

Aeschylus, *Eumenides* (*The kindly ones*)

The sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. In the background the three-legged prophetic seat (the tripod or throne), suspended over the deep steaming fissure that is the heart of the sanctuary, is visible within the sanctuary building, through its open doors, which are at the top of a set of steps.

Apollo's PRIESTESS appears. Facing the steps, and so away from the audience—like ORESTES in the last play—she kneels to pray. After some time she speaks.

PRIESTESS

In my prayer, I call on first
the first and oldest prophet-force,
the truth-breath of the Under-earth
that, rising to me, gives me voice.
That truth-breath's child was Justice; by and by
the goddess Justice gained the mastery
to mount this throne above the depths profound,
to be its second voice when the truth-breath sounds.

In this Titan-line the third—
enthroned by reason, not by force—
was Phoebe daughter of the earth.
As heir, her grandson was her choice:
the god Apollo, brighter than the sky,
came from the Aegaeon pool he was born by
to beach his prow within the Attic sound
and be throned fourth upon Parnassus' ground.

10

Then it was that Athens heard
Apollo come; her welcoming voice
to her tilled fields for him was stirred;
she built him roads of straightest course,
she showed him lushness won from dusty-dry
to mark the honour he was cortèged by.
Hephaestus' sons made all his praises sound,
and Delphos, naming-lord of all this ground.

Rising and turning to the audience.

Zeus it was breathed seercraft into him:
Apollo speaks here as his father's prophet.
Of all the gods, my prayers name them the first.

20

Turning back towards the sanctuary.

And Athene rules my words
as I invoke the airy grace
of Parnassus' nymphs, the spirit-birds
who dwell here in the mountain's caves.
Dionysus too has held this place since he

en-netted Pentheus by his mastery,
his savage women like a pack of hounds
who tear their prey apart once it is downed.

Last I ask my prayers be heard
calling up the Sea-God's force,
and powers by which the springs are stirred;
to Zeus who finishes all, my voice
concludes my prayer, as I ascend on high
to be enthroned, and there to prophesy.
Let this then be my prayers' fervent sound;
and this time, may good fortune here be found!

30

A final word to the audience.

If there are Greeks here, they may now approach,
taking their turn by lots, as is the law.
In allotted order, Greeks, approach with awe;
for what I speak, I speak by God's guiding touch.

She turns and mounts the steps, and enters the sanctuary building. We see her silhouette as suddenly she falls to her knees and screams aloud. At the end of her long scream, she rushes out, falling on all fours in her frantic hurry but keeping going anyway.

O sight beyond speech, O sight beyond seeing of eyes!
Apollo—you drive me out from your mysteries?
O God! My strength is gone! I cannot stand!
I crawl like infants do upon my hands!
(*To herself*) O you stupid old woman—no better than prattling child...

Composing herself a little, raising herself, and addressing the audience.

There I am, on my way to the wreath-clad shrine,
when I see at the very centre a suppliant, 40
gripping the altar, begging to expiate.
His hands are a slick of blood, his gore-soaked sword
still smokes with the death of the one he has just butchered.
Yet those hands grip a branch of the high-born olive tree,
round which he has wrapped the long skein of snow-white wool
that signals his desire to expiate.
And opposite this man is a terrible pack of—
what shall I call them? Monstrous women-forms
that crouch on the throne, that seem to be asleep...
not women but gorgons—yet not gorgons either.
Once in a painting I saw the demented Harpies 50
that preyed upon Jason's men: these looked like them,
though wingless, and darker, and fouler than words can say.
They sleep; and they snore, with a stink of repellent breath.
Their eyes drip pus; even their sight is envenomed;
their funeral clothes unfit them for anyone's door,

mortal's or god's, temple or human house.
And their mourning clothes—not right for any god's shrine,
not fit to be seen under a mortal roof either.
What sort of creatures are they? I don't know,
nor which is the land can boast them as its own—
can say it reared them, and without new groans.

But for my part, I leave them to Apollo, 60
Apollo of the Strength, lord of this house:
healer and priest, seeing miracles yet to come;
healer, renewer of dark and desanctified homes.

The PYTHIA leaves. The scene changes and we see inside the sanctuary, where ORESTES, always touching the altar, kneels before it with reddened sword and wool-twined olive branch, as she described. Facing him, on seats, are three sleeping FURIES. ORESTES prays, a little desperately.

ORESTES
Lord Apollo, you know your way past each wrong turning.
Since you know that, learn too not all caring's wrong caring.
Lord of the Strength, your strength is what I'm now needing!

In a sudden flash of blinding light, APOLLO appears above him.

APOLLO
And I will not betray you. To the end,
and whether I seem near to you or not,
I'll guard you and fall harsh on all your foes.
You see already how I've caught these hags
in drooling sleep: these bridesmaids of disgust,
these virgins by revulsion, since no god—
nor man, nor even animal—would have them; 70
evil they were made for, from pitch dark,
the Tartarean dark that is their home.
But flee from them—flee from them and don't weaken—
for they will chase you down the spine of Greece,
behind you always through the striding miles;
would follow you too to cities over the water.
Do not grow tired, though your neck's yoked with this woe;
and do not rest until you take your stand 80
in Athene's ancient city, in her house,
where you can grasp her image with your hands.
A jury we will find there for your case,
and smoothing soothing words of oratory;
and we will find devices that will bring
relief to your long watch of haunting troubles.
For it was I who made you kill your mother.
Remember this: don't let the fear take over.

And Hermes, guard him—you my own blood-brother. 90

Messenger-god as you are, show him his way.
Shepherd him; for he's my suppliant,
and Zeus respects the wanderer's sacredness.
Thus he comes back, though an outcast matricide,
to his place in the life of men; stand at his side.

APOLLO disappears; ORESTES, his eyes always on the FURIES, backs away slowly from them till he is out of their reach, then turns and runs; exit.

For a moment the stage seems empty; then the audience realises, with a shock, that the GHOST OF CLYTAEMESTRA is already there. She approaches the three sleeping FURIES.

GHOST

Sleep? Well may you sleep! Why not! Drowse on!
And while you sleep, you leave me to dishonour,
to be sneered at even in hell, among the dead.
The killer's taint—it will not let me go;
I stray disgraced.

The FURIES are unresponsive.

I'm *speaking* to you now!
I'm telling you how deeply I am blamed:
despite the things they did to me—my *kin*— 100
though I was slaughtered by a matricide—
no high-up deity contends for *me*.

She glares balefully after APOLLO.

Look at my wounds! Look at them with heart's eye,
you greedy lickers-up of offerings,
of the sober serious libations of a woman,
of the feasts night-hallowed in the deep fire-pit—
all other gods asleep—that I offered you. 110
It's all disdained. It's trodden into dirt.
While he—Orestes—slips the hunters' chase,
neat-stepping as a deer, jumps from the net:
his mocking eyes on you, big with derision.
Listen to me now, for my soul's at stake.
Wan goddesses of hell, hear and be wise;
for this your dream is Clytaemestra's cries.

A moan from the sleeping FURIES.

Moan if you like. You've let Orestes go
unpunished to his friends in a suppliant's pose—

The sleeping FURIES moan again. 120

—while you, on *my* side, drowse—moan—take no heed.
Orestes murdered me! Should he walk free?

A louder noise, a growl, from the sleeping FURIES.

You growl. Won't you awake? You drowse on still.
What are you good for? What do you do but ill?

A louder growl, but still the three FURIES sleep.

Once upon a time twelve terrible beasts...
—what? —Worked too hard? And now they need their rest?

A high-pitched moan, in which we realise there are not just three FURIES' voices but twelve. Then suddenly all twelve FURIES' voices break out, diminuendo, in their chant:

CHORUS

Catch him catch him catch him catch him *shout it* 130

The GHOST waits, but nothing follows this tailing-off cry.

GHOST

Dream-hunters, the whole pack. Drugged, twitching hounds
who bell and yelp for blood—and sleep on sound.
Do you *do—anything?* Then do it! Then get up!
Can you let your work exhaust you? Can you rest,
anaesthetise your injuries in sleep?
You *deserve* these goads! Don't they bite home?
To anyone of wisdom, aren't they spurs?

Exhale on him your blood-breathed vengeance-wind;
drain him dry with your burning from within;
hunt him, scorch him to husk-parched shrivelling.

The GHOST disappears. A silence. Then the first of the FURIES stirs, turns to the FURY next to her, and shakes her by the arm.

FIRST FURY

Wake her, wake her, wake her, as I wake you. 140
Sleeping? Now arise, kick slumber off!
We dreamt. It's time to see if we dreamt true.

*All three FURIES are now awake. With horror they notice the empty altar. More and more FURIES seethe and surge onto the stage, swarming and circling around the altar until all twelve are present. As they come their soft but deadly chant begins again—“**Catch him** catch him catch him catch him *shout it*”. This chant in the background gives the underlying beat to the choral ode that they now begin. This ode marks an important transition; at its beginning the FURIES are still, to the audience, mere horrors; by its end the audience should begin to be able to see how, for all their grotesqueness, the FURIES' case is a real and urgent practical demand, the demand of requiting justice.*

FURIES

O pain O pain O pain my friends I've ached *strophe 1*
 my aching O my aching all to waste
 it cuts us through, our agony within
 intolerable the suffering we are in
for he is gone: our just prey has escaped
 sleep has destroyed us, drowsiness has raped

raped, Apollo, Zeus's thieving son *antistrophe 1*
 you ride all night right through us till you're done 150
 What *do* you respect? The supplicating hands
 of this parent-curse of a godless reckless man
 So a mother-slaughterer stows away with you
You're a god? Yet you're shafting Justice too?

I dreamt I was shamed. I dreamt of sour disgrace, *strophe 2*
 shame like a spur-goad finding the sorest place,
 a spike-point driven under the ribs and up;
 like the white chill of the public hangman's whip 160
 heavier and heavier on those he flays.

But this is how they act, this new god-breed. *antistrophe 2*
This is how they rule, their power-greed
 driving them beyond all justice due.
 The Delphic seat is blood-drenched, through and through;
 from the navel of the world, miasma bleeds.

Prophet Apollo has foulèd his own throne *strophe 3*
 The impetus? The call to it? His own 170
 Honouring men above the ancient law
 Despising every fate that ruled before

Despising *us!* Yet he won't get him off *antistrophe 3*
 not even if he flees under the earth.
 W here d'you run next, when hell is where you've fled?
 How escape Hades, with Hades' dark hand on your head?

There is a loud crack as of a whip. At once the FURIES are silenced. In a harsh white flash of dazzling light APOLLO appears and addresses the FIRST FURY.

APOLLO
 I order you, *out*. Get out of my temple *now*.
 Leave your defilement, your siege of my sanctuary! 180
 Or you will feel the snake-bite from my bow,
 the gold-strung sting that glitters through the air,
 that makes you throw back up the human blood,
 the clots of death, you have lapped from your victims' wounds.
You have no place within miles of my hall.
 Your place is as spectators of beheadings,
 of eyes gouged out; in the audience as fresh eunuchs
 watch their sons writhe as they are castrated too;

justice, for you, means hands and feet lopped off,
means death by stoning, and the long slow scream
that a man makes when impalement splits his spine.
Do you not know how the gods spit on your feasts?
Everything about you breathes disgust!
The blood-stinking den of a lion drunk on gore:
you belong there, not rubbing your filthy taint
off on those come to worship at my shrine.
Get out of here, you rabble of herdless goats.
You think any god will look on you—and *dote*?

190

CHORUS

So much for your speech, Lord Apollo. Now hear ours.
For your temple's fouling, you are not *partly* to blame.
The blame is *all* yours—and that means, none of ours.

200

APOLLO

Explain what you've said. Say that one thing, and no other.

CHORUS

Whose oracle was it told *him* to murder his mother?

APOLLO

To kill her to avenge his father! Yes, I did. *And?*

CHORUS

And then you received him? Her blood still wet on his hands?

APOLLO

I told him to come here to Delphi—to be safe in my grace.

CHORUS

You told a murderer *that*? Yet you blame *us* for giving him chase?

APOLLO

It's enough for my blame that you're here polluting this place.

CHORUS

But this is our role; the task we're assigned to do—

APOLLO

—Oh your *task*! Do say: what honours are decked on you?

CHORUS

We drive into exile those who destroy their mothers.

210

APOLLO

And what do you do with—a wife when she kills her lord?

CHORUS

Shed by his wife, a man's blood's not hers, but another's.

APOLLO

So Hera's vows, and Zeus', are just *ignored*?
They count for nothing, the marriage-bond of love,
the goddess Aphrodite, that bright source
of all most radiant in human life?
Rather, I'd say, well-fated unions
of man and woman, under Justice' sign,
outvalue every other oath that's sworn.
But you don't mind a husband-murdering wife?
You won't chase *her*, or look on her with wrath? 220
Then you are not to hunt Orestes down.
You judge Orestes with severity;
for Clytaemestra, you're all leniency.
The true verdict rests with Athene's equity.

FIRST FURY

We won't give up. We'll never give him peace.

APOLLO

Then give *yourselves* up—to vain toil with no release.

FURY

Your words won't steal honours given us long ago.

APOLLO

Steal? You think I want them? Thank you, no.

FURY

Your honours are known: your rank is next to Zeus'.
My task's to hound and follow this mortal man: 230
I do it to avenge his mother's blood.

APOLLO

And mine's to uphold and shield him from ill use.
Knowing betrayal of a suppliant
brings terrible wrath on a mortal—or a god.

Blackout, in which the CHORUS and APOLLO disappear. When the lights return the scene has changed: we are before Athene's temple at Athens. ORESTES kneels in prayer, facing towards the temple, in front of which is a tall and beautiful statue of the goddess.

ORESTES

Athene, at Apollo's voice
I come to you. What's brought me here's
no sanctuary-quest for polluted course,
no suppliant's accusing fears;
yet those I have fled, as guest, from host to host,
drive me from land to sea, from sea to coast. 240

No, it's just begun—
we're not done when you're drained
to the depths you must come
where there's more to be paid
in the drift-mobs of hell
among those who offend
against the dooms the gods spell
against guest's rights or friend's. 270
Come to Hades, who judges
all men of all kinds;
for all you've done's written
in the wax of his mind.

ORESTES

No wisdom without troubles.² Mine have taught me
when to speak, and when to hold my tongue.
And in my present case, an expert master
tells me that the time has come to speak.

The stain is fading, drying from my hand. 280
Time of pollution from my mother's death
is at an end. Pig's blood's been dripped on me;
at Apollo's hearth I've been cleansed by sacrifice.
Strangers now when they encounter me—
again and again—when they meet me, meet no harm.
My words are well-omened now. From purified lips
I call on Athene, mistress of this land,
to haste to help me. Thereby she will gain,
by my consent, myself, my land, my folk: 290
Argos, a faithful ally made for ever.

To Athene, then, wherever she may be—
whether she is far off, on Egypt's soil,
by the Libyan river Triton of her birth,
or whether in her battles for her friends
she is now on the charge, or stands at bay,
perhaps in survey of the battlefield
as if she were a bold man in command—
wherever she may be, I call her near
so as to aid me; called, my goddess hears.

CHORUS

No god-strength of Athene or Apollo 300
can save you from the path that you must tread:
the path of the outcast, lost among the dead,
with not the least light of *happiness* in his brains:
the path of the man whose spirits our sucking drains;
the path of the man whom we empty until he's a shadow.

² *Agamemnon* 177.

ORESTES is silent.

Have you no answer, Orestes? Are you *afraid*—
you who are vowed to our altar and to our teeth?
Yet not to be *knifed* on that altar: we'll eat you alive.
And here is the song that will chain you, the spell that will bind.

Touch hands for the death-dance
the music men hate
strut it before humans
show them how their fates
are dealt out to them by our gang. 310

We say we deal rightly
whoever is just
whose hands are unblemished
is untouched by us
he lives on in peace all life long.

But this man who is guilty
who hides his hands' red
we witness against him
we appear for the dead
death-sentence on him is our song. 320

O Night our Queen, O Night who gave us birth,
to afflict both live and dead you brought us forth:
hear us! For Apollo—scoundrel-god—
serves us the worst dishonour we have had:
he steals our prey, the victim rightfully dead
because of the mother's blood that he has shed. *strophe 1*

Hear our chant above our victim's frame. *ephymnion 1*
Our song is frenzy out of reach of shame,³
our song will bear him off and blight his mind: 330
the Furies' tuneless terror-dirge will bind
whatever withered life it overcame.

Our overpowering sharp unchosen Fate *antistrophe 1*
locks us into the web of our changeless state:
when their fortune puts in mortals' hands the knife
by which they rob their own kindred of their life—
we hunt him down. We hunt him till he's dead:
but not free, even then, of the blood he's shed. 340

Hear our chant above our victim's frame. *ephymnion 1*
Our song is frenzy out of reach of shame,

³ Ag. 223.

our song will bear him off and blight his mind:
the Furies' tuneless terror-dirge will bind
whatever withered life it overcame.

From our beginning such has been our fate.
And we touch no hands with the deities in their state;
no one who lives with them, also shares our life.
Pure white dignity of heaven, above all strife—
for that we are unmade, unfit, unbred:
our life's the darkness of the walking dead.

strophe 2
350

For the way we have chosen
means families' downfall
when war-violence seizes
and fissures the clan-hall:
thus with this strong felon
we weigh down his head
we sap him pursuing
the blood that he's shed.

ephymnion 2

So we will have this care, by right of birth.
What is it to the Olympians? Nothing worth:
not to be brought to their windy trials of word,
no case for their thin-air court to hear preferred.
Nor will Zeus admit us—we bloodstained wards of the dead—
to his rationalist salon, where he now reclines at its head.

antistrophe 2 360

And the glories of men
once splendour-lit by the sun
sink into earth's darkness
by our darkness and earth's undone
defamed and accursed
by envy's corrupting breath
dishonoured and lost
destroyed by our dance of death.

strophe 3

370

For our dance is a leap
a tripping a trap
when the light foot descends
then the heavy jaws snap
the runaway's caught
no matter how fast
we move swifter than thought
he is ruined and lost

ephymnion 3

Lost ruined and gone
so lost he can't see it
all his wits are undone
no sense even to flee it
and the air tainted foul

antistrophe 3

hanging thick with his shame
all the winds of grief howl
the black clouds on his name.

380

His curse is not gone. And we—we never give up;
we will see the pursuit of him through, right through to the end.
We tally men's crimes and all their injustices up;
we send back unopened the pleadings for mercy they send.
Unhonoured—*dishonoured*—we play out the part the Fates give:
exiles from Olympus who move in no heavenly light,
harsh stumbling-rocks in the jolt-stone road of The Right
jarring the feet of the dead and of those alive.

strophe 4

Such is our office. And they—do they not fear,
are they not struck by awe, these mortal men?
When we speak dooms, it is the gods' will they hear,
destinies to be traced out to their end.
Our ancient role's not gone; in that at least—
in following it out—we find respect,
even though we dwell with the sunless unelect
of the underworld whose darkness cannot cease.

antistrophe 4
390

ATHENE appears in the air, dressed for battle.

ATHENE

I come from afar, in response to a prayer for help.
I was abroad; I was fighting at Sigeion;⁴
I was taking possession of the Trojan land
allotted to me by the leaders of the Greeks:
my prize, my spoil, won by the work of spears,
to be mine alone, absolutely and for ever,
unendingly bequeathed through Theseus' line.

400

From there I have made my untiring unfaltering way;⁵
the waft of my aegis, my storm-coat, serves me as wings.
What creatures, what crew, do I see crawling over my land?
A goddess can know no fear; but you shock my eyes.
Just one question I ask of all: what *are* you?
That question too to the suppliant clasping my stone—
but mostly to you, misbegottens and unknowns,
creatures no god would expect among the goddesses,
creatures no man would expect among feminine forms.
—But let harsh words wait till I know that I have cause.
To abuse on chance meeting falls not within Justice' laws.

410

⁴ There seems a clear reference here (the Greek is *apo Skamandrou*, "from the river Scamander") to Athens' capture of the fort of Sigeion, near the site of Troy, from the Persians in 465 BC. The succeeding lines are clearly intended to emphasise Athens' role in the Trojan War itself, which in Homer had been notoriously small.

⁵ Athene's *language* does not particularly recall Clytemnestra's beacon speech (*Ag.*281 ff.). But Athene's *claim*—that she has just this moment arrived, by supernaturally swift flight, from a Greek fortress in the Trojan littoral—surely does.

CHORUS

Daughter of Zeus, we'll explain what you need to hear.
We are the immortal daughters of Night;
they call us The Curses in Hades, and they fear.

ATHENE

So this is your clan, and the names you are called aright.

CHORUS

Then next let us tell you our privileges and our task.

ATHENE

That you should explain them clearly is all I ask. 420

CHORUS

This is our task: chasing murderers from their homes.

ATHENE

The one that you chase, then: how far is he bound to roam?

CHORUS

As far as Hades, where happiness is unknown.

ATHENE

And you plan to drive Orestes to such a flight?

CHORUS

Why not, when he thinks that killing his mother is right?

ATHENE

Didn't he do this in fear of the wrath of another?

CHORUS

What fear should outweigh the fear of killing his mother?

ATHENE

There are two sides to this, and I've heard from one, but not both.

CHORUS

And what *can* he tell you? When he won't deny it on oath?

ATHENE

You like to *sound* just. Yet justly is not how you *act*. 430

CHORUS

Well if you're such an expert, why don't *you* teach us the facts?

ATHENE

What I teach is: Don't trust in oaths that are taken unduly.

CHORUS

Then question him yourself! But judge him truly.

ATHENE

So you will allow me to see through the rest of this case?

CHORUS

Why not? We'll trust you, since you have looked us in the face.

ATHENE

turning to ORESTES

Your turn, stranger-guest. So how do you answer their charge?

Begin with your land, your family, and—what's happened.

When we know that, then explain to us your defence.

It seems you are here by my image, at my hearth, 440

trusting to Justice to save you as suppliant;

as Ixion did before, but did not prove true.⁶

To answer these charges, let's hear something credible from you.

ORESTES

Athene, my first words address your last.

For first I will remove one grave concern:

I am no tainted suppliant needing cleansing.

These hands that grasp your image aren't impure.

I have strong proof of this, and I will speak it.

The law for a killer is silence absolute

until some priest empowered to purify

has sprinkled him with the blood of a new-born pig. 450

But I, elsewhere, have been purified like this

long since, and washed that blood off in the stream.

Thus I now speak, and set that bar aside.

So now let me tell you at once what my family is.

I am of Argos. My father you know well,

Agamemnon, admiral of the Greeks:

it was with him you untowned the town of Troy.

But Agamemnon did not die in honour:

when he came home my mother's hell-black mind

contrived his murder, blindfolded in silks 460

whose sea-rich purples witnessed his last bath.

I was in exile when he died; when I came back

I killed my mother—I do not deny it:

her blood for my beloved father's blood.

But in this deed my partner was Apollo,

who foretold pain that stabs within the heart

if I did nothing to my father's killers.

⁶ *Eumenides* 718.

To judge this just or not: that is for you.
Whichever way you judge, you will judge true.

ATHENE

One mortal judge could never settle this—
if any dared. Nor even I have rights
to adjudicate where the murder-Fury comes.
You come, moreover, as my suppliant,
purified, cleansed, unharmful to my house,
no bane upon my city; so I must
put my protection over you, not judge.

470

And yet these Furies can't just be *dismissed*.
For if their pleas do not win them the case,
the after-poison of their slow vindictiveness
will fall into the soil, enplague the land.

Such then is my dilemma. Either course—
drive them off or allow them to remain—
brings troubles I can't see how to avert.
But since the crisis comes to testing here,
here it is that I'll swear jurors in,
here in Attica will found my court for ever.

480

So you, you Furies, bring your case on here;
call witnesses and arguments to your aid,
evidence that will support your plea;
and I'll return when I have found the best
within my Athens to be jurors here.
They will swear an oath to hear this duly;
and I will swear that they will judge it truly.

Exit ATHENE.

*During the last section of ATHENE's speech the CHORUS have been muttering louder and louder. When she leaves their complaints rise in a crescendo to a shout of anger, and their chant "Catch him catch him catch him catch him **shout it**" breaks out again. It forms the rhythmic background to the ensuing choral ode: which begins as a shout of rage against the new gods of Olympus, but modulates into something quite different.*

CHORUS

This is their downfall
Olympus will crash
their new laws stand broken
their credit be smashed
if he gets away
if he gets away with this

strophe 1
490

He **butchered his mother**.
And you let him be?

Now every murderer's
watching with glee
Now every mortal
thinks "None can touch *me*"
Now every son-rebel who
kills goes scot free
if he gets away
if he gets away with this

And we will stand idle
our just wrath will sleep
no us to enforce them
means no laws to keep
if he gets away
if he gets away with this

antistrophe 1
500

And *if* we do nothing
then all die for sure
for it's our purging murders
keeps men sane and pure
See your neighbour go down
and you'll search for a cure
every place you can think of—
but cures are no more
if he gets away
if he gets away with this

And don't cry to us
when fate makes you groan
call out "It's not just!"
appeal to our throne
if he gets away with this

strophe 2

510

When a father or mother
sees old suffering renew
our court is now risen
we cannot help you
if he gets away
if he gets away with this

There's a right time for fear⁷
but will that guard remain,
will men still know how to
learn wisdom from pain
if he gets away with this?

antistrophe 2
520

Is there a city
is there a man

⁷ *Eumenides* 699.

who won't defy justice
if this fellow can
if he gets away
if he gets away with this?

We should not live in anarchy
nor creep in a tyrant's gaze.
God's prize goes to moderacy,
though worked in different ways
in different human lives.
I give you apt advice:
what comes forth from impiety
's disastrous over-reach; but days
of the happy life that men have always sought
—these spring from god-fearing minds and reverent thought.

strophe 3

530

But you, for all futurity,
should bow at Justice' throne.
Don't idolise prosperity
and trample Justice down
in the dishonouring mud;
for vengeance also is a god,
and vengeance with finality
will always track you down.
God-filled awe for your parents—that is best,
and due reverence for the god-sent trusting guest.

antistrophe 3

540

That they meet Justice no one can avoid,
though all choose whether they meet it forced or free.
Who welcomes the just won't live unhappily,
who waits on Justice will not be destroyed.
The daring rebel, though—hold full of loot,
his life's ship loaded down with stolen toys—
must run before the wind that blows his joys
aloft, away, astray like burned-up soot,
must watch the avenging wind explode his sail,
just calamity break his mast; must watch all fail.⁸

strophe 4 550

The sinking rebel cries but cries unheard,
unrescued from the snake-strong strangling waves.
The gods not weep but grin. They do not save
this hot, this restless-boastful, this absurd,
this man so sure his doom-star could not rise.
Quickly exhausted, he half-fights, half-floats,
the sea that just swallowed his ship all splintered motes,
smashed on the reef of Justice. So he dies;
so sky and sea cry *Justice*; that cry rings
the vault of heaven and the depth of things.

antistrophe 4

560

⁸ *Agamemnon* 1005-13.

During the fourth strophe and antistrophe, the stage has been gradually filling up with a herald, a jury, officials of the court, and a courtroom audience, who are taking their places in what would have been immediately recognisable to Aeschylus' audience as the order of an Athenian criminal court; ORESTES has moved too, to the dock.

When the CHORUS have finished their ode, while the courtroom is still arranging itself, enter ATHENE.

ATHENE

Herald, speak the word to silence all.

Now let the Tuscan trumpet fill with breath,
and shrilly fanfare silence to the host.

We're waiting for this hall of deliberation

570

to find its order. So let silence fall,
that men may learn my order and my rule—
that my way be learned for all time in this place,
that it bring good judgement in this present case.

The HERALD is about to comply when APOLLO enters, and all fall silent anyway.

ATHENE

Apollo, here authority is your due.

But tell us—what concern is this case to you?

APOLLO

I appear as a witness in it; for by law
this man is my suppliant and guest-friend,
whom by law I have ritually cleansed of killing.

I also appear as his advocate; for the blame
for his mother's death is mine. So bring the cause,
and judge it well by the wisdom that is yours.

580

ATHENE

To the FURIES

I bring the cause; it's for you to speak in it.

Let the prosecutor rise first, and make clear
what is the charge on which he seeks judgement here.

CHORUS

To ATHENE

We may be many, but yet we will speak with one voice.

To ORESTES

You answer our questions, then, one after another.

The first thing to tell us is this. Did you kill your mother?

ORESTES

Yes, I did kill her. I don't deny it at all.

CHORUS

We win if we throw you thrice. Well, there's your first fall.

ORESTES

You're crowing already? So far you've not thrown me at all.

590

CHORUS

Next say *how* you killed her; and let the jury take note.

ORESTES

Yes; let them know that this sword-hand here severed her throat.

CHORUS

By whose order was this? Whose command could this possibly follow?

ORESTES

By the word of the one who will witness the deed: by Apollo.

CHORUS

You dare to claim that a *god* told you: "Slaughter your mother"?

ORESTES

His order; my fate. Up till now I would not choose another.

CHORUS

You'll soon change your mind when the jury's vote seals your doom.

ORESTES

I'm not afraid. And my father will help from his tomb.

CHORUS

You call on your father? When you have just murdered your mother?

ORESTES

I call on him, yes; for she was polluted twice over.

600

CHORUS

You think the jury have any idea what you mean?

ORESTES

Unclean once for her husband; and again for my father, unclean.

CHORUS

And her death paid for her. But you are alive—still to pay.

ORESTES

And you left *her* alone! It was *me* you drove exiled away!

CHORUS

It's the blood-tie we honour. There's none between husband and wife.

ORESTES

And a mother and child: they *are* one in blood and in life?

CHORUS

You murderer, yes. How else could her body breed you?
Will you deny her to whom closest of kinship-love's due?

ORESTES

Apollo, speak as my witness now, and make clear
whether for killing her I stand convicted here. 610
I do not deny that I did the deed, as has been seen.
But whether, for killing her, I now stand clean or unclean—
that is for you to judge, and for me to plead.

APOLLO

I'll judge. I'll say this: that you are clean of this deed.
That is my judgement, you jurymen, in this court,
Athene's great court; and a prophet like me does not lie.
Every word handed down from my prophecy-throne,
about women or men, about cities—
every word of mine has come straight from Olympian Zeus.
Understand what power this justification has.
Hear my father's decision, and obey.
To Zeus himself, even jury-oaths give way. 620

CHORUS

Zeus, you say, through his oracle gave the order
to this Orestes, to avenge his father—
and to take no thought for the honour of his mother?

APOLLO

Yes. For it's different, the death of a noble man—
the death of one Zeus-sceptred and war-throned—
his death at the hands of a woman, not in war,
not fairly shot down by an Amazon-bow from afar—
his death by the means I'll explain to the jury here,
your jury, Athene, who rule this by their vote-stones. 630

Agamemnon came home victorious from his war,
his war where all was done well, or mostly well.
Clytaemestra—with kind words she took him in,
led him to his bath; then at the end
ensnared him with her coil of ill-rich cloth,
trapped in its tent, and ran him helpless through.

Such was the death of the general all adored,
the fate of the supreme overlord of the fleet.
And such was the woman who killed him. Let the court
appointed to judge this, know her from my report!

CHORUS

You make Zeus sound like he cares about fathers' deaths. 640

Would that be the Zeus who chained up his father, Cronos?
How do you square what you say with what Zeus does?

To the JURY

If you are true judges, make sure you note down *this*.

APOLLO

You loathsome subhumans, detestable to the gods,
chains can be loosed, imprisonments can end—
and Zeus can end them any way he likes.
But once a man's blood's been sucked into the earth,
he dies, and there can be no resurrection.⁹
No magic my father's made will bring him back.
Zeus orders all things, as effortless as a breath;
yet in all Zeus' world you will find no cure for death.

650

CHORUS

"No cure for death": and yet you're defending *him*?
This man who has splashed all his mother's blood on the earth—
you think he can lodge now within his father's gates?¹⁰
And in the whole city, what altar could be his?
What guild could purify one who's done *this*?

APOLLO

I'll explain this too; you mark how rightly I speak.
To what we call *her* child, the natural mother
is no true parent, but a fosterer.
The parent is the one who plants it there,
the male who spurts his seed within her womb;
all *she* does, like a host who feeds a guest,
is grow his seedling in her—if god wills.
This is my case; and I can show a proof.
There can be fathers even without mothers:
that much is proved right here, by Athene,
whose father's Zeus, and *no one* is her mother.
Is she a child a womb could have brought forth?

660

Turning to ATHENE.

In this and all things, Pallas, I know how
to bring your city and your tribe renown.
I sent Orestes as your suppliant here
so you might see his loyalty. Year by year
may he and his descendants, once thus gained,
persist your allies, and your friends remain;
may this bond be inherited through the strain!

670

ATHENE

Has all been spoken now for the jurors to note?

⁹ *Choephoroi* 48, *Agamemnon* 1019.

¹⁰ *Choephoroi* 909.

Should they be told to consider their verdicts and vote?

CHORUS

For our part, we have said what we need to say;
we only wait to see who will win the day.

ATHENE

Wait, then. *To APOLLO and ORESTES.* And you: are you satisfied to proceed?

APOLLO

To the JURY.

You have heard what you've heard; so now, take heed
of your jury oath; vote, and vote the true way.

680

The JURY rise and prepare to vote.

ATHENE

Now for the first time, people of Attica,
judge a murder-case; and hear my words.
For ever from this time for Aegeus' children
this court will sit for justice to be heard,
on Ares' Hill, this Areopagus,
where Theseus defeated the warrior-women
who came to Athens full of their grudge against him,
who built new fort on fort and tower on tower;
who sacrificed here to Ares—hence its name.
So in this place will reverence for the law
and kindred fear of doing injustices
restrain the people of Athens, day and night;
provided they themselves do not pollute
with evil influence their justice-code.
Would you quench your thirst in Justice' healing stream?
Then do not foul it; keep it flowing clean.

690

For these my people, my advised policy
is neither ruleless freedom, nor yet tyranny.
There is a right place for fear in the good city;¹¹
mortals are unjust through their audacity.
But to live in awe of just authority—
that is my country's ward, city's security;
no safety like it anywhere in humanity,
not among far barbarians, not in Arcady.
So I have founded for them this judiciary,
incorruptible, reverend, severe,
their unsleeping guard when all else drowns here.

700

So I speak long to my citizens, and advise
with words that will serve them for ever. But now you must rise:

¹¹ *Eumenides* 519.

remember your vow, take hold of one vote-stone each,
and settle this case with your verdict. So ends my speech.

710

The JURY rise from their seats and vote one by one during the exchange that follows. As the background to it we hear again—for the last time—the FURIES’ chant “Catch him catch him catch him catch him shout it”, in a slow-building crescendo.

CHORUS

Well, *my* advice to you is: Do not grieve
us Furies, who can load your land with pain.

APOLLO

While what I tell you, jurors, is: Believe
the words that Zeus and I spoke, *not* in vain.

CHORUS

To APOLLO

Blood-crimes fall not to you! You flatter them,
and so discredit all your prophecy.

APOLLO

So was Zeus Father’s kindness to false Ixion,¹²
first of murderers, *flattering* clemency?

CHORUS

So goes your talk. But we, if we lose this case—
the wrath of the Furies will weigh down this land again.

720

APOLLO

You’ll lose; for none of the elder gods loves your faces,
none of us younger gods either. You’ll lose; I’ll win.

CHORUS

You act against nature here as you did for Admetus,
tricked the Fates into setting him free from his natural death.

APOLLO

Should we gods not help when suppliants plead and entreat us?
Is it not justice to take up the just prayer’s breath?

CHORUS

You’re a low trickster, destroyer of all that’s divine!
The majestic Fates—and you lull them and gull them with wine!

APOLLO

¹² *Eumenides* 441. As Sommerstein points out *ad loc*, Ixion is an example of a murderer who was pardoned, and abused the pardon; so one might expect the Furies to retort that the right answer to Apollo’s question is that Zeus *was* too soft on Ixion. Why don’t they make this retort? My translation is designed to suggest the answer “Because they dare not risk the *hybris* of calling Zeus himself ‘too soft’, or ‘a flatterer’”; while Apollo’s point here is to argue, *a fortiori*, that if Zeus was right to pardon Ixion, then he is right to pardon Orestes.

And you are a loser in court, or will be by and by.
Spit your venom out then, and see if your enemies die.

730

CHORUS

You young deity, you arrogant Apollo,
spurring your horse wit over me, old and fallow;
but I wait, my wrath waits, to find out what verdict will follow.

During these exchanges the eleven JURORS have voted, one vote per speech. The FURIES' chant has become a loud shout during this last speech, but now dies away to a quiet background, barely audible.

ATHENE

And now my turn—to cast the final vote.
My vote will go to Orestes, for acquittal.
There was no mother who brought me to birth;
I take the male side in everything,
excepting marriage; I'm my father's child.
And so I will not give the precedence
to the death of a wife over the man she killed,
the lord and overseer of the house.
And if the votes are equal, Orestes wins.

740

She votes.

That's all; the voting's done. Now, tellers, turn
the votes they've cast here out of the voting urns.

The FURIES' chanting increases in volume again.

ORESTES

O Apollo my god, what will the verdict be?

CHORUS

O Night our mother goddess, do you see?

ORESTES

One way brings me death and dishonour; the other the light.

CHORUS

The choices for us are ruin, and retaining our rights.

APOLLO

Count the votes now, strangers, and with care;
of fraud or miscounted division, let all beware.
No good can come of right judgement going astray;
a single right vote can restore a whole dynasty's sway.

750

The verdict is brought by the foreman of the JURY to ATHENE. The FURIES' chant ceases completely.

ATHENE

Six votes for guilt and six for innocence.
A tie means the verdict goes to Orestes' defence!

ORESTES

Falling to his knees

Athene, you're the saviour of my house!
Athene, I was banished from my home,
banished my fatherland: you've brought me back.
So now the Greeks will call me Argive again,
see me anew as Agamemnon's heir—
restored as I am by Apollo and Athene,
restored, above all, by all-ordaining Zeus:
by Zeus who's taken pity on my father, 760
redeeming me though face to face with Furies.

What's left for me is just my journey home.
But first I swear this oath to last for ever,
my oath to Athene's people and her land,
my oath of alliance: that there'll never come
into Attica the well-made lance of Argos,
nor into Athens the generals of our host.
For if they dare, I will vex them from the grave;
those who break my oath I'll haunt with failure.
There'll be miracles of blundering and miscarry,
their marches wretched vulture-circled trudges, 770
their war-effort a weariness to themselves.
But if they go the right way, honouring
this Athens with a loving ally's spear—
then still will King Orestes hold them dear.

Farewell, Athene; and Athenians!

He bows to the audience.

In every bout you fight, may you find¹³ the hold
that brings your enemy down—and you the gold.

Exit ORESTES.

CHORUS

O you young deities, Athenes and Apollos,
spurring your horse over laws that time has hallowed,
reducing us and our rule to impotent shadows!

And I dishonoured, shunned by native and stranger, 780
will drip into this land my foretold anger,
poison it with my spite, my back-bite canker;

with a creeping mould leaves crops and children withered,

¹³ Reading ἔχοις with the codices.

ruin of men across the kingdom scattered,
the justice of gods against human crimes embittered.

I groan aloud. What now? What follows after?
Loud in my ears I hear the citizens' laughter: 790
not to be borne, what I bear and what I suffer.

This is our ill fortune, our fortune of horror:
Thus we, divine Night's goddess-daughters, are dishonoured.

ATHENE

Hear my words: do not bewail and howl.
You haven't lost. The vote came out a tie;
the count was fair; you have not been dishonoured.
Here lightning has come straight from Olympian Zeus.
Himself the witness, his the prophecy:
it's Zeus who says that Orestes should go unpunished. 800
So quench your rage, and do not drip your anger
over Attica's land to leave it barren,
poisoned with goddess-spite, with seed-death canker.
For I myself will undertake my oath
this city will give you a home beneath its earth,
with shining thrones, with your altars close at hand:
there you will have every honour from all my land.

CHORUS

O you young deities, Athenes and Apollos,
spurring your horse over laws that time has hallowed,
reducing us and our rule to impotent shadows!

And I dishonoured, shunned by native and stranger, 810
will drip into this land my foretold anger,
poison it with my spite, my back-bite canker;

with a creeping mould leaves crops and children withered,
ruin of men across the kingdom scattered,
the justice of gods against human crimes embittered.

I groan aloud. What now? What follows after?
Loud in my ears I hear the citizens' laughter: 820
not to be borne, what I bear and what I suffer.

This is our ill fortune, our fortune of horror:
Thus we, divine Night's goddess-daughters, are dishonoured.

ATHENE

Dishonoured you are not. But gods you are;
so do not turn excessive rage on mortals,
poisoning their land with your black spell.
For me, I'll only say: I trust in Zeus,

and he entrusts to me alone the knowledge
that unlocks the chamber of his thunderbolt.
Which I won't need, if you will be persuaded
not to loose vain speech against this land, 830
empty words about spoiling harvest-yields.
Lull back to sleep that black wave's bitter swell.
You're holy, honoured here; and you're my guest.
When all the first-fruits that great Athens offers
are yours whenever its women breed or wed,
you'll remember, and be glad at what I've said.

CHORUS

That I have to undergo this *strophe 2*
I the wisdom of old
live where speaking is all hatred's hiss
where my tale, my desert, is untold
Every breath I breathe's swollen with anger, 840
black bitter sharp pain in my guts
mother Night, swindling gods leave me stranded
stretch the honours I'm owed in the dust

ATHENE

I'll bear with your wrath for you; for you are old,
and age has made you wiser than I am,
even though I too have Zeus's gracious gift. 850
But this I'll foretell, if you Furies leave
and make some other realm your dwelling-place—
that those who leave Athens long for her like lost lovers.
For with the flow of time this town will grow
ever greater in glory; an all-glorious seat
within it will be yours by Erechtheus' house,
where citizens male and female bring to you
glories you'd be given nowhere else.
[So do not shed your venom, civic violence,
upon these places that are dear to me; 860
don't madden them with wineless drunkenness,
don't lend my citizens the heart that crows
and pecks and leaps and slashes even kin,
the Ares who makes dunghills of his clan.
There can be war, but it must not be within;
lovers of glory, fight for it abroad—
it isn't civil-war cockerels I intend.]¹⁴

This is the option I now offer you:
to act as kindly as Athens acts to you:
to bless us, and be honoured at our hands;
to share in this most god-blessed of all lands.

¹⁴ These lines seem an interpolation, or at the least a last-minute addition to the text reflecting a political crisis.

The FURIES pause—but then mechanically begin again their complaints, though more hesitantly and with less conviction.

CHORUS

That I have to undergo this *antistrophe 2*
I the wisdom of old 870
live where speaking is all hatred's hiss
where my tale, my desert, is untold
Every breath I breathe's swollen with anger,
black bitter sharp pain in my guts
mother Night, swindling gods leave me stranded
drag the honours I'm owed through the dust 880

ATHENE (*patiently*)

You cannot weary me of telling you
how I, a younger god, offer you good gifts.
I won't have you complaining of dishonour,
of my citizens' slighting of your reverend age.
If *you* have any reverence for persuasion,
for the honey-charm enchantment of my tongue,
then you will stay. Or if you are unwilling,
go—but lose your right to loose your wrath,
your spite, or any harm upon this land.
By leaving, here's the chance that you turn down: 890
a permanent home and honour in this town.

A pause.

CHORUS

Lady Athene: what home are you offering me?

ATHENE

One to free you from all of your troubles—that is itself free.

CHORUS

And if I accept it—what privileges then will I have?

ATHENE

Every house here does well or does ill: just as you give.

CHORUS

You would do that? You would risk giving us such a right?

ATHENE

If they honour the Furies—I'll set their fortunes aright.

CHORUS

And this will be ours—for the whole span of future before us?

ATHENE

Yes. I don't promise what I cannot match in performance.

CHORUS

I feel your spell now; my anger begins to abate. 900

ATHENE

And so you'll remain? And acquire both friends and a state?

CHORUS

What then are the blessings that I should invoke on this land?

ATHENE

The blessings that go with a triumph not niggard but grand;
the blessings that come from the earth and from the sea;
the blessings of heaven. And that the fair winds' breaths
should walk across this land with sunshine smile;
that flocks and the fruit of the earth should multiply
for all my people, dying no early deaths;
that family succession should not fail. 910
Be generous, too, in rewarding reverence:
for my care is like a gardener's, the defence
of all that grows grief-free through righteousness.
These are for you to grant; for my part, I
could not endure it if they were war-shy:
this must be a city at home with victory.

Another pause.

CHORUS

We will share Athene's hearth, *strophe 1*
we will honour with our voice
the Attic earth that is Zeus's earth
and rests on Ares' warrior-force.
This land is the surety of Greece's altars, high 920
delight of all the deities; so I
now pray with good will and I prophesy:
here all good luck, all happiness be found!
May the bright sun draw up flourishing from this ground!

ATHENE

Valuing my citizens' worth
is my reason and my cause
to call these great gods of the earth,
so hard to please, within our doors. 930
Their power touches all men's lives, and he
who irks them is struck down by an enmity
unknown, long-grudging, rising without sound
to crush the noisiest mortal into the ground.

CHORUS

And may their trees not be wind-cursed
(this blessing comes in my own voice)
with southern heat that blights buds' birth—
ward off such marring from this place.
All canker far from all their harvests be;
Pan nurse their herds to breed abundantly;
may Athenian wealth be what's banked in their ground,
may Athens' land be the fortune Athens has found.

antistrophe 1

940

ATHENE

Watchtower of my city, hear—
do you hear?—what these prayers bring,
what authority a queen-Fury wears
with men on earth and heavenly kings?
So what the Furies pray, in all eyes' sight
they will fulfil with sure and certain might:
some eyes will see joyous days and triumph's crown,
some eyes not see at all for the tears blur down.

950

CHORUS

My prayers fend off the deaths that come too young;
they hasten, for young girls, their wedding hour,
make longed-for marriages blossom—by the power
that our goddess-sisters have to seal this done:
the just-dealing Fates whose mother and ours is Night,
the just-dealing Fates who share in every clan;
whose weight presses down on every brow of man,
whose presence in every household is as of right,
who are honoured with every honour that humans can.

strophe 2

960

ATHENE

I watch and rejoice as these things are done for my land;
I watch and give thanks for Persuasion's oversight,
her gaze that keeps my tongue and tact aright
as long as wild ill-will won't understand.
Our victory is for Zeus of the skilled speech:
the victory of both, since well for each.

970

CHORUS

My prayers ward off the storms of civil strife;
never, here, may the greedy undertow
of party hate drown their public life in woe;
never their dust soak dark with their citizens' life.
Nor let them trade in revenge as in their sweet right,
rejoice when they fell their opponents, because they can,
unconcerned if, to bring down their foe, they bring down their land;
instead let them trade in the favours of friendship's delight,
in the oneness of all men that's healing for each one man.

antistrophe 2

980

ATHENE

The Furies on kind speaking's path? Do I understand?
Do these bitter faces, till now such a terrible sight, 990
now look on my people with scowls turned to smiles of delight?
This can be for their good: if the citizens of this land
return kindness with kindness, honour them with high praise,
then my people will see how their own honour also is raised.

CHORUS

Addressing the audience

Be blessed, be happy, with the riches that are your fate; *strophe 3*
fare well indeed, you citizens of these groves,
you whose lives are lived at Zeus's own gate,
who are loved by the maiden-goddess whom Zeus loves,
you who have learned to be wise while it's not too late. 1000
Those who live under Athene's covering wing
are sacred even to Zeus the father king.

ATHENE

To the FURIES

And be blessed too! But let me go before,
and with me these attendants with their fires,
to lead you to the home that will be yours.
Come now, haste underground, and there inspired
to kindness by the offerings we pour,
stand strong against what ruins this our land,
stand strong for what puts victory in our hand.
You dwellers in this ancient city, be 1010
kind welcomers to your community
of these outlanders who now settle here;
let kindness answering kindness now appear.

CHORUS

Be blessed, be happy: hear me speak these words again! *antistrophe 3*
Fare well indeed, you inhabitants of this place,
you who live here, both daimon-spirits and men.
I settle as honoured outlander in your state:
My presence revered in Pallas Athene's city
will bring it a life others watch with awe, not pity. 1020

ATHENE

I praise you for these words that bless my town;
and now escort you, by these torches' light,
along the road that leads us underground.
My statue's guardians march too, as is right,
since we go to the heart of all Athens' ground.
Attica will clothe you royally;
the fire of votive offerings you will see;
so that these goddesses in friendliness 1030
will bless us with bold hearts and happiness.

The final choral ode is sung by the whole PROCESSION that has now formed.

PROCESSION

The gods have relieved your watch; you have all you ask.
Old children of Night, no children, leave your old task;
let us host you to your new home and role, and let
awe-filled silence now fall on the throng.

Let us host you, in kindly procession, to the cavern
where honours divine and sacrifice will be given,
the ancient stage where the play of your cult will be set.
Awe-filled silence be kept in the throng.

Come now in holiness, come now in love for our land,
Goddesses of Awe whom we welcome with fire in our hands,
Goddesses of Awe who delight in the cleansing of flame.
People of Athens, shout now to answer our song.

1040

Goddesses of Awe, outlanders who come bringing peace,
together with Zeus, the god-king whose eye sees all Greece,
you have brought us our destiny-day, which we now claim.
People of Athens, shout now to answer our song.

The end

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