Eumenides

AESCHYLUS

c. 525–456 BC

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Εὐμενίδες

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited

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Eumenides · Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC)

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited. Reading edition, Forage, October 2026. forage.com/aeschylus/eumenides

Greek text: Herbert Weir Smyth (1863–1937, ed.), *Aeschylus*, vol. 2 (Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, and New York: Putnam, 1926), via the Perseus Digital Library (github.com/PerseusDL/canonical-greekLit) (canonical-greekLit, tlg0085.tlg007.perseus-grc2), CC BY-SA 4.0. Lines the editor brackets as interpolated are omitted; lost text is marked "…". English: translated from the Greek with AI (Claude), then edited for accuracy and consistency. Not reviewed by a human specialist. Free to reuse under CC BY-SA 4.0. The small numbers set in the text are line numbers.

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INTRODUCTION

Orestes has killed his mother, and her Furies, ancient goddesses who punish bloodshed within a family, are hunting him. The play opens at Apollo's oracle at Delphi, where the priestess finds the Furies asleep around the suppliant Orestes, and moves to Athens, where Orestes clings to the image of Athena.

Athena does something new: instead of judging the case herself, she sets up a court of Athenian citizens on the Areopagus to try it, with Apollo defending Orestes and the Furies prosecuting. The trial, and what Athena then does with the Furies' fury, turns the old law of blood for blood into the justice of a city.

Eumenides is the third and last play of the *Oresteia* (458 BC): *Agamemnon*, then *Libation Bearers*, then *Eumenides*. The title, "the Kindly Ones," is a name later given to the Furies.

Eumenides

Delphi, at Apollo's temple, then Athens, at Athena's temple and on the Areopagus.

PROLOGUE

At Delphi the priestess finds Orestes among the sleeping Furies; Apollo sends him to Athens.

PYTHIA [1] First in this prayer, before all the gods, I honor Earth, the first prophet. After her I honor Themis, who, as one story has it, was the second to take her seat at this oracle of her mother's. Third in line, with Themis willing and no force used on anyone, another Titaness, a daughter of Earth, took the seat: Phoebe. She gave it as a birthday gift to Phoebus, who takes his name from Phoebe's. He left the lake and the rocky reef of Delos, put in at the shores of Pallas, thronged with ships, and came to this land and his seat on Parnassus. The children of Hephaestus, road-builders, escort him here and pay him great reverence, turning a wild country into a tame one.[1] [15] When he arrived, the people paid him high honor, and so did Delphus, the lord who steered this land. Zeus filled his mind with the prophetic art and set him on this throne as the fourth prophet. Loxias is the spokesman of Zeus his father.[2]

[20] These are the gods I put first in my prayers. Pallas, whose shrine stands before the temple, has pride of place in my words as well. I revere the nymphs, where the Corycian rock is hollow,

1 The "children of Hephaestus" are the Athenians, descended from Erichthonius, Hephaestus' son; they were said to have cleared the road to Delphi.
2 Loxias is Apollo's name as god of oracles.

loved by birds, a haunt of spirits. Bromius holds the place too, I don't forget it, ever since the god led his Bacchants to war and stitched up death for Pentheus as if for a hare. I call on the springs of Pleistus, on Poseidon's power, and on Zeus the highest, who brings all to fulfillment, and then I take my seat on the throne as prophet. Now may they grant me success on this entrance far beyond any before. If there are any Greeks here, let them come forward in the order of the lot, as is the custom. For I prophesy as the god leads me.[3]

34 Terrible to tell, terrible to see with one's eyes, are the things that have driven me back out of Loxias' house! I have no strength left, I can't stand on my feet; I'm running on my hands, not on quick legs. An old woman who's frightened is nothing, no better than a child.

39 I was making my way into the inner shrine, hung with wreaths, and there on the navel-stone I see a man the gods abhor, sitting as a suppliant. His hands are dripping blood, and he holds a freshly drawn sword and a branch of olive from high on the tree, decently wreathed with a great tuft of wool, white fleece. On that point, at least, I can speak plainly.[4]

46 In front of this man an astonishing band of women is sleeping, seated on chairs. No, not women. Gorgons, I'd call them; and yet I can't compare them to Gorgon shapes either. Once before I saw some in a painting, carrying off Phineus' dinner. But these, to look at, have no wings. They're black, loathsome in every way. They snore with breaths no one can come near, and from their eyes they drip a hateful ooze. Their dress is not fit to bring before the statues of the gods, or into the houses of men. I've never seen the tribe this company comes from, nor any land

3 Bromius is Dionysus; Pentheus, king of Thebes, was torn apart by the Bacchants for resisting him. The Corycian cave, high on Parnassus, was sacred to the nymphs.

4 The navel-stone (omphalos) at Delphi was held to mark the center of the earth. Suppliants carried olive branches wound with wool.

that could boast of rearing this brood without harm and not groan afterwards over its pains.[5]

60 From here on, let this be the concern of the master of this house himself, mighty Loxias. He is a healer and prophet, a reader of portents, and he cleanses the houses of others.

APOLLO 64 No, I will not betray you. To the end I'll be your guardian, whether I stand close beside you or far away, and I will never go soft on your enemies. And now you see these raging creatures caught. They've fallen asleep, these loathsome maidens, gray and ancient children, whom no god, no man, no beast ever mingles with. It was for evil they were born, since they dwell in evil darkness, in Tartarus beneath the earth, hated by men and by the Olympian gods. Even so, run, and don't lose heart. They'll drive you across the wide mainland, as you tread the earth in endless wandering, over the sea and through cities ringed by water. 78 Don't wear yourself out too soon as you tend this hardship. When you come to the city of Pallas, sit down and clasp the ancient image in your arms. There we'll have jurors for this case and words to charm them, and we'll find a way to free you from these troubles once and for all. For it was I who persuaded you to kill your mother.[6]

ORESTES 85 Lord Apollo, you know how to do no wrong. And since you understand that, learn also not to neglect me. Your strength is a sure pledge that you will do me good.

APOLLO 88 Remember: don't let fear conquer your mind. And you, Hermes, my brother by blood, born of the same father, watch over him. Live up to your name and be his Escort. Shepherd this suppliant of mine (Zeus respects this sacred right of outcasts) as he sets out among mortals with a fortune that escorts him well.[7]

5 Phineus, a blind prophet-king, was plagued by the Harpies, winged women who snatched away his food.

6 The ancient olive-wood image of Athena on the Acropolis was believed to have fallen from heaven.

7 One of Hermes' titles was Pompaios, "the Escort," as guide of travelers and of the dead.

GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA [94] So you'd sleep, would you? Hey! What use are you asleep? Because of you I'm dishonored like this among the other dead. The reproach for those I killed never leaves me among the perished, and I wander in disgrace. I tell you plainly: they hold me guilty of the gravest crime. And yet though I suffered so terribly at the hands of those dearest to me, not one of the spirits is angry for my sake, though I was slaughtered by a matricide's hands. Look at these wounds with your heart, and see where they came from. For the mind, asleep, is bright with eyes; but by day, the lot of mortals is to see nothing ahead.

[106] Many offerings of mine you've licked up: wineless libations, sober drinks to soothe you, and solemn night-feasts I sacrificed on the hearth of fire, at an hour shared with no other god. And all of it, I see, is trampled underfoot. He's slipped away and gone like a fawn, and lightly, too, he sprang out of the middle of your nets and leered at you with contempt. Hear me, for I have pleaded for my very soul. Come to your senses, goddesses beneath the earth. In a dream, I, Clytemnestra, am calling you now.

CHORUS [117] (A moan.)

GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA [118] Moan if you like, but the man is gone, escaping far away. He has friends, and they're nothing like mine.

CHORUS [120] (A moan.)

GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA [121] You sleep too deeply, and you feel no pity for what I suffered. Orestes, the killer of this mother, is gone.

CHORUS [123] (A groan.)

GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA [124] You groan, you sleep. Won't you get up, quickly? What task has fate given you except to work evil?

CHORUS [126] (A groan.)

GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA [127] Sleep and toil, powerful conspirators, have drained the strength of the dreadful she-dragon.

CHORUS [129] (A loud double moan.) Get him, get him, get him, get him! There, mark him!

GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA [131] In your dream you hunt your prey, and you bay like a hound that never lets go of its eagerness for the chase. What are you doing? Get up! Don't let toil beat you, and don't let sleep make you soft and forget my pain. Let my just reproaches pain you to the liver; to the right-minded they are a goad. Send your bloody breath after him like a following wind, wither him with its fumes, the fire of your belly. After him! Waste him away with a second chase!

CHORUS [140] Wake her up, wake her, as I'm waking you. Still asleep? Get up! Kick sleep away, and let's see if anything in this prelude has gone astray.

PARODOS

Roused by Clytemnestra's ghost, the Furies find their prey gone and accuse Apollo.

CHORUS

[143] Oh, oh, no! We have suffered, friends,
(and I have suffered much, and all for nothing),
we have suffered a painful blow, oh gods,
an evil past bearing!
The beast has slipped from the nets and is gone.
Overcome by sleep, I have lost my prey.

[149] Oh, son of Zeus, you are a thief!
Young, you've ridden down old goddesses,
honoring the suppliant, a godless man,
cruel to his parents.
You stole away the mother-killer, you, a god.
Which of these things will anyone call just?

155 And to me a reproach came out of my dreams
and struck me, like a charioteer
with a goad gripped in the middle,
under the heart, under the liver.
I can feel the cruel public flogger's lash,
the heavy, heavy chill.

162 This is what the younger gods do,
ruling with power beyond all justice.
There is the throne, dripping murder
around its foot, around its head.
Here you can see the navel of the earth
take on itself the grim pollution of blood, and keep it.

169 Prophet though he is, he has stained his inner shrine
with pollution at his own hearth,
self-driven, self-summoned,
honoring mortal things against the law of the gods,
destroying the shares the Fates assigned of old.

174 He wrongs me too, and that man he will not set loose.
Though he flee beneath the earth, he will never be free.
A polluted suppliant, he will find another avenger
from his own blood to fall upon his head.

FIRST EPISODE

Apollo drives the Furies from his temple; in Athens Orestes clasps Athena's image, and they track him down.

APOLLO 179 Out, I command you! Out of this house, quickly! Leave my prophetic shrine, or you may feel a winged, glittering snake, shot from a golden bowstring, and in agony you'll spew out black foam drawn from men, vomiting the clots of blood you've sucked. It isn't fit for you to come near this house. No, your place is where there are sentences of beheading and gouging out of eyes, where throats are cut and boys' youth is spoiled by the destruction of their seed, where there's mutilation and stoning, and men impaled through the spine moan long and

piteously. Do you hear what sort of feast you love, that makes the gods spit at you? Your whole appearance shows it. Creatures like you should live in the cave of a blood-gulping lion, not rub off your pollution on everyone near you in this oracle. Go, a herd with no herdsman! No god loves a flock like that.

CHORUS [198] Lord Apollo, listen in your turn. You aren't merely a partner in this. You did it all yourself; the whole blame is yours.

APOLLO [201] How so? Stretch out your speech long enough to explain that.

CHORUS [202] You gave an oracle telling the stranger to kill his mother.

APOLLO [203] I gave an oracle telling him to avenge his father. What of it?

CHORUS [204] And then you offered yourself as harbor for fresh-shed blood.

APOLLO [205] Yes, and I told him to come to this house as a suppliant.

CHORUS [206] And yet you abuse us, who escorted him here?

APOLLO [207] Because it isn't fitting for you to come to this house.

CHORUS [208] But this is the task assigned to us.

APOLLO [209] What is this honor? Go on, boast of your fine privilege.

CHORUS [210] We drive mother-killers from their homes.

APOLLO [211] And what about a woman who does away with her husband?

CHORUS [212] That would not be kindred blood shed by a kinsman's hand.

APOLLO [213] Then you've treated as worthless, as nothing at all, the pledges of Hera the Fulfiller and of Zeus. And by this argument Cypris is thrown aside without honor, she from whom the dearest things come to mortals. For the bed of man and wife, appointed by fate, is greater than any oath, when Justice stands

guard over it. So if you go easy on those who kill each other, so as not to punish them or look on them in anger, I say you have no right to hound Orestes from his home. I know that one crime you take very much to heart, while the other you plainly treat more mildly. But the goddess Pallas will oversee the trial of this case.[8]

CHORUS [225] That man I will never let go.

APOLLO [226] Chase him, then, and make more trouble for yourself.

CHORUS [227] Don't you cut down my honors with your words.

APOLLO [228] Your honors? I wouldn't take them if they were offered.

CHORUS [229] No, you're called great as it is, beside the throne of Zeus. But I, since a mother's blood leads me on, will pursue this man for justice and hunt him down.

APOLLO [232] And I will help the suppliant and rescue him. Terrible among mortals and among gods is the wrath of a suppliant, if I betray him willingly.

ORESTES [235] Queen Athena, I have come at Loxias' bidding. Receive kindly a man pursued by a curse: not a polluted suppliant, and not one with unpurified hands, but one already blunted, worn down at other houses and on the roads that mortals travel. Crossing land and sea alike, keeping to Loxias' oracular commands, I come to your house and your image, goddess. Here I'll keep my watch and wait for the outcome of my trial.

CHORUS [244] There! Here's a clear trace of the man. Follow the hints of the voiceless informer. Like a hound after a wounded fawn, we're tracking him by the drip of blood. My lungs are heaving from labors that wear a man out. I've ranged over every place on earth, and over the sea I came in wingless flight, chasing him, no slower than a ship. And now he's here somewhere, cowering. The smell of human blood smiles at me.

8 Cypris is Aphrodite, goddess of love; Hera "the Fulfiller" presided over marriage.

254 Look, look again,
search everywhere,
or the mother-killer will slip off in flight
and go unpunished.
There he is again, with his defense,
his arms wound round the image of the immortal goddess,
wanting to stand trial for what he owes.
But that cannot be. A mother's blood on the ground
is hard to gather up, ah, ah!
The wet stream poured on the soil is gone.
No, you must pay back: let me suck
from your living limbs the thick red offering.
From you may I take my fill, a drink hard to drink;
I'll waste you alive and drag you down below,
to pay in requital for your mother's agony.

269 And there you'll see any other mortal who has sinned,
irreverent toward a god or a guest
or his own dear parents,
each with the penalty justice says he deserves.
For Hades is a great auditor of mortals
below the earth,
and watches everything, with a mind that keeps it all on tablets.

ORESTES 276 Schooled in misfortune, I know many rites of purification, and I know when it's right to speak and likewise when to keep silent. In this matter I've been told to speak by a wise teacher. The blood on my hand is drowsing and fading, and the pollution of my mother's murder is washed away. While it was still fresh, at the hearth of the god Phoebus, it was driven out by purifications with slaughtered pigs. It would be a long story to tell from the beginning how many people I have come to and stayed with without bringing them harm.[9]

287 So now, with pure lips and in reverent words, I call on Athena, queen of this land, to come and help me. Without the

spear she will win me, my land, and the Argive people as her faithful allies, rightly, for all time. Whether she is in the regions of Libya, by the waters of Triton, the stream where she was born, with her foot planted upright or covered beneath her robes, helping her friends, or whether like a bold commander she is surveying the Phlegraean plain, let her come (a god hears even from far away) to set me free from these troubles.[10]

CHORUS 299 No, neither Apollo nor Athena's might could save you from going to ruin, abandoned, not knowing where in your heart joy is to be found: a bloodless thing for spirits to feed on, a shadow. Won't you even answer? Do you spit back my words, you who were raised for me and consecrated to me? Alive you'll be my feast, and not slaughtered at an altar. You'll hear this song, and it will bind you.

9 A killer was purified by having the blood of a sacrificed piglet poured over his hands.

10 Athena was said to have been born by the river Triton in Libya. On the Phlegraean plain the gods fought the Giants.

FIRST STASIMON

The Furies dance their Binding Song around Orestes and proclaim their ancient office.

CHORUS

307 Come, let's join hands in the dance,
since we have resolved
to show forth our hateful music
and tell how our band
deals out their lots to men.
We believe we are straight in our justice.
One who holds out clean hands
is visited by no wrath from us;
he goes through his life unharmed.
But whoever sins, as this man has,
and hides his bloody hands,
we appear beside him, true witnesses for the dead,
exacting the price of blood,
and see it through to the end.

321 Mother who bore me, Mother Night,
who bore me to be vengeance
for the blind and for the seeing, hear me!
For Leto's son
strips me of honor,
snatching from me this cowering hare,
the victim owed to atone for a mother's blood.

328 Over the victim
this is our song:
frenzy, derangement,
madness that wrecks the mind,
the hymn of the Furies,
binding the mind,
sung with no lyre,
withering mortals.

334 This is the lot that piercing Fate
spun for me to hold forever:
when mortals stumble
into wanton murder by their own hands,
to follow them until they go
beneath the earth. And once dead,
they are not so very free.

341 Over the victim
this is our song:
frenzy, derangement,
madness that wrecks the mind,
the hymn of the Furies,
binding the mind,
sung with no lyre,
withering mortals.

349 At our birth this lot was ordained for us:
to keep our hands off the immortals. None of them
sits at feast with us and shares it.
In pure white robes I have no part, no portion.
…

354 For I chose
the overthrow of houses,
when Ares, tame at home,
kills one of his own.
We rush after him,
and strong as he is,
we blot him out for the fresh blood.

360 We are eager to take these cares away from others,
to win the gods exemption by our own diligence,
so that no case even comes before them.
For Zeus has judged this blood-dripping, hateful race
unworthy of his company.

354a For I chose
the overthrow of houses,
when Ares, tame at home,
kills one of his own.
We rush after him,
and strong as he is,
we blot him out for the fresh blood.

368 And the glories of men, however proud beneath the sky,
melt away and dwindle under the earth, dishonored,
at our black-robed onslaughts
and the malignant dancing of our feet.

372 For I leap
from high above
and bring down my foot with a heavy fall,
limbs that trip even runners at full stretch:
ruin hard to bear.

377 He falls and does not know it, in his senseless defilement,
such is the darkness of pollution hovering over the man;
and rumor, full of groans, tells of a murky mist
spread over his house.

372a For I leap
from high above
and bring down my foot with a heavy fall,
limbs that trip even runners at full stretch:
ruin hard to bear.

381 For it endures. Resourceful,
sure to accomplish,
remembering evils, august,
hard for mortals to appease,
we pursue our office, dishonored, despised,
kept apart from the gods in sunless gloom,
a rocky road, hard going
for the seeing and the sightless alike.

389 What mortal, then, does not revere
and fear all this,
when he hears from me the law
ordained by Fate, granted by the gods,
to be fulfilled? Still
my ancient privilege remains,
and I meet with no dishonor,
though my station is beneath the earth
in sunless dark.

SECOND EPISODE

Athena arrives, hears both sides, and resolves to set up a sworn court of citizens.

ATHENA 397 From far away I heard the sound of a call. I was at the Scamander, taking possession of the land that the leaders and chiefs of the Achaeans assigned to me, a great portion of the spoils their spears had won, mine wholly, root and branch, forever, a chosen gift for the sons of Theseus. From there I came, driving my tireless feet, without wings, the fold of my aegis whirring in the wind. And seeing this strange company in my land, I am not afraid, but my eyes are full of wonder. Who in the world are you? I speak to all of you together: to this stranger sitting at my image, and to you, who are like no race of beings ever born, neither seen by the gods among goddesses nor resembling any mortal shape. But to speak ill of one's neighbor when he has done nothing to deserve it is far from just, and what is right stands aloof from it.[11]

CHORUS 415 You'll learn it all in brief, daughter of Zeus. We are the dismal children of Night. In our homes beneath the earth we are called Curses.

ATHENA 418 I know your race, and the names you go by.

CHORUS 419 And my honors you will soon learn as well.

11 Athens claimed territory near Troy, at the mouth of the Scamander, in Aeschylus' day; "the sons of Theseus" are the Athenians.

ATHENA 420 I'd learn them, if someone would tell me plainly.

CHORUS 421 We drive killers of men from their homes.

ATHENA 422 And for the killer, where does his flight end?

CHORUS 423 Where joy is never known at all.

ATHENA 424 Is that the kind of flight you're hounding this man into with your shrieks?

CHORUS 425 Yes. He saw fit to be his mother's killer.

ATHENA 426 Under some other compulsion, or fearing someone's anger?

CHORUS 427 And where is there a goad so sharp as to drive a man to kill his mother?

ATHENA 428 There are two parties here, and I've heard only half the case.

CHORUS 429 But he wouldn't accept an oath from us, or be willing to swear one.

ATHENA 430 You would rather be called just than act justly.

CHORUS 431 How so? Teach me. You're not poor in wisdom.

ATHENA 432 I say that what is unjust must not win by oaths.

CHORUS 433 Then question him, and give a straight judgment.

ATHENA 434 So you would turn the decision of the charge over to me?

CHORUS 435 Of course. We honor you, since you are worthy and of worthy parents.

ATHENA 436 Stranger, what do you want to say to this in your turn? Tell me your country, your family, and your misfortunes, and then defend yourself against this charge, if it's trust in justice that makes you sit here clinging to this image, close to my hearth, an august suppliant in the manner of Ixion. Answer all of this in a way I can easily understand.[12]

12 Ixion, who murdered a kinsman, was the first killer to be purified, by Zeus himself.

ORESTES [443] Queen Athena, first I'll remove a great worry raised by the last of your words. I am not a polluted suppliant, and I did not sit at your image with defilement on my hand. I'll give you strong proof of this. It is the law that a man who has shed blood must not speak until someone who purifies from blood has drenched him with the slaughter of a suckling animal. Long ago, at other houses, I was cleansed like this, with victims and with flowing water.

[453] So I say that worry is out of the way. As for my family, you'll soon learn how it stands. I'm an Argive, and you do well to ask about my father: Agamemnon, commander of the men of the fleet, with whom you made Troy, the city of Ilium, no city at all. He did not die a fine death when he came home. My black-hearted mother killed him, wrapping him in an intricate hunting net that bore witness to the murder in the bath. And I came back, after living in exile until then, and killed the woman who bore me; I won't deny it. It was vengeance, death for death, for my dearly loved father. And Loxias shares the blame for this, for he warned me of pains that would goad my heart if I did nothing to those who were guilty. Now you judge whether it was justly done or not. Whatever happens to me in your hands, I'll accept it.

ATHENA [470] This matter is too great for any mortal who thinks to judge it. And it is not right even for me to decide cases of murder that rouse sharp wrath. Besides, you have come as a suppliant duly prepared by the rites, pure and harmless to my house, and so I respect you as blameless toward my city. But these have a function that is not easily dismissed, and if they don't win this case, the poison of their resentment will afterwards fall on the ground, an unbearable, endless plague on the land.

[480] That is how things stand. Both courses, to let them stay or to send them away, mean disaster, and I'm at a loss. But since this matter has fallen to us here, I will choose jurors for cases of murder, bound by oath, and establish an institution that will stand for all time. You two, summon your witnesses and proofs, sworn evidence to support your case. I will pick out the best of

my citizens and come back to decide this matter truly. They will swear an oath to declare nothing contrary to justice.

SECOND STASIMON

The Furies warn that acquitting Orestes will overturn justice, and praise fear and reverence.

CHORUS

Now comes the overthrow brought by new laws,
if the cause and the crime
of this killer of his mother
win the day.
At once this deed will bind all mortals
together in easy license;
and many true sufferings, wounds dealt by children,
wait for parents
in the time to come.

For from us, the maenads who watch over mortals,
no anger at such deeds will creep upon them.
I will let every death loose.
Man will ask of man, from place to place,
telling his neighbors' troubles,
when his own will end or ease;
and the poor wretch offers remedies
that are no sure cure, in vain.

Let no one, struck down by disaster,
call out,
crying these words:
"Justice!
Thrones of the Furies!"
So, it may be, a father
or a mother freshly wounded
will cry a piteous cry,
now that the house of Justice is falling.

517 There is a place where fear is good,
and it must stay seated,
an overseer of the mind.
It pays
to learn good sense through sorrow.
But who, nursing a heart
that holds no fear at all,
city or mortal alike,
would still revere Justice?

526 Praise neither the life without rule
nor the life ruled by a master.
To the middle in all things
the god has given power,
though he watches over other things in other ways.
I speak a word in measure:
arrogance is the child of impiety,
truly;
but from health of mind
comes the happiness all men love,
the happiness all pray for.

538 And this I tell you, above all:
revere the altar of Justice.
Do not, with an eye on gain,
kick it aside with a godless foot;
punishment will come.
The appointed end stands waiting.
So let each man
give first honor to the reverence owed his parents,
and respect the coming and going
of guests honored in his house.

The man who is just of his own free will, unforced,
will not go without good fortune;
he will never be utterly destroyed.
But the bold transgressor, I say,
who carries a great cargo heaped up in confusion, without justice,
will in time be forced
to strike his sail, when the storm takes him
and his yardarm splinters.

He calls, but no one hears,
in the middle of the whirlpool he cannot wrestle;
and the god laughs at the hot-headed man,
seeing the man who boasted it would never happen
worn down by helpless agonies,
unable to clear the headland.
He has wrecked his old prosperity, for all time,
on the reef of Justice,
and he perishes unwept, unseen.

THIRD EPISODE

Athena founds the court on the Areopagus; Apollo defends Orestes, and a tied vote acquits him.

ATHENA Herald, make the proclamation and hold back the crowd. Let the piercing Etruscan trumpet, filled with human breath, sound its shrill blast to the people. For while this council fills, it is right to keep silence, so that the whole city may learn my ordinances for all time to come, and these two as well, so that their case may be justly decided.

CHORUS Lord Apollo, keep to what is your own. Tell us what part you have in this matter.

APOLLO I've come to bear witness—this man is, by law, a suppliant, he sat at the hearth of my house, and I am the one who purified him of this bloodshed—and to plead his case myself. I

bear responsibility for the killing of his mother. Now, open the case, and settle it as best you know how.

ATHENA 582 The floor is yours; I open the trial. The prosecutor, speaking first and from the beginning, is the one who can rightly inform us of the matter.

CHORUS 585 We are many, but we'll speak briefly. Answer us word for word, each in turn. First, tell us: did you kill your mother?

ORESTES 588 I killed her. There's no denying that.

CHORUS 589 That's one fall already of the three.[13]

ORESTES 590 You're boasting over a man who isn't down yet.

CHORUS 591 Still, you have to say how you killed her.

ORESTES 592 I'll tell you: I drew my sword and cut her throat.

CHORUS 593 And who persuaded you? Whose plan was it?

ORESTES 594 This god's oracles. He is my witness.

CHORUS 595 The prophet instructed you to kill your mother?

ORESTES 596 Yes, and to this day I don't blame my fortune.

CHORUS 597 But if the vote seizes you, you'll soon tell a different story.

ORESTES 598 I'm confident. My father will send help from his tomb.

CHORUS 599 Trust in the dead, then, you who killed your mother!

ORESTES 600 Yes—because she was stained by two pollutions.

CHORUS 601 How so? Explain that to the jurors.

ORESTES 602 She murdered her husband, and so she killed my father.

CHORUS 603 And so you're alive, while her death has set her free of it.

13 A wrestling match was won by the first man to throw his opponent three times.

ORESTES [604] Then why didn't you hound her into exile while she was alive?

CHORUS [605] She wasn't of one blood with the man she killed.

ORESTES [606] And am I of one blood with my mother?

CHORUS [607] How else did she nourish you beneath her girdle, you bloodstained killer? Do you disown your mother's blood, the dearest there is?

ORESTES [609] Now give your testimony. Explain to me, Apollo, whether I was right to kill her. That I did it, just as it happened, we don't deny. But whether this bloodshed seems just to your mind or not—judge, so that I can tell these men.

APOLLO [614] I will speak to you, this great court Athena has founded, justly—and as a prophet I will not lie. Never once have I said from my prophetic throne, about a man, a woman, or a city, anything that Zeus, father of the Olympians, did not command.

[619] Learn how strong this plea of justice is, and I tell you to follow the will of the father. For no oath is stronger than Zeus.

CHORUS [622] Zeus, as you say, gave you this oracle: to tell Orestes here to avenge his father's murder and give no honor at all to his mother?

APOLLO [625] Yes—for it is not the same thing at all, the death of a noble man, honored with a scepter given by Zeus, and at a woman's hands at that—not by bold arrows shot from afar, as an Amazon might, but as you will hear, Pallas, and you who sit here to decide this matter by your vote.

[631] He had come home from a campaign in which, for the most part, he had done well, and she welcomed him with kind words. Then, as he was stepping from the bath, at its very edge, she threw a robe over him like a tent, and in that endless, intricate cloth she trapped the man and cut him down.

[636] This, I have told you, was the death of that man, revered by all, commander of the fleet. I have described her as she was, so that the people appointed to decide this case may feel the sting.

CHORUS 640 By your account, Zeus gives first place to a father's death. Yet he himself put his own aged father, Cronus, in chains. How can you say this without contradicting yourself? I call on you jurors to witness what you hear.

APOLLO 644 You loathsome beasts, hated by the gods! Chains he could undo; there's a cure for that, and a great many ways to set a prisoner free. But once the dust has soaked up a man's blood, once he is dead, there is no rising again. For that my father has made no charms; everything else he turns this way and that, up and down, and arranges it as he likes without even breathing hard.

CHORUS 652 Look how you plead for his acquittal! He has poured out his mother's blood, his own blood, on the ground—and then he'll live in Argos in his father's house? What public altars will he use? What brotherhood will let him share its holy water?

APOLLO 657 I'll answer that too, and you'll see how rightly I speak. The mother of what is called her child is not its parent; she is the nurse of the newly sown seed. The one who mounts her is the parent. She, a stranger for a stranger, keeps the young shoot safe, unless some god harms it. And I'll show you proof of what I say. There can be a father without a mother. Here beside us is a witness, the daughter of Olympian Zeus, who was never nursed in the darkness of a womb, an offspring such as no goddess could bear.[14]

667 And I, Pallas, in this as in everything else I know how, will make your city and your people great. I sent this man to the hearth of your house so that he would be faithful for all time, and so that you, goddess, would win him as an ally, and those who come after him, and so that it would stand forever that their descendants keep these pledges.

ATHENA 674 Shall I now tell these men to cast a just vote, as their judgment dictates, since enough has been said?

14 In myth, Athena sprang fully grown from the head of Zeus.

CHORUS 676 For our part, every arrow has been shot. I'm waiting to hear how the contest will be decided.

ATHENA 678 Well then? How should I arrange things so that you can't fault me?

APOLLO 679 You have heard what you have heard. And as you cast your vote, strangers, respect your oath in your hearts.

ATHENA 681 Hear my ordinance now, people of Attica, you who judge the first trial for blood that has been shed. In time to come, too, this council of jurors will always remain for the people of Aegeus. This is the Hill of Ares, the seat and camp of the Amazons, when they came marching in war out of hatred for Theseus and raised up a rival city of towers against this newly founded, high-towered city, and sacrificed to Ares; and from that this rock takes its name, the Hill of Ares. Here the citizens' reverence, and fear its kin, will keep them from doing wrong, by day and by night alike, so long as the citizens themselves don't corrupt the laws with foul streams flowing in. Muddy clear water with filth and you will never find a drink.[15]

696 Neither anarchy nor despotism: that is what I advise the citizens to uphold and revere, and not to cast fear entirely out of the city. For what mortal who fears nothing is just? If you rightly stand in awe of such a sacred power, you will have a bulwark for your land and a safeguard for your city such as no other people has, neither among the Scythians nor in the land of Pelops. I establish this council untouched by gain, worthy of reverence, quick to anger, a wakeful guard over the land for those who sleep.

707 I have spun out this advice at length for my citizens, for the future. Now you must stand, take up your ballots, and decide the case, respecting your oath. I have said what I had to say.

CHORUS 711 And I advise you not to dishonor us in any way. We can be a heavy presence in your land.

15 The Areopagus, a hill beside the Acropolis, was the seat of Athens' ancient council, which tried cases of homicide. Its powers had been cut back in reforms of 462 BC, four years before this play was staged.

APOLLO 713 And I tell you to fear the oracles, mine and Zeus', and not to make them fruitless.

CHORUS 715 You honor deeds of blood that are none of your portion. The oracles you dispense will no longer be pure.

APOLLO 717 Then was my father wrong in his counsels too, when Ixion, the first killer, came to him as a suppliant?

CHORUS 719 So you say. But if I lose this case, I'll come back and weigh heavy on this land.

APOLLO 721 Among the young gods and the older ones alike you have no honor. I am going to win.

CHORUS 723 You did the same sort of thing in the house of Pheres: you persuaded the Fates to make mortals immortal.[16]

APOLLO 725 Isn't it just to do good to someone who honors you, above all when he happens to be in need?

CHORUS 727 You destroyed the ancient allotments; you tricked the old goddesses with wine.

APOLLO 729 You'll soon lose this case, and then you'll spit out your venom—and it won't weigh on your enemies at all.

CHORUS 731 Since you, young as you are, ride roughshod over me, an old woman, I'll wait to hear the outcome of this trial; I'm still in two minds whether to rage against the city.

ATHENA 734 This is my task, to give the final judgment. I will add this ballot of mine for Orestes. For no mother gave birth to me, and in everything except marriage I favor the male with all my heart; I am wholly my father's. So I will not set a higher value on the death of a woman who killed her husband, the guardian of the house. Orestes wins, even if the votes are equal.

742 Quickly now, tip the ballots out of the urns, those of you jurors who have been given this duty.

ORESTES 744 Phoebus Apollo, how will the contest be decided?

16 Apollo got the Fates drunk so that Admetus, son of Pheres, could escape his death if someone else died in his place.

CHORUS [745] Black Night, our mother, do you see this?

ORESTES [746] Now comes my end: the noose, or the light of day.

CHORUS [747] And for us, ruin, or our honors kept in time to come.

APOLLO [748] Count the ballots honestly as they're tipped out, strangers, and as you sort them, take care to do no wrong. When judgment is lacking, great harm comes of it, and a single ballot has set a house upright.

ATHENA [752] This man is acquitted on the charge of blood. The ballots are equal in number.

ORESTES [754] Pallas, you have saved my house! I was robbed of my homeland, and you have brought me home again. And the Greeks will say, "The man is an Argive once more, and lives on his father's estate, thanks to Pallas and Loxias, and to the third, who brings all things to pass, the Savior"—who, out of regard for my father's death, saves me, seeing these here pleading my mother's case.[17]

[762] And now I will go home, but first I swear an oath to this land and to your people, for all the fullness of time to come: no helmsman of my country will ever come here bringing a well-armed spear. For we ourselves, lying in our tombs by then, will deal with anyone who breaks the oath I swear today, sending them hopeless misfortunes, making their marches disheartened and their crossings ill-omened, so that they regret their efforts. But if they keep it straight, and always honor this city of Pallas with an allied spear, we will look on them with greater kindness.[18]

[775] Farewell, then, you and the people who guard your city. May you have a hold your enemies cannot escape, one that brings you safety and victory in war.

17 The "third Savior" is Zeus, to whom the third libation at a feast was poured.
18 The oath reflects the alliance Athens made with Argos in 461 BC.

KOMMOS

The Furies threaten to blight Athens; Athena answers each outburst with offers of honor and a home.

CHORUS

778 Oh, you younger gods! You have ridden down the ancient
laws
and wrenched them from my hands.
And I, dishonored, wretched, heavy with wrath,
on this land—ah!—
will let fall venom, venom from my heart,
pain repaid for pain,
a drip the ground cannot bear;
and out of it
a blight, leafless, childless—
oh, Justice!—sweeping across the plain,
will hurl its man-destroying stains upon the land.
I groan. What am I to do?
I am a laughingstock to the citizens.
What I have suffered is past bearing.
Oh, great is the grief
of the luckless daughters of Night,
mourning their dishonor!

ATHENA 793 Take my advice, and don't bear this with such heavy groaning. You have not been beaten: the trial came out with the votes equal, fairly, and not to your dishonor. There was clear testimony from Zeus, and the one who gave the oracle was the very one who testified that Orestes should come to no harm for what he did. So do not rage, do not hurl your heavy wrath on this land, and do not make it barren by letting fall your fiendish drops, savage spears that devour the seed. For I promise you, in all justice, that you will have a seat and a cavern in this just land, sitting on gleaming thrones beside your hearths, honored by these citizens.

CHORUS

808 Oh, you younger gods! You have ridden down the ancient
laws
and wrenched them from my hands.
And I, dishonored, wretched, heavy with wrath,
on this land—ah!—
will let fall venom, venom from my heart,
pain repaid for pain,
a drip the ground cannot bear;
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a blight, leafless, childless—
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I groan. What am I to do?
I am a laughingstock to the citizens.
What I have suffered is past bearing.
Oh, great is the grief
of the luckless daughters of Night,
mourning their dishonor!

ATHENA 823 You are not dishonored. Goddesses, don't let your anger run so high that you blight a land of mortals beyond healing. I, too, trust in Zeus—and what need is there to say it? And I alone of the gods know the keys to the chamber where his thunderbolt is sealed. But there is no need of it. Be persuaded by me, and don't let a reckless tongue cast words upon the land that everything bearing fruit should fare badly. Lull the bitter force of that black wave, since you will be revered and honored and live here beside me. And when you have the first fruits of this great land forever, offerings for children and for the rite of marriage, you will praise these words of mine.

CHORUS

837 That I should suffer this—ah!—
I, whose wisdom is ancient, to dwell beneath the earth,
ah, a thing dishonored and abhorred!
I breathe out rage and all my rancor.
Oi, oi, da! Ah!
What pain is this that steals into me, what anguish through my sides?
Hear my wrath, Mother Night!
The gods' tricks, too hard to wrestle,
have stripped me of my ancient honors
and made them nothing.

ATHENA 848 I will bear with your anger, for you are older than I am, and in that respect far wiser. But Zeus has given me, too, no poor understanding. If you go off to some foreign land, you will long for this one; I tell you so now. For time, as it flows on, will bring ever greater honor to these citizens. And you, with a seat of honor beside the house of Erechtheus, will receive from men and from processions of women more than you could ever have from other mortals.[19] 858 So do not cast upon my lands bloody whetstones that harm the hearts of the young, maddening them with a rage that comes not from wine; and do not pluck out their hearts as if they were fighting cocks and plant among my citizens an Ares of kin against kin, reckless against one another. Let war be outside our gates—and it is not hard to find—where there will be a fierce love of glory. But I will have no battle of birds in their own yard.

867 That is the choice I offer you: doing good, receiving good, well honored, to share in this land the gods love most.

19 Erechtheus was a legendary king of Athens, whose shrine stood on the Acropolis.

CHORUS

That I should suffer this—ah!—
I, whose wisdom is ancient, to dwell beneath the earth,
ah, a thing dishonored and abhorred!
I breathe out rage and all my rancor.
Oi, oi, da! Ah!
What pain is this that steals into me, what anguish through my sides?
Hear my wrath, Mother Night!
The gods' tricks, too hard to wrestle,
have stripped me of my ancient honors
and made them nothing.

ATHENA I will never tire of telling you of these good things, so that you can never say that you, an ancient goddess, were driven off dishonored by me, a younger one, and by the mortals who hold this city, an outcast from this land. If you hold Persuasion's majesty sacred, the soothing charm of my tongue, then you will stay. And if you don't wish to stay, it would not be just for you to bring down on this city any wrath or rancor or harm to its people. For you may own a share of this land, justly honored for all time.

FOURTH EPISODE

The Furies accept Athena's offer and ask what blessings they should sing over the land.

CHORUS Lady Athena, what seat do you say I'll have?

ATHENA One free from every pain. Accept it.

CHORUS Say I've accepted. What honor awaits me?

ATHENA That no house will prosper without you.

CHORUS You'll bring that about, that I'll have so much power?

ATHENA Yes, for we will set upright the fortunes of anyone who reveres you.

CHORUS [898] And will you give me a pledge for all time?

ATHENA [899] Yes—no one forces me to promise what I won't fulfill.

CHORUS [900] It seems you're charming me. My anger is leaving me.

ATHENA [901] Then, living in this land, you will win friends.

CHORUS [902] What, then, do you bid me sing over this land?

ATHENA [903] Blessings that suit a victory with no evil in it: blessings from the earth, from the dew of the sea, and from the sky; that gusts of wind may come over the land, breathing in bright sunshine; that the fruit of the earth and of the herds, flowing in abundance, may never fail the citizens as time goes on; and that the seed of mortals may be kept safe. And may you make the god-fearing more fruitful still. For, like a gardener tending his plants, I cherish the race of these just men, untouched by grief.

[913] That is your part. And I, in the glorious contests of war, will never rest from honoring this city among mortals as a city of victory.

EXODOS

The Furies bless Athens and are led by torchlight to their new home beneath the earth.

CHORUS

[916] I will accept a home with Pallas
and will not dishonor the city
that Zeus almighty and Ares
hold as a fortress of the gods,
the pride of the gods of Greece, guardian of their altars.
For her I pray,
prophesying with kindness,
that the bright gleam of the sun
make blessings that serve her life
burst forth from the earth in plenty.

ATHENA

927 This I do with a willing heart for these citizens,
settling here among them
spirits great and hard to please.
For to them it has fallen
to govern all things that touch humankind.
The man who has felt their heavy hand
does not know where the blows of his life come from:
the sins of those before him
bring him before them, and silent destruction,
for all his loud talk,
grinds him to dust with hostile anger.

CHORUS

938 Let no harm that kills the trees blow—
this is the gift I proclaim—
nor scorching heat that robs the plants of their buds
cross the borders of its own place,
nor grievous disease that leaves no fruit creep over them;
may the earth feed thriving flocks
with twin young
at their appointed time;
and may the earth's offspring, rich in its treasures,
honor the windfall the gods bestow.[20]

ATHENA

949 Do you hear this, guardians of the city,
what she brings to pass?
Great is the power of the lady Fury
among the immortals and the powers beneath the earth;
and among mortals, plainly and to the end,
they do their work,
giving some men songs,
and to others a life dimmed with tears.

20 A "windfall" (hermaion) was a lucky find, a gift of Hermes; the line probably alludes to Athens' silver mines.

CHORUS

Untimely deaths that strike men down
I forbid;
and to lovely young women
grant lives with husbands,
you gods who have the power—
and you, Fates,
our sisters by one mother,
spirits who allot what is right,
who share in every house,
whose just visitations weigh at every season,
everywhere most honored of the gods!

ATHENA

I rejoice
that these blessings are granted my land with good will.
I love the eyes of Persuasion,
because she watched over my tongue and my lips
when these refused so fiercely.
But Zeus of the assembly has won;
and our rivalry in doing good
prevails for all time.

CHORUS

And I pray that faction,
never sated with evil,
may never roar in this city;
and that the dust, drinking
the dark blood of its citizens,
may never in anger, for vengeance,
seize greedily on ruinous murder for murder
to the city's harm.
May they give joy for joy
in a spirit of common love,
and hate with a single heart;
for this heals many ills among mortals.

ATHENA

Do they not show good sense
in finding the road of kindly speech?
From these fearsome faces
I see great gain for these citizens.
For if you always honor them highly,
kind to the kindly,
you will stand out in glory,
guiding land and city
on the straight path of justice.

CHORUS

Farewell, farewell, in the wealth that is your due!
Farewell, people of the city,
seated near to Zeus,
dear to the virgin who is dear to you,
learning wisdom in time.
Those beneath the wings of Pallas
her father holds in awe.

ATHENA

Farewell to you as well. I must go before you
to show you your chambers
by the holy light of these escorts.
Go, and with these solemn sacrifices
hasten beneath the earth;
keep down there what brings ruin to the land,
and send up what brings gain,
for the city's victory.
And you, children of Cranaus,
who hold this city, lead the way
for these new residents.
And may the citizens have
a good heart in return for good.[21]

21 Cranaus was a legendary early king of Athens. The Furies become "residents" like the metics, free foreigners living in Athens under its protection.

CHORUS

Farewell, farewell again—I say it twice—
all of you in the city,
gods and mortals alike,
who dwell in Pallas' city.
Revere my dwelling among you,
and you will never find fault
with the fortunes of your life.

ATHENA I approve the words of these prayers, and I will escort you by the light of blazing torches to the places below, beneath the earth, together with the attendants who guard my image, as is right. For the very eye of all the land of Theseus will come out: a glorious company of children and women, and a procession of old women.

Honor them by clothing them in robes dyed crimson, and let the torchlight move forward, so that this company may be kindly to the land and shine hereafter in fortunes rich in good men.

ESCORTS Go to your home, great ones, lovers of honor, / children of Night, yourselves childless, under a kindly escort—
—speak only words of good omen, people of the land!—
beneath the earth in your primeval caverns,
to be revered with honors and sacrifices—
speak words of good omen, all the people!

Gracious and kindly toward the land,
come this way, Holy Goddesses,
rejoicing in the fire-fed torch along the road.
Now raise the women's cry to crown our song!

Peace and libations forever
between Pallas' citizens and her new residents.
So Zeus who sees all
and Fate have come down together.
Now raise the women's cry to crown our song!