Agamemnon

AESCHYLUS

c. 525–456 BC

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Ἀγαμέμνων

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Agamemnon · Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years after the Greek fleet sailed for Troy, a watchman on the palace roof at Argos sees the beacon fire that means the city has fallen. King Agamemnon is coming home. Waiting for him is his wife Clytemnestra, who has not forgiven him for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to get the fleet its wind.

Aeschylus builds dread slowly: the old men of the chorus brood on guilt inherited down the house of Atreus; Clytemnestra welcomes her husband with a purple carpet; and the captive Trojan princess Cassandra, cursed to prophesy truly and never be believed, sees what is about to happen inside the palace.

Agamemnon is the first play of the *Oresteia* (458 BC), the only Greek tragic trilogy that survives complete: *Agamemnon*, then *Libation Bearers*, then *Eumenides*. Together they follow one family's chain of killings to its end in a court of law.

Agamemnon

Argos, before the palace of the sons of Atreus, as the Trojan War ends.

PROLOGUE

A watchman on the palace roof sees the beacon fire announcing that Troy has fallen.

WATCHMAN [1] I keep asking the gods to release me from this toil, a watch a whole year long. All that time I've lain on the roof of the house of Atreus, propped on my elbows like a dog, and I've come to know the nightly gathering of the stars, and those bright lords that bring winter and summer to mortals as they blaze out in the sky.

[8] And now I'm watching for the signal of the torch, the gleam of fire that will bring word from Troy, the news that it's been taken. That's how she rules here: a woman with a heart that hopes and plans like a man. Whenever I take to this bed of mine, tossed about at night and wet with dew, never visited by dreams, because instead of sleep there's fear standing over me, so that I can't shut my eyelids tight in sleep; whenever I think I'll sing or hum a tune, cutting myself a song as a cure for sleepiness, then I weep instead and groan over the misfortune of this house, which isn't managed the fine way it used to be. But now may there come a happy release from toil, when the fire that brings good news shines out of the dark.

[22] Oh, welcome, light in the night, showing us daylight in the dark, and the start of many dances in Argos in thanks for this good luck! Hurrah! Hurrah!

I'm signaling loud and clear to Agamemnon's wife to get up from her bed as fast as she can and raise through the house the women's cry of triumph to greet this beacon, if the city of Troy really is taken, as the signal fire plainly announces. And I'll dance the prelude myself. I'll score my masters' throw as a lucky one, now that this beacon has rolled me a triple six.

Well, may it fall to me, when the lord of the house comes home, to hold his dear hand in this hand of mine. The rest I keep quiet about: a great ox has stepped on my tongue. The house itself, if it could find a voice, would tell it plainly enough. As for me, I'm happy to speak to those who know, and for those who don't, I've forgotten.[1]

PARODOS

The old men recall the omen at Aulis and Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia.

CHORUS

It's the tenth year now since Priam's
mighty opponent at law,
lord Menelaus, and Agamemnon too,
the strong yoked pair of the sons of Atreus,
honored by Zeus with twin thrones and twin scepters,
took an Argive fleet a thousand ships strong
out from this land

1 "An ox on the tongue" was a proverbial expression for being forced to keep silent.

and put to sea, an army to fight for their cause,
shouting a great cry of war from their hearts,
like vultures that, wild with grief for their young,
wheel round and round
high above their nests,
rowing with the oars of their wings,
since they've lost the labor
of watching over the nestlings' bed;
and someone on high hears—Apollo, maybe,
or Pan, or Zeus—the shrill wailing cry
of the birds, these settlers in his sky,
and for vengeance, though late,

sends a Fury on those who transgressed.
Just so Zeus the mighty, god of guests and hosts,
sends the sons of Atreus against Paris
for a woman of many husbands,
to bring many wrestling bouts that weigh down the limbs,
the knee pressed hard into the dust,
the spear-shaft splintered in the rites before the wedding,
to Danaans and Trojans alike. Things now stand

as they stand; all moves to its fated end.
Not by kindling fire under offerings, not by pouring
libations,
not by tears, over rites that knew no fire,

will anyone charm away that unbending anger.
And we, of no account, with our old flesh,
left behind from that expedition,
stay here,
leaning a strength no better than a child's on our staffs.
For the young marrow that springs up in the breast
is no better than an old man's—Ares isn't at his post there;
and extreme old age, its leaves already
withering, walks its three-footed way,
and, no stronger than a child,

wanders, a dream that appears by day.
But you, daughter of Tyndareus,
Queen Clytemnestra,
what's happening? What's new? What have you learned,
what message has persuaded you[2]

to send round your orders for sacrifice?
The altars of all the gods who guard the city,
gods on high and gods beneath the earth,
gods of the sky and gods of the marketplace,
are blazing with gifts.
On every side a torch
rises sky-high,
drugged with the soft, guileless coaxing
of pure holy oil,
the royal unguent from the inner stores.
Tell us whatever you can,
whatever it's right to tell,
and be the healer of this anxiety
that at times turns my thoughts dark,
and at times hope, shining kindly from the sacrifices,
keeps insatiable care away

from my mind, the grief that eats the heart.

2 Tyndareus, king of Sparta, was the father of Clytemnestra; Helen was her sister.

104 It is mine to proclaim the omen, seen on the road,
that blessed the power of men in command—for still, by the gods' gift,
the life that grew with me breathes into me
persuasion, the strength of song—
how the two-throned power of the Achaeans,
the like-minded leaders of the youth of Greece,
were sent with spear and avenging hand
against the Trojan land by a bird of war:
the king of birds to the kings of the ships,
one black, and one white behind,
appearing near the palace
on the side of the spear hand,
on perches seen by all,
feeding on a hare, a creature big with young,
caught before she could run her last race.
Cry *ailinon*, *ailinon*, but let the good prevail.[3]

3 *Ailinon* is a traditional cry of mourning.

122 And the army's trusty prophet, seeing the two sons of
Atreus,
two men of two tempers, knew the warlike eaters of the
hare
for the leaders of the expedition,
and reading the portent he spoke like this:
"In time this expedition
takes Priam's city,
and all the herds before its towers,
the people's abundant wealth,
Fate will violently plunder.
Only may no grudge from the gods cloud over
and strike down beforehand the great bit forged for Troy,
the army in camp. For holy Artemis in pity
bears a grudge
against her father's winged hounds,
who sacrifice the wretched cowering hare, her young and
all, before she gives birth;
she loathes the eagles' feast."
Cry *ailinon*, *ailinon*, but let the good prevail.

"Kind as she is, the lovely one,
to the tender dewy cubs of ravening lions,
and taking delight in the suckling young
of all the beasts that roam the wild,
she bids the signs of these things be fulfilled,
the visions favorable, yet full of blame.
And I call on Paean, god of healing,
not to let her bring the Danaans
contrary winds that hold the ships fast
long, and keep them from sailing,
pressing for another sacrifice, lawless, no meal for anyone,
a builder of quarrels born in the family,
that fears no husband. For there waits, rising up again,
fearsome,
a treacherous keeper of the house, an anger that
remembers, and avenges a child."
Such things Calchas cried out, along with great blessings,
as fated for the royal house from the birds on the road;
and in harmony with them
cry *ailinon*, *ailinon*, but let the good prevail.

Zeus, whoever he may be—if this is the name
he is pleased to be called by,
by this I address him.
I can find nothing to compare,
though I weigh everything in the balance,
except Zeus, if I am truly to cast
the vain burden from my mind.

He who once was great,
bursting with boldness for every fight,
won't even be spoken of: he is past.
And he who came after
has met the one who threw him three falls, and is gone.
But whoever gladly shouts the victory song of Zeus
will hit the mark of understanding whole:

176 Zeus, who set mortals on the road
to understanding, who laid it down
that learning through suffering holds sway.
In sleep, before the heart, there drips
the pain that remembers its wound;
and sound sense comes even to the unwilling.
And the grace of the gods who sit
at the holy helm comes, it seems, by force.

184 And so it was then: the elder leader
of the Achaean ships,
finding no fault with any prophet,
bending with the blasts of fortune that struck him,
when the Achaean host was weighed down
by the calm that kept them in port and emptied their jars,
as they held the shore across from Chalcis,
at Aulis, where the tides roar back and forth;

192 and winds that came down from the Strymon,
bringing harmful idleness, hunger, cruel anchorage,
driving men to wander, sparing neither ships
nor cables,
stretching the time out twice as long,
wore down and carded away the flower
of the Argives; and when, against the bitter storm,
the prophet cried out to the chiefs
another remedy, more grievous still,
naming Artemis, so that the sons of Atreus
struck the ground with their staffs
and could not hold back their tears —

205 then the elder king spoke out and said:
"A heavy doom if I disobey,
and heavy if I must butcher my child,
the jewel of my house,
staining a father's hands with streams
of a slaughtered girl's blood
beside the altar. Which of these is free of evil?
How can I desert the fleet
and fail my allies?
For them to long, with passion beyond passion,
for a sacrifice to stop the winds,
for a virgin's blood—that is their right. May all be well."[4]

218 And when he put on the yoke-strap of necessity,
the wind of his mind veering, impious,
impure, unholy, from that moment
he changed, and set his mind on the deed that dares all.
For mortals are made bold by wretched
derangement, shameful in its counsels, the first source of grief. So he dared
to become the sacrificer of his daughter,
to help a war to avenge a woman,
a first rite for the fleet.

228 Her prayers, her cries to her father,
her young girl's life,
the war-loving chiefs counted as nothing.
After the prayer her father told the attendants
to take her up above the altar like a young goat,
as she lay fallen forward, wrapped in her robes,
to lift her high with all their strength,
and with a guard on her lovely mouth
to hold back
a cry that would curse the house,

4 The child is Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to Artemis at Aulis so that the fleet could sail.

238 by force, by the bridle's silencing strength.
And as she let her saffron-dyed robe stream to the ground,
she struck each of the sacrificers
with a glance from her eyes,
an arrow asking for pity,
standing out as in a painting, wanting
to speak to them by name, since often
in her father's hall, at the rich banquets,
she had sung, and with her pure voice, still unwed,
lovingly honored her dear father's paean
of good fortune at the third libation —[5]

248 What happened next I didn't see, and I won't tell.
But the arts of Calchas do not go unfulfilled.
Justice tips the scale, so that those who suffer
learn.
The future you'll hear when it comes; before then, let it go:
that's the same as grieving in advance.
It will come clear, rising with the light of dawn.
Well, may what follows turn out well, as she wishes,
she who stands nearest, the lone guarding bulwark
of this Apian land.[6]

FIRST EPISODE

Clytemnestra announces Troy's fall and describes the chain of beacons that carried the news.

CHORUS 258 I've come, Clytemnestra, in reverence for your power. It's just to honor the wife of the ruling man when the male throne is left empty. Whether you've heard some good news or not, and are sacrificing in hope of good news, I'd be glad to hear; but if you keep silent, I won't hold it against you.

CLYTEMNESTRA 264 May the dawn, as the proverb goes, be a bearer of good news, born of her mother, Night. You'll hear a joy

5 At a banquet the third libation was poured to Zeus the Savior, with a song of thanksgiving (paean).

greater than anything you hoped for: the Argives have taken Priam's city.

CHORUS [268] What did you say? The words escaped me, I couldn't believe them.

CLYTEMNESTRA [269] Troy belongs to the Achaeans. Am I speaking clearly?

CHORUS [270] Joy steals over me, and calls up tears.

CLYTEMNESTRA [271] Yes, your eyes give away your loyal heart.

CHORUS [272] But what makes it certain? Do you have any proof of this?

CLYTEMNESTRA [273] I do—how could I not?—unless a god has tricked me.

CHORUS [274] Is it the persuasive visions of dreams you put your faith in?

CLYTEMNESTRA [275] I wouldn't accept the fancies of a drowsing mind.

CHORUS [276] Then has some wingless rumor fattened you up?

CLYTEMNESTRA [277] You sneer at my mind as if I were a young girl.

CHORUS [278] And how long ago was the city sacked?

CLYTEMNESTRA [279] In the night, I tell you, that has just given birth to this daylight.

CHORUS [280] And what messenger could get here that fast?

CLYTEMNESTRA [281] Hephaestus, sending out a bright blaze from Ida. Beacon sent beacon on to here, a courier of fire. Ida sent it to Hermes' crag on Lemnos; and third, the steep height of Athos, Zeus's mountain, took up the great torch from the island. Towering up so as to skim across the back of the sea, the strength of the traveling torch, rejoicing … the pine-torch, gleaming gold like a sun, passed the blaze on to the watchtowers of Macistus. And he, not dawdling, not carelessly overcome by

6 "Apian land" is an old name for the Peloponnese, here meaning Argos.

sleep, didn't neglect his part as messenger. Far off, over the streams of the Euripus, the beacon's light came and signaled to the watchmen on Messapion. They lit an answering fire and sent the message onward, setting a heap of dry old heather ablaze.[7] 296 The torch, strong and not yet dimming, leapt across the plain of the Asopus like a bright moon to the crag of Cithaeron, and roused another relay of the traveling fire. The watch there didn't refuse the light sent from afar, but burned a bigger fire than they'd been told. The light swooped down over the lake of Gorgopis, and reaching Mount Aegiplanctus, urged them not to be slow with the ordinance of fire. Kindling it with unstinting strength, they send up a great beard of flame, blazing so as to pass beyond the headland that looks down on the Saronic strait; till it swooped down when it reached the height of Arachnaeus, the watchpost next to our city. And then it strikes down on this house of the sons of Atreus, this light, true grandchild of the fire on Ida. 312 Those, I tell you, are the rules for my torchbearers, one after another, completing the course in relays; and the winner is the one who runs first and last. That's the proof, the token I give you: my husband passed the word to me from Troy.

CHORUS 317 Lady, I'll offer my prayers to the gods later. But I'd like to hear this story again from start to finish, and marvel at it, just as you tell it.

CLYTEMNESTRA 320 Troy is in the Achaeans' hands this day. I imagine the cries ringing out in the city don't mix. Pour vinegar and oil into the same jar and you'd call them quarrelers, not friends: they keep apart. So too you can hear the voices of the captured and the conquerors separately, from their two different fortunes. The ones, fallen on the bodies of husbands and brothers, children on the bodies of the old men who gave them life, wail for the death of those they loved best from throats that are no longer free. The others, worn out by a night of roaming after

7 The chain of beacons runs from Mount Ida near Troy across the Aegean by way of Lemnos, Mount Athos and Euboea (Macistus, the Euripus strait) to mainland Greece and on to Argos.

the battle, sit down hungry to breakfast on whatever the city has —not by any order of rank, but as each has drawn his lot of fortune. Already they're living in the captured Trojan houses, free of the frosts and dews of the open sky; and like lucky men, they'll sleep the whole night through without posting a guard.

338 If they show proper reverence to the gods who guard the city, the gods of the conquered land, and to the shrines of the gods, then the captors won't be captured in their turn. But may no lust first fall upon the army to plunder what they shouldn't, overcome by greed. They still have to get safely home and round the turn, to run back the other leg of the double course. And even if the army came home with no offense against the gods, the wrong done to the dead might still wake, even if no sudden disaster struck. That's what you hear from me, a woman. But may the good prevail, clear to see, with nothing tipping it either way. That's the benefit I've chosen above many blessings.

CHORUS 351 Lady, you speak kindly and sensibly, like a prudent man. Now that I've heard your sure proofs, I'm ready to address the gods properly; for a joy has been won that well repays our troubles.

FIRST STASIMON

The chorus sings of Zeus punishing Paris, of Helen's flight, and of the people's anger over the war dead.

CHORUS

Zeus our king, and Night, our friend,
who have won us great glories,
you who cast over the towers of Troy
a net that covered all, so that neither grown man
nor any of the young could leap clear
of the great dragnet of slavery,
of ruin that catches all!
Great Zeus of guests and hosts I revere,
who brought this about, who long ago
bent his bow against Paris, so that his shaft
would neither fall short nor fly above the stars
and strike in vain.
The stroke of Zeus—they can call it that;
this much, at least, can be traced.
He did as he decreed. Someone has said
the gods don't deign to care about mortals
who trample on the grace of things not to be touched;
but that man was impious.
Now it stands revealed: ruin pays back
the reckless,
who breathe more arrogance than is just,
when their houses teem beyond measure,
past what is best. Let there be wealth
free from harm, enough to content
a man blessed with good sense.
For wealth is no rampart
for a man who, in his surfeit,
has kicked the great altar of Justice
out of sight.

385 Wretched Persuasion drives him on by force,
unbearable child of scheming Ruin.
Every remedy is in vain. The harm isn't hidden;
it shines out, a light with a dreadful gleam.
Like bad bronze
under rubbing and blows,
he turns black and blotched
when put to the test, since
he is a boy chasing a bird on the wing,
bringing on his city a stain past bearing.
None of the gods hears his prayers;
the unjust man who deals in such things
one of them brings down.
Such was Paris, who came
to the house of the sons of Atreus
and shamed the table of hospitality
by stealing a wife.

403 She left her people the clash of shields
and spears,
the arming of ships,
and bringing Troy destruction for a dowry
she passed lightly through the gates,
daring what should never be dared. And many a groan
the prophets of the house let out, saying:
"Oh, oh, the house, the house, and its princes!
Oh, the bed, and the traces of a wife who loved her
husband!
Here you can see him sitting apart,
silent, dishonored, not reproaching,
in bitterest grief.
In longing for her who is over the sea,
a phantom will seem to rule the house.
The grace of shapely statues
is hateful to the husband;
in the emptiness of the eyes
all Aphrodite is gone."

420 “And dream-shapes come, full of mourning,
bringing a joy that is empty.
Empty, for when a man thinks he sees good things,
the vision slips away
through his hands and is gone,
never after following on its wings
the paths of sleep.”
These are the griefs in the house, at the hearth,
and others worse than these.
But everywhere, for those who set out together from the
land of Greece,
grief that the heart must endure
is seen in every house.
Much there is that cuts to the heart:
each knows the men
he sent away; but instead of men,
urns and ashes
come home to each one’s house.

437 Ares, money-changer of bodies,
holding his scales in the battle of spears,
sends home from Troy to their loved ones
heavy gold dust, refined in the fire,
bitterly wept,
filling the urns, neatly stowed,
with ash in place of men.
And they mourn, praising this man
as skilled in battle,
that one as fallen nobly in the slaughter—
for another man’s wife.
This someone growls in silence,
and grief and resentment creep
against the sons of Atreus who pressed the suit.
And there, around the wall,
the beautiful young hold graves
in the land of Troy; the hated earth
has hidden those who won it.

The talk of the citizens, laden with anger, is heavy;
he pays the debt of a curse the people have ratified.
My anxiety waits to hear
something wrapped in night.
For the gods do not lose sight
of those who kill many. The black Furies,
in time, reverse the fortune of a man
who prospers without justice,
wear his life away and turn him to darkness;
and once he's among the vanished,
there is no help.
To be praised beyond measure
is heavy; for the lofty heads are struck
by bolts from the eyes of Zeus.
I choose a prosperity that wakes no envy.
May I never be a sacker of cities,
nor be captured myself
and see my life spent under others.

Sent by the fire of good news,
a swift report
runs through the city; but whether it's true,
who knows, or some deception from the gods?—
Who's so childish, or so knocked out of his wits,
as to let his heart be fired
by new messages of flame,
and then, when the story changes, sicken?—
It's just like a woman's temper
to give thanks before the thing is clear.—
Too credulous, a woman's mind,
its boundary is quickly trespassed; but quick to die,
a rumor spread by a woman perishes. —

SECOND EPISODE

A herald arrives and tells of the army's hardships and the storm that scattered the fleet.

CHORUS 488 We'll soon know about these relays of light-bearing torches, these beacons and handings-on of fire—whether they're true, or whether, like a dream, this light came bringing joy and fooled our minds. I see a herald coming from the shore, shaded with sprigs of olive. The thirsty dust, sister and neighbor of the mud, tells me this: he won't signal to you without a voice, or by kindling a flame of mountain wood with the smoke of fire. Either he'll speak out and give us more cause to rejoice, or—but I want no part of the opposite. May good be added to the good that's appeared.—Whoever prays for anything else for this city, may he reap the fruit of his mind's error himself.

HERALD 503 Oh, soil of my fathers, land of Argos! I've come back to you in the light of this tenth year. Many hopes were shattered, but one I've won: I never dared pray that I'd die here in this Argive land and have my share of a grave in the soil I love best. Now greetings, land! Greetings, light of the sun, and Zeus, highest lord of the land, and the Pythian lord—may you shoot your arrows at us no longer. You were our enemy long enough beside the Scamander; now be our savior instead, and our healer, lord Apollo. And all the gods gathered here I greet, and my protector Hermes, beloved herald, whom heralds revere, and the heroes who sent us out: receive back kindly the army the spear has left.[8] 518 Oh, palace of kings, dear house, holy seats, you gods who face the rising sun: if ever before, now with these bright eyes welcome your king after so long. For he has come, bringing light in the darkness to you and to everyone here alike —lord Agamemnon. Give him a good welcome; it's only fitting, now that he has dug up Troy with the mattock of Zeus who brings justice, the tool that has worked her ground. The altars

8 In the *Iliad*, Apollo, the Pythian god, sends a plague on the Greek camp at Troy with his arrows.

and the shrines of the gods are gone, and the seed of the whole land is being wiped out. [529] That's the yoke he's thrown round Troy's neck, the lord, the elder son of Atreus, a fortunate man, and he has come home, the most worthy of honor of all mortals now living. For neither Paris nor the city that shared his guilt can boast that the deed outweighed what they've suffered. Convicted of abduction and theft, he lost what he'd seized, and mowed down his father's house, land and all, to utter ruin. The sons of Priam have paid twice over for their sins.

CHORUS [538] Joy to you, herald of the Achaean army!

HERALD [539] Joy I have! I wouldn't say no to the gods now, if they wanted me dead.

CHORUS [540] Did longing for this land of your fathers wear you out?

HERALD [541] So much that my eyes are wet with tears of joy.

CHORUS [542] Then it was a sweet sickness you'd all caught.

HERALD [543] How do you mean? Explain, and I'll get a grip on what you're saying.

CHORUS [544] You were struck with desire for those who desired you back.

HERALD [545] You mean this land longed for the army as the army longed for it?

CHORUS [546] So much that I often groaned from a darkened heart.

HERALD [547] Where did this gloomy dread come from that sat on your heart?

CHORUS [548] Long ago I found that silence is the cure for harm.

HERALD [549] What? With our masters away, were you afraid of someone?

CHORUS [550] So much that now, to use your words, even dying would be a great joy.

HERALD [551] Yes, it's ended well. As for all that, over so long a time, some of it you might say turned out smoothly, and some of

it again you could complain about. Who but the gods goes free of pain for all his life? If I told you of our toils and our rough lodgings, the cramped gangways and bad berths—what didn't we groan over, what day went by without its share? And then on land it was even more hateful. Our beds were right under the enemy's walls, and from the sky and up from the ground the meadow dews kept drizzling down on us, a constant ruin of our clothes, filling our hair with vermin. [563] And if you told of the winter that killed the birds, the unbearable cold the snows of Ida sent, or the heat, when the sea sank, waveless and windless, into its noonday sleep—but why mourn all that? The toil is past. Past it is for the dead too, so that they'll never care to rise up again. Why count up the ones who were spent, and why should the living grieve at fortune's spite? I say to misfortunes: a long goodbye. [573] For those of us who are left of the Argive army, the gain wins out, and the pain doesn't weigh as much against it. So it's fitting to make this boast under the light of the sun, as our fame flies over sea and land: "The Argive force, having taken Troy at last, nailed up these spoils for the gods in their houses throughout Greece, a glory for ages to come." Those who hear it must praise the city and its generals; and the grace of Zeus that brought it about will be honored. There, you have the whole story.

CHORUS [583] I'm won over by what you say, and I don't deny it; the old are always young enough to learn. But it's the house and Clytemnestra who should care about this most—though I share in the riches too.

CLYTEMNESTRA [587] I raised my cry of triumph long ago, for joy, when the first fiery messenger came in the night to announce that Troy was taken and overthrown. And someone scolded me: "So you trust beacon-fires and think Troy has fallen now? How like a woman, to let her heart get carried away." Talk like that made me look as if I'd lost my wits. Still, I went on sacrificing, and all through the city, here and there, following the women's custom, people raised the cry of triumph, with words of good

omen, in the shrines of the gods, soothing the fragrant flame that feeds on incense.[9]

598 And now, what need is there for you to tell me the rest? I'll hear the whole story from the king himself. But I'll hurry to give my honored husband the best welcome on his return. For what day is sweeter for a woman to see than this, when she opens the gates to her husband and a god has brought him safe home from the war? Take this message to my husband: let him come as quickly as he can, the city's darling. And when he comes, may he find in his house a faithful wife, just as he left her, a watchdog of the house, loyal to him and hostile to those who wish him harm, the same in every other way, one who has broken no seal in all this length of time. I know no more of pleasure from another man, or of scandalous talk, than I know of dipping bronze.

HERALD 613 A boast like that, so full of truth, is no shame for a noble woman to utter.

CHORUS 615 That's how she has spoken to you, for your instruction: a fine-sounding speech, to anyone who can read it clearly. But you, herald, tell me—I'm asking about Menelaus—has he come back with you, safe and home again, this land's beloved power?

HERALD 620 I can't tell lies that sound fine and have my friends enjoy them for long.

CHORUS 622 Then how can you hit on news that's both good and true? When those two are split apart, it's hard to hide.

HERALD 624 The man has vanished from the Achaean army, he and his ship with him. I'm not lying.

CHORUS 626 Did he put out from Troy in plain sight, or did a storm, a trouble that struck everyone, snatch him away from the fleet?

9 The cry of triumph (the *ololygmos*) was a shrill ritual cry raised by women at sacrifices and moments of rejoicing.

HERALD 628 You've hit the target like a master archer, and put a long misery in a few words.

CHORUS 630 And what did the other sailors say about him? Was he alive or dead?

HERALD 632 No one knows enough to report it clearly, except the Sun, who nourishes the life of the earth.

CHORUS 634 Then tell me, how did the storm come on the fleet, and how did it end, by the anger of the gods?

HERALD 636 It isn't right to stain a day of good omen with a tongue that brings bad news. The honor we owe the gods belongs apart from that. When a messenger with a grim face brings a city the disaster it prayed never to hear, an army fallen, one wound to the city, a wound to the whole people, and many men from many homes offered up as victims to the double lash that Ares loves, ruin with two spears, a bloody pair in harness—a man loaded down with sorrows like those should sing this paean of the Furies. But when I come with good news of deliverance to a city rejoicing in its good fortune, how can I mix the good with the bad, and tell of a storm that struck the Achaeans, not without the anger of the gods? For fire and sea, the bitterest of enemies before, swore an alliance and proved their good faith by destroying the wretched army of the Argives. In the night, disaster rose with the heaving waves. 654 Winds from Thrace smashed the ships against one another. Gored by each other's horns in the violence of the hurricane and the rain-lashed surf, they vanished from sight, sent spinning by an evil shepherd. When the bright light of the sun came up, we saw the Aegean sea blossoming with the bodies of Achaean men and the wreckage of ships. As for us, our ship, with its hull unharmed, was stolen away or begged off by someone—some god, not a man, with his hand on the tiller. And Fortune the savior chose to sit on our ship, so that it neither took the surge at anchor nor ran aground on the rocky coast. Then, having escaped the Hades of the sea, in the white light of day, not trusting our luck, we herded our new sorrow in our thoughts, the fleet battered and cruelly

ground down. [671] And now, if any of them is still breathing, they speak of us as dead—why wouldn't they? And we imagine the same about them. May it turn out for the best. As for Menelaus, expect him first and above all to come. At any rate, if some ray of the sun finds him alive and looking on the light, by the devising of Zeus, who doesn't yet mean to wipe out the family, there's some hope he'll come home again. You've heard this much; know that what you've heard is the truth.

SECOND STASIMON

The chorus sings of Helen as ruin, of a lion cub reared in the house, and of inherited arrogance.

CHORUS

[681] Who was it who named her
so utterly true—
some power we cannot see,
guiding his tongue to the mark
by foreknowledge of what was fated?—
the spear-won bride, fought over on both sides,
Helen? For true to her name,
taker of ships, taker of men, taker of cities,
she sailed out from her delicate, costly curtains
on the breath of the giant West Wind,
and a host of shield-bearing huntsmen
followed the vanished track of oars
of those who had beached their ships
on the leafy banks of Simois,
for the sake of bloody strife.[10]

10 The chorus puns on Helen's name and the Greek root *hel-*, "take, destroy."

699 And on Troy the Wrath that works its purpose
drove a marriage-bond rightly named for grief,
exacting payment in later time
for the dishonor done to the table
and to Zeus who guards the hearth
from those who loudly honored the bride's song,
the wedding hymn that fell that day
to the bridegroom's kin to sing.
But Priam's ancient city,
learning a different hymn,
one full of lament, groans loud, I think,
calling Paris the man of the fatal marriage-bed,
for she has endured a life
of lament and utter ruin
for the pitiful blood of her citizens.[11]

716 Just so a man reared in his house
a lion's cub, robbed of its milk,
still wanting the breast.
In the first rites of its life
it was gentle, fond of the children,
a delight to the old.
Often he held it in his arms
like a newborn baby,
its eyes shining toward his hand,
fawning when its belly drove it.

11 The Greek word *kēdos* means both "marriage-tie" and "grief."

But in time it showed
the nature it had from its parents.
Repaying its fosterers
with ruinous slaughter of their flocks,
it made a feast unbidden;
the house was fouled with blood,
a grief past fighting for the household,
a great havoc of many deaths.
By a god's will a priest of ruin
was reared in the house.

So, I would say, there came at first
to the city of Troy
a spirit of windless calm,
a gentle ornament of wealth,
a soft arrow of the eyes,
a flower of desire that stings the heart.
But she swerved aside and brought
her marriage to a bitter end,
a ruinous guest, a ruinous companion,
rushing on the sons of Priam
under escort of Zeus, god of guests:
a Fury, bringing tears to brides.

There is an old saying,
spoken long ago among mortals:
that a man's great prosperity,
once full-grown, has children
and does not die childless,
and from good fortune there springs
for his family insatiable misery.
But I hold my own mind, apart from others.
It is the impious deed
that breeds more after it,
like its own stock;
but a house that keeps justice straight
has a fate blessed in its children always.

763 Old Arrogance is apt to breed
a young arrogance,
running riot in the miseries of mortals,
sooner or later, when the appointed
day of its birth arrives,
and with it the spirit no one can fight or war against,
unholy Daring, black Ruin for the house,
both like the parents that bore them.

772 But Justice shines
in smoke-blackened dwellings
and honors the righteous life.
Gold-spangled mansions
where hands are filthy
she leaves with averted eyes,
and goes to what is pure,
paying no reverence to the power of wealth
stamped false with praise.
And she steers all things to their end.

THIRD EPISODE

Agamemnon returns with Cassandra; Clytemnestra persuades him to walk into the palace on purple cloths.

CHORUS

782 Come then, my king, sacker of Troy,
offspring of Atreus,
how shall I greet you? How shall I honor you
without overshooting
or falling short
of the right measure of welcome?
Many mortals prize
the look of things

789 above the truth, and overstep justice.
Everyone is ready to groan
along with the man in misfortune,
but no sting of grief
gets through to the heart.
And they share in his joy, putting on a look to match,
forcing unsmiling faces into smiles.
But a man who is a good judge of his flock
cannot be fooled by the eyes of someone
who seems to be loyal at heart
but fawns with watery friendship.
You, back then, when you were mustering the army
for Helen's sake—I won't hide it from you—
were pictured in my mind in ugly colors,
not steering the tiller of your wits well,
seeking through sacrifice to bring back courage
to men who were dying.
But now, not from the surface of my heart, nor unkindly,
...
the toil is a joy to those who have finished it well.
In time, by asking, you will come to know
which of the citizens has kept house in the city justly,
and which unfittingly.

AGAMEMNON 810 First it is right that I greet Argos and the gods of the land, who share with me the credit for my homecoming and for the justice I exacted from Priam's city. For the gods heard the case—not from anyone's tongue—and without wavering cast their votes into the urn of blood for the death of men and the destruction of Troy. To the opposite vessel only the hope of a hand drew near, and it was never filled. Even now the captured city is marked by its smoke. The storm-blasts of ruin are alive, and the ash, dying along with it, sends up rich gusts of wealth. For this we must pay the gods thanks that will be long remembered, since we have hemmed the city in with savage snares, and for a woman's sake the Argive beast ground it to dust, the brood of the horse, the shield-bearing host, launching

its leap about the setting of the Pleiades. Vaulting over the wall, a ravening lion licked its fill of royal blood.[12]

829 That is the prelude I've spun out for the gods. As for what you think, I heard it and I remember, and I say the same; you have me on your side. Few men have it in their nature to honor, without envy, a friend who prospers. The poison of ill will settles on the heart and doubles the burden of the man who has the sickness: he's weighed down by his own sorrows, and groans when he sees another man's good fortune. I can speak from experience, for I know very well that those who seemed most loyal to me are a mirror of companionship, the ghost of a shadow. Only Odysseus, the one who sailed against his will, once he was yoked, was a ready trace-horse for me—whether I'm speaking of a man who is dead or alive.[13] 844 For the rest, matters concerning the city and the gods, we will call public assemblies and deliberate with everyone gathered. What is in good shape, we must plan how to keep that way for a long time. And wherever there is need of healing remedies, we will try, by burning or by cutting with kind intent, to turn back the harm of the disease.

851 Now I will go into my palace and to my hearth, and first greet the gods who sent me out and have brought me back again. Victory has followed me; may it stay with me firmly.

CLYTEMNESTRA 855 Citizens, elders of Argos gathered here, I won't be ashamed to tell you of my love for my husband. With time, people lose their fear. I didn't learn this from others: I'll tell you of my own unbearable life all the while this man was under the walls of Troy. First, for a woman to sit at home alone, without her man, is a terrible misery, hearing one cruel rumor after another, one man arriving, and then another bringing in worse news on top of bad, shouting it to the house. And if this man had received as many wounds as the rumors channeled to

12 The "brood of the horse" is the Greek warriors who hid inside the wooden horse to get into Troy.

13 Odysseus had tried to avoid joining the expedition to Troy by pretending to be mad.

his house, he'd be riddled with more holes than a net. [869] If he had died as often as the stories multiplied, he'd have been a second Geryon with three bodies, boasting that he'd taken a triple cloak of earth, dying once in each of his forms. Because of these cruel rumors, others have often loosened the noose hung high around my neck, held fast as I was. That is why our son isn't standing here, as he should be—the pledge of my faith and yours—Orestes. Don't be surprised at this. A kind friend and ally of ours is raising him, Strophius of Phocis, who warned me of trouble on two sides: your danger under the walls of Troy, and the chance that the clamor of the people, with no one ruling, might overthrow the council, since it's in men's nature to kick the man who is down even harder. An excuse like this, believe me, carries no deceit.[14]

[887] As for me, the rushing springs of my tears have run dry; there isn't a drop left in them. My eyes are damaged from late nights, weeping for the beacons meant for you, always neglected. And in my dreams I'd be woken by the faint whir of a buzzing gnat, seeing more sufferings happen to you than the time that slept beside me could hold.

[895] Now, having endured all this, with a heart free of grief, I would call this man the watchdog of the farmstead, the forestay that saves the ship, the firm-planted pillar of a lofty roof, a father's only child, land sighted by sailors beyond all hope, the loveliest day to see after a storm, a flowing spring to a thirsty traveler. It is sweet to escape every constraint. These are the greetings I think he deserves. And let envy keep away, for we've borne many sorrows before. Now, my dearest, step down from this carriage—but don't set on the ground, my lord, that foot of yours that trampled Troy. [908] Serving women, why are you waiting? You've been given the task of spreading tapestries over the ground of his path. At once let his way be strewn with purple, so that Justice may lead him into a home he never hoped to see.

14 Geryon was a three-bodied monster killed by Heracles; the "cloak of earth" is a grave.

The rest my care, which sleep does not overcome, will set right, with the gods' help, as fate has ordained.

AGAMEMNON [914] Daughter of Leda, guardian of my house, you've made a speech to suit my absence: you stretched it out long. But praise as it should be given—that honor ought to come from others. And for the rest, don't pamper me in a woman's way, and don't grovel and gape your cries at me the way a foreigner would, and don't strew my path with cloths and draw down envy on it. It's the gods we should honor with these things. For me, a mortal, to walk on embroidered beauties is not possible without fear. I tell you, revere me as a man, not as a god. My fame cries out without any doormats and embroideries, and not to think foolishly is a god's greatest gift. Call a man happy only when he has ended his life in the prosperity he loves. If I could act like this in everything, I'd have nothing to fear.

CLYTEMNESTRA [931] Now tell me this, and tell me what you really think.

AGAMEMNON [932] What I really think, believe me, I won't corrupt.

CLYTEMNESTRA [933] Might you have vowed to the gods, in some moment of fear, to do this?

AGAMEMNON [934] Yes, if someone who really knew had prescribed it, I'd have declared this rite.

CLYTEMNESTRA [935] And what do you think Priam would have done, if he'd won what you have?

AGAMEMNON [936] He'd have walked on embroideries, I'm quite sure.

CLYTEMNESTRA [937] Then don't be ashamed of what men may say against you.

AGAMEMNON [938] And yet what the people say has great power.

CLYTEMNESTRA [939] But no one envies a man who isn't worth envying.

AGAMEMNON [940] It isn't a woman's part to be eager for a fight.

CLYTEMNESTRA [941] But for the fortunate, even being beaten is becoming.

AGAMEMNON [942] Do you really value winning this contest so much?

CLYTEMNESTRA [943] Do as I say. Yield the victory to me—of your own free will.

AGAMEMNON [944] Well, if you're set on it, let someone quickly untie my shoes, the slaves my feet tread in. And as I walk on these sea-purple fabrics, may no envy strike me from the eye of the gods far off. I feel deep shame at ruining the house beneath my feet, wasting its wealth and its weavings bought with silver.

[950] So much for that. This foreign woman—take her inside kindly. The god looks from afar with favor on the one who uses his power gently. No one wears the yoke of slavery willingly. She is the choice flower of all our treasure, the army's gift to me, and she has come with me.

[956] And since I've been brought around to listen to you in this, I'll go into the halls of my house, treading on purple.

CLYTEMNESTRA [958] There is the sea—and who will ever drain it dry?—breeding the ever-renewed ooze of so much purple, worth its weight in silver, to dye our garments. And our house, thanks to the gods, has plenty of these. This house doesn't know what it is to be poor. I would have vowed to trample many garments, had it been prescribed for the house by oracles, when I was contriving a ransom for this life. For while the root lives, the foliage comes back to the house, spreading its shade over it against the Dog Star. And now that you've come to the hearth of your home, you signal warmth come in winter; and when Zeus makes wine from the bitter grape, then there is coolness in the house at last, when the man who brings fulfillment walks his home. Zeus, Zeus, Fulfiller, fulfill my prayers! And take thought for what you mean to fulfill.

THIRD STASIMON

The chorus cannot shake off a foreboding of disaster.

CHORUS

975 Why does this fear
keep hovering so steadily
before my heart that reads the signs?
Why does my song, unbidden and unpaid, play the prophet?
Why does no confidence
that I can trust take its seat
on my mind's dear throne,
to spit it away
like dreams hard to read?
Time has grown old
since the stern-cables were hauled in
and the sand of the shore flew up,
when the seafaring army
set out for Troy.

988 With my own eyes I learn
of his homecoming, my own witness;
and still, without the lyre,
my heart within me, self-taught, chants
the dirge of the Fury,
with none at all
of hope's dear courage.
My inward parts do not babble idly:
my heart beside my righteous mind
whirls in eddies that bring things to fulfillment.
But I pray that, against my expectation,
it may all prove false
and fall into nothing fulfilled.

1001 Too true: great health
never rests content at its limit,
for disease, its neighbor
sharing the same wall, presses against it.
And a man's destiny, holding a straight course,
...
strikes on a hidden reef.
But if caution beforehand
throws overboard part of the stored-up wealth
with a well-measured sling,
the whole house does not sink,
laden with too much misery,
nor does the hull go under.
Truly the gift from Zeus, abundant,
from the furrows of each year,
has put an end to the plague of famine.

1017 But once a man's dark blood
has fallen to the ground in death,
who can call it back again by singing spells?
Did not Zeus, to keep us cautious,
put a stop even to the one who knew rightly
how to bring the dead back up?
If one fate ordained by the gods
did not keep another fate
from winning more,
my heart would outrun my tongue
and pour all this out.
But now it mutters in the dark,
aching, with no hope
of ever unwinding anything to good purpose
from a mind on fire.[15]

15 The healer who raised the dead is Asclepius, whom Zeus struck down with a thunderbolt for it.

FOURTH EPISODE

Cassandra foresees her own and Agamemnon's murders, recalls the house's old crimes, and goes in to die.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1035 You get inside too—I mean you, Cassandra—since Zeus, in no anger, has made you a sharer in the holy water of this house, standing among many slaves near the altar of the god who guards our property. Step down from this carriage, and don't be proud. They say that even the son of Alcmene was once sold and had to put up with eating a slave's bread. And if necessity brings someone to this fortune, there's much to be grateful for in masters whose wealth is old. Those who have reaped a fine harvest they never hoped for are harsh to their slaves in everything, beyond what's right. You'll have from us what is customary.[16]

CHORUS 1047 It's you she's speaking to; she's finished, and spoken plainly. Caught as you are in the nets of fate, you should obey, if you're going to obey. But perhaps you won't.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1050 Well, unless she has some unknown foreign speech, like a swallow, I'll speak to her understanding and persuade her with words.

CHORUS 1053 Go with her. As things stand, what she says is best. Do as she says: leave this seat in the wagon.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1055 I don't have time to waste out here at the door. The sheep are standing already at the hearth in the heart of the house, ready for slaughter—we never hoped we'd have this joy. If you mean to do any of what I say, don't delay. But if you don't understand and can't take in what I'm saying, then make signs with your foreign hand instead of speaking.

CHORUS 1062 The stranger seems to need a clear interpreter. She behaves like a wild animal newly caught.

16 The son of Alcmene is Heracles, who was once sold as a slave to the Lydian queen Omphale.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1064 She's mad, that's what it is, and she listens to her own wicked thoughts. She's come here from a city newly captured, and she doesn't know how to take the bit until she's foamed out her rage in blood. I won't waste more words on her and be insulted.

CHORUS 1069 But I pity her, and I won't be angry. Come, poor woman, leave the wagon empty. Give way to this necessity, and take up your new yoke.

CASSANDRA 1072 *Otototoi, popoi, da!* / Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS 1074 Why do you cry out these *ototoi*s to Loxias? He isn't a god who has any business with mourners.[17]

CASSANDRA 1076 *Otototoi, popoi, da!* / Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS 1078 There she goes again, calling with ill-omened cries on the god who has no place standing by at a lament.

CASSANDRA

1080 Apollo, Apollo,
god of the roads, my Apollo—my destroyer!
For you have destroyed me, and thoroughly, a second time.[18]

CHORUS 1083 It seems she's about to prophesy her own troubles. The gift of the god stays with her, even in the mind of a slave.

CASSANDRA

1085 Apollo, Apollo,
god of the roads, my Apollo—my destroyer!
Ah, where have you brought me? To what kind of house?

CHORUS 1088 To the house of the sons of Atreus. If you don't understand that, I'm telling you, and you won't call it a lie.

17 Loxias is Apollo's name as god of oracles; Apollo, god of the healing paean, was thought to shun lamentation.
18 Cassandra puns on Apollo's name and *apollōn,* "destroying"; Apollo "of the roads" was worshiped at a pillar by house doors.

CASSANDRA

No—to a house the gods hate, that knows
of so much murder of kin, of heads hewn off,
a slaughterhouse of men, a floor spattered with blood.

CHORUS The stranger seems to have a keen nose, like a hound; she's tracking down those whose murder she'll uncover.

CASSANDRA

Here is the evidence I trust:
these babies weeping for their slaughter,
and their roasted flesh, eaten by their father.[19]

CHORUS We had heard of your fame as a prophet, but we aren't looking for any prophets.

CASSANDRA

Oh, *popoi*! What is she plotting?
What is this new grief, this great,
great evil she is plotting in this house,
unbearable for those she should love, past curing?
And help stands far away.

CHORUS I know nothing of these prophecies. But the others I recognized: the whole city is crying them aloud.

CASSANDRA

Oh, wretched woman, will you really do this?
Your husband, who shares your bed—
you make him bright in the bath—how can I tell the end?
It will come quickly: a hand reaches out,
and hand after hand stretches forth.

CHORUS I don't understand yet. First riddles, and now I'm baffled by dim oracles.

19 Atreus killed the children of his brother Thyestes and served their flesh to him at a banquet.

CASSANDRA

Ah, ah! Oh, oh! What is this I see?
Is it some net of Hades?
No, the snare is she who shares his bed, who shares
in his murder. Let the band never sated with this family
raise its cry of triumph over a sacrifice that calls for stoning.

CHORUS

What Fury is this you call on
to raise its cry over the house? Your words bring me no brightness.
To my heart has run the drop
of saffron hue, as when, for a man fallen by a mortal wound,
it ebbs away with the last rays of setting life.
Ruin comes swiftly.

CASSANDRA

Ah, ah! Look, look! Keep the bull
away from the cow! She has caught him in robes,
with the black-horned contrivance,
and she strikes. He falls in the vessel of water.
It's a treacherous, murderous bath I'm telling you of.

CHORUS

I wouldn't boast of being a fine judge of oracles,
but I take these to point to something bad.
Yet what good word from oracles
ever comes to mortals? It's through evils
that their wordy arts
bring men to learn the fear that prophets sing.

CASSANDRA

Oh, oh, the ill-starred fortunes of a wretched woman!
For it's my own suffering I cry out, pouring it in on top of his.
Why have you brought me here, wretched as I am?
For nothing but to die with him. What else?

CHORUS

You are frenzied in mind, carried away by a god,
and over yourself you cry
a song that is no song, like the tawny bird
that never has its fill of crying—ah!—from its sorrowing heart,
moaning "Itys, Itys," all through a life
that blooms with sorrows: the nightingale.[20]

CASSANDRA

Oh, oh, the fate of the clear-voiced nightingale!
The gods clothed her in a winged body
and gave her a sweet life, free of weeping.
But what waits for me is the cleaving of the two-edged blade.

CHORUS

Where do they come from, these rushing, god-sent,
futile pains of yours?
Why do you shape your terrors into song
with ill-sounding cries and shrill strains at once?
Where do you get the bounds
of your prophetic path, so full of evil words?

20 In myth Procne killed her son Itys and was turned into a nightingale, forever mourning him.

CASSANDRA

Oh, the marriage, the marriage of Paris, death to his own people!
Oh, Scamander, water my fathers drank!
Once, by your banks, poor girl,
I was nursed and grew;
but now by Cocytus and the banks of Acheron
it seems I'll soon be chanting my prophecies.[21]

CHORUS

What is this word you've uttered, all too plain?
A newborn child could hear it and understand.
I am struck as if by a deadly bite
as you wail shrilly over your painful fortune:
it shatters me to hear.

CASSANDRA

Oh, the toils, the toils of a city utterly destroyed!
Oh, my father's sacrifices before the towers,
so many grazing cattle slaughtered! Yet they brought
no remedy at all
to save the city from suffering as it has.
And I, my mind on fire, will soon dash myself to the ground.

CHORUS

This follows what you said before.
Some malevolent spirit,
falling on you with crushing weight,
makes you sing of sufferings, mournful, bringing death.
But how it ends, I cannot tell.

CASSANDRA All right, then. My prophecy will no longer peer out from behind veils like a newly married bride. It will come rushing in bright and clear, blowing toward the sunrise, so that like a wave it washes up against the light a woe far greater

21 Cocytus and Acheron are rivers of the underworld.

than this. I'll stop instructing you in riddles. Bear me witness, keep pace with me, as I sniff out the trail of crimes done long ago. This house is never left by a chorus that sings in unison but not in harmony, for what it sings is not good. And yes, it has drunk human blood to make itself bolder, and now it stays in the house, a revel band hard to send away: the kindred Furies. 1191 They sit close to the house and sing their song of the ruin that began it all; and in turn they spit in disgust at a brother's bed, hostile to the man who trampled it. Have I missed, or do I hit my quarry like an archer? Or am I a lying prophet, a babbler knocking on doors? Swear first, and bear witness that I know the story of this house's ancient crimes.[22]

CHORUS 1198 And how could an oath, a bond however nobly made fast, bring any cure? But I'm amazed at you. You were raised beyond the sea, and yet you speak about a foreign city as accurately as if you had been standing here.

CASSANDRA 1202 The prophet Apollo appointed me to this office.

CHORUS 1204 Surely not—the god too, struck with desire?

CASSANDRA 1203 Before now I was ashamed to speak of this.

CHORUS 1205 Yes, anyone who prospers grows more delicate.

CASSANDRA 1206 He was a strong wrestler, panting with desire for me.

CHORUS 1207 And did the two of you come to the making of children, as is the custom?

CASSANDRA 1208 I agreed to Loxias, and then I cheated him.

CHORUS 1209 When you were already possessed by the god-given art?

CASSANDRA 1210 Already I was prophesying all my countrymen's sufferings.

CHORUS 1211 Then how did you go unharmed by Loxias' anger?

22 The brother's bed: Thyestes seduced the wife of his brother Atreus.

CASSANDRA [1212] Ever since I wronged him in this, I could persuade no one of anything.

CHORUS [1213] Well, to us at least your prophecies seem believable.

CASSANDRA [1214] Ah, ah! Oh, oh, the horror! Again the terrible labor of true prophecy whirls me round and throws me into turmoil with its ominous preludes. Do you see them, sitting there by the house, those young ones, like shapes in dreams? Children, killed as if by their own kin, their hands full of meat, their own flesh for food. I see them plainly, holding guts and innards, a pitiful load, which their father tasted. For this, I tell you, someone is plotting vengeance: a cowardly lion who rolls about in the bed, keeping house—oh!—for the master who has come home, my master, since I must bear the yoke of slavery. And the commander of the ships, the destroyer of Troy, doesn't know what the tongue of that hateful hound, after it has licked him and pricked up its ear in glad welcome, will accomplish with evil luck, like Ruin lying in ambush. [1231] Such is her daring: the female is the male's murderer. What loathsome beast could I call her and hit the mark? A serpent with a head at either end? Or some Scylla living among the rocks, the ruin of sailors, a raging mother out of Hades, breathing truceless war against her own? And how she raised her ritual cry of triumph, this woman who will dare anything, as if at the rout of a battle! And she pretends to rejoice at his safe homecoming. If you don't believe any of this, it's all the same—what does it matter? What's coming will come. And soon you'll stand here and, pitying me, call me a prophet all too true.

CHORUS [1242] Thyestes' feast on his children's flesh I understood, and I shudder; terror grips me to hear it truly told, nothing made up. But as for the rest I heard, I've fallen off the course and I'm running wide.

CASSANDRA [1246] I tell you, you will look upon Agamemnon's death.

CHORUS [1247] Hush, poor woman! Speak words of good omen, or let your mouth sleep.

CASSANDRA [1248] But no Healer stands over what I say.

CHORUS [1249] No, not if it's going to happen. But may it somehow not happen!

CASSANDRA [1250] You pray, while they are busy with killing.

CHORUS [1251] What man is preparing this abomination?

CASSANDRA [1252] Then you've been thrown far off the track of my prophecies.

CHORUS [1253] Yes, because I didn't grasp the scheme of the one who's going to do it.

CASSANDRA [1254] And yet I know the Greek language all too well.

CHORUS [1255] So do the Pythian oracles, and they're hard to understand all the same.

CASSANDRA [1256] Ah! What fire this is! It's coming over me. *Ototoi*, Lycean Apollo! Oh, me, me! This two-footed lioness, who lies in bed with a wolf while the noble lion is away, will kill me, wretch that I am. Like someone brewing a poison, she vows she'll mix my wages too into her rage, as she sharpens a sword for the man, to make him pay with murder for bringing me here. Then why do I wear these things that make a mockery of me, this staff and these prophet's wreaths around my neck? You, at least, I'll destroy before my own death. Go to ruin! There you lie, and that's how I pay you back. Make some other woman rich in ruin instead of me. Look—Apollo himself is stripping me of my prophet's robe. He watched me, even in this finery, mocked to the full by friends turned enemies, all with one voice, for nothing— [1273] and I put up with being called a vagabond, like a begging priestess, a wretched, starving beggar— and now the prophet, having finished with me, his prophet, has led me off to this deadly fate. Instead of my father's altar, a chopping block awaits me, red with the hot blood of my slaughter, a first offering. Yet we won't die unregarded by the gods. Another will come in turn to avenge us, a son who will kill his mother, avenger of

his father. An exile, a wanderer, banished from this land, he will come home to set the coping-stone on these ruins for his family. For the gods have sworn a mighty oath that his father, lying face up in death, will bring him back. Why then do I lament like this, so piteously? 1287 Since I first saw the city of Troy fare as it fared, and those who took the city are now coming to this end by the gods' judgment, I too will go and fare as I must. I'll endure death. These doors I greet as the gates of Hades. And I pray for a deadly blow, so that without a struggle, as my blood flows out in an easy death, I may close these eyes.

CHORUS 1295 Woman, so very wretched and so very wise, you've spoken at length. But if you truly know your own death, how can you walk so bravely to the altar, like an ox driven by a god?

CASSANDRA 1299 There's no escape, strangers, none, not with more time.

CHORUS 1300 Yet the last moment of time is the one most prized.

CASSANDRA 1301 The day has come. I'll gain little by running.

CHORUS 1302 Well, know this: you endure it with a brave heart.

CASSANDRA 1303 No one who is happy hears that said of them.

CHORUS 1304 But to die with glory is a grace for a mortal.

CASSANDRA 1305 Oh, father, for you and for your noble children!

CHORUS 1306 What is it? What fear is turning you back?

CASSANDRA 1307 Ah, ah!

CHORUS 1308 Why that cry? Unless it's some horror in your mind.

CASSANDRA 1309 The house breathes murder, dripping blood—

CHORUS 1310 What? That's the smell of victims at the hearth.

CASSANDRA 1311 It's the same kind of vapor you see rising from a tomb—

CHORUS 1312 That's no Syrian incense you're describing for the house.

CASSANDRA 1313 Well, I'll go and wail inside the house for my own fate and Agamemnon's. Enough of life! Oh, strangers, I'm

not crying out for nothing, like a bird afraid of a bush. Bear me witness to this when I'm dead, when a woman dies in return for me, a woman, and a man falls in return for a man ill-wed. This is the favor I ask of you as a guest, as one about to die.

CHORUS 1321 Poor woman, I pity you for the death the god foretold.

CASSANDRA 1322 Once more I want to make a speech, not a dirge, my own, for myself. I pray to the sun, facing its last light, that my avengers make my enemies, my murderers, pay as well for me, a slave woman killed, an easy conquest. Oh, human affairs! When they go well, a shadow could overturn them; and if they go badly, a wet sponge with a few strokes wipes the picture out. And this I pity far more than that.

FOURTH STASIMON

The chorus reflects that no mortal's good fortune is safe from ruin.

CHORUS

1331 Faring well is something no mortal ever has enough of.
From halls that fingers point to in envy
no one bars it, turning it away
with the words, "Come in no more."
To this man the blessed gods granted
the taking of Priam's city,
and he comes home honored by the gods.
But now if he must pay for the blood of those before him,
and, dying for the dead,
bring to fulfillment vengeance for other deaths,
what mortal, hearing this, could boast
that he was born with a fate free of harm?

EXODOS

Agamemnon is killed; Clytemnestra defends the deed, Aegisthus claims his revenge, and the chorus defies him.

AGAMEMNON 1343 Oh! I'm struck—a deadly blow, deep inside!

CHORUS [1344] Quiet! Who is crying out that he's struck, wounded to the death?

AGAMEMNON [1345] Oh, again! I'm struck a second time!

CHORUS [1346] The deed is done, I think, judging by the king's groans. Come, let's consult together, in case there's some safe plan.

[1348] —I'll tell you my view: summon the citizens here to the palace with a shout.— —I think we should burst in as fast as we can and catch them in the act, with the blood still running on the sword.— —And I share that view; I vote for doing something. This is no moment for delay.— —It's plain to see: they're making a start like men setting up a tyranny over the city.— —Yes, because we're wasting time. They trample the glory of delay into the ground, and their hands don't sleep.— —I don't know what plan to hit on and propose. It's for the one who acts to do the planning too.— —I feel the same, since I don't see how words can raise the dead to life again.— —What, will we drag out our lives like this and give way to these defilers of the house as our rulers?— [1364] —No, it's unbearable. Better to die: death is a gentler fate than tyranny.— —What, are we going to take groans as evidence and divine that the man is dead?— —We should only be angry about this when we know for sure. Guessing is one thing, knowing for sure another.— —That's the view I approve, and so do the rest on every side: first find out clearly how it stands with the son of Atreus.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1372] Much of what I said before suited the moment; I won't be ashamed now to say the opposite. How else could anyone, plotting hostility against enemies who seem to be friends, fence up the nets of ruin to a height too great to leap over? This contest of an old quarrel has long been in my thoughts, and it has come at last, in time. I stand where I struck, over the work accomplished. This is how I did it—I won't deny it: so that he could neither flee nor ward off his doom, I cast around him an endless net, as for fish, an evil wealth of robe. I strike him twice; and with two groans his limbs went slack. And

when he had fallen I gave him a third, a votive offering to the Zeus beneath the earth, the savior of the dead.[23] [1388] So he fell and gasped away his life, and blowing out a sharp spurt of blood he strikes me with a dark shower of bloody dew—and I rejoice in it no less than the sown grain rejoices in the bright, god-given rain when the bud is giving birth.

[1393] Since that is how things stand, you elders of Argos here, rejoice, if you want to rejoice; I glory in it. If it were fitting to pour a libation over a corpse, it would be just to pour it over this one—more than just. Such a bowl of cursed evils he filled in the house, and now he has come home and drains it himself.

CHORUS [1399] We're amazed at your tongue, how bold your mouth is, that you can boast such words over your husband.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1401] You're testing me as if I were a thoughtless woman. But I speak with a fearless heart to men who know, and whether you choose to praise me or blame me, it's all the same. This is Agamemnon, my husband—and a corpse, the work of this right hand, a just craftsman. That's how things stand.

CHORUS

[1407] What evil, woman,
what food grown from the earth, or drink
drawn up from the flowing sea, have you tasted,
that you've taken on this sacrifice, and the curses the people cry aloud?
You have cast him off, cut him off; and cast out of the city you will be,
a heavy hatred to the citizens.

CLYTEMNESTRA [1412] Now you sentence me to exile from the city, to the citizens' hatred and the curses the people cry aloud, though back then you raised no objection at all to this man. He thought no more of it than the death of a beast, though sheep abounded in his fleecy flocks: he sacrificed his own child, the

23 She makes her third blow a mock offering to Zeus of the underworld (Hades), as the third libation at a feast went to Zeus the Savior.

dearest fruit of my labor, as a spell to charm the Thracian winds. Shouldn't you have driven him out of this land, in payment for his pollution? But when you hear of what I've done, you're a harsh judge. I tell you, make your threats knowing that I'm ready on equal terms: whoever beats me by force may rule me. But if the god decrees the opposite, you'll learn some sense, though you learn it late.

CHORUS

1426 You are proud in your scheming,
and your words are arrogant. Just as
your mind is maddened by this blood-dripping fortune,
so a smear of blood stands out plain upon your eyes.
Still you must, dishonored, robbed of friends,
pay stroke for stroke.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1431 Then hear this too, the solemn sanction of my oath. By Justice, fulfilled for my child, by Ruin and the Fury, to whom I slaughtered this man, no expectation of fear sets foot in my hall so long as Aegisthus kindles the fire on my hearth, loyal to me as before. He is no small shield of confidence for us. Here lies the man who outraged this woman, his wife, the darling of every Chryseis under Troy; and here lies this captive, this reader of signs, who shared his bed, this teller of prophecies, his faithful bedmate, and just as familiar with the sailors' benches. They haven't fared without their due. He lies like this; and she, like a swan, having sung her last dying lament, lies here, his lover. And she has brought me a delicacy to spice the luxury of my bed.[24]

24 Chryseis was Agamemnon's captive concubine at Troy in the *Iliad*; the plural mocks his many such women.

CHORUS

Ah, if only some Fate would come quickly,
without great pain,
without long keeping to a sickbed,
and bring us the sleep that lasts forever,
now that our kindliest guardian
is laid low,
who suffered much for a woman's sake
and at a woman's hands has lost his life.

Oh, oh, Helen, out of your mind,
you alone destroyed the many, the very many
lives beneath Troy.
Now you have crowned yourself with a last flower, long remembered,
through blood that can't be washed away. Truly there was in the house back then
a Strife, strongly built, a husband's misery.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Don't pray for the lot of death,
weighed down by these things;
and don't turn your anger on Helen,
as a killer of men, as one woman who destroyed
the lives of many Danaan men
and brought about a grief past healing.

CHORUS

Spirit, you who fall upon the house and on the two
descendants of Tantalus,
you wield through women a power equal in daring,
and it bites my heart.
Standing over the body like a hateful raven,
she boasts, against all law,
of singing her song …[25]

CLYTEMNESTRA

Now you have set your judgment right
when you call on the spirit of this family,
thrice-gorged.
From him comes the lust for licking blood,
nourished in the belly; before the old pain has ceased,
fresh gore is flowing.

CHORUS

Truly a mighty spirit, ruling the house,
heavy in wrath, is the one you praise—
ah, ah!—an evil praise
of ruinous fortune never sated.
Oh, oh, it comes through Zeus,
cause of all, doer of all.
What is accomplished for mortals without Zeus?
Which of these things is not ordained by the gods?

25 Tantalus was the grandfather of Atreus; his descendants are the royal house of Argos.

Oh, oh, my king, my king,
how shall I weep for you?
From a loving heart, what can I say?
You lie in this spider's web,
breathing out your life in an impious death.
Oh, oh, this bed unworthy of a free man,
struck down by a treacherous death
with a two-edged weapon from your wife's hand.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You claim this deed is mine?
Don't reckon
that I am Agamemnon's wife.
No—taking the form of this dead man's wife,
the ancient, bitter avenging spirit
of Atreus, that cruel host of the banquet,
has paid him back,
sacrificing a full-grown man on top of the young.

CHORUS

That you are guiltless
of this murder—who will bear witness?
How, how? But the avenging spirit, from his father,
could be your accomplice.
Black Ares forces his way
through floods of kindred blood
to the place where, advancing, he will grant justice
for the clotted gore of children eaten.

Oh, oh, my king, my king,
how shall I weep for you?
From a loving heart, what can I say?
You lie in this spider's web,
breathing out your life in an impious death.
Oh, oh, this bed unworthy of a free man,
struck down by a treacherous death
with a two-edged weapon, by a hand.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Didn't he himself bring treacherous ruin
into the house?
Yes—my shoot by him, raised up,
Iphigenia, so much wept for:
he did as he deserved and suffers as he deserves.
Let him make no great boasts in Hades,
now that by death from the sword
he has paid for what he began.

CHORUS

I am at a loss, robbed of any
resourceful thought,
which way to turn, as the house falls.
I fear the beating storm of blood
that brings the house down; the drizzle is ending.
And Fate is whetting justice for another deed of harm
on other whetstones.

Oh earth, earth, if only you had taken me
before I saw him lying
on the low bed of a silver-walled bath!
Who will bury him? Who will sing his dirge?
Will you dare to do this—having killed
your own husband, to wail for him
and, for his great deeds, unjustly
pay his soul a graceless grace?
And who, sending forth the praise at the tomb
over this godlike man with tears,
will labor at it in truth of heart?

CLYTEMNESTRA

It's not your place to concern yourself
with this care. At our hands
he fell, he died, and we will bury him,
not with weeping from those of his house;
but Iphigenia, his daughter,
gladly, as is right,
will meet her father by the swift-flowing
ferry of sorrows,
throw her arms around him, and kiss him.

CHORUS

Reproach comes to meet reproach.
It's a hard fight to judge between them.
The plunderer is plundered, the killer pays.
It remains, while Zeus remains on his throne,
that the doer suffers: that is law.
Who could cast the seed of the curse out of the house?
The family is glued fast to ruin.

CLYTEMNESTRA

You have come to this oracle
with truth. But I, for my part,
am willing to swear a pact with the spirit of the sons of Pleisthenes:
to accept these things,
hard to bear as they are; and for the rest, that he leave
this house and wear down another family
with murders by kin.
Keeping a small share
of the wealth, I'll be fully content,
if only I've rid these halls
of the madness of killing one another.[26]

26 Pleisthenes: an ancestor in the house of Atreus; his "sons" here are the whole family.

AEGISTHUS [1577] Kindly light of the day that brings justice! Now at last I can say that the gods who avenge mortals look down from above on the woes of earth, now that I see this man lying in a woven robe of the Furies—a welcome sight to me—paying for the schemes of his father's hand.

[1583] For Atreus, this man's father, when he ruled this land and his power was disputed, drove out of the city and out of his home my father Thyestes—to put it plainly—his own brother. And poor Thyestes came back as a suppliant to the hearth and found his lot was safe: he would not be killed and stain his ancestral soil with his blood, not he himself. But this man's godless father, Atreus, more eager than friendly, pretending to celebrate a happy day of butchering meat, served my father, as a gift of hospitality, a feast of his own children's flesh. The feet and the combs of the fingers he broke up small, above ... ... sitting apart. And my father at once, not knowing, took the parts that couldn't be recognized and ate a meal that, as you see, has proved ruinous to the family. [1598] And then, when he recognized the monstrous deed, he cried out, fell back vomiting up the slaughtered flesh, and called down on the descendants of Pelops a doom unbearable, kicking over the table to match his curse: so may the whole race of Pleisthenes perish. That is why you can see this man fallen here. And I am the one who justly stitched this murder together. I was the third son, and Atreus drove me out with my unhappy father, a baby still in swaddling clothes; but when I had grown up, justice brought me home again. And I laid hands on this man though I wasn't even here, fitting together every device of the evil plan. So now even death would be fine for me, since I have seen him in the nets of justice.

CHORUS [1612] Aegisthus, I have no respect for gloating over evil. You say you killed this man deliberately, and that you alone planned this pitiful murder. I tell you, when justice comes, your head won't escape the people's curses, and the stones that come with them—be sure of it.

AEGISTHUS [1617] You talk like this, sitting at the lower oar, while those on the upper bench command the ship? Old as you are, you'll learn how hard it is at your age to be taught, when you're told to show some sense. Chains and old age and the pangs of hunger are the finest doctor-prophets there are for teaching the mind. Don't you see it, though you have eyes to see? Don't kick against the goads, or you'll strike and hurt yourself.

CHORUS [1625] You woman! You stayed home waiting for the men to come back from battle, and all the while you shamed a husband's bed—did you plan this death for a man, a general?

AEGISTHUS [1628] These words too will be the start of tears. Your tongue is the opposite of Orpheus'. He led all things after him with the joy of his voice; you, provoking us with your silly yapping, will be the one led away. Once you're mastered, you'll prove tamer.

CHORUS [1633] As if you'll be my tyrant over the Argives—you, who plotted this man's death and then didn't dare do the deed with your own hand!

AEGISTHUS [1636] Because the deceiving was clearly the woman's part; I was suspect, an enemy from of old. With this man's wealth I'll try to rule the citizens. Anyone who won't obey, I'll yoke in heavy harness—he'll be no barley-fed trace-horse, I promise you. No, hunger, that hateful companion in the dark, will see him grow gentle.

CHORUS [1643] Then why, with your cowardly soul, didn't you kill this man yourself? Why did a woman, the pollution of the land and of its native gods, kill him? Does Orestes still see the light somewhere, so that he may come home here with kindly fortune and kill these two, victorious over both?

AEGISTHUS [1649] Well, since you mean to act and talk like this, you'll soon find out. Come on, my comrades of the guard, the work is close at hand!

CHORUS [1651] Come on, then, every man get his sword ready, hilt in hand!

AEGISTHUS 1652 Well, I too have my hand on my sword, and I don't refuse to die.

CHORUS 1653 You talk of dying—we accept the omen. We'll take what fortune brings.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1654 No, no, dearest of men, let's do no more harm. Even this is a great deal to reap, a miserable harvest. There's misery enough already; let's shed no blood. Go, honored elders, to your homes, yielding to what is fated before you come to harm. What we have done had to be done. If there should be enough of these troubles, we would accept it, struck so wretchedly as we have been by the heavy hoof of the spirit. That is a woman's word, if anyone thinks it worth learning.

AEGISTHUS 1662 But that these men should let their idle tongues blossom against me like this, and fling out such words, tempting fate, and miss the mark of good sense, and insult their master!

CHORUS 1665 It wouldn't be like Argives to fawn on a villain.

AEGISTHUS 1666 Well, I'll come after you yet, in days to come.

CHORUS 1667 Not if some god guides Orestes home to come here.

AEGISTHUS 1668 I know how exiles feed on hopes.

CHORUS 1669 Go on, fatten yourself and foul justice, since you can.

AEGISTHUS 1670 Be sure you'll pay me a penalty for this folly.

CHORUS 1671 Brag away, bold as a rooster beside his hen.

CLYTEMNESTRA 1672 Don't pay any mind to their idle yapping. You and I, the masters of this house, will put things in good order.