minds, a grievous corrector. Therefore advise  
 Him, admonished by reason, to be wise,  
 And cease his overboastful temper from  
 Sinning against the gods. And you, aged  
 Mother of Xerxes, go to the palace;

810

820

830



Gather up rich and brilliant cloths, and go  
To meet your son; for he, in grief, has rent  
His embroidered robes to shreds. Gently soothe  
Him with your words: to yours alone he'll listen  
Now shall I descend to nether gloom.  
Elder counselors, farewell, and though  
In time of troubles, give daily pleasures  
To your soul, as wealth cannot benefit  
The dead.

840

*(The Ghost of Darius descends.)*

*Chorus*

Alas! the woes upon us and the woes  
To come have grieved me hearing them.

*Queen*

O god! how many sorrows move against me!  
But one torment has the deepest fang,  
Hearing that dishonor folds about my son  
Its robes. But I shall go to gather up  
Adornments, and try to meet my son.  
When evils come on those we dearly love,  
Never shall we betray them.

850

*(Exit Queen)*

*Chorus*

Oh! alas, Oh! what a great and a good life was ours,  
Civilly ordered, as long as the aged  
Ruler of all,  
Mild, unconquerable king,  
Equal to god,  
Darius ruled the land —  
Glorious arms we displayed, and the bulwarks of custom  
All they did guide. And returning from battle  
Grief had we none,  
Victors, unburdened of all,  
Happy and glad,  
To home again we came. =

860

For many the cities he sacked never crossing the Halys,  
Nor leaving his hearth in a rush  
At the mouth of the River Strymon,  
Near Thracian places,  
The islands of Achelous,—

Both cities beyond the Aegean, surrounded by towers, 870  
Obeyed him our lord, and who round  
The broad strait of Helle boasting,  
And recessed Propontis,  
And gateway of Pontus, Bosphor,=

And the isles along the headland washed by sea 880  
Lying close to shore.  
Samos and Chios and Lesbos the olive-planted,  
Paros and Naxos and Mykonos,  
And Tenos the neighbor of Andros —

And the islands in the midst of sea he ruled·  
Ikaros and Lemnos, 890  
Rhodus and Knidos and cities of Aphrodite,  
Paphos and Solus and Salamis,  
Whose founder's the cause of these sorrows.=

Thus the wealthy and populous lands,  
The Ionian province, he ruled, 900  
And the strength of his helmeted men  
Was unwearied, innumerable allies.  
But now we bear god-routed fortunes,  
Overcome by the blows of the sea.

(*Enter Xerxes alone.*)

*Xerxes*

Oh, hateful this doom, woe is me,  
Wretched alas, without augury. 910  
How savagely swooped the deity.  
What will befall me? I swoon  
Beholding these citizens aged.

Zeus! would that fate had covered me  
With the Persians gone!

*Chorus*

Oh alas, King, for a brave host,  
For the great honor of Persian rule,  
For the ranks of men whom a god has slain

920

Nations wail their native sons,  
Who by Xerxes stuffed up hell,  
Many heroes, Persia's bloom,  
Archers, thick array of men,  
Myriads have perished.  
Woe, O King of noble strength.  
Cruel! Cruel! Asia kneels.

930

*Xerxes*

Here am I, alas, O woe:  
To my native and ancestral land  
Woe is the evil I've become.

*Chorus*

Loudly shall I send, for your return,  
An evil-omened shout, an evil-practiced cry:  
A weeping wail of Persian mourners shall I sing —

*Xerxes*

Send a wail of evil sound  
Lamenting and grievous, now  
Fortune again has changed for me

940

*Chorus*

Mourning wail all-weeping shall I send,  
In honor of your woes and sea-struck grief  
Again a wailing filled with tears I'll cry. =

*Xerxes*

Ionian Ares spoiled,  
Protected by their ships,  
Their partisan in war,

950

Reaping gloomy flats of sea  
and demon-haunted shores.

*Chorus*

Oh alas!

*Xerxes*

Lament and ask for all

*Chorus*

But where are the others?  
Where is thy retinue,  
Like Pharandakas,  
Sousas, Pelagon, and Agabatas,  
Dotamas, Psammis, Sousiscanes  
Leaving Agbatana?—

960

*Xerxes*

The lost I deserted there,  
Who from the ships of Tyre  
To Salaminian shore  
Vanished and were gone, their corpses  
pounding stubborn shores

*Chorus*

Oh alas! but where is Pharnouchus  
And brave Ariomardus?  
Where is Seualkes lord,  
Or Lilaëus grand,  
Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistres,  
Artembares and Hystaechnes?  
These I ask you about.=

970

*Xerxes*

Oh alas, woe,  
Who all, beholding ancient, hateful Athens, gasp on shore,  
Woe upon woe, wretched in a single sweep of oar.

*Chorus*

Did you leave that Persian there,  
Your trusted universal eye,

980

Who made his count by myriads,  
Batanochus' son Alpistus?

. . .

Of Sesames, of Megabates,  
Great Parthus and Oebares you left behind?  
O woe, O woe, O miseries  
You tell of woes on woes —

*Xerxes*

Oh alas, woe,  
The magic wheel of longing for my friends you turn, you tell  
Me hateful sorrows Within my frame my heart resounds,  
resounds

990

*Chorus*

And for the others still we long.  
The leader of ten thousand men  
Of Mardia, Xanthes, Angchares,  
And Diaexis and Arsamas,  
Masters of horsemen,  
And Dadakas and Lythimnas,  
And Tolmus who never slaked his spear.  
I see about the moving tents,  
I see no followers =

1000

*Xerxes*

Gone are the hunters of the pack.

*Chorus*

Gone, alas, fameless.

*Xerxes*

Oh alas, woe

*Chorus*

Woe, O gods  
Who brought these unexpected woes!  
How baleful gleams the eye of doom.—

*Xerxes*

Struck by woes perpetual.

*Chorus*

Struck by recent—

*Xerxes*

A recent woe.

1010

*Chorus*

Woe, alas,

They met the men-of-war without success

How luckless was the Persians' war. =

*Xerxes*

Alas, in so vast an army I am struck

*Chorus*

What is not lost, thou curse of the Persians?

*Xerxes*

Behold the remnants of my power

*Chorus*

I see, I see

*Xerxes*

And this receptacle.

1020

*Chorus*

What is this that is saved?

*Xerxes*

A treasure of arrows.

*Chorus*

How few from so many!

*Xerxes*

We are reft of protectors

*Chorus*

Greeks stand firm in combat —

*Xerxes*

Alas, too firm! I scan an unexpected woe

*Chorus*

You mean the host, routed and broken?

*Xerxes*

My garments I rent at my woe.

*Chorus*

Alas, O woe

1030

*Xerxes*

And even more than woe.

*Chorus*

Double and triple the woe.

*Xerxes*

Painful to us, but to enemies joy.

*Chorus*

And docked was our power.

*Xerxes*

I am stripped of escorters.

*Chorus*

Sea-dooms stripped us of our friends.=

*Xerxes*

Weep, weep, weep for the woe, and homeward depart.

*Chorus*

Alas, O woe, misery.

*Xerxes*

Shout antiphonal to me.

1040

*Chorus*

To woebegone woeful gift of woes.

*Xerxes*

Raising a cry, join together our songs.

*Xerxes and Chorus*

Alas, O woe, woe, woe upon woe.

*Chorus*

Hearing this calamity,

Oh! I am pierced.—

*Xerxes*

Sweep, sweep, sweep with the oar, and groan for my sake.

*Chorus*

I weep, alas, woe is me.

*Xerxes*

Shout antiphonal to me.

*Chorus*

My duty is here, O master, lord.

*Xerxes*

Lift up your voice in lamenting now.

1050

*Xerxes and Chorus*

Alas, O woe, woe, woe upon woe.

*Chorus*

Black again the blows are mixed,  
Oh, with the groans.=

*Xerxes*

Beat your breast and cry Mysian songs

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe.

*Xerxes*

Tear your whitened hair tightly clenched

*Chorus*

Tightly clenched, plaintive.

*Xerxes*

Piercing cry.

*Chorus*

And so I shall.—

*Xerxes*

Full-fold garments with strength of hand rend.

1060

*Chorus*

Woe upon woe.

*Xerxes*

Pluck your hair and pity the host

*Chorus*

Tightly clenched, plaintive.



*Xerxes*

Drench your eyes

*Chorus*

And so I weep.=

*Xerxes*

Shout antiphonal to me

*Chorus*

Alas, O woe.

*Xerxes*

Wretched, homeward depart

*Chorus*

O woe, alas

1070

*Xerxes*

Through the city lamentation

*Chorus*

Lament indeed

*Xerxes*

Softly stepping, moan.

*Chorus*

O Persian land in hardness stepped

*Xerxes*

O woe, woe, in triple banks of oars,

O woe, woe, in argosies destroyed

*Chorus*

We shall escort thee

With mournful lament

(*Exit all.*)

SEVEN  
AGAINST  
THEBES

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

DAVID GRENE

## INTRODUCTION TO *SEVEN AGAINST THEBES*

THIS strange, archaic play was produced in 467 B.C. It is probably the last play of a trilogy written by Aeschylus on the theme of the Oedipus cycle. It is at once undramatic and yet, in a paradoxical way, very theatrical. Who can take seriously a play with almost no action, in which the main event is the recital of the blazonry on the shields of the Seven Champions? But a careful reading will reveal the tremendous effect that the dancing accompaniments would have made. The effect of the whole is, despite its disadvantages for a modern reader, very powerful.

The play is extremely hard to translate. The style is heroic in the good parts and bombastic in the bad. It is never simple and luminous. Whereas the same quality of diction in the elevated parts of the *Prometheus* is always suited to a majesty of theme comprehensible to a modern reader, the matter of the *Seven* is remote from the interest of a reader today, and it needs imagination to conceive of it in the Greek theater, let alone on the stage as we now know it.

It is perhaps better understood by a modern reader in the mood in which he would now attend a ritual ceremony, a church service, or a pageant such as the coronation of an English monarch. The recital of the devices on the shields, the matching of the champions, and, in the last part of the play, the antiphonal keening of the sisters over the dead bodies of their brothers are all properly traditional ritual. They were probably filled for the Greek spectator with matter pertinent to his own time. The political relation of Argos, Thebes, and Athens was then much discussed, and Aeschylus has undoubtedly used the popular interest in these matters to render the old story vital for his audience. It may be that the names of the champions had many associations for the mid-fifth-century Greek. Aeschylus has

similarly used the general interest in the Areopagus in the years 462-459 B C for the pageant drama of the *Oresteia*. Though many of the clues to his employment of this method in the *Seven* are lost to us, we are almost certainly correct in assuming that this is again the course he adopted. The *Seven*, like the *Eumenides*, is the last play of the trilogy, and in both Aeschylus has managed to raise progressively a particular story to the level of a general process of history culminating in a particular historical occurrence known to his contemporaries.

CHARACTERS

*Eteocles, son of Oedipus and  
present ruler of Thebes*

*Antigone* } *his sisters*  
*Ismene* }

*Messenger*

*Chorus of Theban Women*

## SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

SCENE *Thebes The Prince Eteocles confronts a crowd of Thebans*

*Eteocles*

You citizens of Cadmus, he must speak home  
that in the ship's prow watches the event  
and guides the rudder, his eye not drooped in sleep.  
For if we win success, the God is the cause  
but it—may it not chance so—there is disaster,  
throughout the town, voiced by its citizens,  
a multitudinous swelling prelude  
cries on one name "Eteocles" with groans.  
which Zeus defender keep from the city of Cadmus  
even as his name implies

You must help her now—you still something short  
of your young manhood and you whose time of youth  
is gone, your body grown to its full bigness—  
each of you to such charge as fits you—  
help the city, help the altars of your country's Gods,  
save their honors from destruction:

help your children, help Earth your Mother.  
She reared you, on her kindly surface, crawling  
babies, welcomed all the trouble of your nurture,  
reared you to live in her, to carry a shield  
in her defense, loyally, against such needs as this  
Now to this God kindly inclines this day.

For those who have been held in siege so long  
the Gods grant commonly a favorable fight  
So says the prophet now, bird shepherding  
with skill unlying, ears and mind and fire  
tending the oracular birds.

The master of these prophecies declares

10

20

enemy's night council framed a plot  
 for the greatest Achæan assault upon us.  
 All to the battlements, to the gates of the towers!  
 Haste, in full armor, man the breastworks  
 stand on the scaffolding and at the exit gates  
 be firm, abide, your hearts confident  
 fear not that mighty mob of foreigners.  
 God will dispose all well:  
 I have sent scouts and spies upon their host  
 they will not—well I know it—make the journey  
 vainly, and by their information  
 I shall be armed against enemy's stratagems

30

*Messenger*

Eteocles, great prince of the Cadmaeans,  
 I come bringing a clear word from the army  
 of matters there I myself too  
 have seen the things I speak of  
 There were seven men, fierce regiment commanders,  
 who cut bulls' throats into an iron-rimmed  
 shield, and with hands touched the bulls' blood,  
 taking their oaths by Ares and Enyo,  
 by the bloodthirsty God of Battle Rout  
 either to lay your city level  
 with the ground, sacked, or by their death to make  
 a bloody paste of this same soil of yours.  
 Remembrances of themselves for parents at home  
 their hands have hung upon Adrastus' chariot:  
 their tears ran down,  
 but never a word of pity was in their mouths.  
 Their spirits were hard as iron and ablaze  
 breathed courage: war looked through their lion-eyes.  
 You will not wait long for confirmation  
 of this my news: I left them casting lots  
 how each should lead his regiment against your gates  
 Wherefore the choicest men within your city

40

50

set at the entrance gates set them quickly  
 for near already the armed host of Argives  
 comes in a cloud of dust, flecks of white,  
 panted from horses' lungs, staining the ground  
 You, like the skilful captain of a ship  
 barricade your town before the blast of Ares  
 strikes it in storm: already bellows  
 the armed land wave. Take quickest opportunity  
 for all these things and I for the rest  
 will keep my eye, a trusty day watcher  
 Thanks to my clear reports you shall know whatever  
 happens within the gates, and come to no harm.

60

*Eteocles*

O Zeus and Earth and Gods that guard the city  
 My father's Curse, mighty evil spirit,  
 do not root out this city of mine, do not  
 give her to ruin and destruction, do not  
 give her to capture nor her homes and hearths.  
 This is a town that speaks with a Greek tongue  
 City and land of the Cadmaeans are free:  
 do not bind her in slavish yoke, be her protector  
 I think I speak for everybody's good,  
 for a city prosperous honors the Gods

70

*Chorus*

My sorrows are great and fearful I cry aloud  
 the army has left the camp and is gone  
 Look at the forward rushing river, the great tide of horsemen!  
 I see a cloud of dust, sky high, and am convinced,  
 a messenger clear and unlying, though voiceless

80

Treading feet on the earth of my country,  
 trampling hoofs, the sound of these draws near

(*Shout is heard*)

It floats, it rings  
 like a resistless mountain waterfall



O gods, O goddesses, the trouble raised!  
Turn it aside!

(*Shouts*)

Over the walls they spring  
the Horse of the White Shield  
well equipped, hastening upon our city

90

Who will protect us? Who will be our champion  
of gods or goddesses?  
Shall I kneel at the images of the Gods?  
O Blessed Ones, throned in peace,  
it is time to cling to your images.  
We delay and wail too much.

Do you hear or do you not the rattle of shields?

100

When, if not now, shall we hang  
robes and garlands on your statues, supplicating?

I see the sound!  
No one spear rattled so

What will you do? Will you betray,  
ancient lord of our land Ares,  
your own land?

O spirit of the golden helmet look down upon us,  
look down upon a city  
which once you dearly loved.

City guarding gods of our land, come, come all of you!  
Look upon us a band of virgins,  
suppliants against slavery!

110

Around our city the wave of warriors, with waving plumes,  
roars; blasts of the War God stirred them

Alas alas Zeus, Father Omnipotent! all fulfilling!  
Let us not fall into the hands of the foeman!

For the Argives are around Cadmus' city.

120

Fear is stronger than arms.

There is murder in the ringing bits  
between their horses' jaws  
Seven proud captains of the host,  
with harness and spear,  
having won their place by lot,  
stand champions at seven gates  
O victory, battle-loving, Zeus begotten,  
save our city!

O Pallas, and the Horseman, Prince of the Sea, 130  
King of the Trident, Poseidon,  
deliverance from fear,  
deliverance grant  
You, Ares, protect the city of Cadmus, that bears your name

Show your care for it, in manifest presence.  
And Cypris, who are our ancestress 140  
turn destruction away We are sprung from your blood  
we approach you and cry  
with prayers for the ears of the Gods

And you, Wolf God, be a very Wolf  
in the enemy host. And you, daughter of Leto,  
make ready your bow.

Ah, ah, 150  
the rattle of chariots round the city: I hear it.  
O Lady Hera,  
the groaning axles of the loaded wheels.  
Beloved Artemis!  
The air is mad with the whirr of spears.  
What will happen our city, what will become of it,  
whereto shall the Gods bring an end upon us?

There comes a shower of stones on the top of the battlements!  
O beloved Apollo!  
There is the rattle of bronze-bound shields at our gates! 160

O Son of Zeus  
from whom comes the war's fulfilment,  
from whom comes the fight's holy consummation.

O Athene, Blessed Queen, Champion of the city,  
deliver her from the assault of the Seven

O Gods all sufficient,  
O Gods and Goddesses, Perfecters,  
Protectors of our country's forts,  
do not betray this city, spear-won,  
to a foreign-tongued enemy.  
Hear O hear the prayers, hand outstretched,  
of the virgins supplicating in justice.

170

O beloved Spirits,  
that encompass our city to its deliverance,  
show how much you love it:  
Bethink you of the public sacrifices.  
As we have thought of you, rescue us.  
Remember, I pray you, the rites  
with loving sacrifice offered.

180

*Eteocles*

You insupportable creatures, I ask you,  
is this the best, is this for the city's safety,  
is this enheartening for our beleaguered army,  
to have you falling at the images  
of the city's gods crying and howling,  
an object of hatred for all temperate souls?  
Neither in evils nor in fair good luck  
may I share a dwelling with the tribe of women!  
When she's triumphant, hers a confidence  
past converse with another, when afraid  
an evil greater both for home and city.  
Here now running wild among the citizenry  
you have roared them into spiritless cowardice.  
So, outside of our gates, gains strength the enemy

190

while we are by ourselves, within, undone.  
 All this you may have, for living with women  
 Now if there is anyone that will not hear  
 my orders, be he man or woman or in between,  
 sentence of death shall be decreed against him  
 and public stoning he shall not escape.  
 What is outside is a man's province let no  
 woman debate it: within doors do no mischief!  
 Do you hear me or not? Or are you deaf?

200

*Chorus*

Dear son of Oedipus, the bumping rattle of the chariots,  
 rattle, rattle, I am afraid when I hear,  
 when the naves of the axles screech in their running  
 when the fire-forged bits speak ringingly,  
 rudder oars in horses' mouths.

*Eteocles*

What, shall the sailor, then, leave the stern  
 and run to the prow and find device for safety  
 when his vessel is foundering in the sea waves?

210

*Chorus*

But it was to the images of the Gods  
 the ancient images I ran, trusting in the Gods,  
 when the stony snowflakes crashed upon our gates  
 nay, then I was lifted up with force and betook me to prayer  
 to the Blessed Ones, for our city,  
 that they may make their strength its protection.

*Eteocles*

For protection pray that our towers  
 hold off the enemy's spears.

*Chorus*

And shall not that be  
 as the Gods dispose?

*Eteocles*

The Gods, they say,  
 of a captured town desert her.

*Chorus*

Never in my lifetime, never may this assembly  
of Gods desert us never may I live to see  
this city overrun, an enemy soldiery  
putting the torch to it

220

*Eteocles*

Do not call upon the Gods  
and then be guided wrongly  
Obedience is mother to success,  
and success is parent of rescue—  
so runs the proverb

*Chorus*

This is true but the strength of God is still greater  
Oftentimes when a man is hopelessly sunk  
in misfortune He raises him, yes from his greatest sorrow  
while the clouds still hang over him, high above our eyes

*Eteocles*

But it is man's part, the sacrifice, the consultation  
of the Gods, when the enemy assault us;  
it is yours to be silent and stay within doors

230

*Chorus*

It is thanks to the Gods that we have our city  
unconquered it is thanks to them  
that our towers reject the mob of foemen  
What should be resented in these words?

*Eteocles*

I do not grudge your honoring the Gods  
But lest you make our citizens cowards,  
be quiet and not overfearful

*Chorus*

It was but now that I heard the noise and the confusion  
and trembling in fear came to this citadel,  
sacred seat

240

*Eteocles*

If you shall learn of men dying or wounded,  
do not be eager to anticipate it with cries,  
for murdered men are the War God's nourishment

*Chorus*

The snorting of horses! There, I hear it.

*Eteocles*

Do not listen; do not hear too much.

*Chorus*

Our city groans from its foundation we are surrounded.

*Eteocles*

I shall think of this that is enough for you.

*Chorus*

I am afraid the din at the gates grows louder.

*Eteocles*

Silence! Do not speak of this throughout the city

250

*Chorus*

O Blessed Band, do not betray this fort.

*Eteocles*

Damnation! Can you not endure in silence?

*Chorus*

Fellow-citizen Gods, grant me not to be a slave.

*Eteocles*

It is you who enslave yourselves, and all the city

*Chorus*

O Zeus, All Mighty, your bolt upon our foes!

*Eteocles*

O Zeus, what a tribe you have given us in women!

*Chorus*

Base is the tribe of men of a captured town

*Eteocles*

Words of ill omen, your hands on the images!

*Chorus*

Fear captures my tongue, and my spirit is nought

*Eteocles*

Grant me, I pray you, the small thing I ask

260

*Chorus*

Speak it quickly, that I may know

*Eteocles*

Silence, you wretches, don't frighten your friends

*Chorus*

I am silent with others I'll endure what is fated

*Eteocles*

I like this word better than those before.

Furthermore, get you away from the statues,  
and being so, utter a better prayer

"May the Gods stand our allies " First hear my  
prayer and then offer yours—

a holy gracious paean of thanksgiving,  
the cry of sacrifice, our Grecian custom,  
joy to our friends, dissolving fear of foes

270

*(He approaches the images himself and prays )*

Gods of the city, of this country Gods,  
Lords of its fields, and its assembly places,  
Springs of Dirce, waters of Ismenus—  
to you my vow.

if all go well with us, if the city is saved,  
my people shall dye your hearths with the blood  
of sacrificed sheep, aye with the blood  
of bulls slaughtered to honor the Gods.

I shall myself dedicate trophies,  
spoils of my enemies, their garments fixed  
on spear points, in your sanctuaries.

*(To the Chorus)*

These be your prayers, unlamenting  
with no vain wild panting and moaning.  
For all such you will not escape your doom

280

I will take six men, myself to make a seventh  
and go to post them at the city's gates,  
opponents of the enemy, in gallant style,  
before quick messengers are on us and  
their words of haste burn us with urgency.

*Chorus*

I heed him but through fear  
my spirit knows no sleep  
and neighbors to my heart,  
anxieties, kindle terror  
of the host that beleaguers us.

290

As the all-fearing dove  
dreads for its nestlings' sake  
the snakes that menace them  
For they against our forts  
with all their host, with all their people,  
come. What will become of me?

Jagged rocks they hurl  
upon our citizens, on both sides pelted  
O children of Zeus, ye Gods,

300

I pray you—protect  
the city and the army,  
the Cadmus born.

What country will you take in exchange,  
than this one better,  
if you abandon this deep-soiled land  
to her enemies,

and Dirce's water, fairest to drink  
of all that come from Poseidon  
the Earth Upholder, and Tethys' sons?

310

Therefore, you city-guarding Gods,  
upon the men outside our forts  
rain slaughtering destruction  
and ruin, that will cast away their shields.  
and for these citizens here



win glory and of the city  
 be the rescuers  
 Then stand fair in your places  
 to receive our shrill prayers.

320

Pity it were that this city, so ancient,  
 should be cast to the House of Death,  
 a spear-booty, a slave,  
 in crumbling ashes, dishonorably,  
 sacked by an Achaean, with the Gods' consent,  
 that its women be haled away,  
 captives, young and old,  
 dragged by the hair, as horses by the mane,  
 and their raiment torn about them  
 Emptied the city wails  
 as the captive spoil, with mingled cries,  
 is led to its doom

330

This heavy fate is what I fear  
 It is a woeful thing for maidens unripe,  
 before the marriage rites, to tread  
 this bitter journey from their homes  
 I would say that the dead  
 are better off than this.  
 Alas, unlucky indeed the fate  
 of a city captured—  
 murder, fire, and rapine,  
 all the city polluted by smoke,  
 and the breath of Ares on it  
 maddened, desecrating piety, slaying the people.

340

There is tumult through the town.  
 Against her comes a towering net  
 Man stands against man with the spear and is killed  
 Young mothers, blood-boltered,  
 cry bitterly for the babes at their breast.  
 The roving bands of pillagers are all brothers,

350

he that has plunder meets with another,  
 he that is empty calls him that is empty,  
 wishing to have a partner, eager for a share  
 neither less nor yet equal  
 From such things what shall one augur?

All sorts of grain fallen  
 strewn on the ground vex,  
 embitter the eye of the housewife  
 The great, profuse gifts of the earth  
 in reckless streams of waste are poured out  
 The girls, new servants, new to misery,  
 must endure a war captive's bed,  
 bed of a man successful  
 Theirs the expectation of night's consummation  
 but for a triumphant enemy  
 to help their tearful sorrow.

360

*Half-Chorus*

Here, I think, friends, your scout comes bringing  
 some news of the enemy—hastily urging  
 the joints of his legs to carry him here.

370

*Half-Chorus* ,

And here is the king himself, the son  
 of Oedipus in the nick of time to hear  
 the messenger's story He too is in haste  
 and numbly steps along.

*Messenger*

I can declare—

I know it well—the enemy's position:  
 how each at the gates has won by lot his station  
 At the Proetid gate Tydeus now thunders  
 but dares not cross Ismenus' ford, the prophet  
 forbids The sacrifices are unfavorable  
 Tydeus, enraged and thirsting for the fight,  
 threatens, like serpents' hiss at noonday;

380

strikes with abuse the wise seer, Oecleides,  
 "battle and death make him cringe  
 through cowardice"—so he shouts aloud  
 and shakes his threefold shadowing plumes,  
 mane of his crested helm Beneath his shield,  
 inside, ring brazen bells, a peal of terror,  
 and on the shield he bears this arrogant  
 device—a fashioned sky afire with stars  
 In the shield's midst a glorious full moon,  
 night's eye, the eldest of the stars, stands out.  
 With such mad bragging and with overweening  
 trappings of war he roars along the banks  
 in love with battle, like the horse that chafes  
 against the bit, high mettled, impatient, hearing  
 the trumpet's sound Against this champion  
 whom will you set?  
 When the bolts are shot back at the Proetid gates,  
 who will be champion fit to deserve our trust?

390

*Eteocles*

No equipment of a man will make me tremble  
 Devices on a shield deal no one wounds  
 The plumes and bells bite not without the spear  
 And for this night you speak of on his shield  
 glistening with all the stars of heaven—someone  
 may find his folly prophetic to himself  
 For if in death night fall upon his eyes,  
 to him that bears this pompous blazonry  
 it shall be truly and most justly pregnant,  
 and he shall make his insolence prophesy  
 against himself

400

I nominate against him  
 as champion of these gates to challenge Tydeus,  
 the worthy son of Astacus—right noble,  
 one honoring the throne of Modesty  
 and hating insolent words

410

Laggard in all things base he is wont to be  
 but not a coward From those sown men  
 whom Ares spared his root springs—very native  
 is Melanippus to this land His deeds  
 shall Ares with his dice determine,  
 but Justice, blood of his blood, sends him forth,  
 surely, to turn the enemy's spear away  
 from the mother that has borne him

*Chorus*

May the Gods grant  
 good luck to our champion,  
 since justly he comes forward  
 a fighter for us  
 But I fear for our friends  
 to look upon bloodshed  
 of those we love, dying

420

*Messenger*

Yes, may the Gods grant him good luck  
 At Electra's gates stands by lot Capaneus,  
 a giant this man, taller than the other,  
 and his threats breathe inhuman arrogance.  
 Our towers he menaces with terrors—Fortune  
 fulfil them not!—for he declares he'll sack  
 our city with the Gods' good will or ill  
 Not even Zeus's wrath striking the earth  
 before him shall be obstacle to his purpose  
 The lightnings and the thunderbolts he likened  
 to the sun's warm rays at noontide.  
 His device a naked man that carries fire,  
 in his hands, ablaze, a torch all ready. In gold  
 are letters that declare "I'll burn the city"  
 Against this man send—who will meet him?  
 Who will abide his threats and never tremble?

430

*Eteocles*

This man's boasts, too, beget us other gain.  
 For of the haughtiness of vain men, true  
 accuser proves their own tongue. Capaneus  
 threatens to do—and is prepared to do— 440  
 disdains the Gods, and giving exercise  
 to his mouth, in vain joy, up to heaven  
 mortal though he is, against Zeus sends his words,  
 shouted in swelling pride I trust on him  
 will justly come the bolt that carries fire  
 in no way like the sun's warm rays at noontide  
 Against him, be his lips never so insolent,  
 a man of fiery spirit shall be stationed,  
 strong Polyphontes, a guard trustworthy,  
 by favor of protecting Artemis  
 and of the other Gods Tell me another 450  
 that has his place by lot at another gate

*Chorus*

Destruction on him that against the city  
 vaunts huge threats,  
 may the thunderbolt's blast restrain him  
 before he burst into my house,  
 before he ravish me from my maiden room.

*Messenger*

Now I shall tell him that by lot won next  
 station at the gates The third lot cast  
 jumped from the upturned brazen helmet  
 in favor of a third man, Eteoclus,  
 that he should lead his regiment in a charge 460  
 against the gates of Neïs He wheels his mares  
 snorting in their nose bands, ready to charge the gate.  
 Pipes on the bridle bands filled with insolent  
 nostril breath whistle in a foreign note.  
 His shield, too, has its design—and that no lowly—

a man in armor mounts a ladder's steps  
to the enemy's town to sack it. Loud  
cries also this man in his written legend  
"Ares himself shall not cast me from the tower."  
Against him send some champion trustworthy  
to turn the yoke of slavery from this city.

470

*Eteocles*

This man I'll send and may good luck go with him!

There, he is gone. His boast is in his hands  
Megareus, Creon's son, and of the seed  
and race of the sown men He will not blench  
at the furious neighing of horses nor yield the gates.  
Either by death he'll pay his nurture's due  
to his own land or he will capture two men  
and city as depicted on the shield  
and crown his father's house with the spoils of war  
On with another's boasts—don't grudge me the story.

480

*Chorus*

Good success to you, I pray,  
Champion of my house,  
and to the enemy ill success!  
as with wild extravagance  
they prate against the city  
with maddened heart, so may Zeus  
the Avenger look on them in wrath.

*Messenger*

Another, the fourth, holds the gate that neighbors  
Onca Athena, and takes his station with a shout,  
Hippomedon's vast frame and giant form.  
He whirled a disc around—I mean the circle  
of his shield—until I shuddered I speak truth.  
The armorer cannot have been a poor one  
that put upon the shield this work of art—  
a Typho hurling from his fiery mouth

490

black smoke, the flickering sister of fire  
 The rim that ran around the hollow boss  
 of the shield is solid wrought with coiling snakes  
 The man himself cried out his warcry, he,  
 inspired by Ares, revels in violence  
 like a Bacchanal with murder in his glance  
 Take good heed how you deal with such a man,  
 he boasts even now at the gate he will raise panic

500

*Eteocles*

First Onca Pallas, with her place beside  
 our city, neighbor to our gates, will hate  
 the fellow's violence and keep him off,  
 as it were a chill snake from her nestling brood  
 And then Hyperbius, the stout son of Oenops,  
 has been chosen to match him man for man, right willing,  
 at fortune's need, to put his fate to question—  
 no man to be reproached either in form  
 or spirit or in bearing of his arms  
 Hermes has matched the two with excellent reason,  
 for man with man they shall engage as foes  
 and on their shields shall carry enemy Gods  
 The one has Typho breathing fire, the other,  
 Hyperbius, has father Zeus in station  
 sitting upon his shield, and in his hand  
 a burning bolt  
 No one has yet seen Zeus defeated anywhere.  
 Such on each side are the favors of the Gods;  
 we are on the winning side, they with the vanquished  
 if Zeus than Typho mightier prove in battle.

510

520

*Chorus*

Sure am I that he who hath  
 Zeus's foe upon his shield  
 the unloved form of the earth-born God,  
 the likeness hated by men

and the long-living Gods,  
shall lay his head before our gates

*Messenger*

So may it prove Now I shall take the fifth  
that has his station at the fifth, the Northern gate,  
right by Amphion's tomb that sprung from Zeus  
By his lance he swears—and with sure confidence  
he holds it more in reverence than a god,  
more precious than his eyes—he will sack the town  
of Thebes in despite of Zeus. Such the loud vaunt  
of this creature sprung of a mountain mother, handsome,  
something between man and boy.

530

The beard is newly sprouting on his cheeks,  
the thick, upspringing hair of youth in its bloom.

His spirit unlike his maiden name\* is savage,  
and with a grim regard he now advances

He too boasts high as he draws near our gates  
For on his brazen shield, his body's rounded  
defense, he swings an insult to our city,

540

the Sphinx that ate men raw, cunningly wrought,  
burnished, embossed, secured with rivets there.

A man she<sup>†</sup> bears beneath her, a Cadmaean,  
so that at him most of our darts shall fly.

When he comes to the battle, so it seems,  
he will not play the petty shopkeeper  
nor shame the course of his long journey here—  
Parthenopaeus of Arcadia.

He lives among our enemy presently  
and pays to Argos a fair wage for his keep,  
with threats against our forts—which God fulfil not

*Eteocles*

Would that they might obtain what from the Gods  
they pray against us—them, and their impious boasts.

550

\* Parthenopaeus Maiden One



Then would they perish utterly and ill.  
 We have a man to encounter your Arcadian,  
 a man unboasting but his hand looks for  
 the thing that should be done—Actor, the brother  
 of him I spoke of earlier He will not suffer  
 a heedless tongue to flow within our gates  
 and to breed mischief, nor to cross our walls,  
 one bearing on an enemy shield the likeness  
 of the most hateful Sphinx—or else the beast  
 borne outside shall have cause of blame against  
 him that would carry her in, for many a hammering  
 blow she will get beneath the city's walls.  
 With the God's will, I may indeed speak truth

560

*Chorus*

The words go through my heart;  
 the hair stands upright on my head;  
 as I listen to mighty words  
 of impious boasting men.  
 May the Gods destroy them within our land!

*Messenger*

A sixth I'll tell you of—a most modest man  
 greatest in might of battle, yet a prophet,  
 strong Amphiaraus, at the Homoloian gates  
 stationed, shouts insults at strong Tydeus: "Murderer,  
 cause of confusion to the city, greatest  
 teacher of evil to Argos; of the Fury  
 a summoning herald; servant of bloodshed,  
 adviser to Adrastus of all these evils"

570

And then again with eyes uplifted calling  
 on your own brother, strong prince Polyneices,  
 he dwells twice on the latter part of his name \*  
 And this is the speech to which his lips give utterance:  
 "Is such a deed as this dear to the Gods,

580

\* The latter half of the Greek word Polyneices means "strife."

and fair to hear and tell of, for posterity,  
for one to sack his native city, destroy  
the gods of his country, bringing in  
an alien enemy host?

What justice  
shall quench the spring of guilt of another murder?  
Your fatherland destroyed by the spear  
which your own zeal impelled—shall it be your ally?  
But for myself I shall make fat this soil  
a prophet buried under enemy ground.  
Let us fight The fate I look for is right honorable.”  
So spoke the prophet brandishing his round  
brazen shield No device is on its circle.  
He is best not at seeming to be such  
but being so Deep indeed is the furrow  
of his mind from which he gathers fruit, and good  
the counsels that do spring from it. For him  
send out, I recommend, wise and good challengers,  
for he is dangerous who reveres the gods.

590

*Eteocles*

Alas, the luck which among human beings  
conjoins an honest man with impious wretches!  
In every enterprise is no greater evil  
than bad companionship. there is no fruit  
that can be gathered The field of doom  
bears death as its harvest.

600

Indeed, a pious man, going on board  
as shipmate of a crew of rascal sailors  
and of some mischief they have perpetrated,  
has often died with the God-detested breed;  
or a just man, with fellow citizens  
themselves inhospitable, forgetful of the Gods,  
has fallen into the same snare as the unrighteous,  
and smitten by the common scourge of God  
has yielded up his life.

Even so this seer,  
 this son of Oecles, wise, just, good, and holy,  
 a prophet mighty, mingling with the impious—  
 against his better reason—with loud-mouthed  
 men who pursue a road long to retrace,  
 with God's will shall be dragged to their general doom  
 I think he will not even assault the gate—  
 not that he is a coward or faint of spirit—  
 but well he knows how he must die in the battle  
 if Loxias' prophecies shall bear fruit  
 Loxias either says nothing or speaks seasonably  
 Yet against him, the strong prince Lasthenes  
 we shall range in combat, an inhospitable  
 sentry, in mind an old man but a young one  
 in his body's vigor, in his swift-swooping charge,  
 in his hand, undelaying to snatch a spear  
 and hurl it against the unprotected shield side  
 But success—that is for men the gift of God alone

610

620

*Chorus*

Hear, O ye Gods, our lawful prayers  
 and bring them to fulfilment that  
 the city prosper, averting  
 the horrors of war upon our invaders  
 May Zeus strike them and slay them  
 with his bolt outside of our walls.

630

*Messenger*

Lo, now, the seventh at the seventh gate  
 I shall unfold—your own, your very brother  
 Hear how he curses the city and what fate  
 he invokes upon her He prays that once his feet  
 are set upon her walls, once he is proclaimed  
 a conqueror of this land, once he has cried  
 paean of triumph in its overthrow,  
 he then may close in fight with you and killing  
 may find his death beside your corpse.

Or if you live, that he may banish you—  
 in the selfsame way as you dishonored him—  
 to exile. So he shouts and calls the Gods  
 of his race and of his fatherland to witness  
 his prayers—a very violent Polynceus  
 He bears a new-made, rounded shield  
 and a twofold device contrived thereon  
 a woman leading modestly a man  
 conducts him, pictured as a warrior,  
 wrought all in gold She claims she is Justice,  
 and the inscription reads. I will bring him home  
 and he shall have his city and shall walk  
 in his ancestral house

640

Such are the signs  
 But you yourself determine whom to send.  
 You shall not find a fault in my report  
 but you determine how to steer the state.

650

*Eteocles*

Our race, our race, the race of Oedipus,  
 by the Gods maddened, by them greatly hated;  
 alas, my father's curses are now fulfilled!  
 But for me no crying and no lamentation  
 lest even sorer sorrow be begotten  
 I tell you, Polynceus, so well named,  
 soon we shall know the pertinence of your sign,  
 whether your golden characters on the shield,  
 babbling, in wild distraction of the mind,  
 will indeed bring you home. This might have been,  
 if Justice, Zeus's virgin daughter had stood  
 by his actions and his mind But in his flight  
 out of the darkness of his mother's womb,  
 in his growth as a child, in his young manhood,  
 in the first gathering of his chin's hair—no, never  
 did Justice look upon him nor regard him.  
 I do not think that now he comes to outrage

660

this fatherland of his she will stand his ally,  
 or else she is called falsely Justice, joining  
 with a man whose mind conceives no limit in villainy  
 In this I trust and to the conflict with him  
 I'll go myself What other has more right?  
 King against king, and brother against brother,  
 foe against foe we'll fight

670

Bring me my greaves  
 to shield me from the lances and the stones

*Chorus*

O dearest son of Oedipus, do not  
 be like in temper to this utterer  
 of dreadful sayings There are enough Cadmaeans  
 to grapple with the Argives such blood is expiable  
 But for the blood of brothers mutually shed  
 there is no growing old of the pollution

680

*Eteocles*

If a man suffer ill, let it be without shame,  
 this is the only gain when we are dead  
 For deeds both evil and disgraceful never  
 will you say word of good

*Chorus*

What do you long for, child?  
 Let not the frantic lust  
 for battle, filling the heart  
 carry you away. Expel  
 the evil passion at its birth

*Eteocles*

It is the God that drives this matter on  
 Since it is so—on, on with favoring wind  
 this wave of hell that has engulfed for its share  
 all kin of Laius, whom Phoebus has so hated.

690

*Chorus*

Bitter-biting indeed  
 is the passion that urges you

to accomplish manslaying,  
bitter in fruit,  
where the blood to be shed is unlawful.

*Eteocles*

Yes, for the hateful black  
curse of my father loved  
sits on my dry and tearless eyes  
and tells me first of gain and then of death.

*Chorus*

Resist its urging, coward  
you shall not be called  
if you rule your life well.  
Forth from your house the black-robed Fury  
shall go, when from your hands  
the Gods shall receive a sacrifice.

700

*Eteocles*

We are already past the care of Gods  
For them our death is the admirable offering  
Why then delay, fawning upon our doom?

*Chorus*

Not when the chance is yours—  
for in the veering change  
of spirit though late  
perhaps the God may change  
and come with kinder breath.  
Now his blast is full.

*Eteocles*

The curse of Oedipus has fanned that blast.  
Too true the vision of sleepy nightmares  
showing division of my father's heritage

710

*Chorus*

Listen to women though you like it not

*Eteocles*

Speak then of what may be Nor should it be long

*Chorus*

Go not you, go not, to the seventh gate

*Eteocles*

No words of yours will blunt my whetted purpose

*Chorus*

Yet even bad victory the Gods hold in honor

*Eteocles*

No soldier may endure to hear such words.

*Chorus*

Do you wish to reap as harvest a brother's blood?

*Eteocles*

If Gods give ill, no man may shun their giving

*Chorus*

I shudder at the Goddess,  
unlike all other Gods,  
who compasses destruction of the house,  
utterly unforgetting, prophet of ill,  
the Fury invoked by a father's curse.  
I dread that it bring to pass  
the furious invocations  
of Oedipus astray in his mind  
This strife, death to his sons, spurs it on.

720

A stranger grants them land-allotment,  
a Chalyb, Scythian colonist,  
a bitter divider of possessions—  
iron-hearted Steel  
Yes, he has allotted them land to dwell in  
as much as the dead may possess  
no share theirs of their broad acres

730

When they die with mutual hand  
mutually slaughtering  
and earth's dust shall drink  
black clotted murder-blood,

who shall then give purification,  
 who shall wash away the stain?  
 O new evils of the house,  
 new mingled with the old

740

Old is the tale of sin I tell  
 but swift in retribution:  
 to the third generation it abides  
 Thrice in Pythian prophecies  
 given at Navel-of-Earth  
 Apollo had directed  
 King Laius all issueless to die  
 and save his city so . .

but he was mastered by loving folly  
 and begot for himself a doom,  
 father-murdering Oedipus,  
 who sowed his mother's sacred womb,  
 whence he had sprung himself,  
 with bloody root, to his heartbreak  
 Madness was the coupler  
 of this distracted pair.

750

Now, as it were, a sea  
 drives on the wave:  
 one sinks, another rises,  
 triple-crested around the prow  
 of the city, and breaks in foam.  
 Our defense between is but a little thing  
 no bigger than a wall in width.  
 I fear that with our princes  
 our city be subdued.

760

For heavy is the settlement  
 of ancient curses, to fulfilment brought.  
 That evil when fulfilled  
 passes not away.



Prosperity grown over fat  
of men, gain seeking,  
compels jettisoning  
of all goods, utterly

770

What man has earned such admiration  
of Gods and men that shared his city  
and of the general throng of mortal men,  
as Oedipus—who ever had such honor  
as he that from his land had banished  
the Sphinx, that ate men up?

But when in misery he knew  
the meaning of his dreadful marriage,  
in pain distraught, in heart distracted  
he brought a double sorrow to fulfilment.

780

With patricidal hand  
he reft himself of eyes  
that dearer to him were than his own children.

And on those children savage  
maledictions he launched  
for their cruel tendance of him  
and wished they might divide  
with iron-wielding hand his own possessions.

And now I fear  
that nimble-footed Fury bring those wishes to fulfilment.

790

*Messenger*

Take heart, you mother's darlings, this your city  
has escaped the yoke of slavery Fallen  
are the vauntings of the monstrous men.  
Our city is in smooth water and though many  
the assaults of the waves, has shipped no sea  
Our wall still stands protecting us, our gates  
we barricaded with trustworthy champions.  
For the most part all is well—at six of the gates.  
The seventh the Lord Apollo, Captain of Sevens,\*

800

\* "Captain of Sevens" is an ancient cult title of Apollo.

took to himself. on Oedipus' race  
he has fulfilled Laius' ancient follies

*Chorus*

What new and evil thing concerns the city?

*Messenger*

The city is saved, but the twin princes—

*Chorus*

Who? What do you mean? Through fear of your words I am  
frantic.

*Messenger*

Get your wits and hear Oedipus' two sons—

*Chorus*

Alas, alas, the ills I prophesied

*Messenger*

In very truth, crushed to the ground

810

*Chorus*

They lie there? Bitter though it be, yet speak

*Messenger*

The men have fallen, one another's killers

*Chorus*

Did brother's hands achieve a mutual murder?

*Messenger*

The ground has drunk the blood shed each by each

*Chorus*

So all too equal was their guiding spirit

*Messenger*

Surely he destroys this most unlucky race.

Here is store of sorrow and joy at once.

The city has good fortune, but its lords,  
the two generals, have divided the possessions  
with hammered steel of Scythia They shall have  
what land suffices for a grave, swept thither  
down the wind of their father's ill-boding curses

820

*Chorus*

O great Zeus and Spirits that guard  
the city, you Protectors  
that guard our walls  
shall I rejoice, shall I cry aloud  
for our city's safety?  
or for those wretched ones, luckless and childless,  
our generals, shall I lament?  
They have earned their name too well  
and "men of strife" they have perished  
through impious intent

830

O black curse consummated  
on the race, the curse of Oedipus!  
An evil chill assails my heart  
I raise the dirge at the tomb  
like a Bacchanal, hearing  
of their blood-dripping corpses,  
of their ill-fated death  
Ill-omened indeed  
is this melody of the Spear.

It has worked to an end, not failed,  
the curses called on them by their father of old.  
The decisions of Laius, wanting in faith,  
have had effect till now  
My heart is troubled for the city,  
divine warnings are not blunted  
O full of sorrows, this you have done  
a deed beyond belief.  
Woes worthy of groaning  
have come in very truth.

840

*(The bodies of the princes are carried in, escorted  
by their two sisters, Ismene and Antigone.)*

Here is visible evidence of the messenger's tale.  
Twofold our griefs and double

the ills these two men wrought,  
 double the fated sorrow  
 now brought to fulfilment 850  
 What shall I say but that  
 here sorrows, sorrows' children,  
 abide at the hearth of the house?  
 But, my friends, down the wind of groans  
 with hands that beat the head  
 ply the speeding stroke  
 which sends through Death's waters  
 the dark-sailed ship of mission  
 to the shore, untrodden by Apollo, and sunless,  
 the shore unseen, that welcomes all at last 860  
 Here they come to their bitter task,  
 Ismene and Antigone,  
 to make the dirge for their brothers.  
 With true sincerity, I think,  
 from their deep bosoms,  
 they shall utter a song of grief that fits the cause  
 Us it concerns to sing,  
 before their song,  
 the ill-sounding Furies' dirge,  
 and the hateful Hades paean. 870

O most luckless of all women  
 that fasten the girdle about their robes,  
 I cry, I groan: there is no guile  
 in my heart to check my true dirge

*Antigone (speaking over the bodies)*

O you misguided ones,  
 faithless to friends, unwearied in evil,  
 you who plundered your father's house  
 to your misery, with the spear.

*Chorus*

Wretched indeed those who wretched death  
 have found to the ruin of their house. 880

*Ismene*

O you that tore the roof  
from our house, you that glimpsed  
the bitter sovereignty, at last  
you are reconciled—by the sword

*Chorus*

Too truly has that dread spirit,  
the Fury of Oedipus,  
brought all this to fulfilment.

*Antigone*

Stricken through the left sides  
stricken indeed,  
through sides born of a common mother  
Alas, strange ones,  
alas for the curse  
of death that answered death!

890

*Chorus*

A straight thrust to house and body  
delivered by unspeakable wrath,  
by the doom invoked by a father's curse,  
which they shared without discord

*Ismene*

Through the city the cry of weeping,  
the walls groan aloud;  
the plain that loved them groans aloud.  
There abide for their descendants  
the possessions for which  
their bitter fate was paid,  
for which their strife arose,  
for which they found the end of death.

900

*Chorus*

In bitterness of heart they shared  
their possessions in equality.  
no blame from friends  
has their arbitrator,  
Ares, impartial to both sides.

910

*Antigone*

By the stroke of the sword they are as they are  
By the stroke of the sword there awaits them—what?  
The share in their ancestral tomb, says someone

*Chorus*

A shrill cry escorts them from their house,  
a cry heartrending,  
a cry for its own griefs, its own woes,  
in anguish of mind with no thought of joy,  
weeping tears from a heart that breaks,  
for these our two princes

920

*Ismene*

One may say over the bodies  
of this unhappy pair.  
much they have done to their fellow citizens,  
and much to all the ranks of foreigners  
who died in this destructive war

*Chorus*

Unlucky she that bore them  
above all womankind  
that are called by a mother's name  
She took as husband her own child  
and bore these who have died  
their brotherly hands working each other's murder.

930

*Antigone*

Brotherly indeed in utter destruction  
in unkindly severance,  
in frantic strife,  
in the ending of their quarrel.

*Chorus*

Their enmity is ended, in the earth  
blood-drenched their life is mangled  
Very brothers are they now.  
Bitter the reconciler of their feud,  
stranger from over the sea,

940

sped hither by the fire,  
whetted steel  
A bitter and evil divider of possessions,  
Ares, who made their father's curse  
a thing of utter truth

*Ismene*

They have their share, unhappy ones  
of Zeus given sorrows  
beneath their bodies, earth  
in fathomless wealth shall lie.

950

*Chorus (speaking over the bodies)*

You who have made your race  
blossom with many woes  
over you at last have cried  
the Curses their shrill lament,  
and the race is turned to confusion and rout  
The trophy of Destruction stands  
at the gates where they were smitten  
and conqueror of the two  
the Spirit at last has come to rest

960

*(The dirge proper The sisters stand each at the head  
of one of the corpses)*

*Antigone*

You smote and were smitten.

*Ismene*

You killed and were slain

*Antigone*

By the spear you killed

*Ismene*

By the spear you died

*Antigone*

Wretched in acting.

*Ismene*

Wretched in suffering

*Antigone*

Let the groans go forth

*Ismene*

Let the tears fall

*Antigone*

You lie in death—

*Ismene*

having killed—

*Antigone and Ismene*

Woe, woe

*Antigone*

My mind is distraught with groans

*Ismene*

With groans my heart is full

*Antigone*

Alas, alas, creature of tears.

*Ismene*

Alas, again, all-miserable

970

*Antigone*

By a loving hand you died

*Ismene*

And killed one that loved you

*Antigone*

A double sorrow to relate.

*Ismene*

A double sorrow to see

*Antigone*

Two sorrows hard by one another

*Ismene*

Brother's sorrow close to brother's

*Chorus*

O wretched Fate, giver of heaviness,  
awful shade of Oedipus,



black Fury,  
verily a spirit mighty in strength<sup>1</sup>

*Ismene and Antigone*

Woe, woe.

*Antigone*

Evils unfit to look upon—

*Ismene*

have you shown after banishment.

*Antigone*

He came not back when he had slain

980

*Ismene*

This one saved, lost his own life

*Antigone*

This one died—

*Ismene*

and killed the other

*Antigone*

Race unhappy.

*Ismene*

Deed unhappy.

*Antigone*

Grievous sorrows of kindred.

*Ismene*

Grievous, thrice grievous sorrow

*Chorus*

O wretched Fate, giver of heaviness,  
awful shade of Oedipus,  
black Fury,  
verily a spirit mighty in strength

*Antigone*

You have learned the lesson by experience

*Ismene*

And you have learned it, no whit later.

990

*Antigone*

When you returned to the city—

*Ismene*

yes, to face him with your spear.

*Antigone*

Deadly to tell

*Ismene*

Deadly to see

*Antigone*

Pain—

*Ismene*

Ill—

*Antigone*

To house and land—

*Ismene*

and most of all to me.

*Antigone*

O unhappy king of sorrow!

*Ismene*

O of all most rich in pain!

*Antigone*

Where shall we lay them in the earth?

*Ismene*

Where their honor is greatest.

*Antigone*

O brothers possessed by evil spirits, in doom—

*Ismene*

that will sleep by the side of their father to his hurt.

*Herald*

It is my duty to declare to you,  
counselors of the people, the resolves  
already taken and the present pleasure  
of this Cadmaean city. . . .

Our Lord Eteocles for his loyalty  
 it is determined to bury in the earth  
 that he so loved Fighting its enemies  
 he found his death here In the sight  
 of his ancestral shrines he is pure and blameless  
 and died where young men die right honorably  
 These are my instructions to communicate  
 with respect to him. His brother Polyneices,  
 or rather his dead body, you must cast out  
 unburied, for the dogs to drag and tear  
 as fits one who would have destroyed our country  
 had not some God proved obstacle to his spear  
 Even in death he shall retain this guilt  
 against his Gods ancestral whom he dishonored  
 when he brought his foreign host here for invasion  
 and would have sacked the city. So it is resolved  
 that he shall have, as his penalty, a burial  
 granted dishonorably by the birds of the air  
 and that no raising of a mound by hand  
 attend him nor observance of keening dirge  
 Unhonored shall his funeral be by friends.  
 This is the pleasure of the Cadmaean state.

1010

1020

*Antigone*

So I to the Cadmaean magistrates  
 declare: if no one else will dare to join me  
 in burying him, yet will I bury him  
 and take the danger on my head alone  
 when that is done. He is my brother. I  
 am not ashamed of this anarchic act  
 of disobedience to the city. Strange,  
 a strange thing is the common blood we spring from—  
 a mother wretched, a father doomed to evil.  
 Willingly then with one that would not will it,  
 live spirit with dead man in sisterhood

1030

I shall bear my share His flesh  
 the hollow-bellied wolves shall never taste of.  
 Let that be no one's "pleasure or decree."  
 His tomb and burying place I will contrive  
 though but a woman In the bosom folds  
 of my linen robe I shall carry earth to him  
 And I shall cover him let no one determine  
 the contrary Be of good cheer (*to her sister*), I shall  
 find means to bring my will to pass.

1040

*Herald*

I forbid  
 this act, defiance of the city's pleasure

*Antigone*

I forbid you your superfluous proclamations

*Herald*

Harsh is the people now that danger's past.

*Antigone*

Harsh truly. But *he* shall not go unburied

*Herald*

Him the state hates, will you grace with a tomb?

*Antigone*

Long since the Gods determined of his honor.

*Herald*

Not till he cast in peril this land of ours.

*Antigone*

He suffered ill and gave back what he suffered

*Herald*

This deed of his was aimed at all, not one

1050

*Antigone*

Last of the Gods Contention ends her tale.

But I shall bury him spare me long speech.

*Herald*

Have your own way. but I forbid the act.

*Chorus*

Alas, alas.

O high-vaunting, ruin to the race

fatal Furies, who have destroyed

the race of Oedipus so utterly—

What will happen me? What shall I do?

What shall I plan?

How shall I be so heartless,

not to mourn for you,

not to give escort to your funeral?

But I fear the dreadful authority

of the people. I am turned from my purpose.

1060

*(To the body of Eteocles)*

Many mourners you shall win.

*(To the body of Polyneices)*

But this poor wretch unwept

save for his sister's single dirge

shall go his road Who would yield

so much obedience as this?

*(The Chorus divides in two)*

*First Half-Chorus*

Let the state do or not

what it will to the mourners of Polyneices

We will go and bury him;

we will go as his escort.

This grief is common to the race

but now one way and now another

the city approves the path of justice

1070

*Second Half-Chorus*

But we will go with the other, as the city

and Justice jointly approve.

For after the Blessed Ones and the strength of Zeus

he is the one who saved the city

from utter destruction, from being overwhelmed

by the wave of foreign invaders

# PROMETHEUS BOUND

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

DAVID GRENE



## INTRODUCTION TO *PROMETHEUS BOUND*

IN THE eighteenth century the critics knew what they thought about the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus and knew why they thought it. It was a bad play because the structure was episodic, the characters extravagant and improbable, the diction uncouth and wild. Their handbook of criticism was the *Poetics* of Aristotle, either directly or indirectly drawn upon. And it is plain that the Aeschylean play does not measure up to Aristotelian standards. Since the eighteenth-century critics believed there was only one canon for drama, rooted in the principles of Aristotle, they quite reasonably judged the *Prometheus* a bad play. During the nineteenth century, with the Romantic revival and the breakdown of the so-called "classical" rules of the drama, the *Prometheus* was acclaimed by the critics as a great work of art. But they so acclaimed it entirely in terms of its theme or its poetry and in the same breath spoke of the greatness of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Goethe's *Faust*. There was no effort to discover what in the nature of Aeschylus' dramatic method set him so apart from Sophocles that the eighteenth-century critics had refused to recognize his merit. Nor did they sift the striking differences which exist between the *Prometheus* and any of the Shakespearean tragedies or *Faust*. They contented themselves with vague and not entirely satisfied references to the *Prometheus* as a study-drama rather than a play for the theater.

Of the three dramatists, Aeschylus perhaps appears for a modern reader the most provocative and the most enigmatic. There is so much in the *Oresteia*, for instance, and particularly in the *Agamemnon*, which appeals directly to our sense of the theater and dramatic poetry. And yet the conclusion with its stress on an obscure theological point and its very local emphasis on the court of the Areopagus baffles our awakened interest. But in no play of Aeschylus is a

reader today so aware at the same time of the directness and universality of the theme and also of the purely Greek, and indeed purely fifth-century, implications of it as in the *Prometheus*. The remarks that follow constitute only one more attempt among many to assist readers who are not classical scholars to a more complete understanding of a very great and very puzzling play.

For Aeschylus the myth is the illustration of a great permanent truth that he finds at the heart of man's activity. His dramatic imagination seizes on such truths as are most frequently a compromise between two opposites, and consequently the myths he uses most are those which tell of conflict on a cosmic scale and conflict ultimately laid by some concessions on the part of both combatants. To make myth universally significant, both characters and plot must correspond symbolically with characters and plot on one or more levels in addition to the myth in which they are imbedded.

In the *Prometheus*, the probability is not in the action or the conditions the dramatist has stated for us before the play commences. It consists in setting forth a very simple story, one which comes from a common stock of mythological stories known to almost all, and fusing this with a number of other patterns known to almost all. Everybody in Greece knew the legend of the Titan who stole fire from heaven to give it to man. But everybody in Greece also knew the story of Peisistratus, the tyrant of Athens, or Lygdamis, the tyrant of Naxos, or Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos. They knew the kind of outrage citizens had suffered at their hands, the innovations in established custom and ritual and in the conventional governmental attitudes of mercy, the "unwritten laws." Thus when the Prometheus-Zeus conflict is represented also as the rebel versus tyrant conflict, it has been invested with a new probability. And men everywhere have felt, some obscurely and some clearly, an opposition between the animal and the spirit in man, between violence and persuasion, between might and intellect. So when the Zeus-Lygdamis versus Prometheus-rebel struggle is represented as another facet of the conflict between the two most powerful factors in human life—brute force and mind—the story has been invested with a new



probability drawn from the community of man's experience. And men everywhere have known the torture of subjugation to a stronger force than themselves, have known the helplessness of persuasion against force, and yet have believed in the ultimate triumph of persuasion. And so, when the suffering Prometheus cries out in his helplessness and his knowledge, and doubts yet feels certain of the outcome, the story has been invested with a new probability drawn from the community of man's experience. The original story of Zeus and Prometheus is like a stone thrown into a quiet pool, where the ripples spread in wider and wider circles.

Methods like the Aeschylean, developed to varying degrees of complexity, are familiar in other forms of literature. The degree of complexity is determined by the number of levels of meaning involved. For instance, in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, there is only one meaning in the tale apart from the highly dramatic story of Christian's journey, and that is the progress of the Christian soul toward the Eternal City. But, in the *Prometheus*, Aeschylus has made his story significant on a number of different levels, though each level involves the conflict of two opposing principles. For Prometheus is, politically, the symbol of the rebel against the tyrant who has overthrown the traditional rule of Justice and Law. He is the symbol of Knowledge against Force. He is symbolically the champion of man, raising him through the gift of intelligence, against the would-be destroyer of man. Finally, there is a level at which Prometheus is symbolically Man as opposed to God.

We are never told in this play why Zeus wished to destroy man. There is no indication what sort of animal he wished to put in his place; but, insofar as Prometheus in disobedience to Zeus enlightened man by the gift of intelligence, it may be assumed that Zeus's creation would have had no such dangerous potentialities of development. This first attempt to destroy mankind is almost certainly the flood of Deucalion, of which we hear elsewhere, and there is a tradition to the effect that Prometheus counseled Deucalion to the building of the ark which preserved him and his family. The second

action in Prometheus' rescue of man from the enmity of the world in which he found himself is even more significant "I stopped mortals from foreseeing doom," says Prometheus.

*Chorus* What cure did you provide them with against that sickness?

*Prometheus* I placed in them blind hopes

*Chorus* That was a great gift you gave to men.

As the rest of his gifts to man are all concerned with enlightenment, and, indeed, as fire itself becomes a symbol of that enlightenment, this gift of "blind hopes" seems at first strange. Yet it is quite consistent. There is a passage in the *Gorgias* which is illuminating here. We are told that in the days of Kronos and *when Zeus was newly king*, men were informed as to the day of their death and were judged alive, with all their clothes on and their possessions about them, by live judges. This was a practice which brought much injustice, says Plato, and Zeus ultimately ordered it otherwise. Plato is using the myth for the illustration of his own theme, and we must not be surprised that his picture of the development of man when this was the state of things does not accord with that of Aeschylus. But the dating in the case of Plato shows either that he and Aeschylus were drawing on the same myth or else that Plato is borrowing from Aeschylus. "In the days of Kronos and when Zeus was newly king." What, then, is the meaning of the blind hopes which were the compensation for man's loss of knowledge of his death and yet left him able to use his reason to build houses and yoke horses and invent cures for sickness?

Prometheus is wise in the wisdom of his mother Themis, or Earth, and consequently wise in the knowledge of destiny. This is not reason. It is absolute knowledge. The knowledge of the day of a man's death partakes of that quality, for it is in the province of destiny. Thus man at the beginning had an infinitely small particle of the *same kind of knowledge* which Prometheus enjoyed in large measure. Just as animals today seem to have a curious intuition of the coming of their death and crawl away into hiding to face it, so primitive man had this knowledge. And Prometheus caused them

to cease to foreknow the day of their death. For the gift of reason, the supreme ally in their struggle against nature, made them fight on against death in "blind hope," even when the day of their death had come. It is worth noticing here that, of the two accounts of man's origins in the world—the one that of a golden age of material and moral perfection and the other of miserable ignorance and helplessness—Aeschylus has preferred the scientific tradition. But he has chosen to incorporate in his account a grain of the truth of the former. The very small particle of absolute knowledge which man possessed was a spark of the divine. The fire itself, Prometheus' greatest and most celebrated gift to man, is a symbol of practical, not speculative, reason. And nowhere does Aeschylus assert that such speculative reason in its full will ever be in man's possession.

There is a sense in which Prometheus in this play appeals directly to the human sympathies of his audience because though a Titan and a God his helplessness before Zeus places him on the same level with mortals. It is the story of the man-god who must suffer for his kindness to man by having his state equated with theirs. In the case of Prometheus the good achieved for man is achieved before the suffering—which comes in the nature of a punishment. The cry of Prometheus—

I knew when I transgressed nor will deny it  
In helping man I brought my troubles on me;  
but yet I did not think that with such tortures  
I should be wasted on these airy cliffs—

is the cry of one who is man enough to be weak under pain. Prometheus, though possessed of a knowledge of destiny and therefore of victory in the end, is for the present at the mercy of a brutal and ignorant opponent. So, too, is the mortal Io. So are all the mortals over whom Death holds power against which they fight with "blind hopes." Finally, Prometheus' deliverance by Heracles, who is part god and part man, once again binds his fate to the creature whom he has helped to survive in the teeth of the opposition of the supreme god.

## PROMETHEUS BOUND

## CHARACTERS

*Might*

*Violence (muta persona)*

*Hephaestus*

*Prometheus*

*Oceanos*

*Io*

*Hermes*

*Chorus of daughters of Oceanos*

## PROMETHEUS BOUND

SCENE: *A bare and desolate crag in the Caucasus Enter Might and Violence, demons, servants of Zeus, and Hephaestus, the smith.*

### *Might*

This is the world's limit that we have come to; this is the Scythian country, an untrodden desolation Hephaestus, it is you that must heed the commands the Father laid upon you to nail this malefactor to the high craggy rocks in fetters unbreakable of adamantine chain For it was your flower, the brightness of fire that devises all, that he stole and gave to mortal men; this is the sin for which he must pay the Gods the penalty—that he may learn to endure and like the sovereignty of Zeus and quit his man-loving disposition.

10

### *Hephaestus*

Might and Violence, in you the command of Zeus has its perfect fulfilment: in you there is nothing to stand in its way. But, for myself, I have not the heart to bind violently a God who is my kin here on this wintry cliff. Yet there is constraint upon me to have the heart for just that, for it is a dangerous thing to treat the Father's words lightly.

High-contriving Son of Themis of Straight Counsel: this is not of your will nor of mine; yet I shall nail you in bonds of indissoluble bronze on this crag far from men. Here you shall hear no voice of mortal; here you shall see no form of mortal. You shall be grilled by the sun's bright fire and change the fair bloom of your skin. You shall be glad when Night comes with her mantle of stars and hides the sun's light; but the sun shall scatter the hoarfrost again at dawn. Always the grievous burden of your torture will be there to wear you down; for he that shall cause it to cease has yet to be born.

20

Such is the reward you reap of your man-loving disposition. For you, a God, feared not the anger of the Gods, but gave honors to mortals beyond what was just. Wherefore you shall mount guard on this unlovely rock, upright, sleepless, not bending the knee. Many a groan and many a lamentation you shall utter, but they shall not serve you. For the mind of Zeus is hard to soften with prayer, and every ruler is harsh whose rule is new.

30

*Might*

Come, why are you holding back? Why are you pitying in vain? Why is it that you do not hate a God whom the Gods hate most of all? Why do you not hate him, since it was your honor that he betrayed to men?

*Hephaestus*

Our kinship has strange power; that, and our life together.

*Might*

Yes. But to turn a deaf ear to the Father's words—how can that be? Do you not fear that more?

40

*Hephaestus*

You are always pitiless, always full of ruthlessness.

*Might*

There is no good singing dirges over him. Do not labor uselessly at what helps not at all.

*Hephaestus*

O handicraft of mine—that I deeply hate!

*Might*

Why do you hate it? To speak simply, your craft is in no way the author of his present troubles.

*Hephaestus*

Yet would another had had this craft allotted to him.

*Might*

There is nothing without discomfort except the overlordship of the Gods. For only Zeus is free.

50

*Hephaestus*

I know. I have no answer to this.

*Might*

Hurry now. Throw the chain around him that the Father may not look upon your tarrying.

*Hephaestus*

There are the fetters, there: you can see them.

*Might*

Put them on his hands: strong, now with the hammer. strike  
Nail him to the rock

*Hephaestus*

It is being done now. I am not idling at my work

*Might*

Hammer it more; put in the wedge; leave it loose nowhere. He's a cunning fellow at finding a way even out of hopeless difficulties

*Hephaestus*

Look now, his arm is fixed immovably!

60

*Might*

Nail the other safe, that he may learn, for all his cleverness, that he is duller witted than Zeus.

*Hephaestus*

No one, save Prometheus, can justly blame me.

*Might*

Drive the obstinate jaw of the adamantine wedge right through his breast: drive it hard.

*Hephaestus*

Alas, Prometheus, I groan for your sufferings.

*Might*

Are you pitying again? Are you groaning for the enemies of Zeus? Have a care, lest some day you may be pitying yourself.

*Hephaestus*

You see a sight that hurts the eye.

*Might*

I see this rascal getting his deserts. Throw the girth around his sides.

70



*Hephaestus*

I am forced to do this; do not keep urging me.

*Might*

Yes, I will urge you, and hound you on as well. Get below now, and hoop his legs in strongly.

*Hephaestus*

There now, the task is done. It has not taken long.

*Might*

Hammer the piercing fetters with all your power, for the Overseer of our work is severe

*Hephaestus*

Your looks and the refrain of your tongue are alike.

*Might*

You can be softhearted. But do not blame my stubbornness and harshness of temper.

80

*Hephaestus*

Let us go He has the harness on his limbs

*Might (to Prometheus)*

Now, play the insolent; now, plunder the Gods' privileges and give them to creatures of a day What drop of your sufferings can mortals spare you? The Gods named you wrongly when they called you Forethought; you yourself *need* Forethought to extricate yourself from this contrivance.

(*Prometheus is left alone on the rock*)

*Prometheus*

Bright light, swift-winged winds, springs of the rivers, numberless

laughter of the sea's waves, earth, mother of all, and the all-seeing circle of the sun: I call upon you to see what I, a God, suffer at the hands of Gods—

90

see with what kind of torture

worn down I shall wrestle ten thousand years of time—

such is the spiteful bond that the Prince  
 has devised against me, the new Prince  
 of the Blessed Ones Oh woe is me!  
 I groan for the present sorrow,  
 I groan for the sorrow to come, I groan  
 questioning when there shall come a time  
 when He shall ordain a limit to my sufferings  
 What am I saying? I have known all before,  
 all that shall be, and clearly known; to me,  
 nothing that hurts shall come with a new face  
 So must I bear, as lightly as I can,  
 the destiny that fate has given me,  
 for I know well against necessity,  
 against its strength, no one can fight and win

100

I cannot speak about my fortune, cannot  
 hold my tongue either. It was mortal man  
 to whom I gave great privileges and  
 for that was yoked in this unyielding harness  
 I hunted out the secret spring of fire,  
 that filled the narthex stem, which when revealed  
 became the teacher of each craft to men,  
 a great resource. This is the sin committed  
 for which I stand accountant, and I pay  
 nailed in my chains under the open sky

110

Ah! Ah!

What sound, what sightless smell approaches me,  
 God sent, or mortal, or mingled?  
 Has it come to earth's end  
 to look on my sufferings,  
 or what does it wish?

You see me a wretched God in chains,  
 the enemy of Zeus, hated of all  
 the Gods that enter Zeus's palace hall,  
 because of my excessive love for Man.

120

What is that? The rustle  
of birds' wings near? The air whispers  
with the gentle strokes of wings.  
Everything that comes toward me is occasion for fear

*(The Chorus, composed of the daughters of Oceanos, enters,  
the members wearing some formalized representation of  
wings, so that their general appearance is birdlike )*

*Chorus*

Fear not: this is a company of friends  
that comes to your mountain with swift  
rivalry of wings  
Hardly have we persuaded our Father's  
mind, and the quick-bearing winds  
speeded us hither The sound  
of stroke of bronze rang through our cavern  
in its depths and it shook from us  
shamefaced modesty, unsandaled  
we have hastened on our chariot of wings

130

*Prometheus*

Alas, children of teeming Tethys and of him  
who encircles all the world with stream unsleeping,  
Father Ocean,  
look, see with what chains  
I am nailed on the craggy heights  
of this gully to keep a watch  
that none would envy me.

140

*Chorus*

I see, Prometheus and a mist of fear and tears  
besets my eyes as I see your form  
wasting away on these cliffs  
in adamantine bonds of bitter shame.  
For new are the steersmen that rule Olympus  
and new are the customs by which Zeus rules,  
customs that have no law to them,  
but what was great before he brings to nothingness.

150

*Prometheus*

Would that he had hurled me  
underneath the earth and underneath  
the House of Hades, host to the dead—  
yes, down to limitless Tartarus,  
yes, though he bound me cruelly  
in chains unbreakable,  
so neither God nor any other being  
might have found joy in gloating over me.  
Now as I hang, the plaything of the winds,  
my enemies can laugh at what I suffer

*Chorus*

Who of the Gods is so hard of heart  
that he finds joy in this?  
Who is that that does not feel  
sorrow answering your pain—  
save only Zeus? For he malignantly,  
always cherishing a mind  
that bends not, has subdued the breed  
of Uranos, nor shall he cease  
until he satisfies his heart,  
or someone take the rule from him—that hard-to-capture rule—  
by some device of subtlety.

160

*Prometheus*

Yes, there shall come a day for me  
when he shall need me, me that now am tortured  
in bonds and fetters—he shall need me then,  
this president of the Blessed—  
to show the new plot whereby he may be spoiled  
of his throne and his power.  
Then not with honeyed tongues  
of persuasion shall he enchant me;  
he shall not cow me with his threats  
to tell him what I know,

170

until he free me from my cruel chains  
and pay me recompense for what I suffer

*Chorus*

You are stout of heart, unyielding  
to the bitterness of pain  
You are free of tongue, too free  
It is my mind that piercing fear has fluttered,  
your misfortunes frighten me  
Where and when is it fated  
to see you reach the term, to see you reach  
the harbor free of trouble at the last?  
A disposition none can win, a heart  
that no persuasions soften—these are his,  
the Son of Kronos

180

*Prometheus*

I know that he is savage and his justice  
a thing he keeps by his own standard still  
that will of his shall melt to softness yet  
when he is broken in the way I know,  
and though his temper now is oaken hard  
it shall be softened: hastily he'll come  
to meet my haste, to join in amity  
and union with me—one day he shall come.

190

*Chorus*

Reveal it all to us. tell us the story of what the charge was on  
which Zeus caught you and punished you so cruelly with such dis-  
honor. Tell us, if the telling will not injure you in any way

*Prometheus*

To speak of this is bitterness To keep silent  
bitter no less, and every way is misery  
When first the Gods began their angry quarrel,  
and God matched God in rising faction, some  
eager to drive old Kronos from his throne  
that Zeus might rule—the fools!—others again

200

earnest that Zeus might never be their king—  
 I then with the best counsel tried to win  
 the Titans, sons of Uranos and Earth,  
 but failed. They would have none of crafty schemes  
 and in their savage arrogance of spirit  
 thought they would lord it easily by force  
 But she that was my mother, Themis, Earth—  
 she is but one although her names are many—  
 had prophesied to me how it should be,  
 even how the fates decreed it: and she said  
 that “not by strength nor overmastering force  
 the fates allowed the conquerors to conquer  
 but by guile only” This is what I told them,  
 but they would not vouchsafe a glance at me  
 Then with those things before me it seemed best  
 to take my mother and join Zeus’s side  
 he was as willing as we were.  
 thanks to my plans the dark receptacle  
 of Tartarus conceals the ancient Kronos,  
 him and his allies These were the services  
 I rendered to this tyrant and these pains  
 the payment he has given me in requital  
 This is a sickness rooted and inherent  
 in the nature of a tyranny:  
 that he that holds it does not trust his friends

210

220

But you have asked on what particular  
 charge he now tortures me. this I will tell you.  
 As soon as he ascended to the throne  
 that was his father’s, straightway he assigned  
 to the several Gods their several privileges  
 and portioned out the power, but to the unhappy  
 breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending  
 to blot the race out and create a new.  
 Against these plans none stood save I: I dared.

230

I rescued men from shattering destruction  
that would have carried them to Hades' house,  
and therefore I am tortured on this rock,  
a bitterness to suffer, and a pain  
to pitiful eyes. I gave to mortal man  
a precedence over myself in pity I  
can win no pity pitiless is he  
that thus chastises me, a spectacle  
bringing dishonor on the name of Zeus.

2

*Chorus*

He would be iron-minded and made of stone, indeed, Prometheus, who did not sympathize with your sufferings I would not have chosen to see them, and now that I see, my heart is pained.

*Prometheus*

Yes, to my friends I am pitiable to see.

*Chorus*

Did you perhaps go further than you have told us?

*Prometheus*

I caused mortals to cease foreseeing doom.

25

*Chorus*

What cure did you provide them with against that sickness?

*Prometheus*

I placed in them blind hopes.

*Chorus*

That was a great gift you gave to men.

*Prometheus*

Besides this, I gave them fire.

*Chorus*

And do creatures of a day now possess bright-faced fire?

*Prometheus*

Yes, and from it they shall learn many crafts.

*Chorus*

Then these are the charges on which—

*Prometheus*

Zeus tortures me and gives me no respite.

*Chorus*

Is there no limit set for your pain?

*Prometheus*

None save when it shall seem good to Zeus

260

*Chorus*

How will it ever seem good to him? What hope is there? Do you not see how you have erred? It is not pleasure for me to say that you have erred, and for you it is a pain to hear. But let us speak no more of all this and do you seek some means of deliverance from your trials

*Prometheus*

It is an easy thing for one whose foot  
is on the outside of calamity  
to give advice and to rebuke the sufferer.  
I have known all that you have said. I knew,  
I knew when I transgressed nor will deny it  
In helping man I brought my troubles on me;  
but yet I did not think that with such tortures  
I should be wasted on these airy cliffs,  
this lonely mountain top, with no one near.  
But do not sorrow for my present suffering;  
alight on earth and hear what is to come  
that you may know the whole complete. I beg you  
alight and join your sorrow with mine: misfortune  
wandering the same track lights now upon one  
and now upon another.

270

*Chorus*

Willing our ears,  
that hear you cry to them, Prometheus,  
now with light foot I leave the rushing car  
and sky, the holy path of birds, and light  
upon this jutting rock. I long  
to hear your story to the end.

280

(*Enter Oceanos, riding on a hippocamp, or sea-monster.*)



*Oceanos*

I come

on a long journey, speeding past the boundaries.  
to visit you, Prometheus. with the mind  
alone, no bridle needed, I direct  
my swift-winged bird, my heart is sore  
for your misfortunes, you know that. I think  
that it is kinship makes me feel them so  
Besides, apart from kinship, there is no one  
I hold in higher estimation: that  
you soon shall know and know beside that in me  
there is no mere word-kindness tell me  
how I can help you, and you will never say  
that you have any friend more loyal to you  
than Oceanos

290

*Prometheus*

What do I see? Have you, too, come to gape  
in wonder at this great display, my torture?  
How did you have the courage to come here  
to this land, Iron-Mother, leaving the stream  
called after you and the rock-roofed, self-established  
caverns? Was it to feast your eyes upon  
the spectacle of my suffering and join  
in pity for my pain? Now look and see  
the sight, this friend of Zeus, that helped set up  
his tyranny and see what agonies  
twist me, by his instructions!

300

*Oceanos*

Yes, I see,

Prometheus, and I want, indeed I do,  
to advise you for the best, for all your cleverness.  
Know yourself and reform your ways to new ways,  
for new is he that rules among the Gods.  
But if you throw about such angry words,

310

words that are whetted swords, soon Zeus will hear you,  
 even though his seat in glory is far removed,  
 and then your present multitude of pains  
 will seem like child's play My poor friend, give up  
 this angry mood of yours and look for means  
 of getting yourself free of trouble Maybe  
 what I say seems to you both old and commonplace,  
 but this is what you pay, Prometheus, for 320  
 that tongue of yours which talked so high and haughty  
 you are not yet humble, still you do not yield  
 to your misfortunes, and you wish, indeed,  
 to add some more to them; now, if you follow  
 me as a schoolmaster you will not kick  
 against the pricks, seeing that he, the King,  
 that rules alone, is harsh and sends accounts  
 to no one's audit for the deeds he does  
 Now I will go and try if I can free you  
 do you be quiet, do not talk so much  
 Since your mind is so subtle, don't you know 330  
 that a vain tongue is subject to correction?

*Prometheus*

I envy you, that you stand clear of blame,  
 yet shared and dared in everything with me!  
 Now let me be, and have no care for me  
 Do what you will, Him you will not persuade,  
 He is not easily won over. look,  
 take care lest coming here to me should hurt you

*Oceanos*

You are by nature better at advising  
 others than yourself. I take my cue  
 from deeds, not words Do not withhold me now  
 when I am eager to go to Zeus I'm sure,  
 I'm sure that he will grant this favor to me, 340  
 to free you from your chains

*Prometheus*

I thank you and will never cease, for loyalty  
is not what you are wanting in Don't trouble,  
for you will trouble to no purpose, and no help  
to me—if it so be you want to trouble.

No, rest yourself, keep away from this thing,  
because I am unlucky I would not,  
for that, have everyone unlucky too

No, for my heart is sore already when

I think about my brothers' fortunes—Atlas,  
who stands to westward of the world, supporting  
the pillar of earth and heaven on his shoulders,  
a load that suits no shoulders, and the earthborn  
dweller in caves Cilician, whom I saw  
and pitied, hundred-headed, dreadful monster,  
fierce Typho, conquered and brought low by force  
Once against all the Gods he stood, opposing,  
hissing out terror from his grim jaws, his eyes  
flashed gorgon glaring lightning as he thought  
to sack the sovereign tyranny of Zeus;

but upon him came the unsleeping bolt  
of Zeus, the lightning-breathing flame, down rushing,

which cast him from his high aspiring boast  
Struck to the heart, his strength was blasted dead  
and burnt to ashes; now a sprawling mass

useless he lies, hard by the narrow seaway  
pressed down beneath the roots of Aetna high  
above him on the mountain peak the smith

Hephaestus works at the anvil. Yet one day  
there shall burst out rivers of fire, devouring  
with savage jaws the fertile, level plains

of Sicily of the fair fruits; such boiling wrath  
with weapons of fire-breathing surf, a fiery  
unapproachable torrent, shall Typho vomit,  
though Zeus's lightning left him but a cinder

350

360

370

But all of this you know you do not need me  
to be your schoolmaster reassure yourself  
as you know how this cup I shall drain myself  
till the high mind of Zeus shall cease from anger

*Oceanos*

Do you not know, Prometheus, that words are healers of the  
sick temper?

380

*Prometheus*

Yes, if in season due one soothes the heart with them, not tries  
violently to reduce the swelling anger

*Oceanos*

Tell me, what danger do you see for me in loyalty to you, and  
courage therein?

*Prometheus*

I see only useless effort and a silly good nature

*Oceanos*

Suffer me then to be sick of this sickness, for it is a profitable  
thing, if one is wise, to seem foolish

*Prometheus*

This shall seem to be my fault

*Oceanos*

Clearly your words send me home again

*Prometheus*

Yes, lest your doings for me bring you enmity.

390

*Oceanos*

His enmity, who newly sits on the all-powerful throne?

*Prometheus*

His is a heart you should beware of vexing.

*Oceanos*

Your own misfortune will be my teacher, Prometheus.

*Prometheus*

Off with you, then! Begone! Keep your present mind.

*Oceanos*

These words fall on very responsive ears Already my four-legged  
bird is pawing the level track of Heaven with his wings, and he  
will be glad to bend the knee in his own stable

*Chorus*

STROPHE

I cry aloud, Prometheus, and lament your bitter fate,  
my tender eyes are trickling tears  
their fountains wet my cheek  
This is a tyrant's deed; this is unlovely,  
a thing done by a tyrant's private laws,  
and with this thing Zeus shows his haughtiness  
of temper toward the Gods that were of old

400

ANTISTROPHE

Now all the earth has cried aloud, lamenting  
now all that was magnificent of old  
laments your fall, laments your brethren's fall  
as many as in holy Asia hold  
their stablished habitation, all lament  
in sympathy for your most grievous woes

410

STROPHE

Dwellers in the land of Colchis,  
maidens, fearless in the fight,  
and the host of Scythia, living  
round the lake Maeotis, living  
on the edges of the world

ANTISTROPHE

And Arabia's flower of warriors  
and the craggy fortress keepers  
near Caucasian mountains, fighters  
terrible, crying for battle,  
brandishing sharp pointed spears

420

STROPHE

One God and one God only I have seen  
before this day, in torture and in bonds  
unbreakable: he was a Titan,  
Alas, whose strength and might  
ever exceeded, now he bends his back  
and groans beneath the load of earth and heaven

430

ANTISTROPHE

The wave cries out as it breaks into surf,  
the depth cries out, lamenting you, the dark  
Hades, the hollow underneath the world,  
sullenly groans below, the springs  
of sacred flowing rivers all lament  
the pain and pity of your suffering

*Prometheus*

Do not think that out of pride or stubbornness I hold my peace,  
my heart is eaten away when I am aware of myself, when I see  
myself insulted as I am. Who was it but I who in truth dispensed  
their honors to these new gods? I will say nothing of this, you  
know it all; but hear what troubles there were among men, how  
I found them witless and gave them the use of their wits and made  
them masters of their minds. I will tell you this, not because I  
would blame men, but to explain the goodwill of my gift. For  
men at first had eyes but saw to no purpose; they had ears but did  
not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their  
long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion.  
They did not know of building houses with bricks to face the sun,  
they did not know how to work in wood. They lived like swarming  
ants in holes in the ground, in the sunless caves of the earth.  
For them there was no secure token by which to tell winter nor  
the flowering spring nor the summer with its crops, all their do-  
ings were indeed without intelligent calculation until I showed  
them the rising of the stars, and the settings, hard to observe. And  
further I discovered to them numbering, pre-eminent among

440

450

subtle devices, and the combining of letters as a means of re- 460  
 membering all things, the Muses' mother, skilled in craft It was  
 I who first yoked beasts for them in the yokes and made of those  
 beasts the slaves of trace chain and pack saddle that they might be  
 man's substitute in the hardest tasks, and I harnessed to the car-  
 riage, so that they loved the rein, horses, the crowning pride of the  
 rich man's luxury It was I and none other who discovered ships,  
 the sail-driven wagons that the sea buffets Such were the con-  
 trivances that I discovered for men—alas for me! For I myself am 470  
 without contrivance to rid myself of my present affliction

*Chorus*

What you have suffered is indeed terrible You are all astray and  
 bewildered in your mind, and like a bad doctor that has fallen sick  
 himself, you are cast down and cannot find what sort of drugs  
 would cure your ailment

*Prometheus*

Hear the rest, and you will marvel even more at the crafts and  
 resources I contrived Greatest was this in the former times if a  
 man fell sick he had no defense against the sickness, neither heal- 480  
 ing food nor drink, nor unguent, but through the lack of drugs  
 men wasted away, until I showed them the blending of mild  
 simples wherewith they drive out all manner of diseases. It was  
 I who arranged all the ways of seercraft, and I first adjudged  
 what things come verily true from dreams, and to men I gave  
 meaning to the ominous cries, hard to interpret. It was I who set  
 in order the omens of the highway and the flight of crooked-  
 taloned birds, which of them were propitious or lucky by na- 490  
 ture, and what manner of life each led, and what were their  
 mutual hates, loves, and companionships, also I taught of the  
 smoothness of the vitals and what color they should have to  
 pleasure the Gods and the dappled beauty of the gall and the lobe.  
 It was I who burned thighs wrapped in fat and the long shank  
 bone and set mortals on the road to this murky craft. It was I who  
 made visible to men's eyes the flaming signs of the sky that were

before dim So much for these. Beneath the earth, man's hidden  
 blessing, copper, iron, silver, and gold—will anyone claim to 500  
 have discovered these before I did? No one, I am very sure, who  
 wants to speak truly and to the purpose One brief word will tell  
 the whole story. all arts that mortals have come from Prometheus

*Chorus*

Therefore do not help mortals beyond all expediency while neg-  
 lecting yourself in your troubles For I am of good hope that once  
 freed of these bonds you will be no less in power than Zeus 510

*Prometheus*

Not yet has fate that brings to fulfilment determined these things  
 to be thus I must be twisted by ten thousand pangs and agonies,  
 as I now am, to escape my chains at last Craft is far weaker than  
 necessity

*Chorus*

Who then is the steersman of necessity?

*Prometheus*

The triple-formed Fates and the remembering Furies

*Chorus*

Is Zeus weaker than these?

*Prometheus*

Yes, for he, too, cannot escape what is fated

*Chorus*

What is fated for Zeus besides eternal sovereignty?

*Prometheus*

Inquire of this no further, do not entreat me. 520

*Chorus*

This is some solemn secret, I suppose, that you are hiding

*Prometheus*

Think of some other story. this one it is not yet the season to give  
 tongue to, but it must be hidden with all care, for it is only by  
 keeping it that I will escape my despitful bondage and my agony,



*Chorus*

STROPHE

May Zeus never, Zeus that all  
the universe controls, oppose  
his power against my mind  
may I never dallying  
be slow to give my worship at  
the sacrificial feasts  
when the bulls are killed beside  
quenchless Father Ocean  
may I never sin in word  
may these precepts still abide  
in my mind nor melt away

530

ANTISTROPHE

It is a sweet thing to draw out  
a long, long life in cheerful hopes,  
and feed the spirit in the bright  
benignity of happiness.  
but I shiver when I see you  
wasted with ten thousand pains,  
all because you did not tremble  
at the name of Zeus your mind  
was yours, not his, and at its bidding  
you regarded mortal men  
too high, Prometheus

540

STROPHE

Kindness that cannot be requited, tell me,  
where is the help in that, my friend? What succor  
in creatures of a day? You did not see  
the feebleness that draws its breath in gasps,  
a dreamlike feebleness by which the race  
of man is held in bondage, a blind prisoner.  
So the plans of men shall never  
pass the ordered law of Zeus

550

ANTISTROPHE

This I have learned while I looked on your pains,  
deadly pains, Prometheus.

A dirge for you came to my lips, so different  
from the other song I sang to crown your marriage  
in honor of your couching and your bath,  
upon the day you won her with your gifts  
to share your bed—of your own race she was,  
Hesione—and so you brought her home.

560

*(Enter Io, a girl wearing horns like an ox )*

*Io*

What land is this? what race of men? Who is it  
I see here tortured in this rocky bondage?  
What is the sin he's paying for? Oh tell me  
to what part of the world my wanderings have brought me  
O, O, O,

there it is again, there again—it stings me,  
the gadfly, the ghost of earth-born Argos  
keep it away, keep it away, earth!  
I'm frightened when I see the shape of Argos,  
Argos the herdsman with ten thousand eyes.  
He stalks me with his crafty eyes he died,  
but the earth didn't hide him; still he comes  
even from the depths of the Underworld to hunt me:  
he drives me starving by the sands of the sea.

570

The reed-woven pipe drones on in a hum  
and drones and drones its sleep-giving strain  
O, O, O,

Where are you bringing me, my far-wandering wanderings?  
Son of Kronos, what fault, what fault  
did you find in me that you should yoke me  
to a harness of misery like this,  
that you should torture me so to madness  
driven in fear of the gadfly?

580

Burn me with fire · hide me in earth · cast me away  
to monsters of the deep for food · but do not  
grudge me the granting of this prayer, King.  
Enough have my much wandering wanderings  
exercised me · I cannot find  
a way to escape my troubles.  
Do you hear the voice of the cow-horned maid?

*Prometheus*

Surely I hear the voice, the voice of the maiden, gadfly-haunted,  
the daughter of Inachus? She set Zeus's heart on fire with love  
and now she is violently exercised running on courses overlong,  
driven by Hera's hate

590

*Io*

How is it you speak my father's name?  
Tell me, who are you? Who are you? Oh  
who are you that so exactly accosts me by name?  
You have spoken of the disease that the Gods have sent to me  
which wastes me away, pricking with goads,  
so that I am moving always  
tortured and hungry, wild bounding,  
quick sped I come,  
a victim of jealous plots.  
Some have been wretched  
before me, but who of these  
suffered as I do?  
But declare to me clearly  
what I have still to suffer: what would avail  
against my sickness, what drug would cure it:  
Tell me, if you know:  
tell me, declare it to the unlucky, wandering maid.

600

*Prometheus*

I shall tell you clearly all that you would know, weaving you no  
riddles, but in plain words, as it is just to open the lips to friends.  
You see before you him that gave fire to men, even Prometheus.

610

*Io*

O spirit that has appeared as a common blessing to all men, unhappy Prometheus, why are you being punished?

*Prometheus*

I have just this moment ceased from the lamentable tale of my sorrows.

*Io*

Will you then grant me this favor?

*Prometheus*

Say what you are asking for: I will tell you all.

*Io*

Tell who it was that nailed you to the cliff.

*Prometheus*

The plan was the plan of Zeus, and the hand the hand of Hephaestus.

*Io*

And what was the offense of which this is the punishment?

620

*Prometheus*

It is enough that I have told you a clear story so far.

*Io*

In addition, then, indicate to me what date shall be the limit of my wanderings.

*Prometheus*

Better for you not to know this than know it.

*Io*

I beg you, do not hide from me what I must endure.

*Prometheus*

It is not that I grudge you this favor.

*Io*

Why then delay to tell me all?

*Prometheus*

It is no grudging, but I hesitate to break your spirit.

*Io*

Do not have more thought for me than pleases me myself

*Prometheus*

Since you are so eager, I must speak; and do you give ear

630

*Chorus*

Not yet. give me, too, a share of pleasure First let us question her concerning her sickness, and let her tell us of her desperate fortunes And then let you be our informant for the sorrows that still await her

*Prometheus*

It is your task, Io, to gratify these spirits, for besides other considerations they are your father's sisters To make wail and lament for one's ill fortune, when one will win a tear from the audience, is well worthwhile

*Io*

I know not how I should distrust you. clearly  
you shall hear all you want to know from me  
Yet even as I speak I groan in bitterness  
for that storm sent by God on me, that ruin  
of my beauty; I must sorrow when I think  
who sent all this upon me. There were always  
night visions that kept haunting me and coming  
into my maiden chamber and exhorting  
with winning words, "O maiden greatly blessed,  
why are you still a maiden, you who might  
make marriage with the greatest? Zeus is stricken  
with lust for you, he is afire to try  
the bed of love with you do not disdain him  
Go, child, to Lerna's meadow, deep in grass,  
to where your father's flocks and cattle stand  
that Zeus's eye may cease from longing for you "  
With such dreams I was cruelly beset  
night after night until I took the courage  
to tell my father of my nightly terror.

640

650

He sent to Pytho many an embassy  
 and to Dodona seeking to discover  
 what deed or word of his might please the God, 660  
 but those he sent came back with riddling oracles  
 dark and beyond the power of understanding.  
 At last the word came clear to Inachus  
 charging him plainly that he cast me out  
 of home and country, drove me out footloose  
 to wander to the limits of the world;  
 if he should not obey, the oracle said,  
 the fire-faced thunderbolt would come from Zeus  
 and blot out his whole race. These were the oracles  
 of Loxias, and Inachus obeyed them. 670  
 He drove me out and shut his doors against me  
 with tears on both our parts, but Zeus's bit  
 compelled him to do this against his will.  
 Immediately my form and mind were changed  
 and all distorted; horned, as you see,  
 pricked on by the sharp biting gadfly, leaping  
 in frenzied jumps I ran beside the river  
 Kerchneia, good to drink, and Lerna's spring.  
 The earth-born herdsman Argos followed me  
 whose anger knew no limits, and he spied 680  
 after my tracks with all his hundred eyes  
 Then an unlooked-for doom, descending suddenly,  
 took him from life. I, driven by the gadfly,  
 that god-sent scourge, was driven always onward  
 from one land to another: that is my story.  
 If you can tell me what remains for me,  
 tell me, and do not out of pity cozen  
 with kindly lies: there is no sickness worse  
 for me than words that to be kind must lie.

*Chorus*

Hold! Keep away! Alas!  
 never did I think that such strange

words would come to my ears:  
 never did I think such intolerable  
 sufferings, an offense to the eye,  
 shameful and frightening, so  
 would chill my soul with a double-edged point.  
 Alas, Alas, for your fate!  
 I shudder when I look on Io's fortune.

690

*Prometheus*

You groan too soon. you are full of fear too soon: wait till you  
 hear besides what is to be.

*Chorus*

Speak, tell us to the end For sufferers it is sweet to know before-  
 hand clearly the pain that still remains for them.

*Prometheus*

The first request you made of me you gained  
 lightly. from her you wished to hear the story  
 of what she suffered Now hear what remains,  
 what sufferings this maid must yet endure  
 from Hera Do you listen, child of Inachus,  
 hear and lay up my words within your heart  
 that you may know the limits of your journey.  
 First turn to the sun's rising and walk on  
 over the fields no plough has broken. then  
 you will come to the wandering Scythians  
 who live in wicker houses built above  
 their well-wheeled wagons; they are an armed people,  
 armed with the bow that strikes from far away:  
 do not draw near them; rather let your feet  
 touch the surf line of the sea where the waves moan,  
 and cross their country on your left there live  
 the Chalybes who work with iron. these  
 you must beware of, for they are not gentle,  
 nor people whom a stranger dare approach.  
 Then you will come to Insolence, a river  
 that well deserves its name. but cross it not—

700

710

it is no stream that you can easily ford—  
 until you come to Caucasus itself,  
 the highest mountains, where the river's strength  
 gushes from its very temples Cross these peaks, 720  
 the neighbors of the stars, and take the road  
 southward until you reach the Amazons,  
 the race of women who hate men, who one day  
 shall live around Thermōdon in Themiscyra  
 where Salmydessos, rocky jaw of the sea,  
 stands sailor-hating, stepmother of ships.  
 The Amazons will set you on your way  
 and gladly you will reach Cimmeria,  
 the isthmus, at the narrow gates of the lake. 730  
 Leave this with a good heart and cross the channel,  
 the channel of Maeotis and hereafter  
 for all time men shall talk about your crossing,  
 and they shall call the place for you Cow's-ford.\*  
 Leave Europe's mainland then, and go to Asia.

(*To the Chorus*)

Do you now think this tyrant of the Gods  
 is hard in all things without difference?  
 He was a God and sought to lie in love  
 with this girl who was mortal, and on her  
 he brought this curse of wandering bitter indeed  
 you found your marriage with this suitor, maid.  
 Yet you must think of all that I have told you  
 as still only in prelude 740

*Io*

O, O

*Prometheus*

Again, you are crying and lamenting what will you do when you  
 hear of the evils to come?

\* Cow's-ford· Bosphorus.



*Chorus*

Is there still something else to her sufferings of which you will speak?

*Prometheus*

A wintry sea of agony and ruin.

*Io*

What good is life to me then? Why do I not throw myself at once from some rough crag, to strike the ground and win a quittance of all my troubles? It would be better to die once for all than suffer all one's days

750

*Prometheus*

You would ill bear my trials, then, for whom Fate reserves no death. Death would be a quittance of trouble: but for me there is no limit of suffering set till Zeus fall from power.

*Io*

Can Zeus ever fall from power?

*Prometheus*

You would be glad to see that catastrophe, I think.

*Io*

Surely, since Zeus is my persecutor

*Prometheus*

Then know that this shall be.

760

*Io*

Who will despoil him of his sovereign scepter?

*Prometheus*

His own witless plans

*Io*

How? Tell me, if there is no harm to telling.

*Prometheus*

He shall make a marriage that shall hurt him.

*Io*

With god or mortal? Tell me, if you may say it.

*Prometheus*

Why ask what marriage? That is not to be spoken

*Io*

Is it his wife shall cast him from his throne?

*Prometheus*

She shall bear him a son mightier than his father.

*Io*

Has he no possibility of escaping this downfall?

*Prometheus*

None, save through my release from these chains.

770

*Io*

But who will free you, against Zeus's will?

*Prometheus*

Fate has determined that it be one of your descendants

*Io*

What, shall a child of mine bring you free?

*Prometheus*

Yes, in the thirteenth generation.

*Io*

Your prophecy has now passed the limits of understanding.

*Prometheus*

Then also do not seek to learn your trials

*Io*

Do not offer me a boon and then withhold it.

*Prometheus*

I offer you then one of two stories

*Io*

Which? Tell me and give me the choice.

*Prometheus*

I will choose that I tell you clearly either what remains for you  
or the one that shall deliver me

780

*Chorus*

Grant her one and grant me the other and do not deny us the tale.  
Tell her what remains of her wanderings: tell us of the one that  
shall deliver you. That is what I desire.

*Prometheus*

Since you have so much eagerness, I will not  
refuse to tell you all that you have asked me  
First to you, Io, I shall tell the tale  
of your sad wanderings, rich in groans—inscribe  
the story in the tablets of your mind.

790

When you shall cross the channel that divides  
Europe from Asia, turn to the rising sun,  
to the burnt plains, sun-scorched, cross by the edge  
of the foaming sea till you come to Gorgona  
to the flat stretches of Kisthene's country.

There live the ancient maids, children of Phorcys  
these swan-formed hags, with but one common eye,  
single-toothed monsters, such as nowhere else  
the sun's rays look on nor the moon by night  
Near are their winged sisters, the three Gorgons,  
with snakes to bind their hair up, mortal-hating:  
nor mortal that but looks on them shall live  
these are the sentry guards I tell you of.

800

Hear, too, of yet another gruesome sight,  
the sharp-toothed hounds of Zeus, that have no bark,  
the vultures—they take heed of—and the host  
of one-eyed Arimaspians, horse-riding,  
that live around the spring which flows with gold,  
the spring of Pluto's river go not near them.

A land far off, a nation of black men,  
these you shall come to, men who live hard by  
the fountain of the sun where is the river  
Aethiops—travel by his banks along  
to a waterfall where from the Bibline hills  
Nile pours his holy waters, pure to drink  
This river shall be your guide to the triangular  
land of the Nile and there, by Fate's decree,  
there, Io, you shall find your distant home,  
a colony for you and your descendants.

810

If anything of this is still obscure  
or difficult ask me again and learn  
clearly I have more leisure than I wish

*Chorus*

If there is still something left for you to tell her of her ruinous  
wanderings, tell it, but if you have said everything, grant us the  
favor we asked and tell us the story too

820

*Prometheus*

The limit of her wanderings complete  
she now has heard but so that she may know  
that she has not been listening to no purpose  
I shall recount what she endured before  
she came to us here: this I give as pledge,  
a witness to the good faith of my words  
The great part of the story I omit  
and come to the very boundary of your travels  
When you had come to the Molossian plains  
around the sheer back of Dodona where  
is the oracular seat of Zeus Thesprotian,  
the talking oaks, a wonder past belief,  
by them full clearly, in no riddling terms,  
you were hailed glorious wife of Zeus that shall be.  
does anything of this wake pleasant memories?  
Then, goaded by the gadfly, on you hastened  
to the great gulf of Rhea by the track  
at the side of the sea: but in returning course  
you were storm-driven back: in time to come  
that inlet of the sea shall bear your name  
and shall be called Ionian, a memorial  
to all men of your journeying: these are proofs  
for you, of how far my mind sees something farther  
than what is visible: for what is left,  
to you and you this I shall say in common,  
taking up again the track of my old tale.  
There is a city, furthest in the world,

830

840

Canobos, near the mouth and issuing point  
 of the Nile there Zeus shall make you sound of mind  
 touching you with a hand that brings no fear,  
 and through that touch alone shall come your healing. 850  
 You shall bear Epaphos, dark of skin, his name  
 recalling Zeus's touch and his begetting  
 This Epaphos shall reap the fruit of all  
 the land that is watered by the broad flowing Nile  
 From him five generations, and again  
 to Argos they shall come, against their will,  
 in number fifty, women, flying from  
 a marriage with their kinsfolk but these kinsfolk  
 their hearts with lust aflutter like the hawks  
 barely outdistanced by the doves will come  
 hunting a marriage that the law forbids.  
 the God shall grudge the men these women's bodies,  
 and the Pelasgian earth shall welcome them 860  
 in death for death shall claim them in a fight  
 where women strike in the dark, a murderous vigil.  
 Each wife shall rob her husband of his life  
 dipping in blood her two-edged sword even so  
 may Love come, too, upon my enemies  
 But one among these girls shall love beguile  
 from killing her bedfellow, blunting her purpose.  
 and she shall make her choice—to bear the name  
 of coward and not murder. this girl,  
 she shall in Argos bear a race of kings  
 To tell this clearly needs a longer story, 870  
 but from her seed shall spring a man renowned  
 for archery, and he shall set me free  
 Such was the prophecy which ancient Themis  
 my Titan mother opened up to me,  
 but how and by what means it shall come true  
 would take too long to tell, and if you heard  
 the knowledge would not profit you.

*Io*

Eleleu, eleleu

It creeps on me again, the twitching spasm,  
the mind-destroying madness, burning me up  
and the gadfly's sting goads me on—  
steel point by no fire tempered—  
and my heart in its fear knocks on my breast  
There's a dazing whirl in my eyes as I run  
out of my course by the madness driven,  
the crazy frenzy, my tongue ungoverned  
babbles, the words in a muddy flow strike  
on the waves of the mischief I hate, strike wild  
without aim or sense

880

*Chorus*

STROPHE

A wise man indeed he was  
that first in judgment weighed this word  
and gave it tongue the best by far  
it is to marry in one's rank and station  
let no one working with her hands aspire  
to marriage with those lifted high in pride  
because of wealth, or of ancestral glory

890

ANTISTROPHE

Never, never may you see me,  
Fates majestic, drawing nigh  
the bed of Zeus, to share it with the kings  
nor ever may I know a heavenly wooer:  
I dread such things beholding  
Io's sad virginity  
ravaged, ruined; bitter wandering  
hers because of Hera's wrath.

900

EPODE

When a match has equal partners  
then I fear not may the eye

inescapable of the mighty  
 Gods not look on me  
 That is a fight that none can fight a fruitful  
 source of fruitlessness. I would not  
 know what I could do I cannot  
 see the hope when Zeus is angry  
 of escaping him

*Prometheus*

Yet shall this Zeus, for all his pride of heart  
 be humble yet such is the match he plans,  
 a marriage that shall drive him from his power  
 and from his throne, out of the sight of all  
 So shall at last the final consummation  
 be brought about of Father Kronos' curse  
 which he, driven from his ancient throne, invoked  
 against the son deposing him no one  
 of all the Gods save I alone can tell  
 a way to escape this mischief I alone  
 know it and how So let him confidently  
 sit on his throne and trust his heavenly thunder  
 and brandish in his hand his fiery bolt  
 Nothing shall all of this avail against  
 a fall intolerable, a dishonored end  
 So strong a wrestler Zeus is now equipping  
 against himself, a monster hard to fight  
 This enemy shall find a plan to best  
 the thunderbolt, a thunderclap to best  
 the thunderclap of Zeus and he shall shiver  
 Poseidon's trident, curse of sea and land  
 So, in his crashing fall shall Zeus discover  
 how different are rule and slavery

910

920

*Chorus*

You voice your wishes for the God's destruction

*Prometheus*

They are my wishes, yet shall come to pass.

*Chorus*

Must we expect someone to conquer Zeus?

930

*Prometheus*

Yes, he shall suffer worse than I do now.

*Chorus*

Have you no fear of uttering such words?

*Prometheus*

Why should I fear, since death is not my fate?

*Chorus*

But he might give you pain still worse than this.

*Prometheus*

Then let him do so, all this I expect

*Chorus*

Wise are the worshipers of Adrasteia

*Prometheus*

Worship him, pray, flatter whatever king  
is king today, but I care less than nothing  
for Zeus. Let him do what he likes,  
let him be king for his short time. he shall not  
be king for long

940

Look, here is Zeus's footman,  
this fetch-and-carry messenger of him,  
the New King. Certainly he has come here  
with news for us

*Hermes*

You, subtle-spirit, you  
bitterly overbitter, you that sinned  
against the immortals, giving honor to  
the creatures of a day, you thief of fire:  
the Father has commanded you to say  
what marriage of his is this you brag about  
that shall drive him from power—and declare it

950



in clear terms and no riddles You, Prometheus,  
do not cause me a double journey; these

(*Pointing to the chains*)

will prove to you that Zeus is not softhearted

*Prometheus*

Your speech is pompous sounding, full of pride,  
as fits the lackey of the Gods You are young  
and young your rule and you think that the tower  
in which you live is free from sorrow from it  
have I not seen two tyrants thrown? the third,  
who now is king, I shall yet live to see him  
fall, of all three most suddenly, most dishonored.  
Do you think I will crouch before your Gods,  
—so new—and tremble? I am far from that.  
Hasten away, back on the road you came  
You shall learn nothing that you ask of me

960

*Hermes*

Just such the obstinacy that brought you here,  
to this self-willed calamitous anchorage.

*Prometheus*

Be sure of this when I set my misfortune  
against your slavery, I would not change.

*Hermes*

It is better, I suppose, to be a slave  
to this rock, than Zeus's trusted messenger.

*Prometheus*

Thus must the insolent show their insolence!

970

*Hermes*

I think you find your present lot too soft.

*Prometheus*

Too soft? I would my enemies had it then,  
and you are one of those I count as such

*Hermes*

Oh, you would blame me too for your calamity?

*Prometheus*

In a single word, I am the enemy  
of all the Gods that gave me ill for good.

*Hermes*

Your words declare you mad, and mad indeed

*Prometheus*

Yes, if it's madness to detest my foes.

*Hermes*

No one could bear you in success.

*Prometheus*

Alas!

*Hermes*

Alas! Zeus does not know that word

980

*Prometheus*

Time in its aging course teaches all things

*Hermes*

But you have not yet learned a wise discretion

*Prometheus*

True: or I would not speak so to a servant

*Hermes*

It seems you will not grant the Father's wish

*Prometheus*

I should be glad, indeed, to requite his kindness!

*Hermes*

You mock me like a child!

*Prometheus*

And are you not  
a child, and sillier than a child, to think  
that I should tell you anything? There is not  
a torture or an engine wherewithal  
Zeus can induce me to declare these things,  
till he has loosed me from these cruel shackles.  
So let him hurl his smoky lightning flame,

990

and throw in turmoil all things in the world  
with white-winged snowflakes and deep bellowing  
thunder beneath the earth me he shall not  
bend by all this to tell him who is fated  
to drive him from his tyranny.

*Hermes*

Think, here and now, if this seems to your interest.

*Prometheus*

I have already thought—and laid my plans

*Hermes*

Bring your proud heart to know a true discretion—  
O foolish spirit—in the face of ruin

1000

*Prometheus*

You vex me by these senseless adjurations,  
senseless as if you were to advise the waves  
Let it not cross your mind that I will turn  
womanish-minded from my fixed decision  
or that I shall entreat the one I hate  
so greatly, with a woman's upturned hands,  
to loose me from my chains: I am far from that

*Hermes*

I have said too much already—so I think—  
and said it to no purpose: you are not softened  
your purpose is not dented by my prayers  
You are a colt new broken, with the bit  
clenched in its teeth, fighting against the reins,  
and bolting You are far too strong and confident  
in your weak cleverness For obstinacy  
standing alone is the weakest of all things  
in one whose mind is not possessed by wisdom  
Think what a storm, a triple wave of ruin  
will rise against you, if you will not hear me,  
and no escape for you. First this rough crag  
with thunder and the lightning bolt the Father

1010

shall cleave asunder, and shall hide your body  
 wrapped in a rocky clasp within its depth;  
 a tedious length of time you must fulfil 1020  
 before you see the light again, returning  
 Then Zeus's winged hound, the eagle red,  
 shall tear great shreds of flesh from you, a feaster  
 coming unbidden, every day. your liver  
 bloodied to blackness will be his repast  
 And of this pain do not expect an end  
 until some God shall show himself successor  
 to take your tortures for himself and willing  
 go down to lightless Hades and the shadows  
 of Tartarus' depths Bear this in mind  
 and so determine This is no feigned boast 1030  
 but spoken with too much truth. The mouth of Zeus  
 does not know how to lie, but every word  
 brings to fulfilment Look, you, and reflect  
 and never think that obstinacy is better  
 than prudent counsel.

*Chorus*

Hermes seems to us  
 to speak not altogether out of season.  
 He bids you leave your obstinacy and seek  
 a wise good counsel Hearken to him Shame  
 it were for one so wise to fall in error.

*Prometheus*

Before he told it me I knew this message· 1040  
 but there is no disgrace in suffering  
 at an enemy's hand, when you hate mutually.  
 So let the curling tendril of the fire  
 from the lightning bolt be sent against me: let  
 the air be stirred with thunderclaps, the winds  
 in savage blasts convulsing all the world.  
 Let earth to her foundations shake, yes to her root,  
 before the quivering storm: let it confuse

the paths of heavenly stars and the sea's waves  
in a wild surging torrent this my body  
let Him raise up on high and dash it down 1050  
into black Tartarus with rigorous  
compulsive eddies death he cannot give me

*Hermes*

These are a madman's words, a madman's plan  
is there a missing note in this mad harmony?  
is there a slack chord in his madness? You,  
you, who are so sympathetic with his troubles,  
away with you from here, quickly away! 1060  
lest you should find your wits stunned by the thunder  
and its hard defending roar.

*Chorus*

Say something else  
different from this give me some other counsel  
that I will listen to this word of yours  
for all its instance is not for us.  
How dare you bid us practice baseness? We  
will bear along with him what we must bear  
I have learned to hate all traitors there is no  
disease I spit on more than treachery 1070

*Hermes*

Remember then my warning before the act:  
when you are trapped by ruin don't blame fortune.  
don't say that Zeus has brought you to calamity  
that you could not foresee: do not do this:  
but blame yourselves: now you know what you're doing:  
and with this knowledge neither suddenly  
nor secretly your own want of good sense  
has tangled you in the net of ruin, past  
all hope of rescue.

*Prometheus*

Now it is words no longer: now in very truth  
the earth is staggered in its depths the thunder  
bellows resoundingly, the fiery tendrils  
of the lightning flash light up, and whirling clouds  
carry the dust along: all the winds' blasts  
dance in a fury one against the other  
in violent confusion: earth and sea  
are one, confused together. such is the storm  
that comes against me manifestly from Zeus  
to work its terrors O Holy mother mine,  
O Sky that circling brings the light to all,  
you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly.

1080

1090