

Aeschylus, *Choëphoroi*
*(Ceremonies for the Dead)*¹

At the rear of the stage is the royal palace of Argos. Before it at centre stage is a rough mound of fresh earth with a headstone bearing one crudely-chipped word, ΑΓΑΜΕΜΝΩΝ. ORESTES and PYLADES enter, dirty and travel-worn, hats over their faces; both are boys, not men. ORESTES holds in his right hand a lock of his own hair. Day is slowly breaking. After a few steps, and still well distant from the tomb, ORESTES falls to his knees and prays aloud. At first his words are lost,² but as the light increases they become more audible. Once we can hear, what we hear is this.

ORESTES

Messenger-god of the under-earth,
 guardian of the father's force,
 save me, fight on my behalf:
 calling to you, hear my voice.
 Returning here is coming home; but I
 slip in as an exile under surveillance skies,
 fear for my throat where my father was cut down
 by our watch-bitch of a queen and her creeping hound.

He rises, sees the tomb, and approaches it.

A pile of dirt? My father's tomb? Then *here*
 I call on him to listen to my prayer;
 the sign I gave to the god at our river-weir
 I vow to my father too—a lock of hair.
 My grief and rage must meet in it, since I
 did nothing to rescue him when my father died;
 not one who loved him among the guests was found
 at his funeral, fixed by this watch-bitch and her hound.

O God!

Old serving-women of the house in black mourning dress—the CHORUS—begin to emerge from the palace.

But what is this I see? What's this procession
 of black-clad women, marching dignified?
 What should I suppose they're gathering for?
 Is our house struck again by fresh affliction?

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¹ *Choëphoroi* literally means “the people [either gender] bringing mourning libations”, i.e. offerings, usually of wine, which are poured on the grave as a mourning and propitiation ceremony. There is perhaps a suggestion in the title that Orestes, by killing Aegisthus and Clytaemestra in the play, pours a different kind of offering.

The play's usual English title is, simply and literally, *(The) Libation Bearers*. I suggest *Ceremonies for the Dead* as an alternative name, perhaps the name that the play would have had, had it been written in English. The Greek name *Choëphoroi*, while ancient, should not be treated too reverently: it may well not have been Aeschylus' own—it seems to arise simply by allusion to *Ch* 15. Going by Aristophanes' evidence (*Frogs* 1124), only the *Oresteia* as a whole had a name for the Athenians of his time. (These remarks draw on Sommerstein, Loeb, p.ix.)

² A possibly-none-too-subtle nod to the parlous state of the text of the opening of *Choëphoroi*.

Or is it the wrath of my father unpacified
and the anger of hell that they bear libations for?

He sees ELECTRA (a girl, not a woman) come out of the palace, following the old women of the CHORUS.

It's that and nothing else; for there's Electra
my sister, coming with them, bright with grief.
O Zeus, may I avenge my father's death:
look favourably on my prayer, and fight with me.
Pylades, let's stand apart from them, so we
may watch and understand their obsequy. 20
They hide.

CHORUS

I am out here doing her command, *strophe 1*
wearing new grief's cheek-gashed outward show—
new grief, in my life? It was always woe.
Escorting this libation with breast-beating hands,
the air around us snaps as we rip our gowns, 30
make public sign that mourning strikes us down.

A horror-vivid sweat-of-terror dream, *antistrophe 1*
prophecy to her in nightmare's form,
fell on her asleep, fore-breathing storm,
raised in her purdah her fear-anguished scream.
The seers claimed immunity first³; then found
“Wrath at a murder rises from underground”. 40

So I am out here doing her penance for her. *strophe 2*
Impenitent penance, graceless, disgraceful grace!
Am I to stand to insult my own gods of place?
His deep blood has rained from a man in unpaid murder;⁴
is that a deed for libations to erase?
O house, O house where disaster is at home, 50
where the rakings of the hearth are mourning-ash,
where blank darkness is unpierced, no hope undashed,
whose last king's dead, whose future is unthroned.

There was a time when reverence to the gods *antistrophe 2*
filled every heart, when the true worship made
true nation and true men. But now it fades.
No longing for that mystery's in their heads;
no breathheld awe; just *someone is afraid*.
The only god they care about is Luck; 60
they forget all-weighing Justice, set on high,
who decrees that luck by which they live or die,
who brings some day, some twilight, others dark.

³ Cp. *Iliad* 1.84-90.

⁴ Cp. *Ag.*1019-1021.

But disaster's not forgotten them, meanwhile. *strophe 3*
 Their waiting doom wafts off them like plague-breath.
 Their seeping blood-spill creeps down through the soil
 till the soaked earth gags and chokes with clotted death. 70

Who violates a maiden's secret space *antistrophe 3*
 no more finds mercy than the murder-stain,
 should all earth's streams converge, can be erased:
 converging, they flow over it in vain.

And me?² I am to watch it all, *epode*
 I this bent and wizened spoil
 seized as a maiden, fifty years past and more,
 from a long-dead town in a long-forgotten war.
 I am to watch, to bow, and not gainsay:
 whether she's right or wrong, I just obey.
 Thus I hide my detestation, but beneath 80
 my slavery-veils my tears are chill with grief,
 grief at his hopeless, pointless, needless fall.

They have halted in front of Agamemnon's tomb. During this lyric ELECTRA has been kneeling in silence before it. Once the CHORUS have finished she remains there still for some time. Then she rises and turns to the CHORUS.

ELECTRA

My household ladies, orderlies of my home,
 since you escort me as I supplicate,
 advise me too. *What can I possibly say?*
 What words are there could fit my care for him?
 What can I decently say over this libation?
 Custom demands that I call on my father's ghost
 with "This from your loving wife to her well-loved lord".
 Am I supposed to say that *for Clytaemestra?* 90
 Custom demands that I also say this word:
 "Repay with good things those who send you these".
Good things to those murderers! Some reward!
 Or should my offering seep through the swallowing earth
 in silent shame, since death caught him in shame—
 should I pour like the penitent doing expiation,
 throw the emptied flask behind and not look back?

No, I dare not do it in silence. I must pray,
 not risk my father's wrath by unworthy offering.
 Yet neither can I find one word to say.

Advise me then. If we decide together, 100
 at worst it won't be just me going wrong.
 When this clan storms we weather the same weather:
 don't hide your thoughts through fear of anyone.

For what's our fate will find us, though we're free,
as sure as it finds those living in slavery.
So speak, if you can think of anything better.

CHORUS

My lady, I am still loyal to the king.
And you say speak. So for his sake, I speak.
Your father's tomb is holy ground to me.

ELECTRA

Yes, speak, since I well know your loyalty.

CHORUS

What you should first say is: "Bless my dear kin."

ELECTRA

Kin I have here; but as *dear*, who counts in?

110

CHORUS

First count yourself. Then add all of Aegisthus' foes.

ELECTRA (*with helpless anger*)

Who's left here but us, for a blessing like that to enclose?

CHORUS

You know what you're saying. There's small need to say any more.

ELECTRA

But in praying this, who *else* am I praying for?

CHORUS

Still, pray for Orestes... wherever Orestes may be.

ELECTRA (*subsiding*)

It can do no harm. I know you mean kindness to me.

CHORUS

Then think of the killers, the crime they are answerable for—

ELECTRA

—And say what? Please teach me; I've never faced this before.

CHORUS

Ask that someone, some angel or mortal pursuing, will find—

ELECTRA

—And kill them? Or put them on trial? Which have you in mind?

120

CHORUS

Simply ask for their blood. To be shed in exchange for his.

ELECTRA

I ask for their *deaths*? Is that truly what holiness is?

CHORUS

How could holiness *not* mean that their crime is answered by this?

ELECTRA gazes at the CHORUS silently; then turns to the tomb and prays.

ELECTRA

Messenger-god of the under-earth,
Hermes, herald of heaven and hell,
summon both on my behalf
that hell and heaven may hear me well.
To my father's household's guardian spirits I
pray, and to Earth, whom all are mothered by:
we are born of Earth's land, nourished by Earth's ground,
in Earth's kind soil, at death, at last laid down.

She pours the first libation.

And so I pour what cleanses hands from sin;
and so I present my father's offering.
I call on him to look on me with pity— 130
on me, and on Orestes, whom I love.
His royal children—how shall we rule his house?
For we are refugees, slaves bought and sold,
swapped by our—other parent for this man,
this collaborating miscreant, Aegisthus.
I am imprisoned here, no hope to marry;
the heir of all, meanwhile, crown-prince Orestes,
must flee his own inheritance and leave
this pair to gloat and glut upon your pains.
My prayer for him is: somehow bring him home—
O father, hear me!—Orestes back to our land.
And for myself? I ask what my mother lacks:
rightness of mind and holiness of hand. 140

She takes a deep breath.

These are my prayers for us; but for those opposed
what I ask, my father, is that your avenger appear,
and that those murderers be murdered in just return.

Looking at the CHORUS.

So I shape, in the middle of benedictions,
my blighting maledicting curse on them.
But for us, father, intercede with those above:
with Mother Earth and the Justice of Victory
plead our cause with the powers of goodness on high.

Thus, to seal my prayers, I pour this libation.

Adorn it now with the wailings tradition lays down: 150
 raise to the heavens the one who's now underground.

CHORUS

Fall, let them fall upon the earth:
 falling tears for our fallen lord
 poured with these pourings on our behalf,
 a tower against evil, goodness' keep and ward.
 At the tomb of the king I greet his dark ghost, and I
 long for the sword to slash, for spears to fly, 160
 for the mighty bow that's strung only bent to the ground—
 for full panoply of vengeance to come down.

ELECTRA (*looking closely at the grave*)

My father now has the offerings, the drink of the earth.
 But here's a new puzzle I also ask you to share.

CHORUS

A new puzzle? What? My heart dances on your behalf.

ELECTRA

Here on his grave is a cutting of somebody's hair.

CHORUS

Is it a man's hair, or is it a deep-lapped girl's?

ELECTRA

Whoever likes riddles can guess any guess that occurs. 170

CHORUS

But what is *your* guess? Let my old age be taught by your youth.

ELECTRA

Among all those here only I could have cut this, in truth.

CHORUS

Yes, since his wife turned due mourning to enmity.

ELECTRA

And yet it's so like—when I look at it, so like to see—

CHORUS

Whose hair is it like? Tell me! This I need to know.

ELECTRA

The hair it most closely resembles is *this* hair: my own.

CHORUS

Then could this hair be *Orestes'* secret gift?

ELECTRA

His hair to the life: same colour, the same curl and lift.

CHORUS

But how would he dare to come here, just to leave this?

ELECTRA

It's a tribute he *sent*, perhaps, placed by a hand not his. 180

CHORUS

If your guess is right, no less reason for tears to flow,
if his own land's become a place he never can go.

ELECTRA

Adrenalin pounds my heart as much as yours.
The spear-blade of this sight runs me clean through,
the salt drops fall unmastered from my eyes
in squalls, in floods—because of a lock of hair.
Who else in the city has hair that matches this?
Would his murderess cut such an offering,
she I call mother, she whose motherly way 190
towards her children's thirsting for their blood?
But I—that I should come out with it full-on—
that I should call it, openly, the token
of the human I love most, of my Orestes...
hope is a courtier. These are courtier's lies.
O, if it had voice in it, mind like a messenger's,
could speak to me and stabilise my doubt:
is it a thing to spit upon and hate,
shorn from a head that's full of hate for me?
Or is it true kin to me—we mourn together,
it pays love's tribute too to my dead father? 200

We pray to the heavenly powers, who all along know
what sea-storms our frail vessels undergo.
Perhaps there awaits me happiness yet to be;
the smallest seed can grow into the mightiest tree.

And yes: a small something else, a second sign:
A footprint here—the enlarged image of mine.
No—*two* pairs of feet, *two* sets of prints.
Someone and his friend... and not long since.
And this someone—look, his heel and instep stand
like copyings of mine upon the sand... 210

She has been tracking the footprints towards ORESTES' and PYLADES' hiding-place. At these last words she reaches it and ORESTES reveals himself. ELECTRA screams.

Ah! Labouring and overthrow of my mind!

ORESTES

From now on pray for the future and not for the past,
with thanks to the gods, who have given you what you have asked.

ELECTRA

What I have asked? God-given? What do you mean?

ORESTES

That someone you've prayed for so long is now someone seen.

ELECTRA

Can you know who I pray for? Out of the whole of mankind?

ORESTES

I know the dear place that Orestes keeps in your mind.

ELECTRA

With answered prayers—what does any of this have to do?

ORESTES

I am Orestes. The only true family to you!

ELECTRA

What web are you spinning around me? What treachery?

220

ORESTES

Do I spin you deceit? If I do, my web's also round me.

ELECTRA

You're laughing at me—you are mocking me in my woe.

ORESTES

I'd be laughing at my grief as well, if it were so.

ELECTRA

Orestes, then—is that who you claim to be?

ORESTES

Yes! You recognise my tokens, yet not me!

Imagination flew unwatched before,
and then you knew me from a lock of hair;
and then you saw me in marks on this floor.
Now your mind won't let you *say* it's me.

He removes his hat.

So take the lock I offered, and see where
it fits the place on my crown where it grew before;
see how it matches, male-wise, your own hair.

230

He unties a band of embroidered cloth from his arm.

And see what I've kept from our childhood, made by you:
the hunt-scene you stitched for me once, as I asked you to.

ELECTRA looks like she might scream with delight.

Be inward with this—don't joy senselessly!
Keep it quiet, while our worst foes are our own family.

ELECTRA (quietly, with calm intensity)

You the heart-longing of your father's house,
you our sigh of hope for a future king...
you the eye delight sees! You I'll call
by four names from now on. You are my father;
my mother too, since now her love is yours
and all she has from me's hate full-deserved;
and you are now Iphigeneia to me,
the sister so unpitifully sacrificed.
You were always the one I could trust, always you
still showed me love and respect when others did not.
Your return's salvation to me, and if you trust
in your own strong arm your father's rule will be yours.
Justice and Force unite; now let both loose,
combined in you as instrument of Zeus.

240

ORESTES

Zeus, lord Zeus, watch over what we plan.
Our eagle father's fledglings, not half grown,
we think how he died in that twisting snake's cold clasp.
And with him gone, it's like we wait in the nest,
and wait, and wait, and starve; no hunters yet,
we haven't his skill to hunt down our own prey.

250

And you can see us, Zeus. Yes, you can see us,
me and this girl—Electra here, my sister:
two children unmanned of their father, sharing now
in furtive flight, in heart-deep exile's ache.
Zeus, if you let us die—if you abandon
the nestlings of our father Agamemnon,
king of the blood-soaked altar of sacrifice—
what clan else will you find to feast you like ours?
Yes, Zeus, if you let us die, our eagle-brood,
then no sign you send to men will make them believe:
if you wither away the whole of our royal stock,
then your days of oblation will die with no altar-flame lit.
Remake, with us, our house great from our small—
our fallen house that seems broken beyond recall.

260

CHORUS

You children who will save your house—
 mere children—you must hush
 lest word of you reach our new lord
 via tongues that wag and gush—
 our lord, whom I'd see cased in pitch
 and burned like a torch of rush.

ORESTES

Apollo's mighty prophecy is sure
 and bears my trust.⁵ His word, explicit, loud, 270
 was *I must do it*: undergo this danger
 or watch my own blood cooling as I die.
 As die I shall, if I do not deal out
 to my father's killers *just what they dealt him*.
 Their deaths for his: that is Apollo's word.
 And if I don't, my own life is the price;
 my own life, said Apollo, and a siege
 of shameful bitter draining sufferings.
 He told me how it is with those who wake
 the sleeping wrath of the subterranean powers:
 how pallid ulcers chew their septic flesh, 280
 consume their onetime looks away from within,
 parch off all hair but the sparse white leper's strands.
 Nor is this all—he said—that the Furies raise
 once moved by a father's unavenged shed blood.
 The nightshade weapons of the underworld,
 poison-tipped by the blood of fallen kin,
 bring sweat-of-terror-maddened empty watches
 where day-wide eyes stare open all night through,
 bring restless fits to the exiled outcast's mind
 that mark him as clear as the murderer's iron collar. 290
 Such men are barred from every communal grace—
 no loving-cup for them, none drinks their health;
 banned from the safety of the friendly altar
 by the living rage of a father who has died,
 they know no guesthood and are shunned as hosts.
 Friendless and dishonoured, they die by inches:
 their withered flesh rots on them while they live.
 These were Apollo's words. Should I disbelieve?
 But even then, the deed would remain to do.
 A crowd of reasons point to this one act:
 the god's command, my father's grievous death, 300
 the theft of my due realm—that weighs on me;

⁵ I translate on the assumption that Orestes' next words introduce a new Loxian prophecy, rather than referring back to one we already know of. As Sommerstein notes *ad loc*, there is nothing up to this point in *Ch* to which Orestes could be referring. Undeniably Cassandra's prophecy at *Ag* 1280-4, Loxias-inspired like all her prophecies, is highly germane to this speech of Orestes'. However (a) Orestes cannot know what she said at *Ag* 1280-4, and (b) if Orestes *were* referring to *Ag* 1280-4 then those lines would be a counter-example to the rule that nothing Cassandra says is ever believed.

and to liberate my land from tyranny,
 not to allow this best of human cities,
 the men who conquered Troy by their bold hearts,
 to be thus bridled by a brace of women.
 Or is his heart a man's heart? Shall we *see* it?

CHORUS

You great Fates, you great mistresses of Time,
 by Zeus' will bring this to its proper end.
 Let it be just as the goddess Justice sends,
 as she declares while exacting crime for crime:
 "Harsh words by harsh words are properly paid; 310
 for bloody murder proper payment's made
 only when bloody murder comes in reply.
 To suffering is where all action tends":
 this is the age-old burden of her cry.

ORESTES

My father, O the father of my pain, *Strophe 1*
 what act is there, what word unlocks the way,
 the infinite journey, far as night from day,
 that I would have to take to see you again?
 My tears fall—and yet enact their grace, 320
 lament for the once lord buried in this place.

CHORUS

Child, O my child, the dead man can be burned *Strophe 2*
 but not his anger. The revenant once returned,
 his dirges are all quenched: fire outburns fire.
 It will burst forth in time, his scalding ire;
 and the death-song for your father that you raise— 330
 this is the sound stirs up his justice-chase.

ELECTRA

My father, O the father of us both, *Antistrophe 1*
 heed the grief that streams from one then the other
 in our wake-words—a sister and a brother,
 exiles and sanctuaries shielded by—your death.
 What is solely good? Is not evil mixed in with all?
 What strength wrestles Doom so that Doom himself takes a fall?

CHORUS

Yet still, if god is willing, this dark hour 340
 can be the bud from which your victories flower;
 your wake-song at this grave can modulate
 into a paean at the royal gate;
 your cup of pain turn the dear new wine of all.

ORESTES

If only, my father, some tribesman at Troy, *Strophe 3*

some blade of a hill-clan, had killed you—destroyed,
 but with honour still left to your family's sons,
 with honour that still brings the reverent glance: 350
 not buried in Greece, but with honour that's borne
 upon honour heaped up on your burial-cairn.

CHORUS

Then he would come, beloved, to those he loves, *antistrophe 2*
 a ruler below as he was a ruler above,
 the general in death as in life in his majesty,
 ruling his fallen heroes, passed infantry;
 second only to those who have always ruled in that place—
 just as, alive, he bore justice' doom-sword with dread grace. 360

ELECTRA

If only, my father, it were not you at Troy, *antistrophe 3*
 not you whom the life-shearing blade had destroyed,
 not you buried there amid crowds of the dead,
 but your butchers whose blood turned the streams of Troy red—
 dead there, and their family far off not learn 370
 before black moss thick-velvets their burial-urn.

CHORUS

My child, you name a wish prized more than gold:
 a wish warms hearts beyond the northern cold,
 a dream come true you talk of. But it's *talk*.
 What's real now is the lash's falling fork,
 the whip-stripes coming home. Your father's dead,
 helpless to help and cold beneath the earth.
 Your enemy's enthroned—mind blank, hands red.
 These things are a scourge beyond mere children's worth.

ORESTES

This pierces my ear like a blade. *strophe 4* 380
 O Zeus, O Zeus, you send from below
 the reckoning of doom, so long left unmade:
 doom on the reckless, sure though it's so slow,
 doom on the ruthless, sure though long delayed.
 We children owe this debt. It must be paid.

CHORUS

May we be the choir who sing the hatred-hymn, *strophe 5*
 who raise the triumph-howl over their destruction—
 who watch with joy the striking-down of *him*,
 who celebrate the sight of *her* perdition.
 Why should we hide the hawk-thought wings our minds? 390
 Why shouldn't our hearts' ship run with hatred's head-winds?

ELECTRA

And when will your judgement-day— *antistrophe 4*

O Zeus, O Zeus—fall on these below,
 their smashed heads sign of your irresistible sway?
 Let the land see, let justice *show!*
 Justice we ask for at last—we, so long betrayed.
 Earth and the underworld—hear now the prayer we've made!

CHORUS

Certainly the law, for blood, is blood; 400
 the sodden gore congealing in the mud
 cries out for vengeance, calls a Fury on,
 for the sake of those long murdered, dead and gone,
 demands new doom, new murder, and new blood.

ORESTES

O gods, O gods of the under-earth, *strophe 6*
 look on this, you great in force,
 you Curses made on the dead's behalf:
 calling to you, hear the voice
 of Atreid children who come home to die,
 who knock at their own doors with no reply,
 who turn and turn, look every way around,
 and yet what help, what hope, what light is found?

CHORUS

Truly it cracks my heart to look on them, *antistrophe 5* 410
 to be the witness to their lamentation—
 my darkening senses fade despairing-dim
 hearing their hopeless and black expectation.
 Speak bold, Orestes, and renew our minds.
 Are you a living hope, or a dead resign?

ELECTRA

What words, what words would have any worth? *antistrophe 6*
 Should we speak of the suffering like a curse
 set on us by who gave us birth,
 by her who can spare us no remorse?
 She may sweet-talk, but there still remains 420
 our unflattering ache of remembered pains;
 in us the same undeflected mind is found
 as in a wolf—or in that watch-bitch hound.

CHORUS

Like the mourning rites of Asia, of Iran, *strophe 7*
 I tear myself, I pound my chest for woe
 with frenzy-clutching fists that can't let go,
 with arms that grope the air, with emptied hands
 that claw my face with gash-lines, up and down,
 that batter helpless till my helpless head resounds.

ELECTRA

O my mother—
 cruel ruthless bitch—
 who killed my father—
 stacked him in this ditch—
 his citizens away
 and none to mourn:
 deserted funeral day
 full of your scorn.

strophe 8
 430

CHORUS

And I must tell you that she marred him too,
 marked him to stop him walking as a revenant;
 mutilated him so she'd hurt you.
 These are her crimes against him—this bitch miscreant!

strophe 9
 440

ORESTES (*scoring his hand with his knife*)
 A tale of dark dishonour, this, from you.
 But she will pay out for her sacrilege:
 pay to the under-gods, and to my hands too.
 And then a peaceful death's my privilege.

antistrophe 9

ELECTRA

You're recording our father's death at these traitors' hands?
 I was helpless, trapped, but I watched all this happening so;
 hunched in my purdah-prison, my hot tears flowed
 till I heard the woe's-breath catch as the chest expands
 that makes mourner the hideous mimic of the clown,
 makes weeping parody laughter. Write *that* down.

antistrophe 7

450

CHORUS

Write it all down,
 what will stab through the ear
 what will spread like a cloud
 in the soul, of dark fear.
 Your father has heard this
 and waits for the rest;
 his dark strength now braces
 your will for its test.

antistrophe 8

ORESTES

Father, I ask you: be with us, whom you love.

strophe 10

ELECTRA

I ask the same, though I ask it through my tears.

CHORUS

This is a prayer that we too are all part of;
 rise to the light and stand with us as you hear!

460

ORESTES

Our War-God will fight their War-God; our Right, their Right.

antistrophe 10

ELECTRA

O deities, come and fulfil what is truly just!

CHORUS

I hear them pray; they pray, and it fills me with fright.
Doom's long delayed in its coming, but come it must.

The bloodsticky grip, the inbred grief,
the tuneless Fates'-croon over their family;
and woe-weight bearing them down without relief;
and pain without end, without pause, without sanctuary.

strophe 11

470

Strip the wound, let the family heal itself.
There is no cure for them but from within;
through fever-strife is their only way to health:
so goes the under-gods' remorseless hymn.

antistrophe 11

Thus, blessed gods of the under-earth,
they pray to you: hear their plea:
for the fight that's now before them
grant them your aid graciously.

ORESTES

Send on your son, since you died no death for a lord,
the power, O father, that leads to our house restored.

480

ELECTRA

I ask for—Aegisthus' death, and then for my rights in life:
father, free me from here to be some good prince's wife.

ORESTES

For only so can the feasts that remember those gone
include your name; without them, honour forgone,
you will watch from outside when memorial feasts are put on.

ELECTRA

And I will offer libation when I am wed—
libation, your legacy's due from your daughter and son;
above all else, I will honour your place of the dead.

ORESTES

O mother Earth, let my father guard our fight!

ELECTRA

Send us fair victory, Persephone, queen of hell's night!

490

ORESTES

Recall the bath, father, where you were cheated of life.

ELECTRA

And the man-hunting net invented for you by your wife.

ORESTES

No foundry-fired chains, my father; and yet they trapped *you*—

ELECTRA

—shamefully held in their windings, in treachery’s glue.

ORESTES

Do these stories of shame, my father, wake you from the dead?

ELECTRA

Do you rouse at them, raise up your love-remembered head?

ORESTES

Either send Justice as ally to us your true family,
or show us some secret hold over them like they had over you.
How can you bear not to turn foul defeat into victory?

ELECTRA

So, father, hear this: my last cry to you. 500
When you see your own offspring refuged in your sanctuary,
pity my girlish tears; your boy’s tears too.

ORESTES

Don’t let us be the last of all your dynasty:
a future for us is an afterlife for you.
A man’s fame in life is preserved in his family;
like the floats of cork that hold up the fisherman’s net,
that won’t let it sink in the clammy abyss where it’s set.

ELECTRA

Father, hear us, for our tears are all shed for you.
To heed our words saves us, and rescues your own honour too.

Pause

CHORUS

Thus your long prayer. And in its length, correct: 510
it compensates for long years of neglect.
Now for the deed. Your minds steeled to one end,
go on with it, and see what fortune sends.

ORESTES

And so we shall. But it comes in our course
to ask why Clytaemestra sent libations.
Such late atonement for intolerable crime—
to kill him, then say *Sorry*, and think he hears—

I know of no comparisons for that.
 How could such gifts outweigh her dreadful sin?
 “For one man’s blood, you try to quash your crime
 by giving all you have? You waste your time.”
 That’s what men say. But why she acted so,
 if you can tell me, I will gladly know.

520

CHORUS

My dear child, I do know, for I was there.
 Nightmare horrors prowled her guilty bed:
 therefore that godless woman sent libations.

ORESTES

What was the nightmare? Was that plainly heard?

CHORUS

“I gave birth to a snake”—in her own words—

ORESTES

This dream did not come on her randomly!

CHORUS

—“and wrapped and nursed it human-tenderly.”

ORESTES

And for its poisonous mouth, what food was best?

530

CHORUS

She dreamt she offered to it her own breast.

ORESTES

Then how could she avoid its painful bite?

CHORUS

It bit her: blood-red mixed with her milk-white.

ORESTES

And it ended there, this story of a dream?

CHORUS

Not *ended*—but it was where we heard her scream,
 and where the clustered palace lights flamed back,
 for her sake chasing down the long crooked shadows.
 And that was when she sent us with libations,
 hoping to cut the root out of her pain.

ORESTES

Mother-god of the under-earth,
 spirit in my father’s tomb,
 let me be her dream’s true worth:

540

let what I am show her her doom.
 I fit her dream so all in it is apt.
 She bore us both. The blanket that she wrapped
 around me, warmed the snake. Just where I lapped,
 the snake drank that will gulp her life-blood down.
 Our watch-bitch bore a monster; and it's found
 the time for her to die; for it's her son.
 So decrees her dream. It will be done. 550

CHORUS

You are the one to read this dream for me.
 May this all come! But complete your prophecy:
 tell us, your friends, what to do and what let be.

ORESTES

Our plan is simple.—Electra, go indoors,
 and I warn you, let none know what I plot with you,
 that those whose subterfuge killed this great man
 may be themselves destroyed by subterfuge.
 That they in their own trap would one day die
 was Apollo's word; and Apollo's never lied.
 So I will come to their... to *my*... front gate 560
 dressed as a foreigner, with traveller's gear,
 and with me their war-ally, Pylades.
 Both of us will disguise the way we talk,
 and speak the Phocian dialect of Parnassus.
 And if their gatemen are so dark of mind
 they keep us out—the house's curse goes deep—
 then here we stay, like this, for all to see,
 and to feed the dark surmise of passers-by.
 “Aegisthus, then” (they'll say), “makes suppliant wait?
 In residence, and yet he lets this happen?” 570
 But once I pass the threshold of this gate,
 but once I see him loll on my father's throne
 or watch him make his entrance, face to face,
 then know well that the moment our eyes meet,
 before the languid query leaves his lips
 “Where is our guest from?”, I make him a corpse:
 that instant I will wrap him round this blade,
 that instant our already-glutted Fury
 will drink blood undiluted—her third draught.
 So now, my girl, inside, where women's matters
 wait for your good care; such is your part. 580
 Then as for you, good ladies, my advice
 is *Only words well-omened*. You well know
 when to hold your tongues, when let them go.
 And for the rest, I ask the messenger-god:
 “Stand guardian over me now I draw my sword.”

Exeunt ORESTES and PYLADES off the stage, and ELECTRA into the palace.

CHORUS

Mother Earth flowers monstrosities, *strophe 1*
 sweet-oozed venom flaws her breath;
 the silken Sea's immensities
 hide a hundred forms of death;
 the burning holy Heights above us hold
 destruction that swings down from stately gold 590
 in blazing bolt and blasting hurricane,
 consuming beast and bird in un pitying flame.

But mortal man's audacities, *antistrophe 1*
 his never-sated mind,
 and the insolence of lust that is
 in the nature of womankind,
 and that sees both, surest partner, to their doom—
 the disaster woman brings if you give her room,
 and the shared homes brought to ruin by her reign— 600
this, men and beasts lack words to give full name.

Yet any not too proud to see may know: *strophe 2*
 Meleager's story tells us so,
 the child whose life was to burn out as foretold
 at the same time as the log on his mother's fire:
 she plucked that log out, kept it safe and cold,
 gripped like her son in her unrelenting hold, 610
 till the moment that she chose for him to go—
 then threw it back in to become his funeral-pyre.

Another traitorous woman fit to hate *antistrophe 2*
 is Skylla who, with the enemy at the gate,
 was bribed by them with a necklace made of gold,
 knowing her father Nisus would soon die
 if his hair was cut (for so it was foretold).
 She crept up on him, her bitch heart cheaply sold,
 defenceless in his sleep, and sheared his fate: 620
 they killed him, but it was her he was cut down by.

But worst of all Hypsipyle, who chose, *strophe 3*
 when Jason's army came to her land as foes,
 to lead the women of Lemnos in the crime
 of murdering their men to become his whores.
 What she did is a byword for all time;
 the Lemnians of then are a vanished line;
 what the gods hate, no human honour knows.
 Are any of them in this catalogue without cause? [630]

But since I make my catalogue of pain, *antistrophe 3*
 of women whose choices brought their houses shame—
 this Clytaemestra's choice is one of those.
 Against her hero, come back from the wars,

with a woman's trick and the dirtiest of his foes
whoring, then treacherous murder,'s what she chose.
Only a modest woman is fit to reign,
who keeps her nature's heat well within doors.

The probing sword of sorrow pierces deep,
you struggle, but it's run you through the lungs; 640
you fight lest Justice go down to defeat,
trampled by men's misdeeds, by rampant wrongs.

Yet Justice stands unshaken; its fire forges
fateful vengeance-weapons of its own;
Justice' son brings the blood-for-blood that purges; 650
Fury for Fury in fury shall atone.

Enter ORESTES and PYLADES, disguised. ORESTES goes to the closed palace doors and begins to knock on them.

ORESTES
Open the door! Hear my hands upon it!
Open the door! Who waits there within it?
Open the door! -The third time of repeating:
does Aegisthus' guest-craft not
stretch to asking "Who is waiting?"?

GATEKEEPER (*behind the door*)
All right, I can hear you. Who are you? Where from?

ORESTES
What you have to say's to the masters of this home:
I'm here for them, not you. And I'm here with news.
Tell them that, and quickly. For night comes: 660
the western darkness climbs up the vivid sky:
the traveller seeks his harbour in some house
where unsuspecting hosts will welcome all.
Who is within with power to treat with me?
Is someone mistress here; or better, master?
Yes, send *him* out. For if the woman comes,
I fear that modesty will thwart my speech;
what men say to men will be plain enough for each.

Suddenly the doors open, revealing CLYTAEMESTRA in her majesty. As he has just predicted, ORESTES flinches.

CLYTAEMESTRA
Good sirs, my guests, you must tell me all you need.
Within the palace we have all you can ask.
Since the traveller's limbs are loosened in our baths, 670
Since the weary are wrapped in the silk-weave of our beds,
the gaze of our hall's fellowship you can trust.

Or if what you want is something more complicated,
then that's for the men; to the men let it be stated.

ORESTES

I your guest am a Daulian from Phocis.

Coming to Argos, my luggage on my back—
well, you saw me with my stuff when I arrived—
I fell in as a stranger with—some stranger:
Strophios, a Phocian too, he said.

He asked me questions and found out my route.

“My friend,” he said, “you're going to Argos anyway;
so please, make it your care to tell his parents—
and do not shirk it—of Orestes' death. 680

I don't know whether his kin will want him back
or inter him where he is, a resident alien;
but pass their wishes back to us in Phocis,
where Orestes' ashes wait for them, enclosed
already in an urn, and duly mourned.”

That's what I heard, and so I pass it on.

By rights should I be telling you it's so?

Perhaps his father should be first to know? 690

CLYTAEMESTRA

Ah! Now our Argos too is a ransacked city.

You curse of our house, so hard to wrestle with,
so keen-eyed to spot the things we'd keep out of harm's way,
so sharp in your lethal archery, even long-range,
so thorough to strip me of everyone that I have loved!

And now of Orestes. Right he was to keep off,
to hold himself aloof from this lethal mire.

Yet even so, our hope he might halt the insane
dance of the curse in our halls: that hope was in vain.

ORESTES

For my part, I'd have preferred it if I'd come, 700
recognised and honoured at my arrival,

as bringing good news to a happy, flourishing home;
for what is sweeter than friendship of host and guest?

Yet this way it must be; for to my mind
impiety alone could make me waver,
impiety only let me leave a task

that I must now complete for those I love,
that I must end for those who make me guest,
that I must do as commanded from above.

CLYTAEMESTRA

You will receive no less than you deserve;
you will be no less honoured by this house.

The bad news would have reached us anyway.

But now is the hour for the all-day traveller 710

to reap the reward of his arduous journeying.

To her attendants

Take him to the men's guest-rooms of the palace,
him and his travelling-companion following;
there indeed let them reap the house's rewards.

Be sure to make of this your special care.

To ORESTES

Meanwhile I shall share your news with the king.

We are not short of friends and kin, and they
will help us plot our path past this sad day.

Exeunt.

CHORUS

Come now, you serving-girls,

only your voices

720

to raise for Orestes—

but they too are forces.

Goddess of under-earth,

power of graves,

guard of our warlord's worth,

hear now and save.

The time is ripe for Persuasion to fight on his side,

for Hermes the underworld messenger to stand his guide:

for Orestes comes now to the moment the sword will decide.

Enter CILISSA.

What now? Has the stranger-visitor done some harm?

730

For here is the nurse of Orestes, and in tears.

What brings you out here, Cilissa, in such alarm,

trailed, by your looks, by tag-along griefs and fears?

CILISSA

Her Majesty tells me to call Aegisthus in

to meet these strangers, soon as possible.

Wants him to hear man to man what the new news is.

Oh yes, all sorrow she was, in front of the servants!

Hiding inside her her glee how it's all turned out.

Good news *for her*, but for her *house*, outright disaster—

740

if indeed it's true, what the strangers so plainly report.

And he will rejoice in it too, as soon as he hears—

He will, that Aegisthus!

Oh—but what about *me*?

It was bad enough, all that mixed-up history.

Unbearable, the things that have happened here,

if you let it get to you—the way I do.

But nothing's hurt me quite as bad as this...

I knew how to put on a brave face, bear my pains...

but my dear boy Orestes, my life's trouble—

the one I reared from the moment he was born—

750

the one whose imperatives kept me up all night—
 so many little jobs, so few of them pleasant.
 Before a child has reached the reasoning age
 you rear him like a little animal—how else?—
 and for his *reasonings*? You ask his nurse.
 For what can *he* say to you from in his cradle,
 when he's hungry, or needs liquid in—or out?
 As for his bowels—a law unto themselves.
 So I had to guess what was coming, like an interpreter.
 I got it wrong often enough, and paid in scrubbing;
 child-minding, nappy-laundry—they're one job.
 So I held both these tasks by royal appointment,
 I reared Orestes for his father the king.
 And now I hear—I can't bear it!—that he's died.
 And this is my news to this man who blights our affairs:
 I have to report to Aegisthus his answered prayers.

760

CHORUS

Tell me how Clytaemestra told him to appear.

CILISSA

How she told him? Repeat it—that's not clear.

CHORUS

Did she say "Bring your bodyguard"? Or was it "Come here alone"?

CILISSA

He was to bring all those spearmen. His comfort-zone!

CHORUS

No, don't say that to this master whom you hate.
 Greet him joyfully, with "Sir, leave your guards to wait.
 You won't hear this news right from men you intimidate."
 The message is crooked; so, messenger, set it straight.

770

CILISSA

Joyfully? What, are you pleased with the news we've had?

CHORUS

What if suddenly Zeus were to change all to good from bad?

CILISSA

How could Zeus do that, Orestes, our hope, being dead?

CHORUS

A seer who drew that conclusion *now* would have misread.

CILISSA

Do you mean that you have heard different from what's just been said?

CHORUS

Go with your message; and tell it the way you've been told.
 What the gods care for, they care for: you watch it unfold. 780

CILISSA

I'm going, then, yes, and will tell them it just as you say.
 By the gods' gift, may all this turn out the best way.
Exit

CHORUS

Now at my asking, Father Zeus, *strophe 1*
 king of Olympus and all its gods,
 grant us the luck now that turns to some use,
 grant us the light that we yearn towards.
 What I ask has the right in it, every word:
 Zeus, Lord Zeus, protect us, stand our guard.

Hear me; and as for our visitor within, *mesode 1*
 raise him over his foes, Zeus. Raise him to win, 790
 and you will receive from him, once he's thus raised,
 the doubled, the tripled up offering of praise.

Orphaned Orestes, Father Zeus, *antistrophe 1*
 son of the one your heart moved towards,
 no more than a colt, yet yoked for this race—
 may he calmly measure his pace to the course,
 run the full distance before him as he intends,
 no rest or respite or regret until all this ends.

And you divine children of Father Zeus, 800 *strophe 2*
 kings of the inner house, gods of its hoards,
 help us, put your good will to some use:
 bring back to his kingdom here our banished lord.
 Dissolve the power of blood shed long ago;
 Let ancient murder-spores dry up, not sow.

Hear us; and you god who dwell at the gate, *mesode 2*
 Apollo, give him to see his own good fate: 810
 give him to see how freedom's steady light
 comes like a dawn to those who have lived through the night.

Help him too, spokesman of Zeus, *antistrophe 2*
 Hermes, swiftest of the gods
 to move deeds as the times conduce,
 unraveller of tangled words
 but weaver too of spoken webs of night,
 ambiguous spells on which day sheds no light.

His act begins the journey, Father Zeus, *strophe 3*
 that leads him to the cleansing of his home; 820

if our women's voices are able to produce
a following wind, then we say *Let it come*;
rejoicing in how well for us all this will end—
in calamity at last on foes, not friends.

And you, Orestes, when the moment comes,
when she appeals to you that *You are her son*,
end the vengeance-round so it runs no further:
say as you strike the blow *And he was my father*.
Like Perseus, the daring son of Zeus,
cut your Medusa down, but do not look:
to your clan alive and dead, bring more than truce,
bring an end to war for the house fortune forsook.
Within this palace, one more bloody deed
is the act that finally kills new murder's seed.

mesode 3

830
antistrophe 3

Enter AEGISTHUS.

AEGISTHUS

I've reason to be here—a messenger called.
I've heard there's news some foreigners have brought,
a new word in; and not one we rejoice at.
Orestes dead! The house drips blood already;
and now another knife-cut, wound on wound.
How does it stand? Is this eye-witness truth,
or just some scared old women's dancing fancy,
a fire-spark fizzing out on fact's cold hearth?

840

Eyeing the CHORUS

What can you say to make it clear to me?

CHORUS

All we can say, my lord, just repeats what we've heard;
go inside, and you'll hear it in these men's original words.
We women can offer you mere intermediary speech;
what these men say to you will be plain enough for each.

850

AEGISTHUS

My pleasure is to appraise this messenger.
I'll find him out, I'll know him as he is.
Is he just another hot-air wanderer?
Or is he the kind who is there when the man dies?
I'll front him face to face and then we'll see.
Whatever he hides, it'll all come out to me.
AEGISTHUS goes into the palace.

CHORUS

Master-god of the over-sky,
what, King Zeus, am I to say?
What—invoke the gods, shall I?
Then how shall I begin to pray?

Well-meaning, I seek words that strike the mean—
 too much or little kills; I seek *between*—
 while bright fresh red runs over dust-fade brown
 on the axe-blade by which one of them's struck down.

860

Either forever ruined by
 Orestes' daring is his land,
 or he sets a flame on high,
 a light of freedom for his clan,
 and claims the rich patrimony that's his
 with all its wealth and all its majesties.
 May he win like a god, and strike his twin fiends down,
 when alone he fronts the watch-bitch and her hound.

A scream within the house: a frightened inarticulate sound.

Oh God, oh God, what scream, what shout is this?
 What has been done? Which way has it turned out?
 We stand aside in passive blamelessness
 awaiting our hopes' triumph; or their rout.

870

AEGISTHUS' SERVANT rushes in distraught.

SERVANT

Howl, howl grief, howl for my struck-down lord!
 Howl, I tell you! Howl and howl again!
 Aegisthus—he is dead. Now open up!
 Unbar the women's quarters! Instantly!
 We need a resolute strong arm as well—
 though not to save Aegisthus' life: too late.
 Come on and *answer* me!

880

Do I waste my breath?

Are you all deaf in there, idly asleep?
 And where is Clytaemestra in all this?
 The axe's edge is poised above her head;
 Justice's stroke awaits to strike her dead.

Enter CLYTAEMESTRA.

CLYTAEMESTRA

What is the matter? Why all this scream and shout?

SERVANT

That the living are killed by the dead is what I called out.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Oh God! You riddle, but I know what your riddle's about.
 Our destruction comes by deceit, just as our triumph came.
 Will no one bring me an axe, a man-splitting blade?
 Let's see if this ends in our victory, or in our shame—

890

whether this is the evil by which I am made, or unmade.

Enter ORESTES, bloody sword in hand, with PYLADES following.

ORESTES

It's you I seek now; *his* payment is fulfilled.

CLYTAEMESTRA

My strength, my love, my Aegisthus, have you been killed?

ORESTES

"Your love" and you—it's one grave you'll be laid in!
In a way he got lucky. *He* died before you betrayed him.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Orestes, hold back. Think! Would you run through this breast?
Stab the place where, a milk-sodden infant, you once sucked your rest?

ORESTES

Pylades, your view. Should I shrink from killing my mother?

PYLADES

And after that, what? Leave Loxias' law for another? 900
Abandon our oaths, though we swore them as brother to brother?
Be at peace with the gods, though at war with every other.

ORESTES

The prize is yours, for the right advice what to do.
(*To CLYTAEMESTRA*)
Come back with me to the place where I kill you too,
right next to him, the man you preferred to my father.
You "love" to be with him? Now you'll be always together.
You chose his "strength". Your choice enmuscled your fate.
Losing coherence in his anger.
You chose to love *him!* My father you chose to hate!

CLYTAEMESTRA

But I reared you from the moment of your first breath.
What I want's to be with you up to my *old-age* death.

ORESTES

You kill my father, then ask—can you lodge at my gates?

CLYTAEMESTRA

I'm to blame for his death. But Orestes, blame also the Fates. 910

ORESTES

Blame them as well for *your* death, which now awaits.

CLYTAEMESTRA

But my son—have you really no fear of a parent’s curse?

ORESTES

Soon as born, you cast me adrift. What should I fear worse?

CLYTAEMESTRA

Not *cast adrift!* A friend’s schooling I freely gave.

ORESTES

Pointing to AGAMEMNON’s tomb

My father was *him*. And I, bought and sold like a slave.

CLYTAEMESTRA

You *bought and sold?* So what price did I get for you?

ORESTES

I could answer plainly. But not without shaming you.

CLYTAEMESTRA

Oh, you want to get rough? Shall we talk of your father’s whores?

ORESTES

You sit weaving slander while he fights for you in the wars.

CLYTAEMESTRA

I sat and waited for him. I was his wife.

920

ORESTES

Women risk getting bored. Men risk their life.

CLYTAEMESTRA

So is this it, then? You will kill your mother?

ORESTES

You die by your own hand only, and no other.

CLYTAEMESTRA

If you kill me, you set my Furies hot on your trail.

ORESTES

If I spare you, you think my father’s Furies will fail?

CLYTAEMESTRA

All my persuading’s no more than my own pre-sung dirge.

ORESTES

Such is your fate. How else is my father’s death purged?

CLYTAEMESTRA

This was the dream I feared, of all prophecies.

I dreamt I gave birth to a snake. And here the snake is.

ORESTES

You brought him a death that no husband ought to see. 930
So now you meet *your* death, no less unnaturally.

PYLADES and ORESTES force CLYTAEMESTRA, at knife-point, into the palace.

CHORUS

Not even their double death deserves *no* lament.
But their blood that Orestes dares shed brings the end of the feud.
This is the worst over. We see, in this dark event,
how the house that was almost extinguished can be renewed.

Justice came to Priam's house in the end, *strophe 1*
the heavy justice of full punishment;
so now to Agamemnon's, Justice sends
a lion pair, war-gods in doublement,
that the exile burdened with Apollo's word 940
may bring to full completion what he's heard,
may complete his course as the moving gods intend.

Raise the victors' triumph-howl *mesode 1*
for the house no more by fraud befouled,
freed from a fortune that defiled,
the misrule of the vile.

What's arrived here fights underhand, *antistrophe 1*
Revenge whose mind is full of treachery,
who wars beneath the touch of the truthful hand
of Zeus's daughter—Zeus's daughter, she
called Zeus-tice, Justice, not without good cause: 950
Zeus-tice the faithful steward of his laws,
the anger-storm against which no enemies stand.

Justice it is whom Mount Parnassus' lord *strophe 2*
proclaimed without deceit had been deceived:
Justice was wounded by Clytaemestra's sword;
of her long pain is finally now relieved.
By one stroke or another, high divinity
for every ill contrives some surgery;
right reverence, to right rule, is right reward. 960

Shattered now are the bridling chains *mesode 2*
that bound this house in its slow pains;
from the night of its grave, see the new day climbs:
too long entombed, it will now arise.

Soon he on whom all power's conferred *antistrophe 2*
will pass the threshold he has saved,
enter the house that his cleansing word

and cleansing act from crime has laved;
 and then the fortunes of the clan will joyfully
 flock back to nest where they roosted formerly, 970
 happy familiars of a house at last restored.

*The doors of the palace are opened to reveal ORESTES and PYLADES standing over the
 corpses of CLYTAEMESTRA and AEGISTHUS.*

ORESTES

You see the coupled tyrants of this land,
 the father-killers, palace-pillagers.
 Glorious they were when they sat upon their thrones;
 at least their love endures—or so I guess.
 And what they swore has held them in its grip:
 they swore they'd kill my father and die together,
 and as they swore they've faithfully performed.
 And see as well, you audience of their crimes, 980
 the trick they played, the trap for my luckless father
 that tied his hands, that bound his helpless feet.
 Spread out the death-robe; standing round it, show
 the silken fetters that brought our great lord low.
 Now may the Father see: not just my own,
 but the Father who watches over everything.
 So let that Father one day stand my witness
 that I was right to hunt my mother down.
 For killing Aegisthus, no defence is needed:
 he paid the courtroom price for adultery. 990
 What should I call this cloth to do it justice?
 A trap to catch a lion in? A shroud,
 a bathtub-coffin-covering, head to foot?
 Rather you might say a hobbling-net, 1000
 a strangling snare, straitjacketing his legs.
 It might belong to some treacherous wayside host
 who lives a life of swindling his guests
 of their purses and their lives; with this to catch them
 he'd live a life as cosy as Procrustes'.
 But as for her who did this to her husband—
 she bore his children for him on her breast,⁶
 their bite was loving then, but is deadly now—
 What then of her? Is not her very touch
 as deadly as a serpent's or a sea-snake's
 even without her bite? So poisonous is
 the lawless mind that knows no conscience-fear.
 Please God I never share my house with such:
 I'd rather heaven should kill me without heir.

CHORUS

⁶ Literally the Greek is *hypo zônês*, “below the girdle”, i.e. in the womb, but the immediate transition to talking about Clytaemestra's children biting her, first at the breast then with a sword, with obvious allusion to the dream earlier in the play, makes my deliberate mistranslation hard to resist.

The chanting stops for a moment.

I pray that those I leave in Argos town 1040
 will keep the memory green how these woes grew up;
 I pray that Menelaus—if he comes—
 will have a fair account from you of me.
 Fugitive exile under a hostile sky,⁷
 I'll bear this burden till my final breath:
 that for my father's I exacted my mother's death.

The chanting is loud (f) and insistent.

CHORUS

You acted *well*. Don't speak so frantically,
 nor let your lips close on a blasphemy.
 Your act has freed your kingdom and your state:
 you beheaded the venomous two-head snake.

ORESTES (*screams*)

The hideous ones—the witch-faced hellish hags—
 sheathed in shining scaly serpent-grey—
 hair slithering with snakes—I can't stay here. 1050

CHORUS

What illusion's this, you whom your father held dear,
 shaking and shifting your mind? Hold fast. You have *won*.

ORESTES

Here is no illusion. The sign of my suffering is come.
 Plain as day, see the hounds of her following wrath.

CHORUS

The blood on your hands is only this moment washed off.
 That is the cause of the horror your mind is gripped by.

ORESTES

Oh God, O Apollo, they swarm, they multiply—
 And septic canker drips from each blank eye-hollow.

CHORUS

Whatever your affliction, the cure is Apollo:
 the touch of his healer's hand will set you free. 1060

ORESTES

They still are not visible to you, as they are to me?
 I see them. And they drive me forth from here.

Exit ORESTES followed by PYLADES. The chanting, which has swelled to ff, now dies away altogether.

⁷ Cp. *Agamemnon* 1282.

CHORUS

Go with our blessing, and gods hold you dear,
 Watch over you with foresight, send god-speed.

Thus the third storm on this house,
 blown full, blows itself full out.

Thyestes' cannibal meal came first:
 he ate his sons, and died accursed.

Second came Agamemnon's death,
 the war-lord slaughtered in his bath.

1070

Does this third slaughter come to save?
 Or to bring yet others to their graves?

When will it end, and we be rid
 of the debts of the wrongs that our fathers did?
 How long till their hearts'-cries for vengeance cease?
 At what price will they rest in peace?

End of The Choëphoroi

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