# Libation Bearers

AESCHYLUS

c. 525–456 BC

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Χοηφόροι

*Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited*

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*Libation Bearers* · Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC)

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# INTRODUCTION

Years after Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon, their son Orestes returns from exile to Argos, sent by Apollo to avenge his father. At Agamemnon's tomb he finds his sister Electra, who has come with a chorus of captive women to pour offerings sent by Clytemnestra after a terrifying dream.

Brother and sister recognize each other, and over the grave they and the chorus call on their dead father in a great lament that is also a summoning of strength. Then Orestes enters the palace in disguise, and the play moves toward the one act no Greek audience could watch without horror: a son killing his mother.

*Libation Bearers* is the second play of the *Oresteia* (458 BC): *Agamemnon*, then *Libation Bearers*, then *Eumenides*. Its title comes from the chorus, the women who carry the libations to the tomb.

# Libation Bearers

*Argos, at Agamemnon's tomb and then before the palace, some years after his murder.*

## PROLOGUE

*Orestes returns from exile, leaves locks of hair at his father's tomb, and hides as women approach.*

ORESTES [1] Hermes of the underworld, you who watch over my father's power, be my savior and my ally, I beg you. I have come to this land; I am back from exile. And on this mound of the tomb I call on my father to hear, to listen … … … a lock of hair for Inachus, in thanks for my upbringing, and this second one, in mourning … For I wasn't there, father, to lament your death, and I didn't stretch out my hand when your body was carried out. … What's this I see? What is this crowd of women coming this way, so conspicuous in their black cloaks? What misfortune should I take this for? Has some new grief struck the house? Or am I right to guess that they're bringing libations to my father, offerings to soothe the dead below?[1] [16] It can't be anything else. I think I see Electra, my own sister, coming, marked out by her bitter grief. Zeus, let me avenge my father's death, and be my ally; stand with me willingly.

[20] Pylades, let's stand out of the way, so I can find out clearly what this band of women has come to pray for.

1 The play's first lines survive only in quotations by later writers, so there are gaps. A young man would dedicate a lock of his hair to his local river, here the Inachus of Argos, in thanks for his upbringing.

## PARODOS

*Captive women bring libations from Clytemnestra after her nightmare and lament the unavenged blood.*

CHORUS

Sent out from the house I have come
to escort the libations,
with the sharp beat of hands.
My cheek shows red with gashes,
fresh furrows cut by the nail—
but all my life my heart has fed on cries of grief.
In my anguish the linen is ripped,
my woven clothes torn to rags,
the robe that covers my breast
struck by sorrows that know no laughter.

For Phoebus, the dream-prophet of this house,
shrill, making the hair stand on end,
breathing wrath out of sleep,
sent up a cry in the dead of night,
a cry of terror from the inner rooms,
falling heavy on the women's quarters.
And those who read these dreams,
under the god's pledge, cried out
that those beneath the earth
are bitterly aggrieved
and rage against their killers.

Seeking such a graceless grace
to turn evil away—
oh Earth, our mother!—
the godless woman sends me out.
But I'm afraid
to let these words fall.
For what can ransom blood
once it has fallen to the ground?
Oh hearth of utter misery!
Oh house torn down!
Sunless darkness, hateful to mortals,
shrouds the house
through the deaths of its masters.

The awe that once was unconquered, unbroken,
unassailable,
passing through the people's ears and minds,
now stands aside.
And people are afraid.
Success—
among mortals that is a god, and more than a god.
But the scale of Justice watches:
swiftly it falls on some in the light;
for others, who linger, troubles wait
in the borderland of dark;
and others are held by night,
where nothing comes to pass.

Through blood drunk up by the nursing earth
the gore of vengeance has set hard
and will not drain away.
Agonizing ruin tears the guilty one apart
until he teems with a sickness
that overpowers all.

For one who violates a bridal chamber
there is no cure;
and though all streams ran together
in a single course
to wash the blood from a polluted hand,
they would rush on in vain.

But as for me—since the gods brought
the doom of siege upon my city,
and led me from my father's house
into a slave's lot—
it is fitting that I approve
my rulers' commands, just or unjust,
forcing my mind
to master my bitter hatred.
Yet beneath my robes I weep
for my masters' senseless fate,
chilled by secret grief.

## FIRST EPISODE

*Electra prays over the tomb, finds the lock and footprints, and recognizes Orestes; he tells of Apollo's command.*

ELECTRA Serving women, you who keep the house in order, since you're here to escort me in this rite of supplication, give me your advice about it. What should I say as I pour these funeral libations? How can I speak kindly? How am I to pray to my father? Should I say I bring them to a loving husband from a loving wife—from my own mother? I don't have the nerve for that, and I don't know what to say as I pour this offering on my father's tomb. Or should I say the words that are customary among mortals: that he should repay with good those who send these offerings—a gift, that is, worthy of their wickedness?

Or should I pour these out in silence and dishonor, just as my father died, and let the earth drink them, then walk away, like someone who has thrown out the leavings of a purification, flinging the vessel behind me without looking back?

[100] Friends, share this decision with me; in this house we hold our hatred in common. Don't hide what's in your hearts for fear of anyone. What is fated waits for the free man and for the man ruled by another's hand alike. Speak, if you have anything better to suggest than this.

CHORUS [106] I revere your father's tomb as if it were an altar, and since you ask, I'll tell you what is in my heart.

ELECTRA [108] Speak, then, as you revere my father's grave.

CHORUS [109] As you pour, say words of blessing for those who wish him well.

ELECTRA [110] And which of his friends should I call by that name?

CHORUS [111] First yourself, and anyone who hates Aegisthus.

ELECTRA [112] Then I'm to say this prayer for me and for you?

CHORUS [113] You understand that now; judge it for yourself.

ELECTRA [114] Then who else should I add to our side?

CHORUS [115] Remember Orestes, even though he's far from home.

ELECTRA [116] Well said. That's no small thing you've taught me.

CHORUS [117] And now remember those guilty of the murder—

ELECTRA [118] And say what? Explain it to me; I don't know how.

CHORUS [119] Pray that some god or some mortal may come to them—

ELECTRA [120] Do you mean as a judge, or as an avenger?

CHORUS [121] Just say it plainly: someone who will kill them in return.

ELECTRA [122] And is it pious for me to ask that of the gods?

CHORUS [123] How could it not be, to pay back an enemy with harm?

ELECTRA [124] Greatest herald of the world above and the world below, Hermes of the underworld, help me: proclaim to the spir-

its beneath the earth, who watch over my father's house, that they should hear my prayers—and to Earth herself, who gives birth to all things, nurtures them, and takes back their increase in turn. And as I pour these waters of cleansing for the dead, I call on my father and say: "Pity me, and your dear Orestes. How are we to rule in our own house? For now we are wanderers, sold, you might say, by the mother who bore us. She has traded us for a man, Aegisthus, who shared in your murder. I live no better than a slave, Orestes is an exile, shut out of his property, while they, in their arrogance, revel grandly in what you worked for. [138] I pray to you that Orestes may come here with some good fortune—hear me, father. And grant that I myself may be far more self-controlled than my mother, and my hand more pious.

[142] Those are my prayers for us. For our enemies, father, I pray that your avenger may appear, and that your killers may be killed in return, as justice demands. In the middle of my prayer for good I set this, speaking this evil curse against them. But for us, be the one who sends blessings up to the world above, with the gods, and Earth, and Justice who brings victory."

[149] With these prayers I pour out these libations. It's your custom to crown them with the flowers of lament, raising aloud the paean for the dead.

CHORUS

152 Let your tears fall, splashing, dying
for our master who has died,
on this bulwark that wards off evil
and guards the good,
now that the libations are poured
to turn away the hateful pollution.
Hear me, hear me,
revered master, from the darkness of your mind.
*Ototototototototoi!*
Let some man come, mighty with the spear,
to set the house free—
an Ares in the thick of battle,
bending in his hands the Scythian bow,
wielding the sword of a single piece
for fighting hand to hand.

ELECTRA 164 My father has his libations now; the earth has drunk them. But share in this news with me—

CHORUS 166 Tell me; my heart is dancing with fear.

ELECTRA 167 I see this lock of hair, cut off, lying on the tomb.

CHORUS 168 Whose could it be? A man's, or a deep-girdled girl's?

ELECTRA 170 That's easy enough for anyone to guess.

CHORUS 171 How so? Let the old learn from the young.

ELECTRA 172 There's no one but me who would have cut it.

CHORUS 173 No—those who ought to mourn him with a lock of hair are his enemies.

ELECTRA 174 And look, it seems very much of a feather with—

CHORUS 175 With whose hair? That's what I want to know.

ELECTRA 176 With my own. It looks very much like it.

CHORUS 177 Then could it be that this was a secret gift from Orestes?

ELECTRA 178 It looks most like his hair.

CHORUS [179] And how could he have dared to come here?

ELECTRA [180] He sent it—a lock cut off as a tribute to his father.

CHORUS [181] What you say is no less a cause for tears, if he is never going to set foot in this land.

ELECTRA [183] For me too a wave of bitterness has surged against my heart, and I'm struck as if by an arrow driven right through me. From my eyes, as I look at this lock, thirsty drops fall unchecked, the flood of a winter storm. How can I suppose that anyone else in the city owns this hair? And surely it wasn't cut by the woman who killed him—my mother, whose godless heart toward her children is nothing like her name. And yet how can I accept outright that this offering comes from Orestes, the dearest of all mortals to me? Still, hope fawns on me.

[195] Ah. If only it had a kind voice, like a messenger, so I wouldn't be tossed this way and that, torn in two. It would tell me plainly either to spit this lock away in disgust, if it was cut from an enemy's head, or else, as my kin, it could mourn with me, an ornament for this tomb and an honor to my father.

[201] But the gods we call on know the kind of storms we're spun around in, like sailors. And if we're meant to find safety, a great trunk may grow from a small seed.

[205] And look—footprints, a second sign, like mine and matching them. Yes, here are two outlines of feet, his own and some companion's. The heels and the lines of the tendons, when I measure them, come out the same as my own prints. I feel a pang like labor, and my wits are going.

ORESTES [212] Tell the gods that your prayers have been answered, and pray that what follows will go well.

ELECTRA [214] Why? What have I won now from the gods?

ORESTES [215] You've come face to face with what you've been praying for so long.

ELECTRA [216] And who do you know I've been calling on?

ORESTES [217] I know you've been longing desperately for Orestes.

ELECTRA [218] And how have my prayers been answered, then?

ORESTES [219] I'm here. Don't look for anyone dearer to you than me.

ELECTRA [220] Stranger, are you weaving some trap around me?

ORESTES [221] Then I'd be plotting against myself.

ELECTRA [222] You want to laugh at my troubles.

ORESTES [223] Then I'd be laughing at my own, if I laughed at yours.

ELECTRA [224] Am I really to speak to you as Orestes?

ORESTES [225] Now, when you see me in person, you're slow to know me. Yet when you saw this lock cut in mourning and tracked my footprints, your hopes took wing and you thought you saw me. Look: hold the lock up where it was cut. It's your brother's hair, and it matches my head. And see this weaving, the work of your own hands—the strokes of the batten, the pattern of animals. Get hold of yourself; don't let joy drive you out of your mind. I know that our nearest and dearest are bitter enemies to us both.

ELECTRA [235] You darling of your father's house, hope of a saving seed, wept for—trust in your strength and you'll win back your father's house. Oh, face I love to see, you hold four places in my heart. I must call you father; and the love I owed my mother turns to you—she is hated, with every justice—and the love I owed my sister, cruelly sacrificed. And you were a faithful brother, the only one who showed me respect. May Power and Justice stand by you, and with them, third, Zeus, the greatest of all.[2]

ORESTES [246] Zeus, Zeus, look on what is happening here. See the orphaned brood of an eagle father who died in the twisting coils of a dreadful viper. The orphans are crushed by gnawing hunger, for they're not yet grown enough to bring their father's prey to the nest. So you can see me, and her too—Electra, I mean—

2 Electra's sister Iphigenia was sacrificed by Agamemnon at Aulis to win a wind for the fleet sailing to Troy.

children robbed of a father, both cast out of our home alike. If you destroy these nestlings of a father who sacrificed to you and honored you greatly, where will you find a hand like his to give you the rich feasts that are your due? 258 If you destroy the eagle's brood, you'll never again be able to send signs that mortals trust. And if this royal stock withers away entirely, it won't serve your altars on the days when oxen are sacrificed. Tend it, and you could raise a great house from small beginnings, though it seems now to have fallen utterly.

CHORUS 264 Children, saviors of your father's hearth, keep quiet, children, so no one hears and, just for the sake of talk, reports all this to those in power. How I'd love to see them dead one day, in the oozing pitch of the flames!

ORESTES 269 Loxias' mighty oracle won't betray me. It ordered me to go through with this danger, and cried out its warnings again and again, threatening ruin, cold as winter, to my warm heart if I don't go after those guilty of my father's death. It told me to kill them in return, the same way they killed, maddened like a bull by the loss of my property. Otherwise, it said, I would pay for it myself with my own dear life, suffering many grim evils. For it revealed to mortals the wrath of malevolent powers from beneath the earth, and it spoke of diseases: sores that mount the flesh and with savage jaws eat away what it was before, and white hair sprouting on the temples from this disease. And it spoke of other attacks of the Furies, brought to pass from a father's blood.[3] 285 For the dark weapon of the powers below, launched by kin who have fallen and cry out for vengeance, and madness, and empty terror in the night, harass and torment a man who sees them clearly, though his eyes move in the dark, and he is hounded from the city, his body defiled, with the bronze-weighted lash. A man like that, it said, may have no share in the mixing bowl or in the friendly libation; his father's unseen wrath bars him from the altars; no one takes him in or shares a roof with him; and at last, dishonored by all and friend-

3 Loxias is Apollo's name as the god who speaks through his oracle at Delphi.

less, he dies, shriveled like an embalmed corpse by a death that wastes him through and through.

297 Should I trust oracles like these? Even if I don't, the deed has to be done. Many desires converge on one thing: the god's commands, my great grief for my father, and besides, the loss of my property presses on me. I can't let my fellow citizens, the most famous of mortals, who overthrew Troy so gloriously, go on being subjects this way of a pair of women. For the man has a woman's heart; if he doesn't, he'll soon find out.

## KOMMOS

*Brother, sister and chorus mourn Agamemnon and call on him and the powers below to help their revenge.*

CHORUS

306 Great Fates, by the will of Zeus
may it end this way,
as justice shifts its course.
Let hateful tongue be paid
with hateful tongue: Justice cries it aloud
as she exacts the debt.
Let murderous stroke be paid
with murderous stroke. The doer suffers:
so says a saying three times old.

ORESTES

315 Father, father of sorrow,
what can I say
or what can I do
to send on a fair wind from far away
to where your resting place holds you
a light to match your darkness?
Yet a lament that brings glory
is a grace all the same
to the sons of Atreus,
who once held this house.

CHORUS

My child, the spirit of the dead
is not tamed
by the ravening jaw of fire;
later he shows his anger.
The dead man is mourned,
the one who harmed him is revealed.
Rightful lament for fathers and parents,
raised loud and full,
hunts its quarry everywhere.

ELECTRA

Hear, then, father, in your turn
our sorrows full of tears.
The dirge of two children
laments you at your tomb.
Your grave has taken us in,
suppliants and exiles alike.
What here is good? What is free of evil?
Isn't ruin a wrestler
no one can throw?

CHORUS

Yet even from this a god, if he wished,
could bring forth sweeter sounds.
Instead of dirges over a tomb
a paean in the royal hall
might bring in the loving cup,
freshly mixed.

ORESTES

If only beneath Ilium,
at the hands of some Lycian, father,
you had been cut down by the spear!
You would have left glory in your house,
and in your children's paths
founded a life that makes men turn and look;
you would have a high-heaped tomb
in a land across the sea,
a grief your house could bear—

CHORUS

dear to the dear ones
who died nobly there,
and beneath the earth
a lord standing out in majesty and honor,
minister to the greatest
rulers of the world below.
For while you lived you were a king
over those whose hands hold
their destined portion
and the staff that men obey.

ELECTRA

No—not even beneath the walls of Troy
would I have you perish, father,
and lie buried by the stream of Scamander
among the rest of the spear-slain host.
Rather, I wish his killers
had been struck down by their own, as he was,
so that someone far away,
who knows nothing of these troubles,
would hear of their deadly fate.

CHORUS

What you speak of, child, is better than gold,
greater than great good fortune,
greater than the bliss of the Hyperboreans—
and you're free to wish it.
But now the thud of this double lash
is coming home. On one side, the helpers
are already beneath the earth; on the other,
the hands of those in power,
these hateful ones, are unholy;
and the children have the better of it.[4]

ORESTES

That has gone right through my ear
like an arrow.
Zeus, Zeus, who send up from below
ruin that avenges late
on the reckless and wicked hand of mortals—
still, for parents, it will be done.

CHORUS

May it be mine to raise
the full cry of triumph
over a man struck down
and a woman destroyed!
Why should I hide what flutters,
in spite of everything, in my mind?
Before the prow of my heart
blows a fierce wind of rage,
of resentful hatred.

4 The Hyperboreans were a legendary people living "beyond the North Wind" in perfect happiness.

ELECTRA

And when will Zeus in his abundant might
lay his hand on them—
ah, ah!—and split their heads?
Let the land have its pledge.
I demand justice from the unjust.
Hear me, Earth, and you honored powers below.

CHORUS

But it is the law that drops of blood
spilled on the ground
demand more blood.
For slaughter cries out for a Fury,
who brings, from those who died before,
fresh ruin on top of ruin.

ORESTES

Ah, you powers who rule the world below,
look, you mighty Curses of the dead,
look at what is left of the sons of Atreus,
helpless,
cast out from their home in dishonor.
Where can a man turn, Zeus?

CHORUS

Again my heart quivers
as I hear this lament.
At times I lose hope,
and my heart goes dark within me
at the words I hear.
But when hope lifts me up again
and makes me strong,
it drives my grief away
and shines out kindly on me.

ELECTRA

What could we say to hit the mark
but the griefs we have suffered
at the hands of the one who bore us?
She may fawn, but they won't be charmed away.
For like a savage-hearted wolf,
the temper we have from our mother
cannot be soothed.

CHORUS

I beat my breast in an Arian dirge,
in the ways of a Cissian wailing woman.
You could see my fists clenched tight,
my hands reaching out in every direction,
raining blow after blow
from above, from high above,
and my wretched, battered head
rang with the strokes.[5]

ELECTRA

Oh, cruel,
all-daring mother,
in a cruel burial,
without his citizens,
without mourning,
you dared to bury your king,
your husband, unlamented.

ORESTES

It was all dishonor, as you tell it. Oh!
Then will she pay for dishonoring my father,
by the will of the gods,
by the work of my hands?
Let me die, then, once I have taken her life.

5 Aria and Cissia were regions of the Persian empire, whose mourners were famous for violent lamentation.

CHORUS

And he was mutilated, too—so you know it.
She did it, the one who buries him this way,
seeking to make his death
a weight beyond bearing for your life.
You hear of your father's sufferings and his dishonor.[6]

ELECTRA

You tell of my father's death. But I was kept away,
dishonored, worth nothing;
shut up in an inner room like a vicious dog,
I let fall tears more readily than laughter,
pouring out in secret my lament of many tears.
Hear this, and write it in your mind ...

CHORUS

Let the story pierce through your ears
to the quiet depths of your mind.
So things stand;
the rest, be eager to learn for yourself.
You must enter the fight with unbending fury.

ORESTES It's you I mean, father: stand with those you love.

ELECTRA And I join my voice to his, in tears.

CHORUS

And this whole company echoes the cry together:
hear us, come into the light,
and be with us against our enemies.

ORESTES Ares will clash with Ares, Justice with Justice.

ELECTRA Oh gods, bring justice to pass with justice.

6 Killers sometimes cut off a victim's extremities and tied them under the armpits, a practice believed to stop the dead from taking revenge.

CHORUS

A trembling creeps over me as I hear these prayers.
What is fated has waited long;
it may come to those who pray.

Oh, pain born in the family,
and the bloody stroke of Ruin,
jarring the music!
Oh, grievous, unbearable sorrows!
Oh, pain that cannot be stilled!

The house has a dressing to plug its wound,
not from others,
from outside,
but from its own,
through savage, bloody strife.
This is the hymn of the gods beneath the earth.

Hear, you blessed powers below,
hear this prayer, and send help
to the children gladly, for victory.

## SECOND EPISODE

*They rouse the dead king; Orestes hears of the snake dream and lays out his plan of deceit.*

ORESTES Father, you who died in a way unworthy of a king, grant what I ask: give me mastery of your house.

ELECTRA And I, father, need this of you: to escape my fate, once I have brought great destruction on Aegisthus.

ORESTES Then men would establish for you the feasts the law requires. Otherwise, at the rich feasts, when savory offerings are burned in this land, you'll have no honor.

ELECTRA And I will bring you libations from my full inheritance, from my father's house, on my wedding day; and before all else I will honor this tomb.

ORESTES 489 Earth, send my father up to watch me fight.

ELECTRA 490 Persephone, grant us a glorious victory still.

ORESTES 491 Remember the bath where they took your life, father.[7]

ELECTRA 492 Remember the net they tried out on you, their new device.

ORESTES 493 You were trapped in fetters no smith had forged, father.

ELECTRA 494 And in a robe, shamefully devised.

ORESTES 495 Are you roused by these insults, father?

ELECTRA 496 Are you lifting your dear head upright?

ORESTES 497 Either send Justice as an ally to those you love, or give us in turn the same grip on them they had on you, if, after being thrown, you mean to win the bout.

ELECTRA 500 And hear this last cry, father, as you see your nestlings sitting at your tomb. Pity your offspring, the female and the male alike, and don't wipe out this seed of the line of Pelops. For then you are not dead, even though you have died. Children keep a man's name alive after his death; like corks they hold up the net, keeping the flaxen line from sinking into the deep. Listen: these laments are for your sake. You save yourself if you honor what we say.

CHORUS 510 Well, you've both drawn out this speech, and no one could fault it—a tribute to the tomb for his unlamented fate. As for the rest, since your mind is set on action, you should get to work now and put your fortune to the test.

ORESTES 514 It will be done. But it isn't straying from our course to ask why she sent libations. What made her honor, so late, a wrong that can't be cured? A pitiful gift to send to a dead man who knows nothing! I can't make sense of it. The gifts are too

7 Agamemnon was killed in his bath, after Clytemnestra threw a robe over him like a net.

small for the crime. For though a man pour out everything he has to pay for one man's blood, the effort is wasted: so the saying goes. Tell me, if you know; I want to hear it.

CHORUS [523] I know, child; I was there. She was shaken by dreams and terrors that wandered in the night, and so the godless woman sent these libations.

ORESTES [526] And did you hear the dream, so you can tell it properly?

CHORUS [527] She dreamed she gave birth to a snake—so she says herself.

ORESTES [528] And how does the story end? What's the point of it?

CHORUS [529] She laid it to rest in swaddling clothes, like a baby.

ORESTES [530] What food did it want, this newborn biting beast?

CHORUS [531] In her dream she gave it her own breast.

ORESTES [532] And wasn't her nipple wounded by the hateful thing?

CHORUS [533] Yes—it drew in a clot of blood with the milk.

ORESTES [534] This is no empty dream. It means a man.

CHORUS [535] She woke from sleep screaming in terror, and many lamps that the darkness had blinded blazed up in the house for our mistress. Then she sent these funeral libations, hoping they would be a cure to cut out her troubles.

ORESTES [540] Well, I pray to this earth and to my father's tomb that this dream will find its fulfillment in me. I read it, I tell you, so that every part fits. If the snake came out of the same place I did, and was wrapped in my swaddling clothes, and opened its jaws around the breast that nursed me, and mixed the dear milk with a clot of blood, and she cried out in terror at what was done to her—then, since she nursed a monstrous portent, she must die by violence. And I, turned snake, am the one who kills her, as this dream declares.

CHORUS [551] Then I choose you to interpret these portents. May it turn out that way! Now explain the rest to your friends: tell some of us what to do, and others what not to do.

ORESTES [554] The plan is simple. She is to go inside, and I tell you women to keep this agreement of ours hidden. They killed an honored man by cunning, so by cunning they must be caught and die in the same noose. That is what Loxias proclaimed, lord Apollo, a prophet who has never lied before.

[560] I'll come to the courtyard gate dressed as a stranger, with a traveler's full pack, together with this man here, Pylades, as a guest and an ally of the house. We'll both speak the dialect of Parnassus and imitate the sound of a Phocian accent. Suppose none of the doorkeepers lets us in gladly, since the house is haunted by troubles. Then we'll wait there, so that anyone walking past the house will wonder and say: "Why does Aegisthus shut a suppliant out of his gates, if he's at home and knows?"

[571] But if I do get across the threshold of the courtyard gates and find him on my father's throne, or if he comes in later and confronts me face to face, raising his eyes to mine and then lowering them, mark my words, before he can even say "Where's the stranger from?" I'll lay him dead, caught in the sweep of my swift bronze. And the Fury, never starved of slaughter, will drink unmixed blood for her third draught.

[579] So now, you keep a careful watch on what goes on in the house, so that all this fits neatly together. You women, I advise you to keep your tongues guarded. Stay silent where you must, and say what the moment calls for. As for the rest, I call on him here to watch over it, the one who has set me on this contest of swords.

## FIRST STASIMON

*The chorus sings of monstrous women who destroyed their own, and of Justice forging her sword.*

CHORUS

Many are the terrors,
the dreadful griefs that earth breeds,
and the arms of the sea
teem with hostile monsters.
Between earth and sky
lights hung high in the air draw near,
and things that fly and things that walk the ground
could tell of the fury
of the stormy whirlwinds.

But who could tell
of man's overweening pride,
and the reckless passions
of women with daring hearts,
partners in mortals' ruin?
Love that has lost all love,
the passion that masters the female,
perverts the yoked unions
of beasts and mortals alike.

602 Let him know this, whoever does not
let his thoughts fly off on wings,
once he has learned
of the scheme of fire
that Thestius' wretched daughter devised,
destroyer of her own child.
She burned the blood-red brand
that was the same age as her son
from the moment he came from his mother's womb and cried,
and kept pace with him through his life
to the day that fate had fixed.[8]

612 There is another we must loathe in story,
the murderous girl
who, for the sake of enemies,
destroyed a man she loved.
Won over by the Cretan necklace
of hammered gold, the gift of Minos,
the dog-hearted girl robbed Nisus
of his immortal lock of hair
while he slept, breathing, unsuspecting.
And Hermes overtakes her.[9]

623 Since I have called to mind
these pitiless sufferings,
now is the moment to tell of a loveless marriage,
a curse upon the house,
and the schemes a woman's mind devised
against her husband, the armored warrior,
a man his enemies rightly held in awe.
But I honor the hearth of a home not inflamed,
a woman's spear that does not dare.

8 Althaea, daughter of Thestius, was told that her son Meleager would live as long as a certain log stayed unburned. When he killed her brothers, she threw it on the fire.

9 Scylla of Megara cut from her father, King Nisus, the purple lock on which his life depended, and so betrayed the city to Minos of Crete.

631 Of all evils, the Lemnian ranks first
in story. It is mourned
as a thing to spit upon,
and men liken each new horror
to the woes of Lemnos.
Through a sorrow the gods detest,
a race of mortals is gone, cast down in dishonor,
for no one reveres what the gods hate.
Which of these tales am I wrong to gather?[10]

639 The sword is close to the lungs.
Sharp and piercing, it drives clean through
at the hand of Justice.
For wrong lies trampled underfoot
in the dust,
the wrong of one who has unrighteously overstepped
all reverence owed to Zeus.

646 The anvil of Justice is planted firm,
and Destiny the swordsmith forges the blade beforehand.
The famous Fury, deep in thought,
brings into the house a child
to pay back at last
the pollution of blood shed long ago.

### THIRD EPISODE

*Disguised as a stranger, Orestes reports his own death to Clytemnestra; the Nurse mourns him.*

ORESTES 653 Boy! Boy! Listen, someone's knocking at the courtyard door! Who's inside? Boy, boy, once again, who's in the house? This is the third time I've called for someone to come out of the palace, if Aegisthus keeps a house that welcomes guests.

SERVANT 657 All right, I hear you. What country is the stranger from? Where from?

10 The women of the island of Lemnos murdered all the men, their own husbands among them.

ORESTES 658 Announce me to the masters of the house. They're the ones I've come to see, and I bring news. Be quick, because night's dark chariot is hurrying on, and it's time for travelers to drop anchor in houses that welcome all strangers. Have someone with authority come out of the house. The lady in charge will do, but a man would be better, because awkwardness in conversation keeps words from coming out clearly. A man can speak boldly to a man and make his meaning plain.

CLYTEMNESTRA 668 Strangers, tell me if you need anything. We have everything a house like this should have: warm baths, beds to charm away weariness, and the presence of honest eyes. But if something else must be done that calls for counsel, that is men's business, and we will share it with them.

ORESTES 674 I'm a stranger, a Daulian from Phocis. I was on my way to Argos, carrying my own pack, on the same journey that has brought me here on foot, when a man fell in with me. He didn't know me and I didn't know him. He asked where I was going and told me his own road. It was Strophius of Phocis; I learned his name as we talked. He said: "Since you're going to Argos anyway, stranger, be sure to remember to tell his parents that Orestes is dead. Don't let it slip your mind. Whether his family decides to bring him home, or to bury him as a settler abroad, a stranger forever, bring their instructions back to me. For as it is, the sides of a bronze urn hold the ashes of a man who has been well mourned." That's what I heard, and I've told it. Whether I happen to be speaking to people with authority here, his kin, I don't know. But his parent ought to know.[11]

CLYTEMNESTRA 691 Oh, no! What you've told us means we're utterly destroyed. Curse of this house, so hard to wrestle down, how much you spy out! Even what was laid safely out of the way you bring down with well-aimed arrows from far off, and you strip me, wretched as I am, of those I love. And now Orestes! He was so sensible, keeping his foot clear of the deadly mire. And

11 Strophius, king of Phocis, had raised Orestes after he was sent away from Argos.

now the one hope this house had, the healer of its fine bacchic revels—write it down as having deserted us.

ORESTES [700] For my part, with hosts as prosperous as you, I'd have liked to be made known and welcomed because of good news. What is kinder than a guest's goodwill toward his hosts? But it seemed to me it would be impious not to carry such a matter through for friends, since I had promised and been taken in as a guest.

CLYTEMNESTRA [707] You'll get no less than you deserve, and you'll be no less a friend to this house. Someone else would have come with the same news anyway. But it's time for strangers who have spent the day on a long road to get what they need. Take him to the guest rooms of the house, and these attendants of his and his traveling companion too, and see that they find there what is fitting for this house. I tell you to do this as one who will answer for it. We will share this news with those who rule the house, and since we're not short of friends, we'll take counsel about this calamity.

CHORUS

[719] Now, dear fellow servants of the house,
when shall we show
the strength of our voices for Orestes?
Holy Earth, and holy mound
that now lies heaped
over the royal body of the fleet's commander,
hear us now, help us now!
Now is the moment for cunning Persuasion
to go down with him into the fight,
and for Hermes of the underworld,
the god of night, to watch over
these contests of the deadly sword.

[730] It looks as if our stranger is working mischief. But here I see Orestes' nurse, in tears. Where are you going, Cilissa, out through the palace gates? Is grief keeping you company without pay?

NURSE [734] The mistress has told me to call Aegisthus to the strangers as fast as I can, so he can come and hear this new report more clearly, man from man. In front of the servants she put on a gloomy face, but behind her eyes she was hiding a laugh over how well things have turned out for her. For this house, though, it's as bad as can be, from the news the strangers brought so plainly. He'll be delighted, sure enough, when he hears the story. Oh, poor me! All the old griefs of this house of Atreus, all mixed together and so hard to bear, used to pain the heart in my breast. But I've never had to bear a blow like this. All the other troubles I bailed out patiently. But dear Orestes, who wore my soul out, whom I took from his mother and nursed — [751] and the shrill cries that kept me up and about all night, and all the troubles I put up with, so many, so hard, and no use to me! A baby has no sense, so you have to raise it like a little animal—of course you do—by guessing what it's thinking. A child still in swaddling clothes doesn't say anything, whether it's hungry or thirsty or needs to pass water, and a baby's insides do as they please. I tried to foresee all that, but many a time, I think, I guessed wrong, and then I was the one washing the baby's clothes. Laundress and nurse had the same job. I had both these trades when I took charge of Orestes for his father. And now, poor me, I hear he's dead. And here I am on my way to the man who's been the ruin of this house, and he'll be glad to hear this news.

CHORUS [766] Then how does she tell him to come? With what escort?

NURSE [767] What do you mean, how? Say it again, so I understand you better.

CHORUS [768] With his guardsmen, or on his own?

NURSE [769] She tells him to bring his spearmen with him.

CHORUS [770] Then don't give that message to our hated master. Tell him to come by himself, as fast as he can, with a glad heart, so he can hear the news without alarm. It's the messenger who can straighten a crooked message.

NURSE 774 What? Are you pleased at the news we've had?

CHORUS 775 Yes, if Zeus will someday bring a turn in our troubles.

NURSE 776 How could he? Orestes, the hope of the house, is gone.

CHORUS 777 Not yet. Only a poor prophet would read it that way.

NURSE 778 What are you saying? Do you know something besides what we've been told?

CHORUS 779 Go and deliver your message, and do what you've been told. The gods look after what they care about.

NURSE 781 Well, I'll go and do as you say. May it all turn out for the best, with the gods' help.

### SECOND STASIMON

*The chorus prays to Zeus, the house gods, Apollo and Hermes for Orestes' success.*

CHORUS

783 Now, as I pray to you,
Father Zeus, god of the Olympian gods,
grant that those who rightly long
to see good order in this house
may truly have their fortune.
Every word I have spoken
I have spoken in justice.
Zeus, may you guard him!

789 Ah, ah! Set him who is inside the halls,
Zeus, above his enemies!
For if you raise him high,
he will gladly repay you
twofold and threefold.

794 Know that the orphaned colt of a man you loved
is yoked to a chariot of sorrows.
And you, set a measure on his race:
grant that we see him keep a steady pace,
this stretch of striding feet
pressing across the ground to the end!

800 And you who dwell within the house,
in the inner chamber that delights in wealth,
hear us, gods who are of one mind with us!
Wash away with fresh justice
the blood of deeds done long ago.
Let old murder breed no more in the house!

806 And you who dwell in the great mouth
of the beautifully built cave,
grant that the man's house may lift its eyes again,
and see with loving eyes
the bright light of freedom
from beneath its dark veil.[12]

811 And may the son of Maia rightly lend a hand,
for no one is readier
to send a deed on a fair wind, when he wills.
But when he speaks a word no one can make out,
he brings night and darkness before the eyes,
and by day he is no plainer at all.[13]

819 And then at last we will raise
the glorious song of the house's deliverance,
the women's song that calls a fair wind,
not the shrill strain of mourners:
"All is sailing well!
My gain, my gain is growing here,
and Ruin keeps away from those I love."

12 The great cave is Apollo's shrine at Delphi, where the oracle spoke from deep within.
13 The son of Maia is Hermes, god of trickery and luck as well as guide of the dead.

827 And you, when the moment for action comes,
be bold. When she cries out "My child!"
answer with your father's name,
and go through with a ruin no one can blame.

831 Raise up in your breast
the heart of Perseus,
and for those you love beneath the earth
and those above,
do the favor their bitter anger asks.
Bring bloody ruin within the house,
and wipe out the one guilty of the murder.[14]

## FOURTH EPISODE

*Aegisthus enters the palace and is killed; Orestes confronts his mother and drives her inside to die.*

AEGISTHUS 838 I haven't come unbidden. A messenger summoned me. I hear that some strangers who have arrived are telling news that's far from welcome: the death of Orestes. Laying this on the house too would be a burden dripping with fear, for a house that is still festering and stung from the earlier murder. How am I to judge this? Is it true and real? Or are these frightened stories from women, which leap up into the air and die for nothing? What can you tell me about it that would make it clear to my mind?

CHORUS 848 We heard it, yes. But go inside and ask the strangers. A messenger's report is nothing compared with asking for yourself, man to man.

AEGISTHUS 851 I want to see this messenger and question him, to find out whether he was there himself, close by when the man died, or is repeating something he picked up from vague rumor. He won't fool a mind that has its eyes open.

14 Perseus beheaded the Gorgon Medusa, a monster whose gaze turned anyone who looked at her to stone, by averting his eyes from her face.

CHORUS

Zeus, Zeus, what shall I say? Where shall I begin
this prayer, this appeal to the gods?
How, loyal as I am,
shall I find words to match the moment?
For now the bloodstained edges
of man-slaughtering blades
will either destroy the house of Agamemnon's line
utterly and forever,
or he will kindle fire and light for freedom,
and hold the rule of the city
and the great wealth of his fathers.
Such is the wrestling match godlike Orestes
is about to join, alone, the fresh challenger
against two. May it be for victory!

AEGISTHUS Ah, ah! *Ototototoi!*

CHORUS Listen, listen! What's happening? How has it ended for the house? Let's stand aside while the thing is finished, so that we seem to have no part in these evils. The outcome of the fight is settled.

SERVANT Oh no, oh no, no, my master's struck down! Oh no, again, I cry it a third time! Aegisthus is no more. Come on, open up, as fast as you can, and unbolt the doors to the women's quarters! It needs a strong young man, though not to help one who's already finished. What good would that do? Hey! Hey! Am I shouting to the deaf, babbling uselessly to people asleep? Where's Clytemnestra? What is she doing? It looks as if her own neck is on the razor's edge now, about to fall under the stroke of justice.

CLYTEMNESTRA What's the matter? What's this shouting you're raising in the house?

SERVANT I tell you, the dead are killing the living.

CLYTEMNESTRA Oh no. I understand the riddle. We'll die by treachery, just as we killed. Someone give me a man-killing axe,

quickly! Let's see whether we win or lose. That's how far I've come in this evil.

ORESTES [892] You're the one I'm looking for. He's had enough.

CLYTEMNESTRA [893] Oh no. You're dead, my dearest, my strong Aegisthus.

ORESTES [894] You love the man? Then you'll lie in the same grave, and you'll never betray him now that he's dead.

CLYTEMNESTRA [896] Stop, my son! Have respect, child, for this breast, where you so often dozed while your gums sucked out the milk that made you grow.

ORESTES [899] Pylades, what shall I do? Should I shrink from killing my mother?

PYLADES [900] Then what becomes of Loxias' oracles from now on, the ones given at Pytho, and the pledges we swore in good faith? Make all men your enemies rather than the gods.

ORESTES [903] You win, I judge, and your advice is good. Follow me. I mean to slaughter you right beside him. While he was alive you thought him better than my father. Sleep with him, then, in death, since you love this man and hate the one you should have loved.

CLYTEMNESTRA [908] I raised you, and I want to grow old with you.

ORESTES [909] What, you killed my father and you'll live with me?

CLYTEMNESTRA [910] Fate had a share in this, my child.

ORESTES [911] Then Fate has also brought about this death.

CLYTEMNESTRA [912] Have you no fear of a parent's curses, child?

ORESTES [913] You gave birth to me, and then threw me out into misery.

CLYTEMNESTRA [914] No, I didn't throw you out. I sent you to the house of an ally.

ORESTES [915] I was shamefully sold, though I was the son of a free father.

CLYTEMNESTRA 916 Then where's the price I got for you?

ORESTES 917 I'm ashamed to throw that in your face openly.

CLYTEMNESTRA 918 No, but tell your father's follies too, just as freely.

ORESTES 919 Don't blame the man who toils while you sit at home.

CLYTEMNESTRA 920 It's painful for women to be kept from their man, child.

ORESTES 921 Yes, but it's the man's toil that feeds them while they sit at home.

CLYTEMNESTRA 922 It seems you mean to kill your mother, child.

ORESTES 923 You're the one who'll kill yourself, not I.

CLYTEMNESTRA 924 Watch out! Beware your mother's raging hounds.

ORESTES 925 And how will I escape my father's, if I let this go?

CLYTEMNESTRA 926 It seems I'm alive and wailing in vain to a tomb.

ORESTES 927 Yes, my father's fate blows this death your way.

CLYTEMNESTRA 928 Oh no, this is the snake I gave birth to and nursed!

ORESTES 929 Yes, the terror in your dreams was a true prophet. You killed the one you shouldn't have; now suffer what you shouldn't.

CHORUS 931 I grieve even for these two, for their double downfall. But since long-suffering Orestes has climbed to the peak of so much bloodshed, still, this is what we would choose: that the eye of the house should not fall in utter ruin.

### THIRD STASIMON

*The chorus rejoices that Justice has come to the house and its long darkness is lifted.*

CHORUS

935 Justice came at last to the sons of Priam,
heavy, punishing vengeance.
To the house of Agamemnon came
a double lion, a double Ares.
The exile sent by Pytho's oracle
has driven his course to the finish,
urged on rightly by the god's counsel.

942 Raise the women's cry of triumph for our masters' house,
for its escape from evils, from the wasting of its wealth
by two defilers,
from its grim fortune![15]

946 And she came whose care is the hidden fight,
Vengeance, cunning-minded.
In the battle the true daughter of Zeus
guided his hand,
Justice, as we mortals call her,
and we name her well,
breathing deadly wrath upon her enemies.

942a Raise the women's cry of triumph for our masters' house,
for its escape from evils, from the wasting of its wealth
by two defilers,
from its grim fortune!

**15** The *ololygmos* was the high, ritual cry raised by women at a sacrifice or a moment of triumph.

953 The very things that Loxias of Parnassus,
who holds the great cavern of the earth,
proclaimed aloud, guileless in his guile,
now come down upon the harm that has lingered long.
Somehow the divine holds firm
and will not serve the wicked.
It is right to revere the power that rules the sky.

961 The light is here to see,
and the great curb has been lifted from the household.
Rise up, house! For far too long
you have lain fallen on the ground.

965 Soon Time, who brings all things to pass,
will cross the threshold of the house,
when all pollution is driven from the hearth
by cleansing rites that drive out ruin.
And fortune's throws, landing fair-faced,
gracious to behold in every way,
will fall again for those who dwell in the house.

972 The light is here to see,
and the great curb has been lifted from the household.
Rise up, house! For far too long
you have lain fallen on the ground.

## EXODOS

*Orestes displays the bodies and the robe, defends the killing, and flees as the Furies appear to him.*

ORESTES 973 Look at this pair who ruled the land as tyrants, who murdered my father and plundered the house! How grand they were, sitting on their thrones, and they're lovers still, as you can judge from what has happened to them. Their oath holds true to its pledges. They swore together to bring death to my poor father, and to die together, and they've kept that oath faithfully too.

980 And look again, you who have heard of these evils, at the device they used, the bonds for my poor father, shackles for his hands and a yoke for his two feet. Spread it out, stand around it in a circle, and show this covering for a man, so that the Father may see it—not mine, but the one who watches over all this, the Sun—may see my mother's unholy work, so that he may stand by me as a witness when I'm tried one day, that I was just in pursuing this death, my mother's death. I say nothing of Aegisthus' death. He has the punishment of an adulterer, as the law allows.

991 But she who devised this horror against her husband, whose children she carried under her girdle, a weight once dear to her and now hateful, as she has shown—what do you think of her? If she had been born a moray eel or a viper, she'd rot another just by touching him, without even a bite, so great is her daring and her lawless mind.

997 What shall I call it, even if I find the fairest words? A trap for a wild beast? Or a bathtub's drapery, shrouding a corpse down to its feet? No, you'd call it a net, rather, a hunting snare, robes to shackle the feet. A highwayman might own such a thing, a man who makes his living cheating travelers and robbing them of their silver. With a trick like this he could kill many and warm his heart a great deal.

1005 May I never have a woman like this sharing my house! Sooner may the gods destroy me childless.

CHORUS

1007 Oh, oh, for these wretched deeds!
You were done to death by a hateful death.
Ah, ah!
And for the one who remains, suffering too comes into flower.

ORESTES 1010 Did she do it, or didn't she? This robe is my witness, how Aegisthus' sword dyed it. The gush of blood, together with time, has spoiled many of the dyes in its embroidery.

1014 Now I can praise him, now I can mourn him, standing here and speaking to this web that killed my father. I grieve for

what was done and what was suffered, and for my whole family, since this victory has left me with a pollution no one would envy.

CHORUS

1018 No mortal passes through his life
unharmed, free of pain to the end.
Ah, ah!
One trouble is here now; another will come.

ORESTES 1021 But I want you to know, because I don't know where this will end: it's as if I were driving a team of horses off the track. My wits, hard to control, are carrying me away, beaten. Fear stands at my heart, ready to strike up a song, and my heart to dance to its angry tune. While I still have my senses, I proclaim to my friends and declare that I killed my mother not without justice, she who was the pollution of my father's murder, a thing the gods hate. And as the spell that drove me to this daring, I name above all

1030 Loxias, the prophet of Pytho, who declared to me that if I did this I would be free of guilt, but if I failed to—I won't say what the penalty was. No archer could reach the height of those sufferings.

1034 And now look at me. See how, armed with this branch and wreath, I will go as a suppliant to the shrine at the earth's navel, Loxias' ground, and to the light of the fire that is called undying, fleeing this blood that is my own kin's. Loxias told me to turn to no other hearth. And I ask all the Argives to bear witness in time to come how these evils were brought about. As for me, I go a wanderer, an exile from this land, and in life and in death I leave behind this name.[16]

CHORUS 1044 But you've done well. Don't yoke your mouth to ill-omened words or let your tongue speak evil of yourself, when

16 Apollo's oracle at Delphi was held to stand at the navel, the center, of the earth; a fire burned there perpetually.

you've freed the whole city of Argos by lopping off the heads of two serpents with one clean stroke.

ORESTES [1048] Ah! Ah! Women of the house, look at them, like Gorgons, in dark robes, their hair twined thick with snakes! I can't stay here any longer.

CHORUS [1051] What visions are whirling you around, you whom your father loved more than any man? Stop, don't let fear overwhelm you.

ORESTES [1053] These torments of mine are not visions. They're clearly my mother's raging hounds.

CHORUS [1055] It's the fresh blood still on your hands. That's why this turmoil is falling on your mind.

ORESTES [1057] Lord Apollo! Now there are more and more of them, and their eyes are dripping loathsome blood.

CHORUS [1059] There is one way to cleanse yourself: Loxias' touch will set you free of these torments.

ORESTES [1061] You can't see them, but I can. I'm being driven away. I can't stay any longer.

CHORUS [1063] Then good fortune go with you, and may the god look on you with kindness and guard you with timely chances.

[1065] So now upon the royal palace
a third storm has blown,
born of the family, and run its course.
First came the miserable sufferings
of children devoured.
Second, the sufferings of a king:
the warlord of the Achaeans
perished, slaughtered in his bath.
And now a third has come from somewhere:
a savior, or shall I call it doom?
Where will it end? Where will it cease,
the fury of ruin, lulled at last to sleep?[17]

17 Atreus, Agamemnon's father, killed his brother Thyestes' children and served them to him at a banquet.