

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon***GUARD**

The gods relieve my watch: that's all I ask.
 Year-long I've haunched here on this palace roof,
 year-long been the all-fours watch-dog of the Atreids,
 learning by rote the slow dance of the stars,
 spectator of the brilliance in black skies
 that brings to men their winters and their suns:
 the stately light-lords' settings and their rise.

I'm here still. Still watching for the fire,
 the relayed beacon that will bring the word
 that Troy is taken: watching by command 10
 of the heart of a woman who waits, her mind like a man's.

My rest is a sleep-walk, sweated clammy dew,
 a sleep-walk which no kind dreams over-watch.
 The presence by my bed's not rest but terror,
 eyelid-spasming drowse-out-jolting terror.
 And when I think to sing or hum some tune
 to inject alertness since no sleep will come,
 the tune becomes tears how miss-fortune freights his house,
 the song is miss-rule capsizing mastership.

But now, gods, change my luck. Relieve my task, 20
 shine out the dark good news for which I ask!

The beacon is seen.

A blaze in the night, as bright as day—*it's here!*
 O how I welcome you, you telltale flame
 speaking to me of dancing of the streets,
 all Argos celebrating Troy's downfall!

Awake—*ai ai*—awake!
 I signal too, to Agamemnon's wife:
 to leave her bed at once and set the house
 aright with victory-howl to bless this blaze...
 If the citadel of Troy is really taken...
 ...that's what this shining messenger *should* mean. 30
 —Why, yes; and I will dance the overture!
 What falls well for my lord, falls well for me:
 this semaphore's my dice rolled six times three.

And may it be my master, when he comes,
 will clasp this hand with his love-hallowed hand.
 There's more, but I won't say it. The saying goes:
 "My tongue's become where the trampling oxen stand."
 You could ask the house. If this house had a mouth,
 this house would speak.

I mean my words just so.

They're dark to those in the dark: not to those in the know.
He descends and goes into the palace.

CHORUS

Decade of home-emptiness 40
this, since the Priam-war
moved to prosecution:
Menelaus led it and Agamemnon,
Zeus-set on twin thrones and twin-sceptred,
twin-yoked in honour as Atreus's sons:
launched here a fleet of a thousand destroyers
packed out with warriors, a military task-force
off from this land:

calling the war-god great in their fury,
screaming like eagles at peak of grief's ecstasy 50
over their young:
wheeling and turning high in the vortex,
rowing the air with the blades of their wing-tips
over their nests,
lost to them now their confinement of care
lost for so long.

But higher up still, they are heard by some Apollo,
by some Pan or Zeus—the harsh scream of these guests in his realm;
overdue, slow,
he hunts down the eagles' assailants, he strikes them all low
overwhelmed.

Thus Zeus almighty sent the sons of Atreus, 60
Zeus guest-protector set them on Paris,
sent in pursuit of a multi-manned woman:
sent with them death-bouts and leaden-limbed strugglings,
sent strength of youths' knees snapped in the dust,
sent with them spear-shafts smashed in the onset,
sent these for Greeks and for Trojans alike.

That's how things stand. The Fates know no escape-clause.
Nor secret sacrifice, extra libation,
nor private gifts of quiet pleading tears 70
can bend their spite, their wrath wears out the years.

But we stand in tattered flesh
old past all usefulness,
left out of that weapon-take,
leaning our child's strength
here on our walking-sticks. 80

A little boy's vitality
leaps in his sternum
but he's no warrior,
Ares the killing-god

not yet at home:
just like him, senility's
leaves drop late-autumn,
a stick props its tottering
noon-dream roam.

But Leda's daughter and Tyndareos',
you, queen Clytaemestra,
what need, what news,
what message-rumour's made
you send your stewards round, commanding all these rites?
For all the gods this city knows,
heaven-gods or underworld,
from mystery-gods to market-idols— 90
every altar blazes with a burning offering bright.
On this side and that
as high as the heaven
their lamp ascends,
dosed by the clean-burning
supple coaxing
holy oil lends,
fires anointed with fuel the queen herself sends.

O say what you can of this, Queen. Explain—what's allowed.
So bring relief to the burden by which we are bowed,
to our expectations one minute so darkly ill, 100
the next as bright as the sacrifice-flame of fresh kill,
as hope fends away the mood of the darkest part,
the ravenous ache of despair that eats out the heart.

[Silence.]

One thing I can still: *strophe 1*
sing of the omen,
parting victory-omen
sent to our war-lords.
Though age has grown old with me,
age still breathes divinely,
still sends the song-strength
the wingèd words.

Here's how the two-throned
might of Achaia,
captains of Greek cadets
two grown to one end, 110
were set on the spear's way,
the hand's way of mighty deeds,
by an omen—two eagles—
against Troy and its land:

ship-kings shown sky-kings
plain, none could miss them,
right over the palace roof,

one black-tailed and one white:
on the well-omened side
catching a mother-hare
ripping her offspring unborn into sight.

120

We sense the pain to come; say *all come right*.

Then Calchas diligent,
military diviner,
seeing the Atreids
twinned in their temper,
twinned in their war-love,
cast them as the eagles:
these two generals were the butchers of the hare.

antistrophe 1

“In time this task-force
will take Priam's city,
in time all Troy's people
be herded there like cattle
by its burning towers
to be raped by their fates”—
he looked at the omen, saw this meaning there.

130

“But how to avoid nemesis,
bitter gods' jealousy,
shadow on the army
sent to halter Troy?
Holy Artemis is watching,
she saw Zeus's winged hounds,
hated their butchery:
she pitied the embryos, the helpless shredded hare.”

We sense pain comes; we say *well all will fare*.

“Artemis, so merciful
to savage lions' little ones,
sweet to every suckling cub
wandering in the wilds,
let these portents come to good
since they fall auspicious-side,
pass over the sense of dread that we feel lurking still.

140

And I invoke the healer,
Paian, to persuade her
to raise no lingering anti-winds
that pin the fleet in port,
to demand no second sacrifice,
lawless, not to feast on,
cogenerate with blood-feud sets man and wife at ill.

150

For a god-wrath is lurking there,
fearful, resilient,

a homemaker whose smile's a trap
 a child-avenging mind."
 So did Calchas prophesy,
 amid the usual blessings,
 fateful words upon the march,
 to the kings; and still

we like him sense pain to come, say all go well, not ill.

Zeus—whoever Zeus may be—
 if “Zeus” is for mortals to sing—
 by Zeus' name will I call to him,
 seeing not even everything
 set in one scale counter-balances him
 set in the other¹; to Zeus must I sing
 if my false-conceiving mind's to be truly free
 of the empty senseless dread that encompasses me.

strophe 2 160

Nor whatever *ci-devant*
 god broiling in all-warring might—
 I will not even mention him
 nor his successor slight.
 Zeus's forerunners are no match for him,
 his arm puts them to flight.
 The prudent mind awards Zeus victory:
 wisdom gives Zeus first place in piety.

antistrophe 2

170

For Zeus's law is first in all the world.
 The law is this: *no wisdom without pain*.
 Slow process of the watching soul's unsleep
 distils tear-drip of threnody within;
 wanted or not by us, such wisdom's gained;
 its score, its etch, its scar in us goes deep.
 The grace of the gods, the bright powers set on high,
 is overpowering, sharp, involuntary.

strophe 3

180

The admiral sits there with his sails all furled,
 his ships becalmed. No Calchas bears his blame.
 Nothing to do but whistle across the still deep,
 to watch his army watch till they starve thin.
 So Agamemnon waits on Aulis' plain
 where the treacherous strait's dark undersurges sweep
 round the pride of Greece's fleet, trapped, stationary,
 round a thousand hulls of seasick infantry.

antistrophe 3

190

The ice-breath that breathes down from the Balkan north
 breeds bad idleness, worse settings-forth.
 Desertions rot the men, mould rots the sails.
 And still the relentless north's tormenting gales
 nag and rub the place already raw
 as Argos' flower's bleached to dead white straw.

strophe 4

¹ Cp. the golden chain of *Iliad* 8.15-24.

Till Calchas recalls Artemis
the eagles and the leverets
till he tells the generals *there's another way*.
His words rush on the Atreids
his cure's worse than the weather-curse 200
they stamp their war-staves, hide wet eyes, howl, pray.

Silence. Then steps Agamemnon forth, *antistrophe 4*
first of the blood, the elder by his birth.
“A hard thing this if our obedience fails;
no less hard for a father—for a trail
of a daughter's blood—across the altar poured—
tracked by my child-red hands for ever more— 210

But tell me, what's the *ill-free* course?
I can't turn deserter,
a general double-crossing troops he promised a bounty-day.
If virgin blood will stop the winds
they're bound to want to urge her blood.
May it be well. May it be well. *There is no other way.*”

So with relief he gave it Necessity's name. *strophe 5*
Once necked in his yoke, though, we smelt off him something unclean,
something desanctified, something set free to defile; 220
new look in his face that said *All is permitted for me*.
Bad wisdom sets us out of reach of shame,
then traps us in the oldest snares of all.

So he
sensed the barriers dissolve that kept him from killing his child,
from butchering her to steel the Bride-War's grip;
he'd sacrifice her to give good speed to his ships.

Once trapped, she wept, called on her father's name— *antistrophe 5*
as if Iphigeneia's maidish scream
could move his crew of genocidophiles, 230
his entourage of death-squads; or move him.
He said the prayers, then had them lift her frame,
thin as a goat-kid's, dress splayed in un-seem,
head lolling shocked, yet still a lovely child.
A silken cincture gagged her pale fine lips
lest her last words reverse the spell for the ships,

lest her last words be a curse on her father's home. *strophe 6*
Her saffron satin fell from her, a stream
of bright cloth flowing to the wet earth, while
her only weapon left, her dazed eyes' gleam, 240
shard-of-mirror-sharp, stabbed at hearts of stone.
She used to sing for her father's parties. She now seemed
to fight her gag for one last song: still the child
too young for sex, little girl on Father's hip,
who performed so sweet at the third libation's sip.

And then? Unseen unthinkable unknown
 but Calchas does not scheme unenacted schemes.
 Justice weights her scales, sets you this trial:
no wisdom without pain. And all you dream,
 your fragile futureness—best let it go,
 best wait until you see, not hope unseen.
 Clarity comes with time, and it dawns meanwhile.

antistrophe 6

250

Enter CLYTAEMESTRA.

But may all that comes be a victory song on our lips!
 We serve *you*, O queen—while the king is away with the ships.

Addressing her directly.

We approach, Clytaemestra, reverent of your rule;
 as of course we should, when the man-throne is vacated
 and his wife is left to fill it as best she can.
 For now we would gladly hear—though we cannot demand—
 whether there's news, or whether it is just hope
 and nothing more solid that leads you to sacrifice so?

260

CLYTAEMESTRA

As your proverb says, let good news come in the dawn,
 she-dawn that is daughter of kindly mother Night.
 I have a tale to tell you more solid than *hope*.
 Our Greek army's captured the citadel of Troy.

CHORUS

What did you say? I cannot believe it's true.

CLYTAEMESTRA

The Greeks hold Troy. Is that plain enough for you?

CHORUS

Now joy creeps in, calling forth a rising tear.

270

CLYTAEMESTRA

Your wet eye makes your right-minded loyalty clear.

CHORUS

But what is your evidence? Is there some proof you've received?

CLYTAEMESTRA

Of course I have proof; unless some sly he-god's deceived.

CHORUS

I hope it's not just that you've had some seductive dream.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Am I such a fool as to mix up what's real with what seems?

CHORUS

Or maybe some rumour's flown in to send your wits wild.

CLYTAEMESTRA

You really think that my mind is no more than a child's?

CHORUS

So *when*, according to you, was Troy taken by storm?

CLYTAEMESTRA

As I've just said—in the night that gave birth to this dawn.

CHORUS

If we took Troy last night—what messenger gets here *this morn*?

280

CLYTAEMESTRA

The fire-god, in light-speed relay borne!

The first beacon was lit on Ida, the mountain of Troy.
Ida's light was seen at Hermes' Rock on Lemnos.
The great blaze they kindled on Lemnos in turn was seen
and acknowledged on Athos, Zeus's mountain height.
From Athos again in a bright track spanning the sea—
dry pine-wood blazing gold, as bright as the sun—
the message crossed over, as quick as the travelling light,
bringing its joy to the lookout of Makistos.

Makistos wasted no time, but all alert
put sleepiness aside and did his part:
his relay-beacon's light blazed out afar
across the Euripus to Messapion's guards.
At once they sparked a pile of withered gorse
and on Messapion passed its answering flame.

290

The untiring lantern, all unfaltering,
clean overleapt the plain of Asopus
as might the moon in all its ruddy splendour,
and woke the next relay, on from Cithaeron's height.

Cithereon's watch sent on the fire-procession
more overdoing than stinting with the fuel;
the glow reflected off the haunted lakes
as far as Aegiplanctus, where it roused
the watchmen to their duty to the fire.

300

And Aegiplanctus laboured happily
to set a flame like wind-beard in the sky.
Visible beyond the Saronic Gulf,
this touched earth next where it reached Arachne's Peak.
Arachne's Peak is the watchpost neighbouring us:
from there it next alighted on our roof,
the light of Ida in true lineage,
arrived in one night on the roof of the Atreids.

310

You see, all this is just as I chose it would be.
This relay covering all the long miles from Troy,

this race where the final runner is still the first,
 still the same victory-fire: I arranged it myself.
 You ask me for proof. Well, this is the proof I bring.
 My news proceeds thus from the very hand of the king.

CHORUS

Later, queen, our thanksgivings will be said;
 but not until we've heard the tale in full
 of how Troy's citadel's at last unmade,
 a tale as longed-for as it's wonderful.

CLYTAEMESTRA

The Greeks hold Troy this dawn: that's all the tale. 320
 I hear Troy echo with two sounds unmixed.
 As rich sleek oil and stinging vinegar,
 poured in one vessel, hostile stand apart,
 so the sleek triumph-howl of the winning army
 discords with the stinging despair of the tears of defeat.
 The losers fall headlong upon the bodies,
 beloved bodies—husbands, brothers; dead.
 A little boy there cradles in his arms
 the dead old man who last night cradled him;
 his throat, a slave's throat now, is thick with sobs.
 But the winners' night of knife-work in dark streets 330
 ends with them breakfasting off the slaughtered city.
 No camp-beds now or quarter-master's rations:
 they break into whatever house they like,
 they sit and eat whatever they choose to take.
 It's their house now the gods have relieved their watch,
 changed frost-dewed trenches for the blessedness
 of sentryless rest that lasts as long as the night.

This can last, if the Greeks can keep respect.
 If they can do due homage to Troy's gods,
 not trample down their altars, then maybe 340
 they'll find a better fate than a knife in the dark.
 But not if a lust already burns in them,
 captured by greed, for plunder beyond their dues.
 The race at its furthest point's only halfway run;
 still to do is the getting safely home.
 If the soldier returns not having offended the gods,
 it may be that the pains of those he destroyed
 will sleep unavenged—not bring him a bad end.

Such is my tale, told in this woman's speech.
 May all come right, and not ambiguously.
 I know my place. It seems better than kingship to me. 350

CHORUS

Lady, you speak almost masculine wisdom and sense.
 And now I have heard that you have proper evidence
 I set myself to speak my thanksgiving prayer;
 we have a reward that is worth the long years of our care.

O Zeus the King, O Night who fights for us,
who fits us out with war-raiment glorious,
who throws across the unscaled towers of Troy
the close-wove net of the fate of all-destroy,
the all-dredge net neither young nor old evades,
stranding all Troy as our slain or as our slaves— 360
Paris broke guest-friendship, and for this
Zeus the guest-friend's bow long bent on Paris:
so now Zeus' true and deadly arrow flies
not short into the earth, nor long into the skies.

The blow that staggers them now is the blow of Zeus: *strophe 1*
whatever else stays unclear, that can be traced.
Zeus decreed it and Zeus did it. Those who use
to say the gods don't care when men disgrace 370
with trampling what crude foot must never touch—
the fall of Troy shows the insolence of such.

He blows and puffs beyond a mortal's right;
vainglory's war-swag overflows the house.
I rather choose a painless plain suffice,
to hubris' heights prefer low common nous. 380
The plunder-drunk who despoils shrines in his lust
may escape a war; he'll never escape What's Just.

Smooth insidious speech entices to it, *antistrophe 1*
sweet speech, the child of foreordained destruction.
The spell once done, no unspell will undo it;
the trap works not by hiding, but attraction. 390
A few blows tarnish cheap tin grimy black:
true mettle shows when the Furies are at your back.

The man whose choices bring his state to ruin
can no more hope his reversal-prayers be heard
can no more hope for the wreck he's made's undoing
than a stumbling toddler catch a soaring bird. 400
No more than this can childish Paris escape
his ruinous guest-guilt for Helen's rape.

Yet free-seduced, she flew from this Atreid house. *strophe 2*
She stole past our guards, past our barracked, ship-barred gates,
daring her dare without caring what dooms she aroused;
she skipped into Troy her contagion of lethal fates.
The wise who saw it groaned both for prince and for house, 410
for the emptied house, for the spectral prince, who awaits,
without hope or wrath, what he no longer wishes to see:
the curves of the faraway form he now hates in her statuary.

Hidden sorrow reveals itself in dreaming, *antistrophe 2* 420
delusion appears as delight in the emptied heart:
delusion, since at first light his wife's seeming

skips from his sleep-sight, unreachably apart.
 And the empty ache at each army-family's hearth
 is hidden too, behind eyes dried fresh from streaming 430
 for the dear-faced husbands whom this war returns
 as faceless ash in funerary urns.

A refiner's fire is Ares'; and he makes, *strophe 3*
 from the counterpoise of spears in his furnace Troy,
 a weeping soot that floats in heavy flakes 440
 which, shipped in parcels home, cremates all joy.
 Love rocks in anguish over it, commemorates
 the fall-, the glory-sign of each dead boy.
 Love breathes a question hidden from the State: 450
 "He died to get Menelaus back his toy?"
 Not even the sign of an urn returns to some:
 their conqueror rots enclosed in the land he won.

The people's murmur's heavy with their blame; *antistrophe 3*
 what Menelaus has cost them is their curse.
 I sense a black night comes. For all these slain 460
 sum to a fate-debt the all-seeing gods rehearse;
 who pushes Justice aside from his path of gain,
 the slow Furies drag him down through luck reversed
 into helpless dark. The highest-daring fame
 attracts Zeus' jealous lightning; not averts. 470
 Enough just to live on, not to draw envy, for me,
 neither captor of cities nor captured and slave to be.

This fire of good-news rumour through the town, 480
 who knows if it tells truth, or some god's deceit?
 Childish to cheer triumphant, then drop down
 deflated if the news turns to defeat.
 For tongues to wag with intelligence incomplete
 is natural when a woman wears the crown.
 A woman's edict quickly echoes round;
 yet before you can inscribe it, self-deletes.

This message fire, these relayed beaconings— 490
 now we'll find out sure knowledge: are they true
 or has some happy dream led us astray?
 Look—real news is arriving from the shore.
 Our herald's coming up the olive-walks,
 his cloak all dust of parched-dry matted mud;
 that means news in words, not in dumb-show semaphore
 or bracken crackling on some distant hill.
 Will he tell us to rejoice, or will his news—
 but I'll leave unsaid the other thing it could be.
 Let him bring new good to add to old good news. 500
 Some may pray the opposite; as for those,
 I pray each reap the ill harvest that he sows.

*Enter HERALD. He prostrates himself and kisses the ground.*²

HERALD

The soil, the soil that sired me! Argive earth!
Back from this empty decade: the tenth year's turn!
So many hopes shipwrecked. Yet this one, the least, has reached shore.
How much hope was left I'd die in my native land,
finish my life here, fill up my family tomb?
Now I greet my land, I greet the light of its sun,
Zeus my land's ruler, and Pythian lord Apollo—
whom I pray to strike us no more with his archery's shafts. 510
Enemy enough you were by Scamander's stream;
now turn our saviour, come now to salve, not to wound.
This to Apollo. To all the Olympian order
taken together, above all to Hermes their herald—
protector and friend of all heralds, and all heralds' cult—
and to the land's heroes who sent us, my prayer is this:
receive back with love the land's army—at least, what is left.

And I greet the palace, dear home of the Atreid kings,
their judgement seats and the sun-facing gods before it. 520
If ever your eyes glistened with greeting tears
let them now welcome our lord after so long a time.
For he comes to you like a candle lit in the dark,
he comes to his people: Agamemnon king!
Receive him then well, as well as he deserves:
the ploughman of Zeus who brings retribution to men,
who turned over Troy, who worked that old soil to new loam,
killed off every clinging weed he uprooted there.
Such was the yoke of chastisement laid on Troy 530
by our Atreid lord, this truly happy man.
And now he comes, most worthy of honour of all
of those now living. Paris and Troy cannot boast
they made us suffer more than we made them;
their debt is settled. Convicted on a charge
of rape and theft, Paris forfeits everything;
his prize is lost, and what he's brought upon
his house and land is all-destroying death.
The sons of Priam pay and pay again.

CHORUS

First-comer of the returners, welcome here.

HERALD

I am well come indeed; complete and beyond death's fear.

CHORUS

You feared to be robbed of return to your fatherland? 540

² To ask, as commentators from Fraenkel on have tended to, how it is that the Chorus's song goes on for the three weeks or so long enough to give the Herald and Agamemnon time to get back to Argos from Troy, is a harmless foible of scholarly pedantry at which anyone who has ever actually been involved in a play will merely smile and shake her head.

HERALD

That was the fear filled these eyes where joy's tears now stand.

CHORUS

Then we may rejoice that the army too knew this disease.

HERALD

The army *too*? Were you not at peace here? At ease?

CHORUS

Our time was like yours. It was fear and longing and loss.

HERALD

From the overseas army, our grief for you echoed across?

CHORUS

Time of echoes and rebounds of bitterness, truly, it was.

HERALD

And this fit of heartsickness fell on my homeland because... ?

CHORUS

My oldest recourse against trouble's to hold my tongue.

HERALD

Some trouble, some fear, the lords being away so long?

CHORUS

Your words to describe it, "beyond death's fear", are not wrong.

550

HERALD

Beyond fear—for all is done well!

Or mostly so:

in a long war it's sure collateral damage will come.
 Whose lives escape *all* blame, *all* trouble? Only the gods'.
 Oh, I could speak of hardships and ill-lodgings!
 No bed but the verminous straw on the trampling deck,
 day after day on the bile-green-sliding sea:
 when you can't see the land, what *doesn't* make you sick?
 Yet when we made landfall things got even worse,
 bivouacked within bowshot of Troy's walls
 in a mildew marsh that bubbled mephitic mists,
 our hair and our clothes alive with crawling horrors.
 Or we could talk of the bird-killing cold of the winters,
 the unbearable cold that blew from the high snows of Ida.
 Or again of the heat, the doldrum heat of the sea,
 the waveless and windless siesta of blank noon.

560

There's no point now to talk of these past troubles.
 For past they are; they no more pain the dead;
 no morning muster drags *them* from their beds.
 They're past as well for us who are alive—
 for us dregs of the Argive army that survive.

570

What we have won outweighs what we have lost.
How can we count our casualties in the cost?
Rather I think the hour comes to rejoice,
to raise in our bright noon a vaunting voice,
to launch our high boast over land and sea:
“At Troy a Greek host once made victory;
here are their trophies in their temples hung
as gifts to their gods, as the glories of old song.”

Now you have heard this, it's your turn to praise
your city and your generals; and to raise
your hymn to Zeus. For me, my tale is done.

580

CHORUS

I am happily won by what I hear from you;
what remains young, in the old, is the will to learn.
Gestures to the HERALD to enter the palace.

But the news you bring is the palace's concern
and Clytaemestra's first—though I profit too.

Enter CLYTAEMESTRA from the palace, blocking the HERALD's way.

CLYTAEMESTRA (*ignoring the HERALD and addressing the CHORUS*)

You heard me cry the victory-howl before.
When the first fire-sign flared across the night,
you heard me say that Troy was overturned.
Remind me, which of you called me foolish then
for trusting the report of a fatuous flame?
Who said “How womanish! So quick convinced!”?
Yes, I'd quite lost my grip, on your account.
I made due offerings anyway; and *womanish*,
the men of Argos spread my victory-howl
across the happy city, censed the altars,
fed our restless gods with soothing flame.

590

To the HERALD

Why then would I need *you* to fill me in?
I'll exact a full account from the King himself.
My current hurry is to give my spouse—
my spouse, at whose deeds wondering shame is due—
the welcome he best deserves. Could any wife
see a sweeter sight than this: her husband home,
home from the wars, preserved for her by the gods?

600

Preserved for me: Agamemnon! Tell him this:
“Come as quick as you can; you see how your city desires you;
in your house awaits a wife unchanged in faithfulness,
just what you left her, the watch-bitch of the house,
right-willed to you, an enemy to ill minds,
unchanged and constant in her character;
she has broken no vow in your time apart;
she knows no more of affairs or adultery-rumours
than of where to cool a new blade's burning steel.”

610

This is my speech, truth-filled in every phrase,
 which a noblewoman may speak with no disgrace.
Exit CLYTAEMESTRA into the palace.

CHORUS

These are Clytaemestra's words; to those in the know—
 to interpreters not in the dark—their truth will show.

But Herald, tell me: what of Menelaus?
 Is he too coming safe back from the war
 to us again, the dear strength of our land?

HERALD

Comfortable falsehoods reassure; 620
 but told to friends, there's small chance they'll long stand.

CHORUS

You cannot, then, speak reassuring *fact*?
 When comfort parts from truth, that's hard to hide.

HERALD

Menelaus went missing sailing back,
 him and his ship. No comfort, but no lie.

CHORUS

Surely he didn't sail away alone?
 Was he then lost in a storm that struck you all?

HERALD

You hit the target like a champion bow.
 Your brief words sum the long suffering I recall.

CHORUS

So he's alive? Or dead? What rumour goes 630
 around the crews? It's surely known to some.

HERALD

No man can say. The only one who knows
 may be the overseer of all life, the Sun.

CHORUS

And what god-driven storm is this that blows
 our fleet apart? How ended? How begun?

HERALD

It seems wrong to stain with darkness this bright day,
 mix bitterness into its sweet thanksgiving.
 The messenger who brings his town the news
 it's fended off so long with pleading prayers,
 whose ashen face speaks how an army's lost,
 how communal calamity's struck the state: 640
 how the city's sons, the households' fathers are
 blood sacrificed on the altar of black War,

one public grief and many private woes,
as the double-ruinous tax to Ares goes—
the messenger borne down with words like these
his hymn's a death-hosanna to the Furies.
I'm not him. But the one who brings the news
of the army saved to its triumphant town—
I'm not him either. My task is to mix
that sweet news with this bitter.

A storm came,

A sea-storm big with the anger of the gods.
Fire and water made alliance on us,
lightning-fire, sea-storm water, always foes before;
they proved their compact by destroying us. 650
The first we knew was tsunami in the night:
the northern gales that grate the ships together,
the lightning-fireball, typhoon-confusion,
the hail that shatters glass—all came at once.
Ship-prow gored ship-belly; then both sank.

The fleet vanished in the black like driven sheep.
And in the bleak-shine brightness of the dawn
we saw the Aegean petalled with our dead, 660
with floating corpses and with shattered masts.

But *our* ship—some small touch on the tiller,
some god's touch not a man's, some stolen chance
or prayed-for—had saved us, preserved our ship.
Good Luck the saviour, perching on our prow!
Somehow we'd been neither swamped at anchor
nor smashed to pieces on the nearest shore.

Afterwards we had hours to gape at it,
pale in the daylight, pulled from the maw of hell,
scarce crediting how the same Luck that saved *us*
had also smashed to matchwood all the rest. 670

If any of them has breath still in his lungs
no doubt he's thinking just the same of us,
just as we're presuming *he* is dead.

May all lead to the best. For Menelaus,
think of him as close kin to the gods,
their first concern, since Helen is Zeus' daughter.
So long as the rays of life's overseer Sun
find him alive somewhere, sight in his eyes,
so long as Zeus wills survival for his heirs,
that long the hope remains that he'll come home.

And now you've heard this, know you've heard the truth. 680

Exit HERALD—not into the palace, but back towards the sea.

CHORUS

Who invented this name, *strophe 1*
name so fitting, so right,
name that maybe came
from the Ones Beyond Sight,
from some god who forced,

out of dark foreknowledge welling,
the name of this spear-whore
war-cause Helen?

Out from her boudoir-veils
silk light and soft,
under the god-filled sails
graced from aloft,
comes Helen, comes hell.
Helen: the navy wrecked.
Helen: whole armies dead.
Helen: the city wracked
with mourning's knell.

690

And hot on her course
the many-manned chase
the puddle-tracks of oars
fade behind the fleet race
camouflaged in the leaf-shade
of Simois' shore
they arrive for the Helen-made
murderous War.

Troy's troth-bond with Helen,
it bound Troy in truth—
like a bull bound for felling
by the axe of god's wrath;
wrath that waits long
to avenge a shamed host,
that out-waits the bride-song
in which Troy delights most,
which Leda's child made them
all sing with all joy,
the song Helen bade them
re-echo through Troy.
Sing Helen, sing hell.
Helen: the navy wrecked
Helen: whole armies dead
Helen: the city wracked
with mourning's knell.

antistrophe 1

700

For the song that they sang then
sounds different now;
death-despair's the new anthem
in Priam's old town;
Paris, who before
was their darling, they call
toy-boy of the blood-whore
who's ruined them all.

710

Once a romping tumbling toy
in a deep-plush coat of gold
was a father's children's playtime joy,

strophe 2

720

chuckled at by the old:
a hunter had brought home with him
a lion-cub for a pet,
mewing suckling cub that mumbled him
with toothless gums as yet,
eyes sharp on his hands when he cradled it
for whatever it could get.

Time went on; the lion-cub grew; *antistrophe 2*
shy before, it turns to bold;
talon-claws, teeth needle-new,
watch the nature in it unfold;
what the hunter had brought home with him
lets its parent instinct out, 730
pays the old hosts who had smiled at it
in bloody cattle-rout:
across the marble floors of the nursery
red sacrifices spout.

We say, with her, there came to Troy *strophe 3*
a sea-calm, windless sense
of fortunes rich, serenest joy 740
with no weapons but love's glance;
she was perfection, bliss, heart-pierced desire.
But once there, she turned a destiny
of doom upon her spouse;
a Fury gifting misery,
a curse fallen on Priam's house;
the irony-guest of guest-friend Zeus's ire,
the bride who burns brides' joys on a weeping pyre.

The old saying is: prosperity, *antistrophe 3* 750
once grown to its full height,
brings forth a fate-posterity,
the offspring of heaven's spite:
each rich man brings disaster on his sons.
But I am minded differently:
it is the blasphemous act
that brings forth fatal progeny,
so like it after the fact; 760
to the house in which the writ of justice runs
no offspring but a joyous fortune comes.

Some ancient deed of cosmic insolence *strophe 4*
conceives new insolence. Amid men's pain,
amid the flourishing of men of violence,
we watch as it emerges yet again,
foul as its parents. This cannot be fought—
uncleanness of impious self-assertion:
a black doom on bright palaces is brought 770
by this dark angel of all self-destruction.

But still the light shines out where Justice is,
 even if Justice is in the peat-smogged hut;
 Justice exalts the poor man's righteousness,
 from pompous gold-leaf shrines with her eyes shut—
 if they were made by unclean hands—she'll leave
 for a house whence humbler purer praise ascends.
 No flattery-frauds from wealth will she receive:
 she distributes to all their deserved ends.

antistrophe 4

780

Enter AGAMEMNON riding, with CASSANDRA and much other war-spoil, in a glorious gold-leaf chariot, with attendants and guards following.

Come then, my king, you taker of Troy,
 you Atreus' and Tantalus's heir:
 how shall I homage you, how shall I yet speak fair?
 How shall I make my praises of you fly
 at target-finding level in the air,
 not short into the earth, nor long into the sky,
 to bring you what they should—and that is joy?

Plenty of mortals overstepping justice
 prefer to the reality, the *seeming*;
 almost all will look for where the true grief is
 and fill the air around it with false grieving—
 fake and forced, and nowhere near heart-piercing. 790
 And likewise in their endless act-rehearsing
 they practise their charade, mask on their grin,
 to welcome back the general whose luck's in.
 But true shepherds of the people know their sheep,
 are undeceived by "friendship" watered down,
 by the seemings of those eyes that claim to seep
 from undilute affection for the Crown.

So I won't try to hide from you, my lord, 800
 that when you led your army forth—for Helen—
 you cut a figure I could not applaud.
 Your plan seemed ill-conceived and un compelling:
 to send an army out to die in war
 to win back what—a voluntary whore?
 But now we elders hide no bitter mind:
 to those whose plans work out, our mood is kind.
 All rulers get the truest information;
 and now you're back, you'll learn in shortest time
 from loyal Argos' unseen population
 who's cleaved to virtue of us, who to crime.

AGAMEMNON

First in justice, my salute is Argos: 810
 Argos and its gods, with whose help I
 make my homecoming here, now Troy has paid
 the bill I forced on them.

The gods made trial
 not of our courtroom speeches, but our deaths;

their undivided verdict was for death;
their vote-stones dropped in the blood-red urn of death,
death to the city; while the white mercy-urn,
overpassed by their empty hands, held—air and hope.
Still-burning Troy turns beacon of its own ruin;
destruction's dust-devils stir the slow-dying ash;
crushed wealth's last breaths choke out through rain-smear'd soot. 820
For this mercy of the gods we may feel grateful,
if indeed we've exacted due revenge
for Paris's presumption; if that woman's price
is prostration humbled by our beast of war,
by the full-armed soldiers that our Horse gave birth to,
dropped from its belly as winter's stars arose.
They jumped, and the lion that lives on raw red meat
jumped Troy's wall too and had dead kings' gore to eat.

So I stretch out this preface-prayer to the gods.

To the CHORUS

As for your thoughts: I hear and store your words. 830
I think the same, and will speak on your side.
Too rarely is this natural for men,
unenvying reverence when a kinsman triumphs.
Malice's poison creeps towards the heart,
redoubling the load of the malicious,
who must contend at once with his own woe
and groan to watch another's happiness grow.
I speak here from experience. I well know
that hall of sliding mirrors we call society.
How often my allies' fervent-friend professions 840
proved smoke and phantoms on the day of battle.
Only Odysseus, who always opposed the war—
even feigned he was mad to try and escape our muster—
only he, once in harness, truly pulled his weight.
And whether he's alive now, or has died,
who knows?

But for the rest, our gods and city,
we call to a general debate in parliament,
there to advise how what goes well with us
can be set right to last, good constitution kept.
And what needs doctoring in this state of ours,
whether cauterised or wisely cut away,
we'll seek to turn aside its ill effects. 850

But now to our entrance at our palace gates.
I come to my own halls, my house and hearth,
to make the homecoming-offering to the gods
who sent me forth, bring me back safe today.
If a true Fortune's followed me, let her stay!

He makes to descend from his chariot; but CLYTAEMESTRA enters from the palace, and he stops.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Elders of Argos, senate of the city,
 I'll show you what a tender wife I am,
 and feel no shame to do it: for shame fades
 with the wearing of the unconsoling years.
 I've learned how miserable a wife can be
 the years her lord looks up at untaken Troy. 860

A dreadful thing, to sit at home and wait,
 solitary and separate from him,
 while one man then another brings bad news,
 and worse bad news, and worse, to shake the house.
 Had the Trojans wounded him as did report,
 he'd be more full of holes than is—a net;
 if he had died whenever rumour killed him,
 he'd be the three-lifed monster revenant, 870
 have had three times his covering of earth,
 met three times his once-only burial.

Ill-omened words of back-returning spite
 drove me more than once to the home-made noose,
 to indignity when my house-slaves cut me down.
 Those rumours—they explain his absence too,
 young master of our mutual promises,
 who should be here, Orestes. So don't look surprised. 880
 He's safe under the guardianship of an ally,
 Strophius of Phocis, who advised me
 we faced a double threat: with you at war,
 the ever-brewing anarchy in the people
 might launch some coup against your absent rule:
 it's natural to kick the one who's down.
 That's the whole reason. There's no trick in this.

Time has dried up the fountain of my tears;
 those springs of pity, parched, don't even drip.
 My eyes are strained and sore from endless watch,
 from the tears I shed for the fires unlit for you 890
 that brought no news, while my sleep's flimsy cover
 was needled through by the small sharp shrill mosquito.

Every night the sufferings I saw
 enringing you went on all night and more.
 All that's endured and over. With grief mending
 I hail you as the watchdog of our stading;
 as the mainstay of our ship; as our strong tower
 holding our roof up; as sole heir empowered,
 unlooked-for land in sight of those lost in the ocean,
 still brightness rising from dark storm's commotion, 900
 a desert traveller's first sight of fresh water in motion.
 These epithets I think him worthy of;
 though after all this, we must ward off the envy Above.

But now, dear head,
 bright imagined head of my dark blessing,
 step down from your height for me. Yet do not tread
 this gross earth with your Ilion-conquering foot.

You slave-girls whom I told to strew his way
with our most costly weaving—do it now. 910
Now may his paths all merge one crimson red
as Justice brings him unexpected home.
As for the rest, sharp thought that outwits sleep
will work the fated justice the gods keep.

AGAMEMNON

Daughter of Leda, steward of my house,
your speech was like my absence: long stretched out.
The praise I deserve to have should have come from others.
No, do not soften my delicious steps
so womanly with *this*, nor fall and worship, 920
crying aloud to me like some barbarian.
And do not make me walk this envious way
and draw the waiting wrath down from Above.
These things are honours for the gods, not men.
The man who walks and soils such silken gear—
a fool does this; a twice-fool, with no fear.
I am no god. Give me a human's due.
This sheening scarlet broidure-web I call
no footpath for my trampling to tear through.
God's greatest wisdom-gift is we not fall
into false wisdom we mistake for true.
Living by this thought only quells our fears:
“Call no man happy till he end with happy years”. 930

CLYTAEMESTRA

To me, speak only what seems truth to you.

AGAMEMNON

You know I never muffle my real view.

CLYTAEMESTRA

At the gods' demand, would you have sacrificed this?

AGAMEMNON

I would, on demand of their direct prophecies.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Would Priam victorious have ventured this sacrifice?

AGAMEMNON

Priam would have trashed this silk and not thought twice.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Then what have you to fear but the people's blame?

AGAMEMNON

The popular view is important, all the same.

CLYTAEMESTRA

No man can be great who gives jealousy *nothing* to chew on.

AGAMEMNON

To persist in this word-war's not the part for a woman.

940

CLYTAEMESTRA

And yet in your triumph, defeat in this is becoming.

AGAMEMNON

You care so much about winning this victory?

CLYTAEMESTRA

Surrender. Be nobler for giving in willingly.

(tempo)

AGAMEMNON

If you say so, then quick: some slave unclasp
these war-boots, my feet's bearers over the ground.
And as I tread these tapestries, I ask
no evil eye from afar may strike me down.
I am ashamed my footsteps should defile
this costly wealth, this silver-weighted web;
but so be it.

The foreign girl, meanwhile,
bring her in softly. Heaven is a lead-
en unresponse except to gentle kings—
and only those who have to, accept slavery.
I bring her home as first prize in the pillaging;
she belongs to me by the gift of my infantry.

950

But now, queen, at your word I bow my head.
Like this, through crimson, to my rest I tread.

AGAMEMNON has descended from his chariot, his feet unshod, and begins to walk slowly across the tapestry.

CLYTAEMESTRA

There is the sea. What sun could burn it up?
From cold dark depths I'll fetch your bright red stain;
your life-warm dye will drench your kingly robes.
The price, my lord, is high; but with god's help
we gladly pay. Since when was *your* house poor?
How many treasure-vestments would *I* tread
if I was told to by some palace oracle,
if such acts would bring back that precious life?
So long as the root lives, there still lives the green
cool overshadde against sun's burning hate.
So your return to your cold palace-hearth
is like a warm spring day that falls in autumn,
like a breath of summer snuffed in the winter hall
where Zeus squeezes out the red wine from the bitter grape;

960

970

and so the house receives back its finished king.

Exit AGAMEMNON into the palace.

Zeus, you finish all. Bring my prayers their end.
To what you have waited to finish, now attend.

Exit CLYTAEMESTRA into the palace.

CHORUS

Why so thick around me now *strophe 1*
float the fear-storm-clouds that won't depart?
Why this armed guard on the doorstep of my heart,
this distant doom-chant throb that pounds my brow?
How is it that I can't spit out 980
the sour-breath aftertaste of uneasy dream,
re-enthroned the simple trust in whatever seems
that this darkness felt inside has made me doubt?
Ten years ago the army went:
we saw the capstans suck the ships from land:
the coiling ropes, retracting, whipped the sand,
fuses burned back to the best fleet ever sent.

They came back before my eyes, *antistrophe 1*
my evidence they're saved is my own sight. 990
Yet what my soul sings within me's not delight,
but self-taught hymn of horror-prophecies.
How can that my peace of mind,
once still within, be withdrawn so utterly?
Yet can the whirling of my heart be vanity
when it and my knowledge of justice are combined
and both predict some terror?
I hope and pray that the blow that I expect
will go astray, that I foresee incorrect,
that everything my sense and reason tell me—is error. 1000

There is a health that is neighbour to disease, *strophe 2*
sought too hard—over-pressed, and over-trained;
there is a prosperity too that is overstrained,
a happiness brings unease,
over-confidence in good fortune's straight-ahead
that will steer a man to wreck on some hidden reef.
The cautious sense when their cargo of luck needs relief,
what ballast their ship needs shed; 1010
they recognise too when all's risked by a top-heavy trim,
how calamity breaks the mast where the sails over-crowd.
Zeus gives and gives to the humble; and to the proud,
who take and take, and thereby anger him.

Once his deep blood has rained from a man to the earth, *antistrophe 2*
gushing out before his face, released into death, 1020

where is the spell that breathes back into him breath?³

No magic has that worth:

or if Asclepius knew how to raise the dead,
if he once had the power to display this art,
sooner than let him, Zeus tore him apart,
a lightning-bolt through his head.

The gods send us powers of fate, but they conflict—

and by conflicting, balance. Were it not so

1030

my tongue would cry aloud what my burning guts know;

not mutter dark words in the dark my fears constrict.

Enter CLYTAEMESTRA.

CLYTAEMESTRA

You come in as well. I mean you, Cassandra.

Kindly Zeus looks on you too graciously:

he gives you too your place in our sacrifice.

All we own is Zeus', including slaves.

CASSANDRA does not move.

Step down from there. Your days of pride are past.

Even Heracles, Zeus' son by Alcmene,

1040

was bought and sold once, fed on food of slaves.

Since slavehood's how fate's balance falls for you,

be glad you're a slave to old nobility.

Those of recent, unexpected wealth

misuse their slaves in everything; but we

intend to treat you with strict equity.

CHORUS

The queen spoke clearly; waits for your reply.

Caught as you are in a deadly net, you should

obey, if you understand; but perhaps you don't.

CLYTAEMESTRA

My words get through to her, even if her wont's

1050

the baby-language of her savage brood,

barbarian birdsong, twittering swallow-cry.

CHORUS

Do as she says! Her word's your least worst good.

Come down from your chariot throne now, and comply.

Still CASSANDRA does not move.

CLYTAEMESTRA (*with an impatient gesture*)

Time to waste with you out here is what I don't

have any more of; for the beasts stand by,

awaiting jugulation where they should.

We sacrifice that the unhopd may come to good.

³ *Choephoroi* 48, *Eumenides* 647.

If you will be part of this, then quick, comply.

CASSANDRA remains still and silent.

Or if your mouth couldn't make him understand, 1060
perhaps you should have used those supple hands?

CHORUS

The foreign girl needs an interpreter,
glares like a beast at who's just captured her.

CLYTAEMESTRA

She's lost her wits, obeys the sorrow-craze
of the hurt mind wrenched from her just-captured home:
she will not learn how to bear indignities
till her broken spirit's boiled off in bloody foam.

But I'll waste no more words on her mad insolence.

Exit CLYTAEMESTRA

CHORUS

Truly, I feel pity for her, not wrath.
Descend, poor child, from your new master's chariot: 1070
accept this fate now, try your new yoke on.

Like a statue coming to life CASSANDRA finally descends. When, after a long silence, she eventually speaks her accent and words are markedly foreign, at first unintelligibly so. (It must be the difficulty of making out what she is saying that in part explains the CHORUS's difficulty in making out what she means.)

CASSANDRA

Ototoi popoi da. Apollo, Apollo! Strophe 1

CHORUS

You name Apollo in your mourning? Why?
Is he the god to hear a sorrow's cry?

CASSANDRA

Ototoi popoi da. Apollo, Apollo! Antistrophe 1

CHORUS

Again ill-omenedly she names Apollo—
the last of gods to listen to her sorrow.

CASSANDRA

Apollo, Apollo! 1080
She-abolisher, my abolisher!
The wandering god
destroyed me once
by deserting me;
to destroy me again
is no difficulty.

CHORUS

She seems to prophesy her own future pain.
Slavery's come, but the god's spark's still there in her brain.

CASSANDRA

Apollo, Apollo!
She-abolisher, my abolisher!
You wandering god,
where is it this time
I am left by you?
What is this house
that you've brought me to?

Antistrophe 2

CHORUS

This is the Atreids' house. But once told, do you know?
If you understand speech, can you hear us say that it's so?

CASSANDRA

A house the gods hate, a history that connives
at in-clan massacres, heads hacked off with knives,
floors that swim with kin-blood, chopped-down lives.

Strophe 3

1090

CHORUS

The blood-hound snuffs and paws obsession's track.
She thinks to bring a tale of murders back.

CASSANDRA

This is the evidence I am persuaded by:
Thyestes the Atreid's dismembered infants cry
out of the pan where their limbs and their entrails fry.

Antistrophe 3

CHORUS

We've heard about your second-sightedness;
but for *that* news, we need no prophetess.

CASSANDRA

Ah, what lie cries mastery?
What most claw-light miseries,
extraneous evil climbing into nest here,
no wrath of kin nor healing can arrest here,
the clan's men scattered?

Strophe 4

1100

CHORUS

Her first speech our whole city understood;
but this I can't get, even if I would.

CASSANDRA

Woman of ill fortune, will
you really do this? With good will
ply lustral water on that classic head and then—
I cannot speak it, but it comes: an end
in stretched cloth shuttered.

Antistrophe 4

1110

CHORUS

No clearer yet; her words riddle and blind,
confused predictions to my confused mind.

CASSANDRA

Eh, eh, papai, papai, what sight is this?
The fish-mesh trap, the fish-mesh trap of death.
The bed-partner, the co-slaughterer, is the net.
Let limitless disorder howl its glee,
gloat 'gainst the clan this offering's infamy.

Strophe 5

CHORUS

What's the dark angel you so long to see
raising her triumph-cry over this family?
Your words bring night, as sinking warriors let
the saffron blood of fear at every breath.
How swift in onset all disaster is.

1120

CASSANDRA

Ah ah, look look, watch watch, keep back the bull!
His herd-cow traps him, caught in his own robe,
robe that the hidden sword horns with black device;
strikes so he falls down where the waters fill.
I tell you of a death-snare bath that kills.

Antistrophe 5

CHORUS

I do not have the prophet-interpreter's skills
but from this even I can shape some ill.
What else do we ever hear from prophecies?
From every seer's words, pure ill englobes
the anxious hearers, fear's flame blown to full.

1130

CASSANDRA

Fate—chance—world—*what have you done to me?*
My own destruction's mixed into what I lament.
Why then do you bring me here in misery?
To die together with him: is that what's meant?

Strophe 6

CHORUS

A mindless mind, borne off by some divinity;
a museless music, shapeless, strings unbent;
and always tuned, like the mourning-bird's, to *me*:
grief unending, gripped like a child life-spent.

1140

CASSANDRA

The mourning-bird, sweetly singing her own dreadful doom!
And yet the girl changed to bird found a kind of rest.
Her new small brain gave her own sorrows no room;
but I'll still be awake when the splitting blade shatters my crest.

Antistrophe 6

CHORUS

Goaded by gods, by spirits vainly driven,

1150

frantic and out of tune, resounding fear,
 you sing your song, yet still no meaning's given.
 How did ill prophecy's pathway get you here?

CASSANDRA

I remember the wedding of Paris,
 the doom of his friends.

Strophe 7

I remember the banks of Scamander,
 my family's spring.

On those green happy banks
 was this prophet's nurturing;
 but the river of hell—on its black and smoking banks—
 is where she ends.

1160

CHORUS

Why spell it out so starkly and so plain?
 A child could see your meaning. I'm struck down,
 lifeblood-bitten by your fate of pain,
 by the terror-sorrow melody you sound.

CASSANDRA

I remember my city's long struggles,
 the offerings made
 by my father against disaster,
 slain beasts in a ring
 outside our walls—than all which, nothing vainer
 against destined suffering.
 Now into this soil, just like those helpless bulls',
 my warm blood fades.

Antistrophe 7

1170

CHORUS

Still you sing hapless dread with every breath.
 Some power on high views you maliciously,
 poisons and overwhelms with this sense of death.
 Yet where your fates will end you I can't see.

CASSANDRA

My wedding hour arrives, when the veil will lift.
 Then in the harsh red wind of your dawning day
 you'll see how my words smash down on you in a wave,
 you'll see how Argos is ten times more crushed than me.

1180

The hour arrives when I speak no more riddles.
 Then you will be the witnesses how close I trod,
 how well I smelt, the trail of your old guilt.

Can you not hear the choir that never leave,
 that never bless, whose discords edge, this house?
 Can you not smell the blood they feed upon,
 the coiling blood that's kept them squatting here?
 How will you drive your inborn Furies out
 when they scream incest, dynasty-defilement,
 when the crimes that found this palace drool from their mouths?

1190

So tell me that I lie, that I shoot as wild
as a gypsy psychic peddling at the gate.
Tell me I've diagnosed wrong, then, if you dare.
If you can swear there's nothing here, then swear.

CHORUS

And how could it help if I swore, even honourably?
What would that heal? And yet I must wonder at you,
here in a distant city, you born overseas—
yet just as if you had been present you speak what is true.

1200

CASSANDRA

God-prophet Apollo made me his prophetess.

CHORUS

What! A god, in a fit of tenderness?

CASSANDRA

Until now, it always mattered to hide this shame.

CHORUS

But now that you're a slave—it's all the same?

CASSANDRA

He wrestled at his work over me, sweet breath hot.

CHORUS

You mean you and he—did the deed whereby children are got?

CASSANDRA

First my consent, then his gift, then my favours withdrawn.

CHORUS

Once he'd filled you with his gift, you repelled him with scorn?

CASSANDRA

By then, by that gift, I'd forewarned Troy of all that would follow.

1210

CHORUS

And did you manage to do this unharmed by Apollo?

CASSANDRA

He cursed me: I speak always truths, never grasped as true.

CHORUS

Yet *we've* understood and grasped every word from you.

CASSANDRA

Ah God! Ah God! Evil, malice, pain!

The labour-pains of my foresight-fit come on;

barely they're started and my reason drifts,
 a useless cork upon the maddened ocean.
 Can you not see the nightmare children there,
 the revenants, the blood-spectres in the house,
 butchered by their own families, holding out
 succulent cuts and joints—from their own limbs, 1220
 delicate sweetbreads and offal—their own insides,
 offering these to their father—and watching him eat?
 There is the first cause that led to this vengeance-plot,
 to the he-lion skulking behind her who stains his bed,
 who lies in wait—ah God!—for my new master's fall
 which I must stand and watch as his new slave.
 And he, the admiral, king, the taker of Troy,
 he Atreus' and Tantalus's heir—
 sees only the hand-lick tongue, he does not see
 how a fawning bitch can stretch out her ears—or a speech— 1231
 and yet within be a ravening destruction.
 I tell you she means to do it: she will *kill*.
 What's the right name to give to a monster like her?
 Two-headed serpent, vampire of the coasts
 coaxing the ships she's hexed onto wrecking reefs,
 the raging mother of hell exhaling war
 on all her kin, the bitch whose triumph-howl—
 all-daring as the male-most warrior's—
 showed her ambiguous joy at his return...

Yet does it matter whether I'm believed?
 What's coming, comes. And you who'll witness it 1240
 will have your pain to tell how much truth I hit.

CHORUS

I got the bit about Thyestes' feast,
 the cannibal father; that bit made me shrink,
 knowing—as I do—that it's not made up.
 The rest of what you said—I can't keep up.

CASSANDRA

"The rest" was: you'll see Agamemnon's death.

CHORUS

Poor girl, you're mad. Save your blaspheming breath.

CASSANDRA

You think a bandage smothering this will heal it?

CHORUS

I won't bewail a blow until the Fates deal it.

CASSANDRA

Trust in your Fates, then. *They* trust in their blades. 1250

CHORUS

"They"? By what man do you say this crime is made?

CASSANDRA

What *man*? And you claim you grasped every word from me?

CHORUS

It's only what trick he could use that I can't see.

CASSANDRA

Didn't I say it in Greek? It was not Greek enough to me!

CHORUS

Apollo's prophets speak Greek; but still delphically.

CASSANDRA

Aah! Oh the fire, the fire that comes over me!

O Apollo, devouring wolf, O the pain you send on me!

(to the CHORUS)

She is the lioness, *she* is the savagery,

when the lion's away *she's* the bed-company

kept by the skulking jackal... does nobody *see*?

Her potion's made: one ingredient's death for me.

1260

And hear this She boast, as she whets the knife for her He,

that death is the price of his triumph's including me.

So why stand to be laughed at in clothes of prophecy,

in Apollo's necklace, with staff of augury?

(Tearing and smashing them)

So these meet their end, before my end arrives for me.

To hell with you all: thus your fall pre-avenges me.

Apollo's power now can hoard ruin for some other she.

I am divested, defrocked, disrobed; and *he* does this to me,

1270

as he *just watched* while these robes brought me mockery,

as he *just watched* while his truths in my prophecies

destroyed every bond between me and my family—

destroyed so they cast me out wandering in penury,

destroyed so they shut me out dying in poverty.

And now Apollo the prophet forecloses on me,

devises a fate that bristles lethality:

instead of the fatherland altar, awaiting me

is a chopping-block warm with the blood of the slaughtered He.

And yet these our deaths are not unavenged from on high.

Our killers will pay to one who I see draws nigh.

1280

The price for his father's life is: his mother must die.

Fugitive exile under a hostile sky,

he will return; and in his returning I

see the capstone action of his clan's frenzy to die.

For an oath has been sworn by the powers hidden on high

1290

that the bait for his trail is to find where his father's corpse lies.

But why should I wail as if others would pity me?

These are the eyes that saw out Troy's tragedy;

now the death of Troy's killers is what they see.

These are the gods' black mercies; and they await me.

The door of this house is the threshold of hell for me.

I pray to meet with a well-timed stroke of death,
to bleed out quietly, succumb without fighting for breath;
that easy submission may close out the light from these eyes.

CHORUS

So much you have suffered; so much you have learned from it;
so much you have said. Yet, seeing the truth of it—
the truth of your coming death—how can you just go
like an ox to an altar-bloodshed that you foreknow?

CASSANDRA

My clock has run down. There is no further point in flight.

CHORUS

Do not condemned eyes open wide to cram in their last light?

1300

CASSANDRA

My last light is *now*. I gain nothing by running away.

CHORUS

I admire your courage, your steadfastness undismayed.

CASSANDRA

When someone's being butchered, that's what the spectators say.

CHORUS

But humans are blessed who thus greet their dying day.

CASSANDRA (*going forward*)

O my father, my dead father and all his dead children!
(*Then she stops, her hand goes to her mouth, she bends double*)

CHORUS

What is the matter? What fear now turns you back?

CASSANDRA

(*retching*)
Pah! Ach!

CHORUS

What mind-nausea's this that makes you spit and hack?

CASSANDRA

The palace stinks. It stinks of dripping blood.

CHORUS

It's just the scent of our offerings to the gods.

1310

CASSANDRA

It sweeps over me like the bad breath from a tomb.

CHORUS

What does? The sacrifice incense-fume?

CASSANDRA

This is no sparrow-reflex, no flight because others fled.
After they've killed me, don't forget what I've said:
that for my woman's death, another woman dies,
that another man's blood will pay for this man mis-wived.
My claim as your guest-friend here is: *do not forget.*

1320

CHORUS

How I pity the course for you that the gods have set.

CASSANDRA

One last word, for a funeral; one last song, for my own.
I pray to the sun, the last sunlight I'll ever see,
that those who will pay for killing him pay also for me:
for killing me, slave-girl, unarmed, defenceless, alone.
O human life. O life. The happiest man of all
is nothing more than a shadow on a wall;
the woman whose agony fills her life's short day—
one damp-sponge dab wipes all of her away.
And this, more still, brings the endless pity on.
Exit CASSANDRA into the palace.

1330

CHORUS

Even the happiest human still wants more
and always more, no matter what he's got;
offer further wealth to any house of note,
not one refuses with "We need no more".
The blessed ones above gave our king *Troy*;
they brought us back to him divinely crowned.
Is he to pay for those who've died before?
Is a guilt-death died for guilt-death his last lot?
Can any human hope for flawless joy
if even Agamemnon's not secure?

Strophe 1

1340

AGAMEMNON (*within*)

And *now*—in my own house—you strike me down?

CHORUS (*The king's scream has broken off their song, which is never resumed*)

That cry! Who times his strike to cause this shout?

AGAMEMNON (*within*)

Two times, and out of time. My blood is out.

A heavy silence.

CHORUS

That scream may mean already it's too late.
And yet—think what to do to save the state!
(*One chorus-member after another speaks out individually*)

ELDER 1

To this, in my view, there's just one reply:
to set on this house the citizens' hue and cry.

ELDER 2

Yes, fall on them at once—that is my view:

1350

catch them red-handed, and red-sworded too.

ELDER 3

This is the opinion I also share.

I vote for action while the moment's there.

ELDER 4

It's clear from how they've started that their rule
will be a harsh and a tyrannical school.

ELDER 5

They've started thus because we've given them time:
dozy Honour, trampled by wideawake Crime!

ELDER 6

Yet how to tell which way our advice should point?

The best advice with *action* is conjoint.

ELDER 7

I think the same. Until words find a way
to bring the dead back, words have little sway.

1360

ELDER 8

So your advice is—save our necks, sit tight,
bow to these murderers' rule, let might be right?

ELDER 9

No, that's unthinkable. I'd sooner die
than stoop to live beneath their tyranny.

ELDER 10

Then you two want to start an army coup
because—you heard a scream that frightened you?

ELDER 11

Ignorant raging only leads to mess.
Wise actions start from knowledge, not from guess.

ELDER 12

Our thoughts all tend together to one thing:
that our first need's to know all's well with the king.

1370

The CHORUS begin to move towards the palace. But as they do so, suddenly its gates are thrown open and CLYTAEMESTRA is revealed, standing in a welter of blood, sword in her hand, over the corpses of AGAMEMNON and CASSANDRA.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Now I strike down—all I said before;
no shame to cancel words once they're out of time.
Someone who's building a trap for the one she hates
must meanwhile seem to love him—or see him escape.
I fenced *him* in with nets too high to leap.
So long I've planned this dénouement of our feud,
and now at last we are come to it today.
So I stand as I struck him, and straddle my handiwork.
I did it like this—and why should I deny it?— 1380
so he could neither run nor fight for his life.
I throw an endless coil of ill-rich cloth,
a noose, a net, a murderous snare, around him.
Then twice I run him through, and twice he screams
then slides in limp collapse. Once he is down
I shaft him with steel once more, this time as a prayer
to subterranean Zeus, the king of the dead.
How quiet he sinks now—his soul starts from his mouth:
with one jerked gulp he brings up his own blood,
spatters me dark with the scarlet dew in his breath. 1390
And that dew falls on me as the gods' spring rains
fall and bless harvest back to the long-parched earth.

What offering to pour on Agamemnon?
His own blood on him's just; and more than just,
for blood with blood is what he mixed himself,
death upon death, crime after blasphemous crime
in a cup of wrath that returned to his lips, in time.

That's how things stand, sirs. Rejoice in it if you will,
or wail, if you prefer. But my prayer's fulfilled.

CHORUS

A shameless mouth, a speech beyond belief.
Your husband killed's your *boast* and not your grief? 1400

CLYTAEMESTRA

Your interrogation fits a witless wife.
But I tell you from a flinchless heart what you all know:
whether you praise it or raise blame and woe,
here is Agamemnon, shorn of life,
my husband, dead. The hand that did it's *this*,
and what it's done is just. That's how it is.

CHORUS

strophe 1

What bad-drug poison have you swallowed, lady,
what narcotic sweated off the festering earth,
what septic brackishness off sea-lagoon has made you
sleepwalk like this into the murderer's curse?
You've cut him down, you've cut him off; now we 1410
forever cut you out from our community.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Yes, now your judgement's exile from my home,
 now you sentence me to the public curse.
 Wise judges! Where were you when this man killed?
 Where were you when, like any lamb from the flock,
 he picked his own daughter to sacrifice to the weather?
 To him, our child was one casual two-minute spasm:
 to me, my dearest and my longest labour.
 So now you rush to judgement, being witnesses
 how I have made him pay the price of her blood.
 Why didn't you banish *him* from this fatherland?
 And if it comes to threats, then hear *this* threat:
 I'm ready too. You want me to submit?
 Then make me. But remember: god above
 may give the victory instead to me to rule—
 a harsh late lesson for some slow old fools.

1420

CHORUS

antistrophe 1

High and mighty your demeanour, lady,
 arrogant your speech: as you have been
 maddened by your killing, that has stained you,
 patched and blotched of face, plain bloodshed seen.
 Dishonoured, friendless, clanless, you will see
 sharp justice fall on your sharp treachery.

1430

CLYTAEMESTRA

Then hear too the words of my righteous oath:
 By the Justice now completed for my child,
 by the Ruin and Fury as whom I have killed her killer,
 no prospect of fear walks within this my palace
 so long as Aegisthus lights the fire in my hearth,
 so long as Aegisthus is loyal as heretofore;
 Aegisthus my shield, my complete security.
 Here lies the man who would destroy his wife,
 toyboy of every slave-girl made at Troy;
 and with him lies his prisoner-prophetess,
 lying with him one last time—as foreseen:
 faithful to him, no doubt, except when the sailors
 wanted her helping hand to polish their masts.
 Here the pair of them get their reward. So he lies thus,
 and she, having sung her own dirge like the dying swan,
 lies here beside him—the woman who mastered this man.
 Thus united in death, this touching, loving pair
 add their zest to the joys of the bed Aegisthus now shares.

1440

CHORUS

Silence and unconsciousness, come quickly to us:
 spare us the slow and helpless bed of pain:
 close down our minds, send thick unknowing through us,
 let us see no more who have seen our kind master slain.
 The best of lords, for one sister he went to war.
 To be killed by the other: is that what he came home for?
 Helen demented:
 one death to so many—

strophe 2

1450

one destructiveness hell-led
that does not spare any,
comes Helen, comes hell.
Helen: her brow bedecked
Helen: with blood that's shed
Helen: this house is wrecked
by her bad spell.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Spare us your death-wish prayers; don't presume
that these things are your burdens to assume.
And do not fulminate at my sister Helen. She
was far from the sole mover of Troy's destiny.
Could she, one girl alone, bring so much doom?

CHORUS

You evil spirit on this house of brothers, *antistrophe 2*
on Agamemnon and on Menelaus, 1470
evil spirit of two sisters, mothers
of this heart-crushing oppression that must slay us,
when you straddled his dead form, the thing I saw
was a carrion crow glut-gloating victory-caw.

CLYTAEMESTRA

What you say is right at least in this—
you see a bad force in this house, and so there is:
a daemon that gorges on three generations' deaths,
that trains our tongues to the taste of blood on the breath,
bursts each scab that forms into fresh red nemesis. 1480

CHORUS

You name this house's guardian-angel master, *strophe 3*
a wicked angel, heavy in its wrath,
evil to name, restless to bring disaster.
And all this comes to us in Zeus's path.
Zeus causes all, and for all Zeus must answer.
Of every tale we start, Zeus tells the end.
What part of this is not something he sends?

Come then my king, you who conquered Troy,
you Atreus' and Tantalus's heir: 1490
how shall I weep for you, how speak my love to dead air?
To lie like this, life choked out so blasphemously,
strangled to death in this spider's silken snare!
To die so naked, so helpless, all your majesty
by a two-edged blade and a two-faced woman destroyed!

CLYTAEMESTRA

So can you only see this deed as mine?
Do not think so; and do not speak of me
as Agamemnon's wife. A power divine
animates this corpse's wife in parody: 1500

it is the harsh and ancient vengeance-power
that led your Atreus to child-cannibal feast
which now pays out Agamemnon in his hour,
unites in death this greatest with those least.

CHORUS

You want someone to say you're clean of this?
You, innocent of this murder? With those hands?
If anyone else is guilty, call your witnesses!
Should we say Atreus' ghost beside you stands?
Yet if anyone's your partner Ares is,
artery-emptying god of kin-blood war,
matching shambles now with cannibal feast before.

antistrophe 3

1510

Come then my king, you who conquered Troy,
you Atreus' and Tantalus's heir:
how shall I weep for you, how speak my love to dead air?
To lie like this, life choked out so blasphemously,
strangled to death in this spider's silken snare!
To die so naked, so helpless, all your majesty
by a two-edged blade and a two-faced woman destroyed!

1520

CLYTAEMESTRA

You think his killing was ignoble work? I don't.
For he destroyed his home by treachery;
lured Iphigeneia with a suitor he knew she'd want;
once he got her to Aulis, swapped Achilles for butchery.
His doing and my deed are exactly met,
so he will make no boast of his in hell:
for her blood spilt, his own blood has been let.
He killed her by falsehoods, by falsehoods he dies as well.

CHORUS

I cannot answer you; my mind is numbed.
Once my wit was prompt; now nothing comes.
The house of Atreus falls; and where to turn?
The tell-tale red rain dripped before; now it floods
in courage- and roof-breaking streams of blood,
while justice' blade is sharpened on Fate's stone
so new killings may for previous killings atone.
I'd rather I'd been swallowed by the earth
than I should live to see my sovereign king
in a death-bed bath of silver panelling.
Who'll bury him? Who eulogise his worth?
Does Clytaemestra have the nerve for *that*,
to kill her husband and then speak his elegy?
Do you really dare crown these enormities
with solemn tributes that—somehow fall flat?
When this last of the heroes is placed on his funeral-bier
who will mourn him for real, with true and unforced tears?

strophe 4 1530

1540

1550

CLYTAEMESTRA

What concern of yours could that possibly be?

He fell and he died among us; among us he
will find due burial, though not our tears.
At Acheron Iphigeneia will appear;
she'll greet him as his daughter, lovingly;
her healing embrace will restore the stolen years.

CHORUS

I understand that his shame answers hers;
I understand how hard to unravel the curse.
The plunderer is plundered; who slays, pays.
So it remains, while Zeus remains enthroned:
for the things we inflict, the things that we suffer atone.
But who could drive this house's taint out—who?
Their ruin-Furies stick to them like glue.⁴

antistrophe 4 1560

CLYTAEMESTRA

In this indeed you have hit true prophecy.
But now I am willing to let go all history
to settle a truce with those ruin-demons of fate:
I'll swallow my pain if the Furies will go from our gate
to drown someone else in their murderous misery.
A small price to pay for the end of this circling hate!

1570

Enter AEGISTHUS.

O happy dawn of the day of my revenge!⁵
Now we can say that the gods are observers of men,
now we can say that earth's crimes are noticed on high,
now that I see him caught in the Furies' web—
Agamemnon, my enemy, now so deliciously down,
paying at last for the trap that his father schemed.
When Atreus ruled this land, his brother Thyestes,
father to me, seemed a threat to the kingly bed
(to speak quite plain). So Atreus drove him out,
barred him from his own home and his own town.
When my poor father returned a suppliant,
begged for his life from this Agamemnon's father,
he got just a promise that *he* would not be killed.
Then with a relish that was not the loving sort
the blasphemous Atreus made my father welcome.
He claimed he had laid a special banquet on,
and so he had: two slaughtered Thyestes' sons.
He hid in the bottom of the dish the telltale bits,
the boys' fingers and toes, their heads and ears and such,
and served this "special dish" to my father alone.
My father was hungry, and wolfed the dish down without question—
the dish that you see has destroyed this whole dynasty.
Then when he got to the proof of what he'd just eaten,
he screamed, he retched, he rocked in agony;
and kicking to pieces the table at which he'd sat

1580

1590

⁴ Unless—as is unlikely—this song was written irregular, ten lines of CHORUS are missing here.

⁵ Clytaemnestra explains that she is now ready to bring an end to the cycle of vendetta; at once Aegisthus enters with a cry of "revenge at last". The cycle is nowhere near ready to end yet.

he laid his world-heavy curse upon Atreus' house, 1600
 dooming them all to a similar destruction.
 This is the reason you see Agamemnon down.
 I made it happen, and I had the right to kill.
 For I was the third son, younger brother to those who were cooked,
 too young to run into a trap, a mere baby then.
 So me and my father, the floating splintered spars
 of the family he'd just smashed, Atreus drove out again.
 And what brings me back here, full grown? Why, *Justice* does.
 Agamemnon never escaped me, even in exile:
 I never forgot my clear duty to bring him to ruin.
 So at last I've seen him caught within Justice' snare. 1610
 Even to die now is something that I could bear.

CHORUS

Aegisthus, delight in disaster's not honoured by me.
 But you tell us you killed him by your own fore-intention,
 that you alone planned it—this heartbreaking butchery.
 So we tell *you*: this will meet with no cowed condoning.
 The curse of the people will fall on your head like a stoning.

AEGISTHUS

Thus the galley-slave to the captain at the helm.
 Thus you openly state your mutinous intention.
 Will starving in prison teach you who rules in this realm?
 You will find mine sour medicine; I teach in a punishing school. 1620
 But that's what it takes to get through to a stubborn old fool.
 You can surely see this, if your eye's not yet wholly unsighted:
we're going to ride you, so you might as well not fight it.

CHORUS

Dodging call-up, you wait in his home—
 you *girl*—for the real men to come
 home from the battle; worse, more,
 while you're waiting, you turn his wife whore.
 And this is the creature who now has his hand on the crown—
 the coward, the traitor, who brought Agamemnon down?

AEGISTHUS

These insults too will bring you to plenty of pain.
 Orpheus' voice, they say, made all things tame,
 tamed beasts of hell; which your bleat just provokes. 1630
 We'll break you yet. We'll see you in the yoke.

CHORUS

As if my king could be someone like you—
 a man who plots murder safely out of view,
 then calls in a woman to do what he dare not do.

AEGISTHUS

But clearly the killing was for his wife to see through.
 I was too suspect: I hated him, and he knew.
 But now Agamemnon's cash can ease my way:

I will turn ruler. And he who won't obey
will find my yoke so heavy he wastes away.
Hunger that houses with darkness will put him straight:
no food here for those who will not pull their weight.

1640

CHORUS

You want his spoils—but not to fight for them,
so, craven coward, you set this woman on him—
this woman now god-marked with murderer's brand,
this abomination roaming in our land.
So we must hope Orestes is living still,
that his return's in some happy fortune's hand;
for there are two here that he needs to kill.

AEGISTHUS

So you mean to act as treacherous as you speak?
[*To his soldiers*] Draw your swords. This fight's not far to seek.

1650

CHORUS

Our swords are ready too. We stand on guard.

AEGISTHUS

And so do I myself. To die's not hard.

CHORUS

You plan to *die*? Now there's a welcome word.

CLYTAEMESTRA [*restraining AEGISTHUS*]

No, my best of men. Enough blood's flowed;
what we have done already must be paid,
a dismal sum, already pain to pay.
So even though provoked, let us shed no more.
Reverend elders, take your way back home.
Learn to move with the times before they bite.
We had to do this, just as we have done it.
If we could cure the pain we've caused, we would;
for it truly pains us, what we've had to do.
If you care to learn from it, such is my woman's view.

1660

AEGISTHUS

So I must listen while the mob's jeers bloom,
take whatever windy insults come my way?
Though I'm their ruler, must let them tempt doom?

CHORUS

To fawn on your sort's not the Argive way.

AEGISTHUS

I'll get even with you, be sure, in the days to come.

CHORUS

Not if the fates bring Orestes safely through.

AEGISTHUS

All exiles live on ifs: I know that too.

CHORUS

So go on! Get fat on your thieving, now you can.

AEGISTHUS

You will pay for these words to me, you foolish man.

1670

CHORUS

How bravely you crow! But this cockerel's behind his hen.

CLYTAEMESTRA

How the dogs bark. But ignore them. I and you,
to set this house aright, we have much to do.

END OF THE AGAMEMNON

Timothy Chappell
June 4 2012 to January 23 2013