THE GREEK PLAYS

SIXTEEN PLAYS BY
AESCYLUS, SOPHOCLES, AND EURIPIDES

NEW TRANSLATIONS EDITED BY
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Each of the three plays that make up the Oresteia—the Agamemnon, the Libation Bearers, and the Eumenides—can be read separately, and each will be introduced separately, but it's also important to consider them, and if possible read them, together. For Aeschylus wrote them to be seen together, on a single day in 458 B.C., in effect making them into one long drama with three constituent parts. Of the surviving tragic playwrights, only Aeschylus, to our knowledge, created such connected trilogies, adapting the three-tragedy format of the City Dionysia at Athens to triple his scope and range; and the Oresteia is the only such triptych that survives.

Scope was what Aeschylus needed in the Oresteia, for its story, as he conceived it, spans all of human, and even divine, evolution. Though its dramatic action occupies perhaps only a decade, its central question—whether justice is to be administered by way of retribution and revenge, or some other, less violent process—goes back to the beginning of time, to the sequence of overthrows by which Cronus took power from his father Uranus and then Zeus from Cronus. Aeschylus effectively brings these primeval usurpations onstage, first in the sweeping, soaring poetry of Agamemnon’s opening choral ode, then, in Eumenides, in the person of the Erinyes or Furies, ancient creatures aligned with the pre-Olympian order that Zeus has displaced. That order is not yet at peace with Olympian rule; the question of justice has not yet been settled among the gods. The Oresteia will see it settled, for gods and for humans alike, and so resolve a dilemma as old as the cosmos itself.

Just as it stretches backward into mythic prehistory, so the Oresteia stretches forward, far past the Trojan War era in which it is set, into the very time and place of the original performance. Its final scene is staged in Athens and depicts a murder trial, played out before a board of nameless jurors. These jurors represent the court of the Areopagus, an Athenian political institution that, thanks to reforms enacted only a few years before performance took place, now held a newly confirmed jurisdiction over murder trials. For Aeschylus’ audience, the setting was modern, the issues contemporary. The world of myth had become
transposed onto that of the *polis*, the social unit in which (as the Greeks believed) justice, the highest marker of human progress, could best flourish.

Only ancient Athenian spectators, for whom tragic theater was an all-day, nonstop event on a festival day when all business had ceased, could have the experience Aeschylus intended when he composed the *Oresteia*. Most modern productions break up the trilogy into three separate plays, staged at different times or on different days, or drastically truncate them to fit the whole sequence into a single evening. The first play, *Agamemnon*, suffers particularly from this truncation, since Aeschylus made it more than half again as long as the other two and, to the frustration of many a modern director, set a giant choral ode, more than two hundred lines long, right at its outset—an ordeal for audiences anticipating speech and action, not dance and verse.

Paradoxically it is the reader, rather than the playgoer, who today can best take in the totalizing vision of the *Oresteia*. On the printed page it can remain whole and unsegmented, a monument to the unique moment, in 458 B.C., when the Theater of Dionysus was made to encompass the cosmos itself.
INTRODUCTION TO

AESCHYLUS' AGAMEMNON

The Oresteia trilogy begins and ends with the kindling of fires. Its final scene, at the end of the Eumenides, will be a torchlight procession that mimics the festivities of an Athenian marriage. The flame seen at the start of the Agamemnon, by contrast, is a beacon signifying military conquest: a signal fire, the last in a chain of such fires, bringing news back to the Greek city of Argos (sometimes also called Mycenae) that Troy had fallen. Hundreds of miles away, the beacon signifies, other fires are blazing. A great city is burning, and the corpses of its warriors lie atop funeral pyres. The flames that, in the trilogy’s third play, will celebrate a joyous union arrive here as messengers of downfall and death, but also of victory for the Greeks.

The beacon relay has been set up by Clytemnestra, queen of Argos, and she describes its operation in nearly ecstatic tones in her first long speech (lines 281-316). She is fiercely proud of the mastery it demonstrates, the capacity of royal power to overcome time and distance and even bridge the divide between Europe and Asia. Her husband, too, had crossed that divide, when he led an army of invasion across the Aegean ten years before. But the crossing required a blood sacrifice: trapped by contrary winds on the shores of Aulis, on the island of Euboea, Agamemnon, instructed by the seer Calchas, had killed his own daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis. Only then had the winds turned and the fleet set sail.

The tale of that killing is retold in this play's opening choral ode, the longest and most ambitious ode found in any extant Greek play. The old men of Argos—left behind, like the Chorus of Persians, after the departure of the troops—describe a bird omen that was seen by the army: two eagles ripped apart a pregnant hare, representing, in the reading of the seer Calchas, the coming sack of Troy by the two sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus. Seers often demanded that special sacrifices be made before battle; it was said that some young Persian captives were sacrificed before the battle of Salamis. But here Agamemnon must sacrifice his own child. The Chorus describe, in horrific detail, the agony of a father as he makes his horrendous choice, the desperate
last struggles of Iphigenia, the gag thrust in her mouth to keep her from uttering curses and ruining the rite—all except the final knife thrust. They seem, for a while, to sympathize with Agamemnon, until the moment he resolves to kill his own daughter:

*Her pleading, her shrieking for her father, the girl's short life—these were worth nothing to the lovers of battle, her judges.* (228–30)

Woven into the Chorus's account of the murder at Aulis are meditations on more ancient events, going back to the beginning of time. Over three generations of gods, the cosmos has been ruled by Uranus, then Cronus, then Zeus. The victory of Zeus deserves celebration, the Chorus claim, though they are not sure what Zeus is or how to address him. But Zeus gives mortals the ultimate gift, the ability to find meaning in the tragic universe around them:

*Zeus puts us on the road to mindfulness, Zeus decrees we learn by suffering. In the heart is no sleep; there drips instead pain that remembers wounds. And to unwilling minds circumspection comes.* (176–81)

Aeschylus will return throughout the *Oresteia* to Zeus' triumph in the third generation of gods, implicitly comparing it to other three-part movements: the three generations leading from Atreus to Agamemnon to Orestes, the three murders of Iphigenia, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra. The *Oresteia* itself forms a tercet that parallels these others, telescoping into a daylong drama the different time scales of cosmogony, myth, and history.

As the Chorus conclude their great ode—in a sense, the overture to the entire *Oresteia*—they greet Clytemnestra, emerging from the palace, as “the chief-tain's wife.” There is palpable tension in their dialogue with her, partly stemming from their obvious discomfort with female rule. But there is also an unspoken worry on their minds. Like the watchman who opened the play, they are aware of an interloper in the royal house: Aegisthus, the last surviving son of Agamemnon's uncle, Thyestes. In the long years the army has been at Troy, Clytemnestra has taken Aegisthus as lover, a move that portends nothing good for her husband. Because of a long-ago quarrel between his own father, Thyestes, and Agamemnon's father, Atreus, Aegisthus has been exiled from Argos and the sovereignty he might have enjoyed there.
Aegisthus stays hidden while Clytemnestra goes out to greet her returning husband, though "greet" hardly seems the right word; both spouses coldly talk past each other and make formal speeches to the Chorus. When wife finally addresses husband, it is to urge him to step from his chariot onto a purple-dyed cloth she has spread—a delicate tapestry he is reluctant to walk on, but his wife insists. In a trilogy in which colored cloths of all kinds have special meanings, this luxury item, stained with the precious secretions of a marine snail, is especially meaningful. It evokes the wealth of Asia, much of which the Greek armies have just plundered, as well as the blood they have shed and the sea they have crossed. As he steps onto it, Agamemnon reenacts the many roles he has had to play as leader of a great invasion, and he behaves, as he himself observes, more like a god than a man.

As he walks this tapestry of doom, Agamemnon gestures to the silent woman accompanying him, bidding the servants bring her inside. This is Cassandra, a daughter of King Priam, a seer fated to utter prophecies that will not be understood or believed. The army has given her to him as a prize of war, meaning in this case a concubine. A foreigner, she seems unable to speak or understand Greek, and the audience must have assumed she was only a muta persona (non-speaking character), though later she bursts into frenzied, hallucinatory speech.

As he goes inside the palace, Agamemnon has earned dikē, punishment, on multiple counts: the murder of Iphigenia; the sack of Troy with its attendant atrocities; and, by the Greek notion that guilt can be inherited, the crimes of his father, Atreus, who butchered his brother Thyestes' children (all except Aegisthus) and fed them to him in a cannibal stew. The question is how he can be punished syn dikēi, with justice. Dikē can be translated as either "punishment" or "justice," reflecting two different phases of Greek social evolution: a prelegal stage in which victims exacted their own revenge on wrongdoers, and the world of the polis, or city-state, in which law courts and juries took charge of such matters. At the start of the Oresteia, the code of eye-for-an-eye vengeance still prevails, but its inadequacies are becoming glaringly apparent. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, both wronged by Agamemnon or his father, can enact only punishment, not justice. The brutal pleasure they take in their murder—especially Clytemnestra, who compares the shower of her husband's spurting blood to the warm rain of spring that nourishes the fertile earth (lines 1388–92)—and the power and wealth they gain by it taint their deed with impiety.

By the conventions of Greek theater, the murder of Agamemnon could not be shown onstage. Aeschylus allows us to hear rather than see it, as Agamemnon cries out under the blows of his wife's blade. In a unique moment among surviving tragedies, the Chorus divide into small groups and the members agonize over whether to intervene—the audience knows they cannot, but their
In a final scene, Aegisthus enters, heavily guarded, to remind the Chorus that this family murder has also been a coup d'état. Argos is now ruled by a new regime, and force will be used to control the populace. The city has descended from monarchy to tyranny, and the scornful way Aegisthus refers to the Chorus as those “down on the rowing bench”—meaning, in Athens, those without property—shows that it also now belongs to the rich. For an Athenian audience in 458 B.C., who had just seen their own city enact sweeping democratic reforms (see the introduction to Eumenides), this was a hateful turn of events.

As the drama ends, the Chorus unsheath their swords, and civil war is only narrowly avoided by the intervention of Clytemnestra. The Chorus's question—"But is Orestes living somewhere?"—haunts both the Argive people and their bloodstained rulers. The next play in the trilogy will see it answered.
Throughout the translation, I have used the following Greek text of the play, indicating in footnotes where and why I have felt it necessary to depart from the text: West, Martin L., ed. *Aeschylus: Agamemnon* (Berlin and New York: Teubner, 2008). I owe profound thanks to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for its generous support of this work.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Watchman belonging to the royal house of Argos

Chorus of elderly male citizens of Argos

Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon

Herald belonging to the Greek army

Agamemnon, king of Argos

Cassandra, daughter of the Trojan king, Priam, and

Agamemnon's war captive

Aegisthus, cousin of Agamemnon and lover of Clytemnestra
WATCHMAN: I beg the gods to free me from this hardship.

Doglike—my head laid on my arms—I've watched
on the Atreides' rooftop through this long year.
Now I'm familiar with the stars' assembly,
potentates shining and distinct on high,
heavenly bodies bringing, as they perish
or in their risings, frost and heat to mortals.
I'm still on lookout for that beacon's pledge;
by fiery ray and oracle from Troy—
news of its capture. This is her stern pleasure,
her womanly hopeful-hearted man-strong purpose.
My dew-soaked bed, my pacing—which is worse?
Dreams never care for me, they never keep
a vigil—fear, not sleep, is at my side,
so steadfast slumber never shuts my lids.
When I decide to sing, or chirr as birds do,
agony, out of tune with rest, seeps in;
I cry and groan then for this home's condition,
with things not run—the best way—as before.
Still—may my effort find a lucky end
when the good news shines through in murky flame.

(Rises up, looking off into the distance)

Oh, welcome, lamp as powerful as daylight,
gleaming announcement! Think of all the dancing
prompted in Argos by this joyful blessing!

(Gives a high-pitched cry)

To Agamemnon's wife I give the clear sign
to rise from bed, swift as a star appearing,
and lift her voice in honor of the lamp
throughout her halls—if truly Ilion's city is taken: but the beacon's news is clear.
And on my own account, I'll dance a prelude.
My masters' luck is reckoned up as mine:
the signal fire has thrown me triple sixes.
For all that, let me feel, when he comes home,
the well-loved heft of my lord's hand in mine.
I have no more to say. A giant ox
stands on my tongue. But if the house weren't mute,
you'd hear, and no mistake. My choice is this, though:
if those who don't know ask, I'm empty-headed.

CHORUS: (entering) A decade now, since the great plaintiffs, Lord
Menelaus
and Agamemnon, took their fleet against Priam.†
By Zeus's will, two honored thrones and scepters,
Atreus' sons, like a strong yoke of oxen,
set out with Argives on a thousand ships
as a relief force from this country.
In their souls' rage, they shrieked for the great god Ares,
shrieked in preposterous pain, like eagles
high up over their children's bed, eddying, wheeling,
weeping fast on their oars of wings,
since the work of guarding their chicks' pallet turned out worthless.
Up above, somebody hears—maybe Apollo or Pan or Zeus—
the bird-wail, howl, sharp shout of the settlers in his country,
and he sends the violators their late penalty: a Fury.
So the overlord, the guest-god Zeus
inflicts the children of Atreus on Alexander‡—
for the sake of a woman bound to many men. He lays on
an overload of grappling holds, sinking the body.
In the dust the knee is driven down, the spear-shaft
shattered first off, inaugural
sacrifice. This is his will, the same
for Danäans§ and Trojans. Now it stands

* Troy.
† King of Troy.
‡ Alexander is another name for Paris, Helen of Troy's lover and kidnapper.
§ "Danäans" is one of the names used in the Iliad to designate the Greeks; it implies that they are descended from Danaus (a descendant of Io) who settled in Argos with his daughters (see Prometheus Bound 853-56).
where it has come, becomes what fate has set down.
Whatever's burned and poured and wept on altars
won't coax away the anger tightly fastened
to gifts no fire should touch.
We remain, our destitute, our ancient flesh
left behind, since that far time, by the voyage of rescue.
We must use these canes to shepherd childlike strength.
As in fresh years the life that spurts up in the heart
is elder-weak—no War God's posted there—
so beyond mere old age, when the leaves have withered
to nothing, three feet walk the path;*
and no more vigorous than a little boy
a dream goes wandering, strange sight in daytime.
You, though, Tyndareus' daughter, Queen Clytemnestra,
what's this that's happened, what's the news you've caught?
What message brings conviction and dispatches offerings
of perfume through the town? All the gods who govern the city
or live in the sky or the Underworld, in houses or the marketplace, 90
have altars blazing with your gifts.
There—and there—one torch, then another springs up, reaching
heaven.
each flame is wheedled forth with holy unguent,
tender, plainspoken, persuasive,
compounded in the royal women's chambers.
Say what you can about all this,
and what the gods permit. Your story will heal this anguish,
my enemy, who was thriving until now;
but now, at your display of sacrifices,
hope comes—and hope hairs back the fretting,
endless hunger, the heart's and mind's tormentor.

\textit{strophe 1}

I have the right to make it known: the road with happy omens,
powerful men leading blossoming manhood. The great age time has
reared in me
still breathes persuasion, strength from the gods for singing.
Twin-throned, the Achaean magnates at the head of Greek youth,
the marshals with one purpose,

* Because a walking staff is used.
were sent by the charging omen-bird to the Tencrians’ country
to collect the debt by force, at the point of a spear.
To the kings of ships the king of birds appeared:
a black one,
and a white one at its back;
verging on the palace they alighted, on the spear-hand side,
where everyone could see.
They were browsing on a hare’s heroic womb, her fruitful brood,
after they’d cut off her final, losing race.
Tell the story of grief, of grief—but may what is good have the
victory.

antistrophe i

And the army’s trusted prophet saw. He recognized
Atreus’ warrior sons, with their two different hearts,
in the guests served the hare; these were the sendoff
for the fleet’s commanders. He voiced the omen’s meaning:
“Time will see the travelers here lay their hands on Priam’s city;
in front of its towers
Fate will drain off the people’s flourishing herds
in violence.
Only look out for the gods’ malice darkening
over you, though your army has been hammered out
into a giant bit for breaking Troy. Holy Artemis’ pity seethes
at her father’s winged hunting dogs;
offering up a miserable, cringing thing, her unborn little ones with
her;
she hates the eagles’ banquet.
Tell the story of grief, of grief—but may what is good have the
victory.

epode

The lovely lady,§ out of her great favor
toward the fresh, soft whelps of raging lions;
out of her gladness in all the clinging nurslings

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* Another name for the Trojans; Teucer, the son of the river Scamander, was believed to be the ancestor of the Trojan royal family.
† The seer Calchas.
‡ The “winged hunting dogs” of Zeus are eagles.
§ Artemis.
of animals ranging through countryside,
demands fulfillment of the signs—
favorable, but still full of blame—from the towering birds." But I call on Paean the healer:

don't let her craft ship-binding, voyage-banning
winds of lingering against the Danaans,
or chase a new sacrifice,
without law, without feasting,

a feud-builder born in the family, and not timid
toward men. The keeper of the house remains,
fearsome and unforgetting, looming, wily Nemesis for her child's
sake."

These words rang out of Calchas,
and along with them greatly favorable things:
the fate of the king’s house seen in the birds of the journey.
Blend your own voice in:
tell the story of grief, of grief—but may what is good have the
victory.

strope 2

Zeus, whoever he is—if he's pleased to hear
that name in invocations,
then I address it to him:
I hold the scales up and find
nothing that is can be like him—
no, not like Zeus, if I’m truly to throw off this weight
of emptiness from my mind.

antistrope 2

Even the god who, long ago, was great;†
swollen with champion gall—yes, he was there,

once, but no one now will even say so.
And the one born after him
was thrown to the mat three times, and was gone.
But the man zealous in shouting the victory of Zeus
will hit the level-headed bull’s-eye.

* They are literally "ostriches," if the text is not corrupt—as its editor strongly suspects.
† Apollo.
‡ The original king of the gods, Uranus, who was overthrown by his son Cronus; Cronus was overthrown
in turn by his son Zeus.
strophe 3

Zeus puts us on the road
to mindfulness, Zeus decrees
we learn by suffering.
In the heart is no sleep; there drips instead
pain that remembers wounds. And to unwilling
minds circumspection comes.
But this is the gods’ favor, I suppose,
claiming by violence the place of awe, the helmsman’s bench.

antistrophe 3

Then the revered commander
of the Achaean fleet,
faulting no prophet,
blended his spirit with the blasts of chance;
when the Achaean army’s jars were emptied
in suffering weather when there was no sailing,
on the shore facing Chalcis,∗
by the circling, roaring tides, in the country of Aulis;

strophe 4

and winds that came out of Strymon
meant evil leisure, hunger, painful anchorage,
sent men off wandering, ate away at the cables,
bent time back double:
the precious Argive army
was worn to fragments. For the punishing weather
a different remedy, then,
one that fell harder on the chieftains,
rang from the prophet’s mouth.
Artemis was his warrant. The sons of Atreus
beat on the ground with their staffs,
tears escaping their eyes.

antistrophe 4

The older of the two, the chieftain, spoke now—these were his
words:
“It is grim Death not to obey—
but the same if I cut my child down, jewel of my house—

* Chalcis, in Euboea, was the point from which the Greek army planned to sail against Troy, but contrary winds kept them pinned down there while their jars of provisions were emptied.
my hands stained—they’re her father’s hands—with runnels of a slaughtered young girl’s blood by the altar. But which choice is safe for me? How can I jump ship, fail this allied expedition? It swells with huge lust for an offering of virgin blood to stop the winds—but Righteousness forbids it. May that guide me well."

strophe 5
But when he put on necessity’s harness, his spirit swerved—now, it was ungodly, unclean, unhallowed; from then on he turned against thinking anything outrageous. Folly, sorry conniver of shame, fills mortals with recklessness—it’s her from the onset. Bare-faced, he officiated at his daughter’s death, to move a relief force toward punishing a woman, and to anoint the ships with sacrifice.

antistrophe 5
Her pleading, her shrieking for her father, the girl’s short life—these were worth nothing to the lovers of battle, her judges. Her father prayed first, then he told the attendants to lift her high up, over the altar, like a goat—though, frantic, she clung to his legs in their robes—to keep her facing the ground, and to guard her exquisite mouth, keeping in sounds of a curse for his house,

strophe 6
With a bit forced in, a power that silenced her. Now her robes—dyed with saffron—poured to the ground and each man who offered her up she pierced with a pitiful gaze—she was like a painting’s central figure—struggling to speak to them, since often in her father’s generous banqueting hall
Aeschylus

she’d sung a hymn full of blessing, in the chaste voice of a virgin,
when the father she loved poured out the third libation;
with loving reverence she sang.

antistrophe 6

The rest I didn’t see; I have no tale to tell;
but Calchas’ skills find proof in what’s fulfilled.
Anyway, Justice tips the scales; some learn through pain.
You’ll know the future when it’s born;
you might as well rejoice
before its time, as mourn before its time.
With dawn, the truth is coming, in those rays.
But let what follows now be some good ending—that’s the wish
of the Apian land’s sole defense,
its bulwark that stands close beside me here.

(Clytemnestra has by this point entered from the palace.)

I’ve come, awed by your power, Clytemnestra.
I know respect is due the chieftain’s wife
as long as there’s a desolate, unmanned throne.
If you have some dear news or not—perhaps
these busy rites serve hope alone—I would
be pleased to hear—but silence won’t offend me.

CLYTEMNESTRA: May Dawn arrive with good news—you must know
the saying—from the pleasant Night, her mother.
The joy for you is greater than your hopes:
the city of Priam’s captured by the Argives.


CLYTEMNESTRA: The Achaeans now hold Troy. Are those words plain?

CHORUS: Bliss, stealing over me, draws out a tear.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Your eye gives evidence of your firm favor.

CHORUS: But what convinced you? Is there any proof?

CLYTEMNESTRA: Of course there is—unless a god has tricked me.

CHORUS: Do signs in dreams have so much hold on you?

CLYTEMNESTRA: A dozing mind does not supply my views.

CHORUS: Perhaps, then, some raw rumor urged you on.

CLYTEMNESTRA: You sneer! My mind’s not like a little girl’s!

CHORUS: How long ago, then, did they sack the city?

CLYTEMNESTRA: During the night from which this day was born.

CHORUS: What messenger could reach his goal so quickly?

250

260

270

280
Oresteia: Agamemnon

CLYTEMNESTRA: Hephaestus, who sent the blazing light from Ida; then beacon after beacon's courier flame:
from Ida first, to Hermes' crag at Lemnos.
Third came the Athos summit, which belongs to Zeus: it, too, received the massive firebrand.
Ascending now to shoot across the sea's back, the journeying torch in all its power and joy
[...]†
The pine wood, like a second sun, conveyed the gold-gleam to the watchtower on Macistus.
Prompt and triumphant over feeblest sleep, unslacking in its task as courier, passing Euripus' streams, the beacon's light signaled far off to watchmen on Messapion.
They sent out light in turn, sent on the message, setting alight a rick of graying heather.
Potent against the dimming murk, the light went leaping high across Asopus' plain like the beaming moon, and at Cithaeron's scarp roused massive fire for still another relay.
The lookout there did not defy the light sent from far off; the new blaze shot up stronger.
The glow shot past the lake called Gorgon's Face; arriving at the mountain where the goats roam, it urged the fire-ordnance on [...] With all their strength, men raised a giant flame, beard-shaped, to overshoot and pass beyond the headland fronting the Saronic strait—so bright the blaze. Darting again, it reached Arachne's lookout peak, this city's neighbor; then it fell here, on the Atreides' mansion.
The light we see descends from Ida's fire. Torchbearers served me in this regimen, with every handoff perfectly performed.
The runners who came first and last both win.

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* The speech that follows describes seven stages of relay in the transmission of the fire beacons from Mount Ida, near Troy, to Argos. The distances of the stages range from about a hundred miles to less than fifteen. Some of the places named by Aeschylus cannot be identified with certainty.
† There is a short gap (known as a lacuna) in the manuscript text.
This is my proof, the pledge of what I tell you.
My husband passed the news to me from Troy.

CHORUS: Later, the gods will have my prayers of thanks.
Please, let me hear the story from the start,
clear through, and you will wear my wonder out.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Today—now—Troy belongs to the Achaeans.
I think the shouts don’t blend as they rise up.
Into one bowl pour vinegar and oil—
you’d say the two were factions and not friends.
So, in their separate fortunes, you would hear
two kinds of sounds, from conquering and conquered.
Some people sprawl on husbands’, brothers’ corpses,
or clutch the gray-haired dead—who in their lives
gave life to them. Already they have voices
of slaves to howl the end their loved ones found.
Others have worked all night in ranging battle.
Famished, they’re now arrayed to break their fast
on the town’s goods, without order, without warrant,
but merely as each man drew Fortune’s lot.
In the Trojan homes that they took prisoner
they live already. They’ve escaped the frost
and dew. Like favorites of the gods, they sleep
all night—there’s no more watch for them to keep.
If they respect the gods who keep the city,
the seized land’s gods, and holy habitations,
then victory won’t fight back against the victors.
But let no overreaching, plundering lust—
defeat by lucre—pitch into the army.
Homecoming is their rescue: they must round
the turning post and race back to the finish.
On course with gods, the army might return,
but if the torment of the dead should wake,
[...]

it may be, if no sudden evil strikes.
This is the woman’s news you have from me.
May the good rule—and no one see it stagger.
I choose to profit by these many blessings.

CHORUS: Woman, you show the sense of a discreet man.
And I, now that I’ve heard good evidence,
am ready to address the gods as due.
Their kindness now is worth my suffering!  
Zeus our king, and dear Night,  
with such great jewels in your possession!  
Onto Troy’s towers you threw a net not even water could slip through:  
no one grown, no one young rose up beyond  
that seine, huge and calamitous, of slavery.  
Zeus, great god of guests, I revere, who has done these things,  
from the start aiming his bow at Alexander;  
not short of the mark, and not beyond the stars  
would the arrow fall down useless.

strope 1
A blow of Zeus—they can cite that;  
this at least is traceable.  
He did as he decreed. It’s been said  
gods turn their backs on mortals  
who trample the blessing of things set apart—  
irreverent people.  
A curse has dawned for the descendants  
of the reckless  
who blast outrageous arrogance from their mouths  
when their homes luxuriate, turn lavish,  
run over the brim of what’s best. Leave me content—  
since this is safe—with my good understanding.  
There is no bulwark  
for the man wealth gluts—  
not when he’s kicked great Justice’s  
altar out of sight.

antistrophe 1
Now ruthless Persuasion storms in,  
the overpowering child of Ruin counseling ruin from the start;  
and every remedy is useless. She’s not hidden—  
she’s right there, bright, a grim light, a visitation.  
If bronze is shoddy, grinding or striking will  
discolor it. This is  
its punishment. A child  
will chase a flying bird.

* Alexander is another name for Paris.
† An uncertain restoration of a difficult stretch of text.
Aeschylus

A man like this will brand the city, break it.
No god will listen to his prayers.
Dealings like his must bring him down. He is the enemy of justice.
Paris' was like this, guest of
Atreus' sons; seizing the wife,
he shamed the welcoming table.

strope 2
She left her citizens the clanging
of shields, squadrons to muster, ships to rig out,
and brought a new kind of dowry to Ilium: its ruin.
She tripped through its gates,
daring what no one should dare. The palace prophets
groaned from their hearts in pronouncing:
"Pity the house, pity the house and the chieftains.
Pity the bed, still rumpled with her husband's love.
Look at him, silent, dishonored, but not berating,
Not entreating, after her desertion.
In his longing for the voyager over the sea,
like a ghost he'll rule the household.
Lovely the contours of statues,
charming—the man reviles them.
Before his helpless gaze, all
passion drains away.

antistrope 2
The images of mournful dreams
are there instead, mere alluring suppositions.
They're empty, naturally; whatever pleasant sights
he thinks he sees go free
from his grasp, are gone, never again
to be his winged attendants on the roads of sleep." These are the agonies in the house, at the hearth,
and agonies still beyond these.
And each of the mustered men who voyaged from Greece
has left on display at home a stoic wife,
who sets her face against mourning.
Plenty, plenty here to strike our hearts!

* See note to line 61.
How familiar were those men
everyone sent out. Now, instead of men,
jars of ashes come back
home by home.

strope 3

And Ares, money-changer of bodies,
is plying his scales in the battle’s clash.
From Ilium he sends
the families heavy gold-shavings,
the pyres’ leftovers soaked with bitter tears;
he neatly loads the crocks
full of men turned to ashes.
They say, as they grieve, that this one
was clever at fighting,
another fell splendidly
in the slaughter—
“For somebody else’s wife.”
Low-pitched, this is their snarl.
And rancorous grief steals into them
toward Atreus’ sons, the counsel in this case—
while there, around the wall,
the lovely fighters hold their conquests,
their tombs in Trojan soil.
The enemy land they seized
has hidden them.

antistrophe 3

A heavy anger strains the citizens’ talk.
He pays the debt of the curse they certified.
My brooding waits to hear
a thing the night roofs over—
since the gods aren’t careless
of those who kill and kill;
in time, the black Furies
throw darkness on the man whose luck
lacks justice. Then his life wears out
in another kind of luck.
There is no strength for him

*I do not see a serious enough problem in the text here to decline any reading or translation, as M. L. West does.*
among the dead beyond our sight.
Heavy, too, is the excess
of fame. Zeus sees it,
and lightning hits it.
I choose the wealth no one envies.
I wouldn't sack a city—
or be taken, either, and watch my life go on
under an alien power.

epode

The flame of good news gave the sign,
and through the city
the rumor sped—whether it's true,
who knows, or a falsehood sent from heaven?
Who's such a child, or so far off his head,
that he lets his heart light up
at the sudden, commanding message—
then suffers when it changes.
This is a woman in command, conceding
her thanks before she sees.
A woman's belief goes grazing over the boundaries,
quick on its way. But quick to die in turn
are facts made public by a woman crier.

CLYTEMNESTRA: We'll soon see, through the beacon-torches loaded
with light, the fire passing hand to hand.
Is their news real? Did their sweet brilliance come
for nothing but to cheat our understanding?
I see a herald from the shore, with bay twigs
shading his brow. Thirsty dust on his clothes
next door to mud, its kin, serves as my witness:
he won't be speechless, won't just raise a flame
from mountain wood. Bare smoke won't be the message.
Either he'll voice the grounds for more rejoicing—
the opposite is sickening to think of.
May what we hear confirm what looks so cheerful!
The man whose prayer is different for our city
should reap his heart's depravity himself.

HERALD: Joy to our father's soil, the Argive land!
This tenth year's daylight breaks as I return.
This one hope I've secured—the rest are shipwrecked.
I didn't ever boast that I would die
at home and have my tomb here—such a dear right.
But joy now to the land, and to the sun's light,
our local Zeus on high, and Pytho's lord,*
who's sending no more arrows out against us—
beside Scamander he was fierce enough.
Become again our savior and our healer,
ruler Apollo. And I call on you,
all the presiding gods, and my protector,
Hermes, sweet herald, whom all heralds worship;
and heroes who dispatched us, be propitious:
take back what enemy spears left of the army.
Hall of the kings, dear residence, their seats
of honor, and you gods who face the sun!
If long ago your bright eyes fittingly
greeted the king, greet him again at last.
To you lord Agamemnon comes and brings
a light in darkness—all these people share it.
Welcome him graciously, as this is right:
he tore Troy from the root with Zeus's harrow
of justice, and he worked the whole ground over.
Altars and settlements of gods have vanished;
all of that country's seed is dying out.
This yoke was put on Troy by Atreus' son,
the lord, our elder, favored fighter, now
arrived; no man alive deserves more honor,
since Paris and the city vouching for him
can’t boast of profit from their enterprise.
Tried for that theft and pillage, he's convicted,
his plunder forfeit. He has cut the house
of his fathers, and the ground below, to ruin.
Priam's sons guilty; double damages!

CHORUS: Herald from the Achaeans: joy!
HERALD: I have it! And the gods can have my life now.
CHORUS: Love for your native land here overcomes you?
HERALD: Yes, from the power of bliss, tears fill my eyes.

* Apollo.
CHORUS: The sickness that has hold of you is pleasant!
Herald: What? Teach me, and I'll master what you say.
CHORUS: The longing that afflicts you was returned.
Herald: The army and the land yearned for each other?
CHORUS: My spirit often groaned aloud in darkness.
Herald: What was the hateful gloom that weighed on you?
CHORUS: Silence has kept me healthy all this time.
Herald: Were certain persons threatening—with your lords gone?
CHORUS: So much, death seemed a privilege—as for you.
Herald: It's turned out well—though in the sweep of time
you'd say some things were lucky, while for others
you'd curse our luck. But who besides the gods
is free, his whole life long, from suffering?
The hardships that we had, the dismal housing
[...]"  
cramped gangways, scanty blankets—what was missing
from our daily rationed reasons to complain?
On dry land there was more, more hateful still.
Our beds were up against the hostile walls.
Out of the earth and sky, the meadow dew
dripped over us, kept ruining our clothes
and lodging tiny wildlife in our hair.
And what about bird-killing winter, made
an agony by snowfall off Mount Ida?
Or the hot season, when the sea slept waveless
and windless, fallen on its noontime bed?
But why mourn now? Our hardships all are bygones,
gone by for good. No longer would the dead,
given a chance, care to rise up again.
To us, the Argive soldiers still alive,
our profit triumphs; pain won't tip the scale.
Why must the living count those thrown away,
or agonize at others' festering luck?
Good riddance to bad fortune—that's what I think.
[...]  
to justify our bragging to this sun's light
as we come soaring over land and sea

* A lacuna; see note to line 288.
"In its day, the Argive force that came by sea
Took Troy and nailed this splendor of the ages,
Spoils for the gods, in all of Greece’s temples.”
Everyone hearing ought to praise the city
and the generals. Zeus’s favor, which has done this,
we’ll honor, too. That’s my report in full!

CHORUS: I now surrender freely to your words.
Old age that’s quick to learn is always young.
The home and Clytemnестra have the most right
to pay attention, but I share their riches.

CLYTEMNESTRA: I gave a shriek of joy sometime ago
when the first envoy came, the nighttime fire
declaring Troy was sacked and overthrown.
They sneered at me: “So it’s through beacon fires
that you’re convinced? Troy’s taken, in your view?
Just like a woman, carried clear away!”
That’s what they made me out to be: unhinged.
I sacrificed, no matter. Women’s custom
raised howls of happy omen everywhere
in the town—where the gods live, a lullaby
to the sweet-scented flame that gulps the offerings.
What can you tell me that’s more comprehensive?
From the king in person I’ll hear everything.
But let me, when my honored spouse returns,
take him in swiftly, graciously. What day
is sweeter for a wife to see than this one?
Her husband’s back from war, saved by a god,
and she unbars the gate. Relay him this:
the city’s sweetheart needs to hurry here;
he’ll find a steadfast woman in the house,
just as he left her, like a household dog,
good to her man, at war with any malice—
his match in everything, who broke no seal
in all this time, knew pleasure from no man
or spoke with one—not so that you could blame me.
I might as well know how to temper bronze.

* Text very uncertain.
This is my boast to you, which swells with truth.
A lady has no shame in saying this.

CHORUS: (to Herald) So that's her speech, and if plain-spoken people interpret it for you, it's plausible.
But Herald, let me know of Menelaus.
Did he survive, has he come home again with you? The man's a power this land holds dear.

HERALD: How could I sow a pretty speech with lies?
My friends would harvest them long in the future.

CHORUS: I wish a truth we cherished hit the mark.

Clearly, the "truth" and "cherished" are divided.

HERALD: The man is gone from the Achaeans, his ship along with him. That's not a lie.

CHORUS: But did he sail from Ilium in plain sight?
Or did a storm weigh down the fleet and take him?

HERALD: An archer in peak form! You've hit the target.
That's our long suffering expressed succinctly.

CHORUS: But was he dead or living in the rumors you heard from other people who were sailing?

HERALD: Nobody has a clear report to bring;
but the Sun, who nurtures earthly life, must know.

CHORUS: Tell us, how did the storm of heaven's anger attack the fleet? Tell us, clear to the end.

HERALD: This blessed day is not for dismal news to dirty. The gods' honor must be spared!
When a grim-faced messenger reports an army toppled, pain that defies the city's prayers,
a common wound that strikes the commonwealth,
cursed men in thousands banished from their homes by Ares' cherished double whip, two spear-points of calamity, a yoke of blood-stained horses—
the man who's frightened with this agony properly hymns the Furies in his speech.
But when I bring the news of danger past to a city reveling in its salvation,
how could I blend the good with evil, saying a storm, full of the gods' rage, struck the Greeks?
Two former enemies, fire and the sea,
plotted together, pledging their good faith
through the ruin of wretched Argive fleet.
Catastrophe rose from the nighttime waves.
Gales blasting out of Thrace hurled the ships
together, forcing them to gore each other
in a blind surge of whirlwind, loud with rain.
A circling, careless shepherd let them vanish.
But when the dazzling sun's light rose, we saw
Aegean waters blossoming with corpses
of Achaean manhood and their splintered ships.
Our hull was not corrupted. Some god stole us
and our ship away, or somehow begged us off—
no human hand was on the tiller handle.
Fortune, our kind deliverer, sat there.
We had no waves, no squall, where we found refuge;
we didn't run ashore on jagged boulders.
Once we escaped this hell that was the sea,
then in white day, dazed by our own good luck,
we found new grief and worry in our flock:
our fleet was in a bad way, from its pounding.
If breath remains in any of those men,
they count us with the dead—of course they would.
And we assume that's how it went with them.
I hope it's for the best! But Menelaus
will come—you must expect him, absolutely.
Well—if some ray of sun discovers him
alive and well—as Zeus devised, unwilling
to bring that lineage to annihilation—
there is some hope that he'll come home again.
You can be sure these words you've heard are true.

(The Herald exits)

CHORUS: Who named her so very aptly?
Was it some invisible being
seeing the future, who directed

* I have kept these three lines in their original order, though West adopts the order 656, 655, 657.
† Text of the line is very doubtful.
‡ It is rare in Greek drama for a character to remain onstage alone during a choral ode, but Clytemnestra seems to do so here, unless she exits and reenters as the ode concludes.
language that whirred to the mark,
calling her Helen—for Hell? She's the one
they fought for, the one the spear courted. How fitting:
ships destroyed, men destroyed, city destroyed when she sailed out from among her dainty curtains,
on the breath of a monstrous zephyr;
and a mass of fighters, hunters carrying shields
hot on the disappearing trail of her oar-blades,
put in at Simois' verdant headland.
Wet with blood, Strife had brought them there.

antistrophe 1
That was the right word, too—"marriage" for "mar"—
for the way Anger drove home her will to Ilium in the time that followed.
For the dishonor to the host's table,
to Zeus Hearth-Share, she levied the price
from the raucous singers
who paid the bride honor with the wedding song,
the hymn her new in-laws
found themselves chanting.
Now I suppose Priam's white-haired city
has learned a new tune, and it wails in mourning, groans,
calling on Paris the Bedder of Ruin.
Ransacked, howling in grief, the citizens must live on,
enduring a pitiful slaughter.

strophe 2
The offspring of a lion was nurtured
in a man's house, simply taken
from the teats and milk it loved.
In the opening strains of life it was tame, and a darling to children,
and to the old people delightful.
Time after time in his arms he held it—it was like a child at the breast;
its eyes gleamed as it licked his hand
so humbly—that's the way its belly drove it.

antistrophe 2
Then time worked on it, and it showed
what its parents had been. It gave
those who had brought it up
the thanks of carnage and ruin in their flocks:
to the feast it prepared no one was invited,
and the home was polluted with blood.
Helpless, the pain for the household,
a slaughtering curse in its power.
Through a god's will, the new child reared
in the house was Disaster's priest himself.

strophe 3
I think a spirit of windless calm arrived
in Ilium at the start—
jewel of wealth, soothing bad omens,
arrows shot soft from the eyes,
flower of love that gnawed at the heart.
Then she swerved off, then she made the marriage
bitter in its fulfillment.
What a sad house where she stayed, where she kept company.
There swept to Priam's sons
a Fury,* a bride who brought weeping,
under the escort of Zeus the guest-god.

antistrophe 3
This saying, now grown old, has lived among mortals forever:
When a man's great prosperity has reached its prime,
it will be fertile, it will not die childless.
Out of good fortune the shoot
rising is ravenous misery.
On my own here, apart, I think my own thoughts;
since an unholy act
gives birth to more in their turn,
and they have the look of their lineage.
But the destiny of houses true to justice
is a child of beauty, always.

strophe 4
An ancient arrogance begets its own
to grow in mortal misery; sooner or later
when the time comes that is ordained,

* The Furies or Erinyes are ancient, terrifying goddesses charged with certain kinds of punishment and
vengeance. Furies make up the Chorus of the third play in the Oresteia trilogy.
this fresh rancor is born,
this spirit enduring all battles, all wars,
unholy insolence full of
Black Ruin for the palace—
the image of its parents.

antistrophe 4
In houses dim with cooking smoke, Justice shines,
honoring the life
of righteousness. Precincts that filthy hands have hung
with cloth of gold, she turns from
in disgust and moves along to holy places.
She doesn't honor money when its
power counterfeits praise.
No, she guides all things to their fitting end.

(Agamemnon enters on foot and slowly moves forward;
Cassandra, dressed as a priestess of Apollo, is brought into sight
on a chariot but remains silent and impassive throughout the
following scene.)

CHORUS: Tell me, my king, sacker of Troy, Atreus' offspring,
how shall I speak to you, how shall I revere you—
not falling short of your favor, not going beyond it.
Much of mankind gives first honor to what
only appears to be—but this trespasses on justice.
Everyone's ready to groan along with misery.
But the teeth of the pain don't sink into their own hearts.
Oh, they tune their features perfectly to joy,
forcing a smile onto their dreary faces
[...]
Whoever, though, knows his flock well
can't be deceived by the eyes of a man
whose purpose is specious, who fawns,
though his affection's thin as water.
Well—in my eyes, when you sent your expedition
for Helen's sake—no, I won't hide it from you—
you hardly were acting a part that invited applause;
there was no skill in your hand as it steered your spirit.
[...] the willing courage
you tended for your men, even as they were dying.
Now, though, it's not at my mind's, not at arms' length
that I smile at you [...] hardship to those who have reached a good ending.
In time you'll make your inquiries, and then you'll know
which of us citizens tending your city like a house
were just, and which ones were—unwarranted.

AGAMEMNON: Argos and this land's gods, accessories

in my return, and in my punishment
of Priam's city, must be first accosted.
In the gods' court, the case stood on the facts.
Every vote went one way, into the blood-urn,
and told me, Kill the men and sack the city.
There were no chits to fill up the opposing
jar, and the Hope attending it was helpless.
The city's still conspicuous—from smoke.
The cyclones of destruction live, while ashes
in their sad dying breathe wealth's oily fragrance.

For this we owe the gods our thanks, recalling
our vengeance on the riotousness of rape.
For a woman's sake, the sharp-toothed Argive beast
nesting inside the horse, the shield-slung army,
roused itself, sprang, and smashed the town to dust
around the time the Pleiades set. A lion
in its raw hunger bounded past the tower
and licked up all the tyrant blood it wanted.

It is the gods my long preamble serves.

(to the Chorus) I've heard and bear in mind your thoughts as well;
I voice the same concerns, I take your case,
since few men have it in them to respect—
and not resent—one of their own who's lucky.

Malice lodged in the heart is a disease,
a blight that doubles pain in the infected:
they feel the weight of their own misery
and groan to see prosperity in others.
I know of what I speak, from long experience:

* A series of lacunae; see note to line 288.
† The so-called Trojan horse was used to sneak Greek soldiers inside the walls of Troy.
people are just a mirror. Those who’ve seemed kindest were phantoms’ shadows in the end—except Odysseus: he was forced to sail,
but yoked beside my traces, he proved willing; for that I give him—dead or living—credit.
Well, as to matters civic and religious,
we’ll have our formal national assembly
and set our policy. What’s going well
must hold, and we’ll see how—as policy;
but as for what requires the healing arts—cutting or cauterizing for its own good—we’ll try to drive back that disease’s pain.
Now that I’m at my hall, my hearth and home,
I’ll give the gods my hand in greeting first:
they brought me back from that far place they sent me.
May Victory—which did follow me—stand steady!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Gentlemen, citizens, honored Argive elders,
I’m not ashamed to tell you how attached
to a man I am, by nature. People’s fear
withers with time. It’s not from second hand
that I report a miserable life
endured the whole time this one was in Ilium.
It is a fearsome thing, first, that a wife
sits at home desolate, without her husband,
malignant noises rising all around her.
Messengers, screeching evil for her household,
keep coming, each with worse news than the last.
I must say, if my man caught all the wounds
news of which kept on sluicing to this house,
a net would have as many holes to count;
and if his deaths had tallied with the stories,
he’d be a second Geryon,* three-bodied,
boasting a cloak of earth allotted three times—thick above, and beneath him, just imagine—when all three versions of his body perished.
Time and again, after such awful rumors,

---

* Geryon was a giant, usually described as three-headed, whom Hercules killed in the course of his twelve labors.
they seized me forcibly and from my neck
wrenched the noose I had fastened to a roof-beam.
And so our son, that forceful guarantee
of our mutual bond, does not stand here beside me.
I know Orestes should, but don't be startled.
Your ally, Strophius of Phocis, meant well
in fostering the boy, as he foresaw
harm—and both places muttered it: for you
in Ilium; here, lawless civil uproar,
the council overthrown—it's in the blood
of humankind to kick at someone fallen.
Certainly, my excuse is hiding nothing.
Oh, but the roaring fountain of my sobbing
has been extinguished—not one drop remains.
My eyes are bad, so late at night I lay
weeping for you and piles of brush deprived always
of beacon fires. From my flimsy dreams
I used to startle wide awake at gnats' wings
in their shrilling onrush. I saw more disasters
for you than my companion, sleep, had time for.
I have endured all this; empty of grief now
I can address my man: the sheepfold's guard-dog,
strong rope that holds the mast, the stalwart pillar
of the high roof, a father's only child,
land to the eyes of sailors past all hope,
the glorious daylight following a storm,
a spring's gush for a thirsty traveler.
So pleasant is escaping all compulsion!
I think you worthy of such salutations—
and banish envy: all that we have suffered
already warrants this. Come on now, darling,
step from your vehicle—but keep your feet
from the ground, great ravager of Ilium.
Maids, hurry! Carry your commission out:
cover the earth he'll walk on with these fabrics;
spread purple on his passage—now! And Justice
will lead him to the home he scarcely hoped for.
As for the rest, let prudence, undefeated
by sleep, settle it justly, with the gods' help.
AGAMEMNON: Offspring of Leda, left to guard my house:
The speech you've given suits my absence well,
since both were quite extended. Proper praise
is a tribute other people ought to give.
Furthermore, don't indulge me—that's just like
a woman. I am no barbarian
for you to gape and squeal at as you grovel—
and don't spread clothing in my path to lead me
to resentment. Only gods should reap these honors,
and I'm a mortal—I'd be terrified
in setting foot on these embroidered splendors.
Revere me merely as a man, I tell you.
Word of me rises and resounds without
foot-wiping tapestries. Lack of presumption
is a god's greatest gift. Call a man happy
who ends his life in sweet prosperity.
If everything were like that, I'd be fearless.

CLYTEMNESTRA: But tell me this—and give me your sincere view.
AGAMEMNON: Count on it: I won't throw my view away.
CLYTEMNESTRA: Would you have vowed to do this, out of fear?
AGAMEMNON: Yes, as a rite an expert had prescribed.
CLYTEMNESTRA: Think: what would Priam, as the victor, do?
AGAMEMNON: Step on embroidery, I really think.
CLYTEMNESTRA: Don't be concerned, then, when the people blame you.
AGAMEMNON: But there's great power in the citizens' voice.
CLYTEMNESTRA: To be unenvied is—unenviable.
AGAMEMNON: Surely a woman shouldn't long for battle.
CLYTEMNESTRA: It's gracious for the fortunate to lose.
AGAMEMNON: You'd really value victory in this clash?
CLYTEMNESTRA: Listen and give in freely, and you win.
AGAMEMNON: If that's your judgment—someone, quick, untie
these boots, the slaves beneath my feet. As I
set foot on heaven's property, these dyed works,
I hope no envious gaze strikes from a distance.
I feel great shame in trampling on my household,
wrecking its wealth, these weavings silver bought us.
Well, be that as it may.
(indicates Cassandra) Bring in this stranger
with kindness. From far off a god's gaze falls
propitiously on gentle use of power.
No one would volunteer for slavery's yoke;
and she's the pick, the flower of great possessions,
my present from the army, as it happened.
I am subdued, however; as you order,
I step into my halls on purple cloth.

(He steps down onto the tapestries.)

CLYTEMNESTRA: There is a sea—who'll scorch it dry?—that feeds
a giant ooze of dye, renewed forever,*
for purple clothing worth its weight in silver.
By the gods' grace, this is on hand, my lord.
Our household isn't trained in poverty.
I would have vowed to trample endless clothing
if orders came from any oracle's seat,
and I could pay for this lost life's return.
If the root lives, the house will come to leaf,
a Shadow stretch to shield us from the Dog Star.t
Back to the hearthside of your residence
you've come; your coming signals warmth in winter;
and Zeus is crafting wine from bitter grapes,
the halls already have grown cool whenever
the man of consequence walks through his home.

(Agamemnon reaches the end of the purple walkway and exits
into the palace.)

Zeus, Zeus, Fulfiller, come fulfill my prayers,
look after all these things you mean to do.

strophe

CHORUS: Tell me, why is this terror
fixed in its hovering
here, before my prophetic heart, like a guard at a gate?
Nobody called for, nobody paid for this song of divination.
The boldness I would need to shove it away (like dreams that baffle me)
is overthrown—it has lost my mind's kingdom.

* Clytemnestra refers obliquely to the murex snail, a marine creature that was crushed to produce the purple dye that colored royal robes.
† Sirius, the Dog Star, rose during the hottest, unhealthiest time of year.
Old age has come to the moment the ropes
were tossed to the sandy shore
when the voyaging army
set off for Ilium.

antistrophe 1

I am the witness myself; my own eyes
take in his homecoming;
yet my heart learns on its own, here inside me,
a song that no lyre can play to: the dirge
of a Fury. The whole of my darling
courage is gone.
Instincts couldn’t be gibberish.
Close to my righteous mind, my heart
wheels in the whirlpools that bring these things’ fulfillment.
Still I pray: may what I forecast
turn out untrue, may it not come to pass.

strophe 2

Flourishing vigor gorges
full on itself, <it strains>
[...] at the limits. But sickness
is living next door and pushes the shared
wall between them outward.
Though a man’s fate holds a straight
course [...] <still he might>! strike on the hidden, sunken rock.
Dread may throw part
of his profit overboard to save the rest,
sling it out in prudence—
then his whole house will not sink,
stashed full of overfullness;
the sea will not take his small boat.
Thick grows and wide spreads Zeus’ gift, his cure,
from each year’s furrows,
killing the plague of famine.†

* Text uncertain.
† I have supplied the words “it strains” and “still he might” as an attempt to fill in part of a gap in the manuscripts.
‡ The text of this stasimon is uncertain. It contains a phrase at the beginning that the editor has despaired of emending, and several lacunae (see note to line 288), of which I have marked only those not plausibly filled in.
But once the black life-blood strikes
the ground in front of a man,
how can anyone's spells
call it back to the body again?
Even the one with the mastery
to bring the dead up from Hades
did not win Zeus' assent. He was not spared. *
Gods deploy one fate to cut off
another—if not for that
I would pour out what I know—my heart would run
out of my tongue's control—
not mutter in the dark,
dismally, without hope of winding the skein
clear to the end at the moment of the crisis—
but my mind leaps in a blaze.

Clytemnestra: Come, get yourself inside—that's you, Cassandra.
Zeus makes you share our household rites—but not
to punish you. You'll stand with many slaves
by the altar where he's Guardian of Goods.
Get off your vehicle—don't be too proud.
They say Alcmene's child once went for sale
and had to tolerate the bread of slavery.†
At any rate, though you've no choice in this,
there's comfort in your owners' ancient wealth.
Those who've reaped richly, when they never hoped to,
are cruel to slaves [...] strictly by the book.
I've told you—so you know—how things are done here.

Chorus: (to Cassandra) She's finished, and she gave you clear instructions.
Here you are, tangled in the net of fate.
You might, perhaps, obey her. Or you might not.

Clytemnestra: Unless there's nothing in her head except
a strange barbarian language like a swallow's,
the things I say to urge her should make sense.

* Apollo's son Asclepius was killed by Zeus for using his medicinal skill to bring the dead to life.
† Heracles, son of Zeus and Alcmene, had to live as a slave for a time.
CHORUS: (to Cassandra) Follow her. Your best choice is as she orders. Obey and leave your seat there in the carriage.

CLYTEMNESTRA: I don’t have time to waste with her outdoors. Already, cattle stand beside the hearth for slaughter in our house’s central shrine,[...]
though we had lost all hope of such a blessing.
You! Hurry, if you’re planning to oblige me. You’re feeble-minded? You don’t understand? Wave your outlandish hand, if you won’t speak!

CHORUS: The foreigner must need someone to translate clearly. She’s like a newly captured wild thing.

CLYTEMNESTRA: She’s listening to her own demented thoughts; coming here from her freshly captured city, she doesn’t know enough to take the bit until her strength bleeds from her foaming mouth. I won’t waste further words on her contempt.

(CLytemnestra exits into the palace)

CHORUS: I only pity her; I’m not provoked. Come on, poor thing, and leave the cart behind you. Give in, since there’s no choice. Try on your new yoke.

strophe 1

CASSANDRA: (wails in grief and horror): Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS: Why raise this wailing in the name of Loxias? What has he ever had to do with mourning?

antistrophe 1

CASSANDRA: (wails) Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS: Again, it’s him she calls on—a bad omen: for those in grief, he’s not the proper helper.

strophe 2

CASSANDRA: Apollo, Apollo! God of the Highway—leading to my death—destroying me once more—destroying me merely in passing.

CHORUS: Foresight about her own poor life is coming. Though she’s a slave, the holy power remains.

* Cassandra’s relationship to Apollo is a complicated one. Apollo conceived a passionate desire for Cassandra, a princess of Troy, and granted her the gift of prophecy. Cassandra accepted the god’s advances but then, for some reason, pulled away at the last minute (see lines 1192–12 below). Apollo did not revoke his gift, but he added a codicil that Cassandra’s prophecies would not be understood or believed.
antistrophe 2

CASSANDRA: Apollo, Apollo!
God of the Highway—leading to my death—
Where have you brought me, who does this house belong to?

CHORUS: The sons of Atreus. Don’t you understand?
Take it from me, then, and rely on it.

strophe 3

CASSANDRA: (shrieking) A house that hates the gods, a house in
on the wicked murder of its own, of itself, a house full of nooses;
a butchery men are driven into, to spatter its floor with their blood.'

CHORUS: The stranger’s got a good nose, like a hound’s.
She’s on the track of victims—and she’ll find them.

antistrophe 3

CASSANDRA: That’s right, and here are the witnesses I trust:
the babies wailing over the sacrifice,
and the roasted meat on which their father was fed.†

CHORUS: We’ve heard about your gift. But we’re not looking
for anyone to explicate the gods’ will.

strophe 4

CASSANDRA: Horrible! What is she plotting?
What’s this fresh suffering? Terrible,
terrible, the evil schemed in the house,
beyond its friends’ endurance, beyond healing, while help
stands to the side, far off.

CHORUS: These later prophecies are quite beyond me;
I know the rest, though; this whole city shouts them.

antistrophe 4

CASSANDRA: Monster, will you see it through?
This is your spouse, your mate you hedded with.
You wash him bright in the bath—and how can I speak of the
ending?
It rushes ahead. She stretches out one hand
and then the other, reaching.

CHORUS: I still don’t understand. These oracles
riddle, they cloud my eyes and leave me helpless.

* The text in the second half of both these lines is very doubtful.
† An oblique reference to the so-called banquet of Thyestes. Atreus, father of Agamemnon, in an effort
to neutralize a perceived threat from his brother Thyestes, fed him a disguised meal of his own children’s
flesh. The savage crime took place in the same palace that Cassandra now stands before.
CASSANDRA: (a prolonged shriek) What's this in front of my eyes now? Is it a hunting net out of the Underworld? Yes, but a mantrap, too, that sleeps with him, helps plot his murder. Let the mob endlessly gorging on this clan raise a shriek over the sacrifice—on which stones will fall in their turn.

CHORUS: Who is this Fury you summon to howl over the house? This hardly leaves me cheerful! All the blood runs to my heart, I am left the color of men who have fallen in battle and lie in the rays of their life as it sets; blood drips to its finish that same moment—then, swiftly, ruin.

CASSANDRA: (shrieks) Look at this! Look! Keep the bull away from the heifer! She's caught him in her dress, her engine, on her black horn, striking. Into the basin he falls, where the water lies. He met his death in the bath, it lay in wait for him, I tell you.

CHORUS: Well, I can't boast perfect skill in making sense of oracles—but evidently something's wrong here. What's the good news from prophecy that ever came to humankind? Evil alone supplies the profession that wordily chants the gods' will, that brings us terror.

CASSANDRA: My torment! My torment, my calamity, this life! It's my own pain I'm now keening, new poured onto the old. Where do you bring me in my anguish today? What is it for, but death along with his?

CHORUS: You're out of your mind, I think—a god has seized it. You wail for yourself in a song without music like the trilling, the insatiable crying from the poor, heart-piercing heart, the means of “Itys, Itys!” as the nightingale chants a life overgrown with suffering.*

* There are several versions of this myth, but in the one Aeschylus probably alludes to, Queen Procne of Thrace, after her transformation into a nightingale, laments her son Itys, whom she herself has killed as revenge against her husband, Tereus, for the rape of her sister Philomela.
antistrophe 6

CASSANDRA: Out of my reach, the shrill nightingale's destiny!
The gods enclosed her in a body with wings,
and then her life was sweet—there were no tears.
But for me, the wide, the cleaving spearhead waits.

CHORUS: Who sent you these surges of inspired anguish—
that are useless?
With an unspeakable scream you beat
fear's time, in a rending melody.
Who marked out your prophetic road
with these evil words?

strophe 7

CASSANDRA: I mourn the marriage, Paris' marriage
that doomed his own people—
and Scamander, the river my fatherland drank from.
On your waterside—to my grief—I was raised
and came to womanhood.
On the banks of Acheron, by Cocyrus,
soon now, I think, I'll chant my second sight.

CHORUS: Why have you given us this prophecy? Yes, it's clear—
a newborn who heard it would understand.
Like a bloody bite your miserable fate
strikes me—you shriek it, whimper it;
it crushes me to listen.

antistrophe 7

CASSANDRA: The suffering, the suffering of my city
in its annihilation!
My father's sacrifices at the citadel's gates,
the massacre of cattle from the field—the remedy wasn't
half strong enough to spare
Troy its allotted agony; and I,
my mind on fire, fall to steadfast Death.

CHORUS: Now you're retracing your oracles.
Some power fills your mind with its spite
bearing you down, crushing you,
setting you tunes of wailing, death-freighted torment—
out of my hands, the ending.

CASSANDRA: I'll prophesy no longer like a new bride
timidly peering out beneath her veil;
my words will be a clear, bright wind, assailing
the rising sun, surging against the rays
like a wave, which carries suffering far greater
than mine. It isn’t riddles now that reach you.
You run with me, a witness as I track,
like a hound, the crimes committed long before.
A troupe of singers squats beneath this roof,
voices in jarring and ill-omened concert.
The human blood they’ve drunk has made their gall
stronger, for endless riot in the house.
You can’t dislodge these Furies, who are family.
Blockaders of the halls, they sing in praise
of primal Ruin, and they take turns spitting
on a brother’s bed and loathe the bed’s defiler.
Do I strike it like an archer? Am I wrong—
babbling, panhandling prophet of what can’t be?
First swear an oath, then certify my knowledge
of this household’s crimes, told in the ancient story!

CHORUS: How could an oath, though fixed in our pure hearts,
be healing? You amaze me, though: brought up
across the sea, you’ve struck this foreign city
straight on the mark as if you were a witness.

CASSANDRA: The seer Apollo placed me in this office.

CHORUS: Though he’s a god, his longing made him helpless?

CASSANDRA: I was ashamed to tell you this before.

CHORUS: That was conceit; it comes with doing well.

CASSANDRA: The wrestler breathed his heady grace on me.

CHORUS: It came—as usual—to what makes children?

CASSANDRA: No, I gave in, but then tricked Loxias.

CHORUS: The holy art had captured you already?

CASSANDRA: I was foretelling all my people’s anguish.

CHORUS: How could you be immune from his revenge?

CASSANDRA: Once I’d offended him, no one believed me.

CHORUS: We find, though, that we trust your prophecies.

CASSANDRA: No, no, the torment!

Once more, the hideous pain of a true seer
whirls me to chaos <with another> prelude.
You see these creatures seated near the house
in their first years, like forms inside a dream?
The children—as if enemies had killed them—

have filled their hands with food from their own bodies,
pathetic weight of guts, the heavy entrails—
yes, I see clearly what their father tasted.
I tell you, someone plans the punishment.

A feeble lion, rolling in the bed,
guards the house—no! no!—from its master's coming—
<my master: it's a slave's yoke that I carry;>†
the ships' premier and Ilium's destroyer
will meet misfortune, ruin skulking here.

Not seen for what she is, the hateful bitch
licks his hand, cheery ears prick—till she bites:
as bold as that, a female who can murder
a male! What name would strike the traitorous monster
on target? She's a viper, she's a Scylla
housed on the cliffs to lash at ships, possessed
Mother of Hades, breathing war—with no truce—
on her own family. Oh, her endless daring!
Her triumph-screech, as when a battle turns,
was like rejoicing at his safe return!
Believe or don't believe me—it's no use,
since what will come, will come. Right here, right now,
you'll say—in pity—I'm too true a prophet.

CHORUS: Thyestes' banquet of his children's flesh
I recognize, and horror seizes me:
I hear the truth, not some mere picture of it.
And yet the rest—I'm running off the scent.

CASSANDRA: I tell you, you'll see Agamemnon's death.

CHORUS: Poor thing! Now sing your reckless mouth to sleep.

CASSANDRA: The Healer's† not presiding over these words.

CHORUS: If they're fulfilled, then no—but may they not be!

CASSANDRA: You're praying, but they're busy with their killing.

CHORUS: But who's the man contriving this destruction?

CASSANDRA: My oracles have made a fool of you.

CHORUS: But I don't see what scheme will see it through.

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* Another impressionistic vision of the banquet of Thyestes (see note to line 1097), described more explicitly below.
† The line in angle brackets was probably not written by Aeschylus but inserted later.
‡ Apollo.
CASSANDRA: I speak your language better than I'd like to.
CHORUS: As Pytho \( ^* \) does: its oracles are murky!
CASSANDRA: Oh! Such a fire is sweeping over me!
   I'm finished, finished, Lycian Apollo!
   A lioness with two feet made her bed here
   with a wolf—the noble lion was away.
   She'll kill me—I'll be helpless; there's a payback
   for me she pours in as she cooks her poison.
   For a man she's sharpening her sword but boasting
   lethal revenge on me for being brought here.
   Why do I keep these jokes about myself,
   the staff, the seer's ribbons on my neck?
   I'll put an end to you before my own.

(Throws the accouterments to the ground and stamps on them.)

Go to your ruin—where you fall I'll follow.
   Somebody else can have your rich destruction.
Look, it's Apollo in the flesh who strips
   my prophet's outfit. He was overseer
   as I was laughed at—even in this finery!—
   by hostile friends, so stubbornly and wrongly:
   [...] I was a crazy vagabond, in their words,\( ^t \)
     poor beggar, starving, half-dead—and I took it.
The prophet's now unmade the prophetess,
   dispatched me to this deadly destiny.
   No father's altar waits there, but a block—
     scarlet and warm when I'm the sacrifice.
And yet the gods will send our deaths reprisal.
   Someone will come, with vengeance in its turn,
     and kill his mother, vindicate his father.
     Banished, estranged, a wandering refugee
     come home will round out ruin for his family,
     his father's sprawling corpse will bring him back.

   Why do I keen this stricken, lost lament?
   At the start, I saw the Trojan city going

\( ^* \) The oracle of Apollo at Delphi.
\( ^t \) I prefer the original manuscript reading over the conjecture adopted in West's text, which depicts
Cassandra as reduced to actual physical misery.
the way it went, but now the gods have judged
its sackers, and the end they have is this.
I'll go and take this hard death in my hands.
<There is a great oath that the gods have sworn.>
Now I address the gates of hell themselves
and pray that this blow hits me where it should,
making my blood spurt out without a struggle,
so that an easy death will close my eyes.

CHORUS: Woman, your pain is great; so is your wisdom.
You've spoken at some length. But with your own death
clearly in mind, how can you step so bravely
to the altar, like an ox the god is driving?

CASSANDRA: I can't evade it any longer, strangers.
CHORUS: Yet life's last hour sits in the place of honor.
CASSANDRA: The day's come. I could run; it wouldn't help.
CHORUS: Your courage makes you steadfast—you must know that.
CASSANDRA: Compare that to what lucky people hear!
CHORUS: A famous death's a privilege for us mortals.
CASSANDRA: Poor father—you and your pure-blooded children!
I'll go into the halls and keen my fate
and Agamemnon's. But life's long enough.
Oh—strangers!

CHORUS: What is it? Why this turning back in terror?
CASSANDRA: No, no!
CHORUS: Why "No"? What's this repulsion in your mind?
CASSANDRA: The palace reeks of dripping blood and murder.
CHORUS: What? That's the smell of offerings at the hearth.
CASSANDRA: No, it's the stench of tombs—I can't mistake it—
CHORUS: No Syrian incense in the house, you're saying ...
CASSANDRA: I'm not a bird, who panics at the breeze
in empty scrub. Testify to my death's words
when a woman dies to pay for me, a woman,
and a man for one who's married to betrayal:
so, as your guest, in death I call on you.

CHORUS: I pity your sad fate, decreed by heaven.
CASSANDRA: Once more I want to make a speech, or sing
my own dirge. To the sun of this last day

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* I am following the original manuscript reading instead of West's conjecture.
I pray that the avengers of my master
exact my murder's price in this same way,
although a slave's death caused so little trouble.
Poor mortal life! Even when greatly blessed,
it scurries when a shadow falls. Bad fortune's
a dripping sponge slapping away what's written.
More than myself, by far, I pity them."

CHORUS: Nobody mortal can eat himself too full of life's good things;
no one will keep them out, bar them from halls people point at in awe.
"Never again will you enter" will not be pronounced.
This man has sacked Priam's city, by the blessed gods' decree,
and the gods honor him as he comes home.
If he will now pay with blood of the bygone,
if for his own dead he dies, which will bring
the retribution for still other deaths—
who among mortals, hearing about it, would boast
of having been born with a fate that cannot be broken?

AGAMEMNON: (heard from offstage, inside the palace)
No! I've been hit! The wound is deep and deadly ...  

CHORUS: Quiet! Who's shouting? What's this deadly wound?
AGAMEMNON: No! Stop! Again—a second blow has landed ...  

AN INDIVIDUAL IN THE CHORUS: I think it's done—that's why the king is wailing.

We must discuss what measures might be safe.
ANOTHER: Listen to me—here's what I recommend:
call out a rescue force of citizens.
ANOTHER: We ought to break in right away—that's my view—
and seize the proof, the sword that drips fresh blood.
ANOTHER: I'm for a policy along those lines:
  I vote for action. Now's no time for dawdling.
ANOTHER: The truth is here to see: this is the prelude
  that signals despotism for the city.
ANOTHER: They're wide awake, they strike while we waste time.
  They're trampling the regard we had for waiting.
ANOTHER: I'm lost: I can't arrive at a suggestion.
The one who does a thing should also plan it.

* A tentative translation of an unclear line, in which the pronoun ("them") has no clear referent.
ANOTHER: I'm just as lost as you. There is no way to make a speech that resurrects the dead.

ANOTHER: How could we even stand to live, condoning leadership that defiles the royal house?

ANOTHER: No, it's unbearable, and death is better, a gentler destiny than tyranny.

ANOTHER: In point of fact, taking those groans as proof, can we divine the gentleman is dead?

ANOTHER: Clear knowledge must precede deliberation, since guessing is a thing distinct from knowing.

ANOTHER: Here I have broad majority support: we should make sure how Atreus' son is doing.

(The palace doors open and Clytemnestra is revealed, standing over two bloody corpses)

CLYTEMNESTRA: Though all I said before was right for then, I'm not ashamed to state the opposite. How else would someone, paying evil back to those disguised as friends, raise suffering's net around them to a height they can't leap over? I gave my full attention to this struggle from far back. Victory came, though that took time. Right where I struck, I stand, on my achievement. I acted—I'm not going to deny it—to trap him so he couldn't fight off death. As if he were a school of fish, I cast a rich robe in inextricable circles. Twice I strike, and a double groan announces his legs' collapse. He's fallen, but I add a third, an extra blow, thank-offering to Zeus below ground, savior of cadavers. He falls, convulsively gasps out his soul, and spouts a headlong slaughter-gush of blood, striking me with dark-scarlet showers of dew, and I rejoice, as in wet, quickened sowings

* This entangling robe will be displayed onstage in the Libation Bearers and spoken of, in horror, in the Eumenides. Just how it immobilized Agamemnon is unclear.

† "Zeus below ground" is Hades, lord of the Underworld. Clytemnestra here perverts the Greek ritual by which someone drinking wine would pour three libations, the third in honor of "Zeus the Savior." Here the "libations" are knife thrusts, and the third goes to Hades the Savior—of corpses.
of Zeus's grace, when buds emerge from labor.
If a libation for a corpse is proper
and right—and more than right—then this is it.
He filled this cup of curses for the house,
and drank it up himself when he returned.
So there you have it, honored Argive elders.
Be glad, or don't—but triumph fills my heart.

CHORUS: We've stunned at this defiance in your mouth,
this bragging speech above your husband's body.

CLYTEMNESTRA: You think you're prodding at a female moron,
but I don't shake inside, addressing those
who understand. And you can praise or blame me—
it doesn't matter. This is Agamemnon,
my husband. He's a corpse now. My right hand,
an honest builder, made this. Here we are.

strope

CHORUS: Woman, what evil thing—
   eatable, drinkable—that the ground or the flowing
   sea nourishes—passed through your lips?
You've burned this sacrifice, earned the town's clamorous curses;
you have cast us off, you have cut us off, you are exiled from the
city;
   to the citizens, you are abomination.

CLYTEMNESTRA: So now you sentence me to banishment,
allot me harred, rumbling civic curses.
Back then you offered him no opposition
when he, as casual as at one death
among the crowding and luxuriant flocks,
sacrificed his own child, my dearest birth-pangs,
to conjure up some blasts of air from Thrace.
Wasn't it that polluted criminal
you should have driven out? You hear what I've done,
   and you're a savage judge. But pay attention:
threaten away, and know that I'm prepared
to let the winner of a fair fight rule
over me. But if god wills otherwise,
you'll learn restraint, and well, however late.

antistrope

CHORUS: Monstrous your enterprise,
aughty the words you spoke—and your mind, along with them,
reels in the passion of your bloody triumph;
and the smear of blood in your eye is unmistakable.
All those you love must be taken in revenge
and a wound pay back each wound that you have given.

Clytemnestra: There's more to hear, an oath that's sanctified
by Justice—realized for my child—and Ruin,'
And the Fury, since I slaughtered him for these:
from now on, hope won't pace the house of fear,
as long as there's a flame lit on my hearth
by Aegisthus, who has been my champion
this whole time, and the shield that gives me courage.

(Indicating the two corpses at her feet)
He lies here, after wronging me, his wife,
and soothing every Chryseis at Troy;†
and here's the seer of the signs, his captive,
who shared his bed; rely on her for saying
sooth—and for other services: the whore
among the sailors' benches. Rightly honored,
the two of them: him, as I stated; her
like a swan, whose song and dance were rites of death—
his lover lying next to him. He brought
this side-dish in—but it was for my pleasure.

Chorus: Only, if only quickly, with no great torture,
with no long nursing vigil,
the end would come for us, bringing
sleep without end, for all time—now that the man who
 guarded us
close to his heart is brought down.
He endured so much for a woman;
now a woman has obliterated him.

You were out of your mind, Helen, Helen,
annihilating great numbers, terrible numbers
of lives beneath Troy's walls.
Now you've won the consummate, the immortal prize:

* Aêt, a Greek word that can be translated "ruin" or "rash blindness (leading to ruin)," is sometimes
  personified as a goddess.
† Chryseis, according to Homer's Iliad, was the daughter of a Trojan priest, taken as war booty by
  Agamemnon and enslaved for sexual purposes.
the blood that will not wash away. It was some spirit of unassailable discord in the house, a husband’s anguish.

CLYTEMNESTRA: No, don’t pray—in your distress—for your share of death.
And do not turn your rage away toward Helen, calling her the one murderer of many, destroyer of the Danaan men’s lives, creator of a sorrow never to be made good.

antistrophe 2

CHORUS: Spirit who falls on the house, on the brace of Tantalus’ sons; Power that grows out of women. It is a match for my life, overpowers me, gnaws on my heart.
Over his body she stands like an evil crow, singing a holy song off-key, and gloating.

CLYTEMNESTRA: So now you’ve set your thoughts on the matter straight:
you call on the spirit, gorged again and again, of this clan; the blood-licking lust is from him, he feeds it in the belly.
Before the old agony stops, a new sore runs.

strophe 3

CHORUS: Powerful, full of hard rage is the spirit in your story toward this house—terrible, terrible fable, glutted with blighting misfortune.
The hand of Zeus, the fearful hand that causes, that does everything, lies on it.
What happens without Zeus in mortal lives?
In all this, what did heaven not accomplish?

ephymnium 2

My king! Tell me, how will I weep for you, my king?
Is there anything that my loving heart can say as you lie in the web this spider wove, panting your life out in an ungodly death?
I grieve for your resting place—fit for no free man—and the death by trickery that brought you down, the stroke from the two-edged weapon in her hand.

* The Greek word here rendered as “sons” is a loose expression indicating descent; it refers to Agamemnon and Menelaus, who are Tantalus’ great-grandsons.
CLYTEMNESTRA: You contend that this act is mine.
But don't count me, then, as Agamemnon's consort.
This corpse's wife is only the form you see—
an ancient, pitiless avenger has paid this man
for Atreus and his brutal banquet.1
He killed this man (indicates Agamemnon), a full-grown sacrifice to
follow the young ones.

antistrophe 3

CHORUS: Guiltless you call yourself; in this
murder—but who would be your witness?
How could you do it, how? But maybe your accomplice in vengeance
came from the father. Through channels of brothers' blood,
the black War-God advances,
in his hands the judgment for the gore
of little children, clotting as it was swallowed.

ephymnium 2

CHORUS: My king! Tell me, how will I weep for you, my king?
Is there anything that my loving heart can say
as you lie in the web this spider wove,
panting your life out in an ungodly death?
I grieve for your resting place—fit for no free man—
and the death by trickery that brought you down,
the stroke from the two-edged weapon in her hand.

CLYTEMNESTRA: No, I don't think that his death was slavish, that

[...]

Didn't he scheme catastrophe for his house?
My little one whom he fathered, who was raised here,
Iphigenia, bitterly mourned
[...]+
What was due he rendered—and he suffered it also.
He has got nothing to bluster about in Hades
but his death on a sword—the price of his own doings.

strophe 4

CHORUS: Now lost, I stand outside of deft
and careful thinking.
Where shall I turn, while the house falls?

* This refers to the slaughter of Thyestes' children (see note to line 1097).
† Another lacuna. The previous line presents good evidence of corruption but does not appear at all unsalvageable for a translator.
I am afraid of the rain that pounds, that shakes the home, a bloody rain. But now it drizzles away. Justice moves on, and Fate is whetting her knife on another stone, for another job of havoc.

\textit{ephyminium 3}

Earth, earth, I wish you'd taken me to yourself before I saw this man sprawled over his bath with its silver sides—pathetic bed. Who will bury him? Who will mourn for him? You—would you dare? You have killed your own husband. Will you mourn him loudly? Will you perform for his ghost this favor that's no favor, in return for all he's done? Will you wrong him this way? Who will send out praise, with tears, at the grave for the man who was like a god? Who will do this work with the truth in his heart?

\textbf{Clytemnestra:} That's no concern of yours, nothing you need to do. By our hands, he fell and he died; we will bury him also—and not to the sound of wailing from those in the house. But Iphigenia will be delighted; his daughter will do what's right and meet her father face to face at the fast-skimming ferry of wailing, throwing her hands around his neck to kiss him.

\textit{antistrophe 4}

\textbf{Chorus:} One insult meets another now—who could decide?—it's a deadlock: the plunderer plundered, the killer paying in full. Still, while Zeus lasts on his throne, the law will last that what a man does, he will endure. This is laid down. Tell me, who'll drive this fertile curse from the house? Disaster and this race are mortared together.

\textbf{Clytemnestra:} It's a truth, it's an oracle you've stumbled on. But I'd make a pact with the Pleisthenids' guardian spirit to be content with this—though it's unbearable—granted he goes from this house and grinds another family to dust with these deaths—no better than suicides.

* Pleisthenids is another name for Atreids.*
Wholly enough for me, a tiny share of these possessions,
if I do away with the frenzy of killing back and forth in this palace.

(Enter Aegisthus, from the palace, surrounded by guards.)

AEGISTHUS: O genial sun that lights the day of justice!
At last I think the gods above look down
on the earth's pain and vindicate us mortals,
now that I see the man who lies here wearing
the robe the Furies wove—heartwarming sight—
and paying for the trap set by his father
who reigned here, Atreus. That man, in plain terms,
banished Thyestes—my own father—though
he was his brother, from his home and city,
when the right to rule this country was disputed.
On his return to Atreus' hearth for mercy,
wretched Thyestes' life remained secure—
which means he didn't bloody native ground
with his own death. But this man's godless father
gave keen but unkind hospitality
to mine. He made a show of sacrifice
on the special day, but served up children's flesh—
the digits of the feet, the serried fingers
minced in a covered dish—and sat apart.
His unsuspecting guest reached out at once*
and ate, to this clan's ruin, as you see.
Then, when he sensed the monstrous thing he'd done,
he fell back, howling, retching out the slaughter,
and called down harrowing doom on Pelops' sons.
The table he kicked over sealed the curse:
annihilation for the race of Pleisthenes;
so on these grounds, he's there to look at, fallen,
and I'm the one who—justly—stitched this murder.
Atreus drove out my poor father and me—
the thirteenth born,† still in my baby clothes,
and Justice brought me back when I was grown.
I fastened this whole grim device together
and caught him in my hand before I came here.

* This is a possible general meaning of two lines that are too corrupt to allow any precise reconstruction or translation.
† In most versions of the myth there were only three children.
Death itself would be sweet for me, since now
he lies before me in the net of Justice.

CHORUS: Aegisthus, I don't honor gloating gall—
you, though, now say you killed this man on purpose?
You schemed his pitiful murder on your own?
Be sure of what I say: when Justice comes,
your life won't dodge the people's stones and curses.

AEGISTHUS: So that's your tone, down on the rowing bench?*
Those with the power are sitting at the rudder.
You're not too old to learn how hard a lesson
prudent obedience can be—at your age.
Chains and starvation are preeminent
physicians for the mind; they even school elders. Why can't you see this? You're not blind.
Kick back when goaded? You'll grow sore from beatings.

CHORUS: Woman, house-watcher, when they came from war,
you joined your marriage bed's defiler, plotting
this death for the commander of the army?

AEGISTHUS: These words will father pain to make you sob.
You don't have Orpheus' eloquence!—far from it.
All living creatures trailed him in their joy;
with idiotic yips you're rousing me
to haul you off. Soon you'll be tamed by force.

CHORUS: So you're the Argives' tyrant, who consulted
in this man's death, but didn't have the courage
to stretch your own hand out and do the killing.

AEGISTHUS: Plainly, it was a woman's job to trick him,
while I, the clan's old enemy, was suspect.
Now I'll deploy his property to rule
the citizens, and set a heavy yoke
on those who won't obey. No barley-fattened
show-horses here! No, hateful hunger, roaming
with darkness, will be jailers of their weakness.

CHORUS: Your heart was quaking—or why didn't you
face the man down? A woman did it for you!
That filthy outrage to our land and gods

* A nautical metaphor that the seafaring Athenians would easily appreciate. In their military, the lower classes, who owned neither horses nor metal armor, rowed the warships that made up the navy.
† Orpheus was a mythical musician whose lyre playing and singing were able to enchant even the gods.
killed him. But is Orestes living somewhere? Fortune might favor him and bring him home to be the champion killer of this pair.

AEGISTHUS: You choose to say and do this—soon you'll learn.

CHORUS: (refusing to back down)

Come on, then, fellow soldiers, here's our duty!

AEGISTHUS: (to his own bodyguard)

You all, come on, get ready. Draw your swords.

CHORUS: I'm ready, too. I don't refuse to die.

AEGISTHUS: I'm glad to hear that—it will be our omen.

CLYTEMNESTRA: No, precious darling, let's not do more damage. There's plenty here to reap, a mournful harvest and good supply of pain—we don't need more. Honored old men, move on toward home. Give way to fate before you suffer [...] chance. What we did was necessary. And if these troubles have a cure, it's welcome: a spirit's heavy hoof—too bad!—has struck us: a woman's words, if someone cares to listen.

AEGISTHUS: These people talk as if they're picking flowers, pelt me with silly words—and take their chance. They've lost their minds, to flout the man in power.

CHORUS: We're Argives. We don't fawn on worthless men.

AEGISTHUS: I'll settle with you in the days ahead.

CHORUS: Not if good fortune steers Orestes home.

AEGISTHUS: I know myself that exiles feed on hope.

CHORUS: You eat! Get fat, soil justice—since you can.

AEGISTHUS: You're quite a fool. You'll pay for it, I promise.

CHORUS: And you're a cock beside your hen. Keep crowing!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Ignore their empty barking. I will rule over this house with you, and set it right.

(Aegisthus and Clytemnestra exit into the palace, leaving the corpses onstage as the Chorus look on in silence.)