

An English version of Aeschylus'

Agamemnon

by Adrian Guthrie

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Watch

God save me from this endless watching!

I watch the whole season – around the clock –
around the full year
like a dog, on my bent arm, watching
crouched on the palace roof looking out...
under these elusive turning stars.
You know they move but you cannot see it.
They rise and fall -
and Winter and Summer
write different constellations in the sky...
but this brilliant procession frames our days
Do we look at them? Do they look at us?
Looking for the light that lights our days?

I scan the horizon for a different chain of lights.
From here to Troy on every hill top,
on cliffs, and island to island,
there are beacons built to fire
the moment Troy is taken.
To light the word of a Greek victory in that inscrutable place.
The city of Troy is the war,
the rouse,
the snare we are entangled in...

And here,
every night the Queen expects it will be won!
She's as assured as any man!
So, although I make my bed here every night,
I do not rest,
I do not dream or drift-off as I crouch here
blanketed in dew,
instead fear keeps me company.
Fear is my old friend... and wards off sleep.

And if I hum or sing to save myself from sleep
it only brings sad memories and makes me cry
for what has happened in this household
which has fallen so far from where it used to be.

Yet, any day the signal fires I watch for
might flash and light up the gloom and dissipation here.

(He sees the signal fire.)

Oh, oh welcome! You blaze of light, like the coming of the dawn,
you show there will be dancing in the streets.
Hey! Hey!
Wake Agamemnon's wife!
Wake her to come out and see the beacon light!

Shout through the house that Troy is taken!
The city of Ilium is ours!
I'll start the dancing myself, here. *(He dances slowly.)*
We cannot mistake it with that beacon there!
The gods have blessed Agamemnon's hand at last!
His luck with the dice is mine.
Six, six, three times six is the score!

May the master of the house come home, come home safe,
And may I take his dear hand in mine, and the rest is a silence...
The ox – that heavy, slow beast – is on my tongue.

The stones of this house could tell a tale, if they had a voice...
And so could I...
but I only speak to those who know,
And to those who don't, I am silent.
(He exits into the palace.)

Chorus

It is ten years since they set out to humble Priam's citadel.
King Menelaus wronged and needing redress
and Agamemnon in command of all the forces of Greece,
Atreus' two strong sons –
both blessed by Zeus in their dual thrones –
launched a thousand Argive ships to prosecute this war.
(Clytemnestra cries within.)
To settle scores with Troy they set out,
screaming for battle!
Like frenzied eagles when their young have been
taken from the nest –
beat the air with their vast wings
and wheel around the sky,
screaming for their lost children,
but they are lost forever
so the oars of the squadron churned the sea.
(Clytemnestra comes from the palace.)
Surely, Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus will hear these cries
And send Furies after the lawless kidnapers.
Like this, Zeus has sent Menelaus and Agamemnon,
Against Paris for the sake of Helen's wantonness.
(Clytemnestra places offerings on shrine.)
Greece and Troy locked in the barren coupling of war:
Knees in the dust, arms wrestle,
Limbs bleed, spears thrust.
Neither flesh
nor wine
nor tears
can appease the god's outrage.
(Clytemnestra lights the altar fire.)
We,

and tore her apart –
stopping her breeding there and then.
They shared that catch
as surely these brother-kings
would do with Troy.

Sing these songs of pain!
But good will come of it!
Good, surely, good, good will come of it.

The Army's shrewd seer studied these signs –
and told that these two eagle-kings
should, in time, seize Troy as the signs had shown,
but warned that the jealous gods may turn on us,
“and let the iron cast for Troy's downfall,
fall on our own forces before that goal...”

[140] They saw
that Artemis, the goddess of the hunt,
would find no pleasure in these brutal raptors' conquest.
Furious with these dogs-of-the-air –
her father's birds-of-prey –
that slaughtered the frail hare and her young,
she would raise crosswinds and hold down the fleet.

Sing these songs of pain!
But good will come of it!
Good, surely, good, good will come of it.

“Gracious virgin-mother, Artemis,
who would be tenderest to the fiercest lion cubs,
and take pleasure in suckling the young
of every wild creature –
settle your wild pity!”

[145] “Apollo, please intervene with reason and appease her!
Lest Artemis raises a storm to stop the fleet in the harbour!
Lest she so gags on pity at the eagles' feast
lest this feast be repaid with another
more terrible meal prepared in this house
by a maker-of-vengeance
who fears no man
who waits, remembers and measures revenge
for a child's death.”

Such were the utterances of the seer ten years ago
as these great eagles crossed the city gates
loaded with hope and doom.

These are songs of pain.
Sing these songs of pain!
Good may come of it!
Good, can come of it... surely good can come of it.

Zeus – w ho ever he is –
If his name means anything –
If it has any pow er to call him –
I will call him that: “ Zeus.”
I have no w ord to do justice to the author of all this!
He holds the balance of it in his hands.
I can only call on him: God! God!
Take this small thing that crushes me
Take this w eight from my heart!

[169] Kronos – no, I shall not use his name –
some king of the gods had grow n stupid w ith pow er
w hen Zeus overthrew him:
I shall name Zeus,
and by praising the victor
get closer to w isdom

Zeus sets us on a course tow ard understanding –
This helmsman has established a strict regime:
Wisdom comes through suffering.
Just as in troubled times
w hen w e try to get to sleep
the memory of pain w ill seep into our mind again:
So wisdom comes to us –
w hether w e w ant it or not!
We are all in this boat blessed by the violent grace of
the gods in the top-seats.

[185] So it w as, that day
the leader of the Greeks, Agamemnon,
did not question the seers’ words:
blow n by the gusts of misfortune he acquiesced to fate.
His ships all harbour-locked
battered by wind and tide
already hunger and injury –
as w ell as outright frustration at the delay –
w ere taking their toll
still in the port of embarkation.

The tides off Aulis held the entire fleet for w eeks
pow erless hulls boundy these storm w inds,
until fatigue and hunger became their undoing –
as ropes snapped – the pride of Greece floundered.

The only answer came from the renegade priest:
 "Artemis must have blood."
This was a cure worse than the impasse of the storm.
Agamemnon and Menelaus cried
grown men cried enraged tears
 and broke their sceptres on the rocks...

And still I hear Agamemnon's words,
"It is terrible to obey, but more terrible to disobey.
 I must send my innocent daughter
 to be slaughtered as a sacrifice,
 her blood on the alter –
 her blood on my hands."

"There is no *right* path here.
 How can I fail my fleet and this army under arms?
 They clamour for war
 and would not stop at spilling a girl's blood
 to feed their fury.
 This is a righteous sacrifice.
 Do this for the greater good.
 And good will come of it."
 Surly good can come of this.

[220] Agamemnon had slipped his head into the yoke of *need*.
 For necessary pragmatism... the means justify the ends.
 he had veered into sacrilege
 and from that moment
 as if he was seized by a frenzy
 his audacity stopped at nothing.
 Delusion – wretched delusion –
 counsellor of evil –
 makes men bold.

He was able to sacrifice his daughter.
 To see his daughter sacrificed to win a war
 fought to save the honour of another woman
 or the honour of the bridegroom's family –
 some honour!

"Father, father!" she called,
 but he, frenzied with war,
 heard nothing of this innocent cry.

Instead the father urged his henchmen on,
 "Lift her high up on the alter!"
 For she had fallen down.
 "Take hold of her strongly," he called,
 "as if she were a young goat."

Sweep up her gown around her...
But gag her mouth with a bridle bit,
do not let her call or curse the house of Atreus."

Silenced,
her glance was eloquent as any words
beseeching compassion from each face,
as if *a picture*
she greeted each guest at her father's table
her silent presence recalled how, before,
often, she had sung sacred hymns for her father's guests.

[240] At the third toast,
she had sung praises to Zeus,
a wrapped, ardent, recital
for her beloved father and his guests.

What then happened, I cannot see and do not tell.
The rogue seer was not unsuccessful
in getting his blood sacrifice.
The scales of Justice incline...
Wisdom comes at the price of suffering.
We suffer and we learn.
We know the future only when it comes:
Greet it too soon – weep too soon.
It will all be clear at dawn...

(Enter Clytemnestra.)

[255] And what shall happen now?
May it all turn out well.
As well as she would wish,
Our guardian
This standing-in for her husband
while he is away at war.

(To Clytemnestra.)

We have come as you asked, Clytemnestra.
Respecting your power –
standing-in for our king while he is away.
What are these sacrificial fires?
Is the news good?
Please, tell us if you will.
But if you wish to remain silent, I have no complaint.

Clytemnestra A breakthrough –
as the proverb has it,
the dark night is the mother of the bright day!
Priam's citadel, Troy, is in our hands!

Chorus This is unbelievable news!
Say the words again, I cannot grasp it.

Clytemnestra I said, that Troy is in Greek hands. Is that clear enough?

Chorus Happiness creeps up in me –
[270] and fills my eyes with tears.

Clytemnestra Indeed, your eyes reveal your loyal heart.

Chorus What proof have you? Is there evidence?

Clytemnestra I have, of course! Unless the gods trifle with me.

Chorus You aren't just seduced by a persuasive dream of this?

Clytemnestra I don't rave about vacuous dreams!

Chorus Or a heady rumour that has fed your heart's desire?

Clytemnestra Don't treat me like a child! Do you mock me?

Chorus When was it? When was Troy destroyed?

Clytemnestra In the night that has just given birth to this day.

Chorus And what messenger could move so fast to bring this news?

Clytemnestra Hephaestus – the god of fire – sprung from Mt Ida
and leapt toward us bringing this news.
From Troy to Hermes' crag on Lemnos
the beacon flames flew with the word –
then further
crossed to Athos –
where at last a bonfire carrying this news
burst into flames in Greece
on this mountain – sacred to Zeus.
And so the signal danced across the sea –
its golden, pine-fuelled, flames
summoning the fish to break the surface of the sea
charmed by the brilliance of this blaze: a sun-writ-small.
The word spreading the fire
and the fire spreading the word –
this message was passed to the watch at Makistos.
Attentive to this sign,
not slackening,
or slipping into the luxury of sleep,
at once they passed the signal on to Messapium.
There they kindled a heap of dry heath

and sped the message on.
 Like the seasonal moon –
 low in the sky –
 gathering strength it crossed the plain of Asôpos
 to Mt Citheron' s summit.
 That triggered a further chain of fires
 carrying the word – like a letter –
 leaping peak to peak.
 Safely past the Moon-goddess' grim promontory –
 on Gorgopus' lake
 – it' s terrible, teasing presence goading us
 to cast ourselves off the cliff into the void –
 it reached Aegiplanctus' top
 stirred those waiting
 to light the blaze and
 fuel the beacon high with brush and bough
 until the fire there got away and
 all the headland burned –
 down to a beard of flame –
 fiery whiskers by the water-line
 But the signal carried across the water
 to the Gulf of Saron –
 succeeding fire on fire
 to the Spider-tops above the city here –
 Arachnaeus from where
 the watch upon the palace roof here
 saw this blaze that started from Mt Ida' s flame.

The torches have fired in a succession
 like runners in a relay –
 where the last is the first past the line.

[315] This is the proof I have –
 carried by this signal as we had planned –
 from my husband in Troy to me.

Chorus Lady, our prayers for thanks are due,
 but I need to hear it again,
 tell us this story beginning to end

Clytemnestra Today, the Greek forces have taken Troy.

I hear the loud clamour in the town,
 a sound of many voices...
 Pour vinegar and oil into a jar –
 these adversaries will not mix:
 they keep apart.
 The shouts of the vanquished
 and the shouts of the victors are not the same.

They are separated by their fate.
 Their freedom lost to slavery now .
 I see the Trojans, weeping,
 throw themselves upon the corpses
 of husbands, brothers, children.
 Fortune separates them, now
 from those Greeks who,
 hell-bent through the night brought down their foe,
 and by the morning satisfied their hunger,
 not with what was their due,
 but with whatever fell their way.
 And then slept
 in Trojan houses.
 Not exposed outdoors –
 but safe from dew and frost –
 delivered safe
 to sleep secure, at last.
 If these forces can show proper respect to
 the alters of this town they have captured;
 and not defile them –
 not plunder all, lest the table-be-turned on us
 remembering the return-leg of their journey
 is still ahead and it is still in the hands of the fickle gods.

 Even if the army returns without any offence to the gods,
 they must answer for the unsleeping anguish of the dead.
 As long as no further disasters befall them!

So, there you have my women's words...
 May good come of it.
 [350] And let me enjoy the fruit of it.

Chorus

Lady, you have spoken like a man.
 Having listened to you argue your proof –
 we must now give thanks to the gods,
 for this outcome that rewards our devotions.

O, Zeus, sovereign lord, thanks be to you.

And Night, kindly night –
 who gave us this embroidery of lights
 and knotted that net so finely
 which was cast over Troy as it slept
 so none escaped either young or old
 that dread-net enslaving all,
 called Destruction.

We revere Zeus, whose hand we see in this.
 Iron Zeus, whose law is cast such that both

host and guest must fear it.
Long ago he aimed his arrow
and held his bow steady –
exacting from his careful shot
the precise debt: neither falling short,
nor wildly shooting for the stars.

[370] “By the hand of Zeus the vain fall!”
They say this, and, as he wishes, it is so!
Someone said that the gods don’t care
if we trample the sacred underfoot.
But that was stupid.
Such reckless crimes will not outlive the retribution,
and the penalty will go on for generations.
Better to live, without want and without excess.
No hoards of gold will save the house that,
in its pride, treads down the altar of Justice.

[385] Sweet, sweet temptation,
the devious child of Destruction,
lures him on, into the trap.
His evil glows in the darkness.
But, just as false metal is darkened by the stone,
he darkens where he goes:
A boy chasing the bird –
who brings it down
and then preys to the gods
to resuscitate the lifeless thing.
No god listens to his prayers.

[400] This is how it was with Paris,
who came into the house of Atreus
dishonoured his host
and took Menalaus bride.

She left her people in uproar:
the clang of weapons,
the din of bronze armour,
the thud of vessels laden for war
And to the house of Ilium, she brought a dowry of destruction.
With her light step,
Death marched through the gates of Troy.
The seers bemoaned her unbearable effrontery:
“Desperate, times
the house,
the household,
this dynasty shaken.
“ There’s the wretched imprint of her body in his bed!
But she’s gone!”

the handsome sons of Greece
w on only graves at Troy.

When the voices of the people are sullen
then their anger is a curse.
They wait in the dark to hear what rumours will surface.
The gods' are not blind to this
when men have blood on their hands.
The black Furies stalk the man
who has grown great beyond his earnings.
The mere glance of a god
and his fortune can change:
reduced to nothing,
dragged down to
feed Hell's demons.
Fame is a perilous state,
Zeus can cast you down in a jealous flash, if he will.
Better to be tranquil, and contented.
Sack no other city
and you should be safe from them attacking you.
It is best to be neither victor nor vanquished.

Elder One Flames, alight through the city
 proclaim the good news.
But can we trust these lighted alters?
Is it just another lie from heaven?

Elder Two Who would be like a child,
 and get enflamed with hope,
 only to have it dashed.

Elder Three It is just like a woman to be full of thanks
 before it is clear what has happened.

Elder Four These stories spread like wildfire
 Then die out as quickly.

Leader We shall soon understand
 what this passing on of the flame is all about;
whether it is a true signal or
 like some dream sent to catch out our senses.

Look! There is a herald running this way from the shore.
Wearing a victor's olive branch!

His running kicks up dust
that promises a more definite message
than the smoke of the fires.
He can hail us as he comes with the good news...
or... it is too unthinkable.
The fire shone brightly –
may the day prove just as bright.

An Elder

If anyone brings curses on Greece
let him reap the fruit of his own ill will.

Herald

Greek earth! Land of my fathers!
After ten years away, this morning I return.
Of our shattered hopes only this has come good:
I didn't dare dream that when I die
I would be laid to rest in my own land.
Bless the earth itself! And the light of the sun!
Bless our most mighty god, Zeus!
And bless also the Lord Apollo –

[510] god of second-sight who has led us to such suffering
But let him have no more shots at us;
we had enough of his arrows at Scamander!
Now we need him to preserve us,
and heal us. Hear us, lord Apollo!

All the gods of this land, I greet you all!
My own patron of heralds, Hermes,
who carries each of us
out of this world with such haste at death...
I greet the radiant dead of this land!
Prepare to welcome the return of your children –
those spared the spear –
whom you sent forth so earnestly.

The well-loved house of the kings,
even your rooves stand cherished.
And these august figures that face the sun,
if you ever looked on the king with kindness
greet him with gladness now.
He comes to you bringing light to the darkness –
to all of you alike –
Agamemnon, our king, has returned.

Greet him as he deserves!
As he has turned over Troy with Zeus' axe
cut down the city
destroyed the altars and the shrines to her gods
and wasted the whole land.
Upon Troy's neck he placed a yoke.

[530] Now he has come home, our king,
 eldest son of Atreus,
 most worthy of honour of all living men.

Neither Paris nor Troy could boast now
that they have anything greater than their suffering.

Indicted for theft and spoliation,
Paris has paid with the destruction his father's house
and even their land itself.
The sons of Priam have paid a two-fold penalty.

Chorus Welcome home from the war, Herald! And rejoice!

Herald I do rejoice. But now I can die, if that pleases the gods.

[540]

Chorus Yearning for home must have worn you out?

Herald Yes my eyes are now filled with tears for joy.

Chorus You must have longed for those you loved here.

Herald I was sick with wanting this place.

Chorus But while you were gone it was overcome by a dark anxiety.

Herald Why, what was this overwhelming fear?

Chorus I have long since learned silence
 as an antidote to getting hurt!

Herald Was there some threat
 when our princes were away?

[550]

Chorus To such a *difficulty* that,
 even death seemed better.

Herald "It is well, only if it ends well."

After the long unhappy years of this campaign
our return comes out happily enough,
but there' s been much that did not.

Only a god can escape from life' s suffering.

[555] When I think of the wretched quarters we had on the ships,
the cramped space and the sorry berths –
of which we did not complain!

And it was worse during the interminable siege
beneath the enemy' s walls.

With drizzling rain and the damp dew upon us
rotting our clothes –
and lice all over us!

Not to tell of the cold in Winter!

With the snow flying off Mt Ida
So cold that I saw birds fall dead from the air...

[565] Then heat,
enough to make you drop...

Dead calm at noon –
without the least eddy of wind on land or the still sea!

But why should we recount that now ?

The numbers of the dead?

It is all past...

It is all over for the dead, all over for us!

The dead need never rise again!

It is all done, gone, lost...

Farewell, farewell, farewell to all that!

For us that remain of the Argive expeditionary force,

Good has the hand,

the scale turns for us

and the dead need never know their loss!

[575] Shout this message over land and sea,
to the bright Sun make this boast:
"The Argive army have taken Troy at last,
and nailed up the spoils on every local shrine
to the glory of the gods of Greece."

[580] Now hearing this,
you should applaud these heroes of the city
and their leaders who,
with Zeus' authority, completed this noble task.

There, you have heard all that I have to say.

Chorus Your words show I was wrong.

Never too old to go back and learn again.

(Enter Clytemnestra)

Let Clytemnestra and the household hear what you have to say –
and I will relish hearing further of your news.

Clytemnestra I have already given an acknowledgement of these events:
when the message arrived by the flames in the night,
that Ilium was overthrown.

[590] And wasn't I chided in a childish way then,
"Are you so convinced by beacon fires?
Do you think Troy is won just because there is a flame?
Surely, you're just like any other woman,
looking for something to comfort her?"
With such taunts, I felt as if my wits were wandering.
But for all that, I still fulfilled the obligation to make sacrifice –
Isn't that the lot of the woman –
and from each of the city's altars
my women gave thanks and burned fragrant incense.

(To the Herald.)

So you need not rehearse to me your account at length.
I shall hear the whole tale from the king, himself.

[600] I am anxious to welcome my lord, my honoured husband:
For what can be sweeter in a woman's eyes
than to unbar the door for her husband
when God has spared him to return from war?
Give this message to my husband:
let him come with all speed!
The dashing, darling of the whole country!
Go, and tell him I have waited for him, a patient wife,
And he will find me as he left me:
Like a savage watchdog –
I will be tender to him alone –
loyal to him,
fierce to anyone who crosses his path.
Unchanged in any way.

[610] Will he find me with a new man in a scandalous affair?
No, no more than I have turned my hand to dyeing bronze.

This is my boast,
This is the truth,
I am a proud woman,
I am of noble birth –
This I will happily shout from the roof.

(Clytemnestra exits.)

Herald Of course, it's only right,
although it is a little strange...
and doesn't a speech like this sound... unladylike?

Chorus Well, she has given you her message clearly enough.
Although, such plain-talking needs careful listening,

if you are to understand her.

But, before you return, I want to hear of Menalaus?

Our chief protector and cherished fellow-king.

Has he too returned safely to Greece?

[620]

Herald There is no comfort in lying about this...

Chorus Well, if you can tell us the truth *and* keep the news good!

Let us know what it is,

even if they are split apart.

Herald This royal figure has been swept away out of the sight of the fleet,
he himself, and his ship likewise.

I do not lie.

Chorus So, he set out from Troy in sight of the other ships?
Then a storm struck at sea and drove him away from the fleet?

Herald Like a master marksman, you have hit the target!

A long tale of distress cut to a brief note.

Chorus Did the others in the flotilla think him... alive or dead?

Herald There is no clear report of this. No one knows...

He is surely somewhere beneath the

the wheeling Sun that brings the Earth to life.

Chorus Are you saying,
that this storm was caused by the wrath of the gods?

Herald This is a day of national rejoicing.

We cannot mix news of any misfortune

with the honour due to the gods today.

Keep them apart.

When a messenger with gloomy looks, reports to a people
of the disaster they most feared –
its army's decimation...

this is a double-wound:

inflicted on the State,

and on the home of every fallen man...

Our best, our most able,

herded from their houses by the dual whip

which Ares, the god of war, loves to crack.

Like a charioteer he drives

a pair of bloody mares careering toward annihilation...

in his wild devotion to destruction.

When, I tell you, a messenger enters with words like these,
it is the anthems to Hell's Furies he ends up singing.

When the messenger

comes with glad news of deliverance of a city

there is a general rejoicing.

How do I mix good with ill news?

I need to just say it...

"Storms smashed the Greek fleet as she sailed homeward,
the gods,

the gods have a lot to answer for..."

[650] Fire and water are eternal adversaries,

but they made a pact

to destroy our home-bound squadron.

Darkness falling, the sea turned vicious –

a Northerly gale blew in, buffeting the fleet.

Ship dashed against ship,

they bucked against each other,
like enraged beasts
Lashed by the furious storm, and the pounding rain –
We were stampeded into the darkness...
As if by the hand of a cruel shepherd.

When the sun rose we saw the Aegean in blossom
with corpses and the wreckage of ships.

Our ship was saved –
its hull intact.

Some divine power had stolen aboard
and put their hand to the tiller of our craft.

[665] Neither swelling surf at anchor
nor the rock-bound coast undid us,
and eventually we slipped into a safe cove.

Death had missed us on the wild sea
And in the clear bright day that followed
We could not believe our luck.

Dazed, we sheltered there,
Anxious, but unable to do anything,

Distraught at the fate of the fleet
Destroyed by the storm

Distressed because we knew
that any of them that had got through
would speak of us as lost.

May it all turn out for the best!
Menalaus, must surely return.

Somewhere, the light of day must shine on him...
Saved by Zeus,

Surely Zeus does not mean to destroy the whole house?

[680] (Hearing this, you know that you hear the truth!) *.(Exit)*

Chorus

Who gave her a name so fatally accurate?
What power, foretelling destiny, named that name?
Who named the bride-of-spears
 Her name compelling a resonance... Hell-ten.
The source of strife,
 true to her name,
 a Hell to men,
 Hell to ships,
 Hell to the city.

[690] Slipping from her veiled lair
 she sailed (before the wind –
So after her they sent across that sea
 A host of huntsmen –
but despite the fleeting power of rowing oars
 no footprints stay upon the surface of the sea...
Where they issued forth at Simois' leafy sanctuary—)
 Became a mouth of blood...

She sailed to Troy,
 as Fate had it,
[700] blending marriage music with the dirge!
 For the Trojans paid,
because the Furies, as instruments of celestial anger,
 exacted payment for the stolen bride...
 and the dishonour to hospitality...
 and the shame to Zeus
 to whom, as god of the hearth,
 the marriage hymns were sung.

[710] But Priam's city learned – a bit late in life –
 a new tune –
 the song sung there is wailing, at the moment!
A loud chorus of, “Paris the badly matched!” “Born to destroy us.”

And, “ Welcoming that woman’ s brought us to this.”
She is to blame for the slaughter of our sons.

A herdsman once reared a lion cub in his house.

Robbed of its mother's milk
but still needing the breast,
the beast was gentle.

[720] It played with his children
and delighted the whole household,
begging scraps from his hand at the table.
It fawned because of its belly's need.

But in time, as it became full grown,
the lion repaid its friendly fostering
by making a feast of the entire flock.

With a taste for blood the lion found its true nature.
The carnage left the house awash with blood,
defiled by the raw and bleeding flesh
the householders were in despair...

It was like a priest-of-ruin,
appointed by god – perverse as ever –
loved, indulged, sustained in the house it destroyed.

So, it would seem, she brought to Troy
a seductive calm,

[740] a golden radiance,
a smiling charm:
a rare jewel or beautiful opening blossom, inviting love.
Then, this suddenly shifted
and with a sudden lunge
she plunged the house into a ruinous war.
As if she was an agent of destruction –

Sent by Zeus to demand his blood-price.

(Enter Clytemnestra.)

[750] An old saying has it that,
*Good fortune breeds
and multiplies misery.*

I have my own view on these things.
I don't just listen to other men's ideas.
I believe that,
It is evil deeds that beget iniquity.

[760] But when a house is righteous,
then its children have lives that are blessed.

When a child is born in dark times
and shows brazen ambition and arrogance
this insolence reveals the curse of older crimes
committed in the household.

*Justice is radiant
even in a smoke-darkened dwelling.*

Why, Justice loves the virtuous person!
She averts her eyes from gilded mansions
if they are built by tainted hands.
Instead she navigates her way by the hearts of the pure.
Justice spurns power, she turns her face from wealth,
and it is she, who steers all towards its destined end.

*(Enter Agamemnon and Cassandra,
in a chariot, with a retinue)*

All hail! My King, conqueror of Troy! Truly a son of Atreus!
[785] How should I greet him?
How shall I do you homage, but neither overshoot
nor run short of courtesy?

To feign praise isn't proper.
 [790] Others pretend to sigh over misfortune,
 without the sting of sorrow in their hearts;
 or make a semblance of pleasure at another's success,
 forcing smiles on their faces.
 [795] But a clever shepherd knows his flock
 and cannot be deceived by men's eyes
 with feign loyalty
 where there is only contempt.
 I concede that when, ten years ago,
 you marshalled the army in Helen's cause,
 [800] staking all for one woman – who had run off of her own accord –
 I saw you as a dark force at the helm
 Sacrificing numerous lives to bring home that petty vanity.

But now, from the depth of my heart,
 I say: *With success, the work is well done.*
 The ends have justified the means.

In time you will learn, by your own inquiries, which of your people,
 remaining at home, have stayed true to you.

Agamemnon Greece first – I greet – as is right and proper!
 The gods of this place have guarded me
 As I extracted justice from Troy.
 There were no dissembling voices amongst the gods
 they cast their votes to destroy Ilium;
 Hope alone nearly voted the other way.
 But in the end she did not cast a vote at all.
 The smoke that even now consumes that city –
 burning still –
 is a sacrificial fire. The embers, as they die,
 breathe forth rich fumes.

For this success we should thank the gods.
For the gods' sake we have extracted payment
 circling the city and bringing it down.
For that woman it has been laid low, and made to pay and pay,
 raped by the fierce Argive beast.

[825] Penetrating her defences —
 when the Pleiades waned
 they came from the wooden horse —
 so we took the city were in the city from the inside,
 and like a ravenous lion
 we slaked our thirst for royal blood.

For the gods I made this prelude.

*(Clytemnestra and her women enter
 carrying rich embroidered cloth.)*

[830] But, the concerns you expressed —
 I have heard well —
 I both agree and will follow through with it.
There are few who can truly celebrate another's good fortune.
For the venom of envy settles upon the heart
and the double blow is that
 weighed down by his own calamity
 he groans to see another's prosperity.
I am familiar with the mirror of companionship
 in which others expect to see only themselves.
And that feigned loyalty: insubstantial as the shadow.
Only Odysseus,
 the very man I had to drag into the war against his will,
 once in the team, was a tireless leader.
Now, whether he is alive or dead, I praise him.

But, for the concerns of the State,
[845] we shall take counsel and carefully consider.

I want this peace and prosperity to be lasting.
If there are seen to be problems here, we shall seek a remedy,
And if necessary we shall use the knife
to cut off the diseased limb.

And now I will return to my palace and to my household
to greet the gods there first:
They sent me overseas and have brought me safely home.
*(He descends from his chariot, looks at Clytemnestra,
stops, but turn away to offer this prayer to the gods.)*
Victory, that has attended me throughout this journey,
remain with me forever!
(Clytemnestra turns from Agamemnon to the chorus.)

Clytemnestra Citizens of Argos,
you respectable representatives of the population...
Forgive me if I seem shameless,
but I must tell you how much I love my husband.
Any of youth's coyness has no place here, now, for me.

Quite candidly I can tell you that this life has been a hard ordeal –
I say this myself, I do not need to rehearse it at other's behest!
Every day he was away, beneath the walls of Ilium,
The ordeal grew,
How terrible it is for a wife to sit at home,
Her husband away at war,
She is shaken by every rumour of the worst.
Every communication seemed to carry news
worse than the last.
As for wounds, if he received as many as were reported, he would
have in him as many holes as a net.
Or if he had died as often as reports claimed,
[870] then truly he would need to have risen from his grave!

There has been a lot of pernicious talk
 spreading like infection through the people.
 These rumours overwhelmed me at times.
 It was too much for me
 and I was several times brought back from despair,
 the noose already around my neck...
 This is why, I have to tell you, honestly,
 our son, Orestes, is not here beside me,
 as he should be...
 He is out of harm's way,
 in the protection of our ally Strophius at Phocis.
 I warned of two potential troubles:
 one, if the war itself went badly;
 and the other was the danger of a revolt
 if the returning men found their gains a disappointment
 and the feet that had trampled Troy went on to crush us.
 Once down you are vulnerable to everybody's foot.

 Now the weeping springs of my eyes are dried up.
 Not a tear remains.
 But my eyes are sore watching for the beacon-lights
 set, and until now not ignited.

 All these long years alone,
 sleepless, just the drone of an insect could wake me!
 And then my mind would be overcome by images
 of the disasters that could befall you:
 Sleep and waking out-doing each other for horrible thoughts.

[895] But now, having borne all this for so long, I am free of it.
 I salute my husband, the man who is the watchdog of the nation.
 The stay that saves the whole ship –

the sturdy pillar that holds the vaulting roof –
he is like a longed-for boy-child –
craved for, as the glimpse of land is sought by men long at sea –
[900] the rapturous dawn following a wild storm –
the cool, quenching stream to the thirsty traveller on the road...
The ecstasy of this, to out-pace Fate!

So, you must take the titles you have earned.

Let envy keep off!

We have endured a great deal to be where we are!

(Gesturing towards Agamemnon.)

Now, I pray you, my dear lord,

dismount, but do not put your foot on the common earth
the mighty foot that has crushed Ilium.

(To her attendants)

Why hold back, you women? I have told you what to do here.

Spread the brocades all the way to the place where he shall walk.

(They spread the brocade cloth.)

[910] Quickly, quickly!

With purple let his path be covered –

that the hand of Justice may lead him home –

Into a house he never thought to see again.

The rest is up to me! The unsleeping vigilance I have held on to, shall
serve us, if it please god, if it is ordained.

Agamemnon Renown child of Leda,

royal consort,

guardian of our house,

[915] your speech is, appropriately, in proportion to my long absence.

But the honours you propose should rightly come from elsewhere.

As for the rest,

do not indulge me as if I were a woman;

or some oriental potentate

at whose feet you throw yourself –
your mouth agape...

[920] Do not draw down envy by strewing my path with tapestries.
It is the gods we must honour this way.
Mortals only tread upon embroidered fineries at their peril.

[925] Revere me, not as a god, but as a man.
My reputation stands.
There is no greater gift of the gods
than to think no folly.
Only when life comes to its end in prosperity
dare we pronounce anyone happy.

[930] If I can live as I say, I have nothing to worry about.

Clytemnestra Come now, tell me frankly, to your best judgement -

Agamemnon My judgement is always frank.

Clytemnestra do you imagine the gods begrudge you this ceremony?

Agamemnon Knowing that this exceeds what is proper for a man, I abjure it.

Clytemnestra And what do you suppose Priam would have done,
if he had achieved your triumph?

Agamemnon Ha!
He would have minced out on these embroideries,
I have no doubt –
his robes flying.

Clytemnestra You have nothing to fear from wagging tongues.

Agamemnon The people's voice has great power.

Clytemnestra You must risk envy if you are to be admired.

Agamemnon Is it seemly for a woman to be this contentious?

Clytemnestra Possibly not,
but isn't it right for the Victor to take his triumphal procession?

Agamemnon What? Do you set so much store on this triumph?

Clytemnestra You are the Victor, give me at least this little triumph.

Agamemnon Enough! Have it your own way,
quick, let someone loosen my sandals...
and slave-like, serve the falling of my foot!
But as I walk upon these purple vestments
may no far off god look askance.
It is a shame for one's foot to mar
a handiwork in which so much labour
and such costly gold and silver threads are lavished.

[950] So much for that.
This is a foreign girl. Receive her into the house with kindness.
Those same gods look well upon a gentle master,
And no one freely takes on the burden of being a slave.

She is the choicest flower of a rich treasure,
the gift to me of the armies,
she has come with me from Troy.

Since I have been forced by you to give way,
I tread upon this fabulous path to enter my house.

Clytemnestra From the harvest of the abundant sea

(that nothing can dry up)
comes the purple and blood-red dyes
colours as costly as silver

[960] and ever vital.

This household has great stores of such treasure.
Thanks to the gods, it does not know poverty.
When I was devising a ransom for your life
I recognised that these vestments were something I could
Allow to be trampled underfoot
had it been demanded by an oracle...

For these superficial leaves can be shed by the household,
as by the tree, so long as the root still lives, life will return.
Leaves come again to the house
and shade us against the scorching dog star.
So, now, your return and entry into your home
is like a warm refuge in cold wintertime –

[970] or,

when Zeus makes intoxicating wine from the grapes that are sour.

(As Agamemnon enters the palace.)

O Zeus, Zeus, who fulfils all,
fulfil our prayers!

Fulfil your own designs, too!

(Clytemnestra exits into palace.)

Chorus What is this suggestion?

In my head
hangs a question?
What has been said?
What has been said?
Dread beats my brain.
What was said?

What was meant?

Like a bird with huge wings
that hovers over us
its huge wings beating...

Or a song, cheap and nasty,
which you can't forget
but don't remember either
it's half in your head...

Tight around my chest...
my heart pounds...
dreading what I should know ...
Not knowing what to dread...
Fearing knowledge and
my ignorance, as well...

The drone...
 my head pounds...
I should be proud and confident.
But through a daze
I dread the thoughts
in my own brain...

Unexplained dreams
my thoughts return...
 buried
 mooring lines
 cast by the fleet in the storm
 to no avail –

They are returned.

It is done.
I saw them return.
I saw Agamemnon home.

[990]

But deep in me it beats
I can't help but hear a dirge
A dreadful unaccompanied hymn
of the Furies
to those avenging spirits...
it drives away my good spirits...
My chest is tight,
and I wonder what I should fear...

What was said?
What was meant?

[1000]

I just pray that my anxieties are mistaken
and that none of this comes about.

[1001]

We must not exceed the bounds –
even in health –
for disease is always there,
the other side of that common wall –
So easily breached.

Fortune can strike a hidden reef
even if the course is straight.
But then, if you throw the right things
overboard at the first shot,
the ship will not founder,
the whole house will not go down.

Each year the furrow dug

makes wealth and feeds us
thank god, this cutting grows

But slash a man – he bleeds
Fallen to earth this will not grow
It congeals in dark pools
And no magic spell can bring it to life.

No living-dead

Zeus put an end to that!

The gods constrain us with their own whims
This fate given – that benefit taken away...

I must be careful, or my tongue
will outpace my better judgement.

(Enter Clytemnestra.)

Clytemnestra Listen, come inside, Cassandra.
Zeus has not been unkind to you since
you will share the victory libation in this illustrious house,
You will stand with many slaves at the altar
of the god who guards our fortune.
Get down from that carriage and do not be too proud;
[1040] even Herakles was once sold
and ate the bitter bread of slavery.
If this yoke falls on you at least be grateful
that this is a family of ancient wealth.
Those who still struggle for riches
and have not reached a rich harvest of possessions,
can be cruel to their slaves.
Here, you can expect the proper customs to be observed.

Chorus It's *you* she is speaking to.
Caught in a net of destiny... obey, if you can.

If you can stand to obey her, do it.

Clytemnestra Listen, are you a swallow, flighty, sweet bird
With a twitter-language all your own?
Let me hear your bar-barous tongue.

Chorus Go along with her.
As things stand for you,
her offer is as good as you can expect.
Step down, as she asks.

Clytemnestra I have no time to waste outside here.
The victims stand by the central hearth
awaiting the sacrifice—
a joy we did not expect to be ours.
If you will take part, make no delay.
[1060] Failing to understand what to say,
at least you can make a sign with your barbarian hand.

Chorus This stranger needs an interpreter...
She is like a wild creature, just captured.

Clytemnestra No, she is mad, and hears wild voices!
Newly caught, she cannot stand the bit –
so fretfully her mouth foams blood

I will waste no more words upon her contempt.
(Clytemnestra exits.)

Chorus I cannot be angry.
She needs pity.
Come, unhappy one,
leave the still chariot...

At least do this last free thing yourself –
take up the new yoke of slavery.

Cassandra O! O! O! O Apollo, O Apollo!

Chorus Why do you cry out in that god' s name?
He is not a god to call on in mourning.

Cassandra O! O! O! O Apollo, O Apollo!

Chorus It' s not a good omen to choose this god.
She calls in grief, but he' s there to celebrate joy...

[1080]

Cassandra Apollo, Apollo! God of the Ways – my destroyer!
You have destroyed me once, now – a second time.

Chorus She is about to foretell her ow n misery.
But slave or not, she has the divine gift.

Cassandra [1085] Apollo, Apollo! God of the Ways, my destroyer!
Where is this that you have brought me! To w hat house?

Chorus If you cannot tell this then I w ill tell it to you –
and you' ll not say that it' s untrue –
this is the house of Atreus' son.

[1090]

Cassandra No, no, any god-forsaken house, but not this
palace w here family slaughters family:
an abattoir – its floor sw imming w ith blood.

Chorus Keen to follow a scent – like a hound,
she is on the trail, and w ill find... the body...

[1095]

Cassandra Here are my witnesses!
Those babies
Screaming
butchered
and baked
for their father!

Chorus Enough!
we do not need
your insight here –

Cassandra What is she planning?
What could be the plot?
Monstrous –
Unspeakable –
Horrible –
loveless –
unendurable –
beyond remedy.
Salvation... is not at hand.

Chorus I cannot understand obscure prophecies –
but the whole city rings with similar words.

Cassandra Damned woman!
Your husband –
Your bedfellow –
when you have bathed him –
How shall I tell the end?
Soon it will be done.
Now this hand, now that, she throws herself into it!

Chorus What are you saying?

I do not understand this riddle
this ominous oracle.

Cassandra Ah! Ah! What do I see?
Is this a net of death?
Yes, it is a snare
She shares him –
In his bed aroused –
Like the crowd in a frenzy –
Calling for blood!

Chorus What Furies have you called
to scream throughout this house?
You empty my heart of blood,
so, weakened, I wait for a blow to fall.

Cassandra Ah, ah, look there, see that!
Let the bull beware his mate!
In a moment she thrashes with that cloak –
has him –
strikes –
He falls in a bath of blood
Fate has made this bath for him...
I'm telling you! Do you hear!

Chorus I am no judge of prophecies...
But her insights can only mean an evil outcome.
When do oracles ever bring good to mortals?
They always bring fear and pain.

Cassandra Ah, ah, my fate is so hard.
Doomed to hear my own voice breaking with pain.
Why was I brought here –

tormented as I am?
For nothing except to die –
fated to die with him.

Chorus [1140] Demented woman,
you are possessed by some heartless god.
You bewail your own fate –
As that dun bird that never ceases making lament...
Abundant in tragic song: the nightingale.

Cassandra Ah, for the fate of the nightingale!
The gods dressed her as a sweet bird
And gave her a life without tears...
But my fate, waiting me, will see me
Destroyed by a two-edged sword.

Chorus Where does this deluge of grief come from?
(What god beats down on you with these strains and gestures.)
(This melody that clashes with the steps of that dance.)
This dread prophesy?

Cassandra Ah, that wedding day when Paris cursed his whole clan!
Ah, if I grew up on the banks of the Scamander –
loved and cared for –
why have I now ended up beside this river of grief, the Acheron?
Soon I shall utter prophecies...

Chorus What is it you say? What does it mean?
A baby might understand you better than I do?
These spasms of sense –
unrelenting revelations –
from wounds deep within you, torn by a bloody jaw,
your sobs and words erupt.

Cassandra O, the suffering, the suffering of my city, ripped apart!
So much suffering...

my father slaughtered many, many sacrificial beasts
to save the city.

[1170] But it did not preserve the city from its downfall.
I, aflame, will plummet to the ground.

Chorus Your speech rings the same note as before.
Some pernicious spirit has entered you –

as if you are being trodden by feet from on high –
writhing in pain with pitiful moans that grab my heart.
But why, why are you in this thrall?

Cassandra Now, there is no need for me to cloak my prophetic gifts –
as if I were some shy young newly wed –
afraid of what the world might think.
It *presents* to me as if it was a clear wind blowing at sunrise –
Soaring beyond me: clear and sharp.
A flare of prophetic insight from deep inside me –
breaking through grief and loss.
No more riddles.
I will teach you.
Come and run and hunt with me.
I am hot on the track of crimes from some time ago.

See this vaulted architecture:

from here the watching choir never leaves!
Chanting in shaky unison –
unharmonious and rude –
they tell nothing good.

Relating the news of the day –
half the time they see and speak of such grim matters,

at the climax I recoiled...

I deceived Apollo.

Chorus [1210] But you already had the gift of his art of divination?

Cassandra Then and there I could prophesy
all the suffering and disasters that would befall my countrymen.

Chorus And Apollo's anger didn't touch you?

Cassandra Because I betrayed him,
he saw that no one ever believed a word I said.

Chorus Yet everything you say seems true enough.

Cassandra Ah, ah! Pain!
[1215/20] The spasm of true divination –
spins me away from the things around...
Look?
Do you see them?
Those presences – phantom children of dreams?
on the vaulted roof of the house?
Children slaughtered by their own kin –
Look, they reach out to offer food to us,
their hands full of meat cooked from their own flesh.
I can see them clearly.
Holding up their own innards,
and their father eating what is offered to him...
This lioness waits... considers vengeance...
plots against my lord on his return.
[1225] Now he is my *master*...
for I must bear the yoke of slavery.
The commander of the Greeks and the conqueror of Ilium

does not hear what his hellhound wife says
when she welcomes him –
less, know what devious deeds she plans,
This dog licked his hand,
as if in gladness to see him –
a goddess of treachery.

[1230]

She has such front!
To assassinate a man like that.
What a monster!
A snake with a poisonous bite at both ends.

Or the hideous scourge of every traveller –
the rocks at Scylla:
all heads and threatening teeth –
but below her waist,
waiting to grind up hapless sailors
she is a seething mass of gnawing dogs!

How dare she shout at his return?
As if, in battle a tumultuous roar is given voice
she feigned joy at her hated husband's entrance.

But it is all one, whether I am believed, or not.
What will come, will come when it comes.
Soon you'll be face to face with it, and have to say,
she pronounced everything just as it has happened.

Chorus

Thyestes' ate his own children's flesh,
I trembled as you suggest this fact, but I understood it.
Terror rocks me as I hear what you say,
And I am thrown off the track.

Cassandra With those eyes you will see the death of Agamemnon.

Chorus Put these unlucky words to sleep.

Cassandra Apollo has no hand in this –
so there is no use to ask his salvation.

Chorus If this is all there is, god forbid it!
[1250]

Cassandra You can only prey.
The gods close in for the kill.

Chorus What man could plot this dreadful business?

Cassandra You must have altogether lost everything I said!

Chorus I don't see that any man can scheme to do this?

Cassandra And yet I speak to you in your own language.
[1255]

Chorus So too do the oracles;
but they too are hard to understand.

Cassandra Oh, oh! Burn me! Slashes and whips like the worst torture!
Woe, woe! Apollo!
Pity me! Pity me!
This lioness rampant, raging,
mates with a wolf while the warrior lion is far from his lair...
[1260] and telling this truth, she will slay me.

She concocts her drugs, spiking them with Hate,
and vows in her fury that she will find my fix.
She sharpens the sword for her husband's neck

to repay him for bringing me here.

Why do I bear this mockery of myself,

[1265]

this wand,

these prophetic decorations –

yokes around my neck?

*(Breaking her wand, she throws it and the other
insignia of her prophetic office upon the ground and
tramples them underfoot)*

This at least I can destroy before I die myself.

Smash, break, destroy,

I pay you back for what you have given me.

Find some other victim in my place.

(Tearing at her robes.)

Apollo himself strips me of my prophetic garb –

He let them mock me.

I am free at last.

In my passion for him I was mocked –

even by my friends,

scorned as a fake,

a pretence,

a joke,

a sideshow trickster...

prostitute

I took all that.

But now, the god of Prophecy has undone me,

his Prophetess,

and brought me to this deadly passage...

Where once there was my father's altar –

a butcher's block waits for me.

The cleaver is already ablaze with my blood...

But I will not die unavenged!
 [1280] There will come an avenger for this family-line,
 to slay his mother
 and take vengeance for his father.
 If he is an exile –
 a traveller,
 a stranger in his own land –
 he will return to place the final capping stone
 upon the masonry of this house:
 upon the unspeakable iniquities here.
 The gods have sworn an oath:
 his father's slashed body will summon him home!
 Why lament then?
 When I saw Troy fare as she has fared,
 and then her conquerors fare as they are to...
 Then I know the end ...
 [1290] I will go to my end ...
 I dare to die!
 This palace door, is as the gates of Death for me!
 I only pray that the blow will finish me at one stroke!

Chorus Woman,
 pitiful woman,
 wise, wise woman,
 you have said much...
 If you can see your own death,
 how can you have this calm courage?
 Like cattle to the slaughter –
 bovine – but, at peace with fate.

Cassandra There is no escape, my friends.

[1300]

Chorus Yet, the final pages advantage time!

Cassandra My time has come,
and there is nothing to gain from trying to get away.

Chorus You have a brave heart.

Cassandra That is how they console those who fly in the face of Fate.

Chorus But to die nobly is, surely, a blessing.

Cassandra Alas for my *noble* father, Priam, and for his *noble* children!
(She approaches the threshold but starts back in horror.)

Chorus What is it? What terror throws you back?

Cassandra Alas, alas!

Chorus Why do you cry like that?
Revulsed by a vision.

Cassandra The house is rank with the stench of blood.

Chorus That is only the smell of the new sacrificial offerings.

Cassandra It is the stink of the open grave.

Chorus That smell of Syrian incense fills the house.
Don't you find that uplifting?

Cassandra I will go in now
and lament my own and Agamemnon's fate.
Enough of life!

[1315] Alas, my friends,
I am not afraid.
I do not shriek like the snared bird.
After I am dead, tell them how I died.
And when the Queen has been slain for me –
 woman for woman –
and when that badly matched man has fallen –
I ask you to tell them, my friends,
 as a last favour for one about to die.

Chorus Poor creature.
 I pity you who can see your own death so clearly.

Cassandra Just one last utterance
 Less a dirge than a prayer to the Sun.
In whose last light I ask
may my enemies pay
a bloody penalty for
the easy slaughter
of a captive slave.

Alas! This is human fortune!
Prosperity can be overturned
in an instant by a mere shadow.
With the stroke of a wet sponge
the careful picture is wiped out...

[1330]
In this frailty I find more to pity
 than in the grand but fraught designs of nations.
 (She enters the Palace.)

Chorus It is the nature of all human beings to crave prosperity.
And in powerful houses no one raises a hand to say,

“Enough power, no more!”

Take this case,
Agamemnon has been blessed to capture Priam's town;
and, divinely-honoured and rich in spoils, he has returned home.
But if he must pay for the blood his father shed,
and die for the deaths he has caused...
Then further deaths must pay for his...
What mortal can boast that they were born free
of the avenging forces of destiny?

(A shriek is heard from within.)

Agamemnon Alas! I have been struck... a killing blow!

Chorus Silence!
Who cried out? Who has been stabbed.

Agamemnon Aah! Again, struck down.

Chorus The deed is done.
This voice was the king's.
Come together.
Is there some right plan of action?
(The members of the Chorus deliver their opinions.)

Chorus One My advice is to call all the townsfolk, to save the Palace.

Chorus Two We must burst in at once –
the blades still dripping in their hands.

Chorus Three Let's do it! We need to act, and to do it now!

Chorus Four It is clear from this first act they are set upon a state of tyranny'
So we must carefully plan to maintain democracy.

Chorus Five Yes, but we are wasting time, while they,
trample caution and do not rest their hand.

Chorus Six What sort of plan could we propose.
We simply have to act..

Chorus Seven We are helpless,
mere words will not bring the dead back to life.

Chorus Eight What! Should we submit to these desecrators of the house?

Chorus Nine No, we can't endure that! Death would be better!
Easier than such a tyranny.

Chorus Ten What are we doing?
On the evidence of a few groans we suppose
Agamemnon is dead?

Chorus Eleven We must be sure of our facts before we go any further
with our anger.

Chorus Twelve We agree on this course –
that we get clear how it stands with Atreus' son.
*(The bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra
are disclosed; the Queen stands by their side)*

Clytemnestra Everything I said before served my ends:
but now I unsay it all, without any shame.
How else could I catch this adversary –
in the semblance of a friend –
unless I built the snare so high he could not escape it?
(She unwinds his body from the robe as

she speaks.)

This ancient blood feud has been with us all these years.

At last, however long it was delayed,

I stand where I dealt the blow .

[1380] I have done the deed. I do not deny it.

As if to catch a haul of fish,

I cast around him an impassable net.

Like this deadly robe – a sign of power and wealth –

he could not escape or ward off doom.

Twice I struck him, and with two groans

his limbs relaxed.

Once he had fallen,

I struck him a third time

to ensure he was beyond the reach of Zeus,

the Deliverer of the dead.

Fallen there, his life gasped away,

until he breathed not air but spurts of blood

that splattered me – dark drops of gore.

I rejoiced in this no less than at dew drops on new grain,

or the gentle shower that is a boon to the burgeoning crops.

So this is how the case stands,

have cheer, you should rejoice.

I glory in the deed.

I was a proper act.

If I could pour libations on the corpse,

to match my words,

what wine that would be!

He has filled the family bowl to overflowing with misery

and drained it to the dregs himself.

Agamemnon is home at last.

Chorus I am appalled by your tongue!
 You gloat over your husband' s body.
 [1400] How can you utter such a brazen speech?

Clytemnestra You try my patience
 when you speak as if I were a witless woman.
 My heart does not quail, as those who know me will be sure!
 Whether you praise me or blame me, it is all the same.
 Here is Agamemnon, my husband, now a corpse,
 the work of this right hand, a good piece of work.
 I stand my case.

Chorus Woman, what noxious brew have you taken?
 What potion drawn from the swirling sea?
 What nurtured this insanity in you?
 You face a public curse for this.
 You have cut and thrown him away
 And you will be cut off and cast into exile.
 Hated and reviled by all.

Clytemnestra You would sentence *me* to exile from this land,
 and see me chased out with your curses and condemnations;
 but where was your righteous outrage against him that lies here?
 He that sacrificed his own child to placate the North winds,
 [1415] with no more concern than if it had been a sheep,
 and the loss no greater than a fleece?
 I bore her with hard labour.
 Is it not *him* you should have banished from this land
 [1420] to answer for this deed?
 No!
 When you recite the charge you make against me,
 you are very stern.
 But I warn you: threaten me at your peril.

If I fall, I know you will lord it over me;
but if, by the stroke of god, it turns out the other way,
you shall learn a painful lesson, though it may come late.

Chorus Such mad pride: you must be possessed by a wild Fury!
Your eyes shot with blood,
and your garments covered in his gore.
You are crazed with the blood of this deed.
Without honour, forsaken by your friends,
[1430] later you will pay for this stroke for stroke.

Clytemnestra By Justice, Vengeance and Fury I have sworn
to repay this man for the murder of my daughter.
I have sacrificed him in their names.
Hope need not pass through the halls of fear,
so long as my hearth is lit by Aegisthus.
He is loyal as he has always been:
a shield.

Whereas, here lies the man who did me wrong,
playing about with the captive Trojan girls.
[1440] And here lies this one, slave, sorceress and mistress:
his oracular whore.
Common property of the seamen's bunks.
This pair has their proper destiny.
For he, prostrate...
and she, like a dying swan,
has sung her last lament, lies here too:
his lover.
Seeing her here like this gives me
relish for the pleasures of my bed.

Chorus

Alas!

must be excised by this fresh wound and bloodletting.

Chorus

You, rightly, speak of a mighty Fiend,
but do not praise this damned insatiate!
Haunting this house, with the dead weight of anger,
[1485] feasting on our future and our sons.
Woe, woe, all of this is the work of Zeus!
What is there for mortal men, but by the will of Zeus?
Our lives are pain, and is it not, all of it, from god?

[1490]

*Alas, alas, Agamemnon, my King, my King!
How to pay tribute and how to mourn you?
How to speak of our affection for you?
While you lie in this spider's web!
Here you gasped your last breath
in this sacrilegious bed
you met your impious death
struck down by a double-edged weapon
in the hand of your own wife!*

Clytemnestra

Do you claim this deed is mine?
Do you imagine that I am Agamemnon's spouse?
[1500] I am a semblance of that corpse's wife.
I embody the revenge of that guest at Atreus' table,
offered my own children's flesh, I repay the household,
and take full-grown victims for those slain babies.

Chorus

You think you can claim you are innocent of these murders?
Who will be your witness?
How would anyone do that?
But still an avenger could arise
locked in this crime of fatherhood –
you may yet have your accomplice!

Forcing your way through streams of blood
with Havoc, the black spirit of war,
press on to vengeance for the gore of children served for meat.

*Alas, alas, Agamemnon, my King, my King!
How to pay tribute and how to mourn you?
How to speak of our affection for you?
While you lie in this spider's web!
Here you gasped your last breath
in this sacrilegious bed
you met your impious death
struck down by a double-edged weapon
in the hand of your own wife!*

Clytemnestra The death he had was a proper one in the circumstances.
Didn't he himself bring ruin on this house?
[1525] And he has suffered: act for act, wound for wound.

Iphigenia, my girl of tears,
what he did to this tender shoot
sprung from him...
Let him make no boasts in Hades
of his swordsmanship...

Chorus Without any ready answers,
bewildered –
where to turn when the house is tottering.
I fear the beating rain –
It may be blood –
Not wash, but crush the house.

On this distressed whetstone Destiny is sharpening justice
for another dreadful deed.

O Earth, sweet Earth,
if only you'd taken me before
and I'd not lived to see my lord
laid out in this unseemly way
(in a silver-sided bath).

Who will bury him? Who will lament?

(To Clytemnestra.)

Can you dare do this?

Kill your own husband with one hand

And mourn him and pay him tributes with the other?

Crown your unholy deed with a cruel disservice to his spirit?

Who, with tears for a hero's grave,

[1550] shall mourn with a true heart?

Clytemnestra It is not your duty to be concerned about him.

The hands that carried him and cut him down

Will take him down to Mother Earth.

There will be no morning for him here.

[1555] But Iphigenia, his daughter,

is waiting for her father with a loving kiss.

Chorus Reproof thus meets reproach by turn –

There is no clear adjudication.

The spoiler is despoiled, the killer pays the penalty.

So, while ever Zeus holds his throne,

it remains the law that *the doer shall be done*.

The actor pays the price.

[1565] No one can cast out of the house this curse!

The line is bound fast to calamity.

Clytemnestra You are right to see the situation in that way, at last.

But I am willing to swear a pact

with the Fiend of the house
[1570] that I will be content with what is done –
hard to endure though it is.
And he shall leave the house and
bleed some other line of murdering kin.
Whatever it takes. A small part of all this wealth is enough for me,
if we can purge ourselves of this
frenzied need to kill each other.

(Enter Aegisthus with armed retainers.)

Aegisthus Hail brilliant light of day
on this day of retribution!
Now, at last, I can say that there are gods in heaven
Who avenge mortal men for the crimes on Earth.

[1580] It is pure joy to me
to see this man lying here
in a robe spun by the avenging Furies.
He pays for the actions
at his father's hand.

Atreus, this man's father, was Lord of this place.
Thyestes, my father, was his brother, and rival for power.
Atreus drove him out of the city, out of his home.

My father relinquished his claim,
and sought to return to his hearth.
He was assured he would not die.
That, if he returned, his native soil would
not be defiled with his blood.

[1590] So Atreus, the godless father of this slain man,
did not shed his blood. But instead,
he made the semblance of a hearty welcome.

And enacting a happy banquet
served my father a special dish
an exotic fare:

his own children's flesh.

[1595] The toes and fingers he carefully cut off.
My father, unwittingly took the servings offered
and, did not recognize he ate a meal that was taboo
and has proved the downfall of the line.

Discovering the monstrous thing that he had done,
my father uttered a great cry, reeled back,
and vomited the butchered flesh.

[1600] He uttered a curse upon the line of Pelops,
kicked over the banquet table, and shouted,
"all the line of the Pleisthenes shall fall like this!"

This is the reason that you see this man fallen here.
I am the one who knotted the web of Justice.
The tiniest babe in swaddling clothes,
I was driven out with my unfortunate father.
But in manhood, Justice has brought me back again.
An exile, I have grasped at everything
to lay my hand upon my enemy,
[1610] Now I can die happily, to see him in Justice's net.

Chorus Aegisthus, your excessive sense of your own triumph
in the face of the anguish here, I hold in contempt.
You say that you planned to kill this man
and plotted this pitiful murder.
I tell you that, you will not escape the people's curses
and death by stoning at their hand.

Aegisthus Whom do you think you are to speak like that?
You sit at the oars and work, while we sit at the higher bench

and control the ship!
You may be old, but you shall learn a painful lesson
Old or not, you will be schooled in prudence.
Chains and the hunger have always been
the best cure for upstarts, young or old.
Can't you see?
The more you kick the more it hurts!

Chorus Woman, you are contemptible!
Lying in wait for the return of this man from war –
all the while defiling his bed –
planning the fall of this great warrior chief.

Aegisthus These words shall prove a source of tears for you.
Yap, yap, yap – my silly gods-of-song –
You think that everyone will dance to your tune,
But no one listens to this mad yelping.
You'll come to heal, and be put down by force.

Chorus *You*, rule here?
You may have schemed to see him fall,
but you lacked the courage to do this deed with your own hands!

Aegisthus To ensnare him was a woman's role, of course.
I could not get close to him, as I was a marked man.

But I shall govern the people.
With the gold he hid away I shall win the people.
And any who endanger civil order,
[1640] I'll yoke and destroy –
no well-fed harness horses here...
No! Hunger and his pitiless mate, the torture chamber,
shall watch over them until they drop:

this will change minds and hearts.

Chorus Coward, why didn't you kill him yourself?
You left his murder to a woman,
and left us open to this:
an unending chain of corruption
and the fury of the gods of Greece.

Orestes, perhaps can see the light of day!
Bring him home please, Providence and Fate!
Bring him home to put an end to these
awful winning killers.

Aegisthus If you speak like that, you'll quickly learn!
[1650] Get them, let your work be to hand.
*(Aegisthus' men raise their swords
to the old men's sticks.)*

Chorus Do your worst!
Raise your swords, if you will.

Aegisthus My hand is on my sword, I do not shrink from death.

Chorus You seem to suggest your own undoing.
We'll take you at your word and put fortune to the test.
(Clytemnestra intervenes.)

Clytemnestra No, my dear Lord, let's not create more wrong doings.
These would be a wretched harvest.
There is enough grief; let's have no more bloodshed.
Venerable citizens, go back to your homes.
What has been done, is destiny –
yield to it, before you come to harm.
If we could, we would all want to end the suffering,
but the hand of fate has us tight in its grasp.

We should accept it.

This is a woman's counsel, if any care to learn from it.

Aegisthus But to let these men get away with these insults...
This florid contempt for the proper authority...
Pushing their luck –
like unruly dogs who put their master to the test!

Chorus No one, certainly no one from here, will whimper around your feet!

Aegisthus Ha! I will stride over you in the days to come.

Chorus Not if fate brings Orestes home.

Aegisthus Exiles feed on hope, as I know too well.

Chorus Gorge yourself, and shit on Justice, while you can.

[1670]

Aegisthus You'll pay for this, you fools!

Chorus Strut, as you like, on your own dunghill: the cock and his foul.

Clytemnestra Let them yelp and howl. They are impotent.
You and I are the masters now.
We shall put this house in proper order.