

The Libation Bearers

Aeschylus



The Libation Bearers

Argument

NOW WHEN SHE had slain Agamemnon, Queen Clytaemestra with her lover Aegisthus ruled in the land of Argos. But the spirit of her murdered lord was worth and sent a baleful vision to distress her soul in sleep. She dreamed that she gave birth to a serpent and that she suckled it, as if it had been a babe; but together with the mother's milk the noxious thing drew clotted blood from out her breast. With a scream of horror she awoke, and when the seers of the house had interpreted the portent as a sign of the anger of the nether powers, she bade Electra, her daughter, and her serving-women bear libations to the tomb of Agamemnon, if haply she might placate his spirit.

Now Princess Electra dwelt in the palace, but was treated no better than a slave; but, before that Agamemnon was slain, her brother, Prince Orestes, had been sent to abide with his uncle Strophius in a far country, even in Phocis. There he had grown to youthful manhood, and on the selfsame day that his mother sought to avert the evil omen of her dream, accompanied by his cousin Pylades, he came to Argos seeking vengeance for his father's murder.

On the tomb of Agamemnon he places a lock of his hair, and when Electra discovers it, she is confident that it must be an offering to the dead made by none other than her brother. She has been recognized by him by reason of her mourning garb; but not until she has had further proof, by signs and tokens, will she be convinced that it is he in very truth.

Orestes makes known that he has been divinely commissioned to his purpose of vengeance. Lord Apollo himself has commanded him thereto with threats that, if he disobey, he shall be visited with assaults of the Erinyes of his father — banned from the habitations of men and the altars of the gods, he shall perish blasted in mind and body.

Grouped about the grave of their father, brother and sister, aided by the friendly Chorus, implore his ghostly assistance to their just cause. Orestes and Pylades, disguised as Phocian travellers, are given hospitable welcome by Clytaemestra, to whom it is reported that her son is dead. The Queen sends as

messenger Orestes' old nurse to summon Aegisthus from outside accompanied by his bodyguard. The Chorus persuades her to alter the message and bid him come unattended. His death is quickly followed by that of Clytaemestra, whose appeals for mercy are rejected by her son. Orestes, displaying the bloody robe in which his father had been entangled when struck down, proclaims the justice of his deed. But his wits begin to wander; the Erinyes of his mother, unseen by the others, appear before his disordered vision; he rushes from the scene.

[SCENE: THE TOMB A]

ORESTES: Hermes of the nether world, you who guard the powers that are your father's, prove yourself my savior and ally, I entreat you, now that I have come to this land and returned from exile. On this mounded grave I cry out to my father to hearken, to hear me. . . . [Look, I bring] a lock to Inachus in requital for his care, and here, a second, in token of my grief. For I was not present, father, to lament your death, nor did I stretch forth my hand to bear your corpse.

ORESTES: What is this I see? What is this throng of women that moves in state, marked by their sable cloaks? To what calamity should I set this down? Is it some new sorrow that befalls our house? Or am I right to suppose that for my father's sake they bear these libations to appease the powers below? It can only be for this cause: for indeed I think my own sister Electra is approaching, distinguished by her bitter grief. Oh grant me, Zeus, to avenge my father's death, and may you be my willing ally!

ORESTES: Pylades, let us stand apart, that I may know clearly what this band of suppliant women intends.

[
]

CHORUS: Sent forth from the palace I have come to convey libations to the sound of sharp blows of my hands. My cheek is marked with bloody gashes where my nails have cut fresh furrows. And yet through all my life my heart is fed with lamentation. Rips are torn by my griefs through the linen web of my garment, torn in the cloth that covers my breast, the cloth of robes struck for the sake of my mirthless misfortunes.

CHORUS: For with a hair-raising shriek, Terror, the diviner of dreams for our house, breathing wrath out of sleep, uttered a cry of terror in the dead of night from the heart of the palace, a cry that fell heavily on the women's quarter. And the readers of these dreams, bound under pledge, cried out from the god that those beneath the earth cast furious reproaches and rage against their murderers.

CHORUS: Intending to ward off evil with such a graceless grace, O mother Earth, she sends me forth, godless woman that she is. But I am afraid to utter the words she charged me to speak. For what atonement is there for blood fallen to earth? Ah, hearth of utter grief! Ah, house laid low in ruin! Sunless darkness, loathed by men, enshrouds our house due to the death of its master.

CHORUS: The awe of majesty once unconquered, unvanquished, irresistible in war, that penetrated the ears and heart of the people, is now cast off. But there is still fear. And prosperity — this, among mortals, is a god and more than a god. But the balance of Justice keeps watch: swiftly it descends on those in the light; sometimes pain waits for those who linger on the frontier of twilight; and others are claimed by strengthless night.

CHORUS: Because of blood drunk up by the fostering earth, the vengeful gore lies clotted and will not dissolve away. Soul-racking calamity distracts the guilty man till he is steeped in utter misery. But for the violator of a bridal chamber there is no cure. And though all streams flow in one course to cleanse the blood from a polluted hand, they rush in vain. For since the gods laid constraining doom about my city and led me from my father's house to a slave's lot, it is fitting for me to govern my bitter hate, even against my will, and submit to the wishes of my masters, whether just or unjust. But I weep beneath my veil over the senseless fate of my lord, my heart chilled by secret grief.

ELECTRA: You handmaidens who set our house in order, since you are here as my attendants in this rite of supplication, give me your counsel on this: what should I say while I pour these offerings of sorrow? How shall I find gracious words, how shall I entreat my father? Shall I say that I bring these offerings to a loved husband from a loving wife — from my own mother? I do not have the assurance for that, nor do I know what I should say as I pour this libation onto my father's tomb. Or shall I speak the words that men are

accustomed to use: "To those who send these honors may he return benefits" — a gift, indeed, to match their evil?

ELECTRA: Or, in silence and dishonor, even as my father perished, shall I pour them out for the earth to drink and then retrace my steps, like one who carries refuse away from a rite, hurling the vessel from me with averted eyes?

ELECTRA: In this, my friends, be my fellow-counsellors. For we cherish a common hatred within our house. Do not hide your counsel in your hearts in fear of anyone. For the portion of fate awaits both the free man and the man enslaved by another's hand. If you have a better course to urge, speak!

CHORUS: In reverence for your father's tomb, as if it were an altar, I will speak my thoughts from the heart, since you command me.

ELECTRA: Speak, even as you revere my father's grave.

CHORUS: While you pour, utter benedictions for loyal hearts.

ELECTRA: And to whom of those dear to me should I address them?

CHORUS: First to yourself, then to whoever hates Aegisthus.

ELECTRA: Then for myself and for you also shall I make this prayer?

CHORUS: That is for you, using your judgment, to consider now for yourself.

ELECTRA: Then whom else should I add to our company?

CHORUS: Remember Orestes, though he is still away from home.

ELECTRA: Well said! You have indeed admonished me thoughtfully.

CHORUS: For the guilty murderers now, mindful of —

ELECTRA: What should I say? Instruct my inexperience, prescribe the form.

CHORUS: Pray that some divinity or some mortal may come to them —

ELECTRA: As judge or as avenger, do you mean?

CHORUS: Say in plain speech, "One who will take life for life."

ELECTRA: And is it right for me to ask this of the gods?

CHORUS: How could it not be right to repay an enemy with ills?

ELECTRA: Supreme herald of the realm above and the realm below, O Hermes of the nether world, come to my aid, summon to me the spirits beneath the earth to hear my prayers, spirits that watch over my father's house, and Earth herself, who gives birth to all things, and having nurtured them receives their increase in turn. And meanwhile, as I pour these lustral offerings to the dead, I invoke my father: "Have pity both on me and on dear Orestes! How shall we rule our own house? For now we are bartered away like vagrants by her who bore us, by her who in exchange got as her mate Aegisthus, who was her accomplice in your murder. As for me, I am no better than a slave, Orestes is an outcast from his inheritance, while they in their insolence revel openly in the winnings of your toil. But that Orestes may come home with good fortune I pray to you, father: Oh, hearken to me! And as for myself, grant that I may prove far more circumspect than my mother and more reverent in deed.

ELECTRA: I utter these prayers on our behalf, but I ask that your avenger appear to our foes, father, and that your killers may be killed in just retribution. So I interrupt my prayer for good to offer them this prayer for evil. But be a bearer of blessings for us to the upper world, with the help of the gods and Earth and Justice crowned with victory."

ELECTRA: []

Such are my prayers, and over them I pour out these libations. It is right for you to crown them with lamentations, raising your voices in a chant for the dead.

CHORUS: Pour forth your tears, splashing as they fall for our fallen lord, to accompany this protection against evil, this charm for the good against the loathsome pollution. Hear me, oh hear me, my honored lord, out of the darkness of your spirit. Woe, woe, woe! Oh for a man mighty with the spear to deliver our house, an Ares, brandishing in the fight the springing Scythian bow and wielding his hilted sword in close combat.

CHORUS: [A
]

ELECTRA: My father has by now received the libations, which the earth has drunk. But take your share of this startling news.

CHORUS: Speak — but my heart is dancing with fear.

ELECTRA: I see here a lock cut as an offering for the tomb.

CHORUS: A man's, or a deep-girt maid's?

ELECTRA: That is open to conjecture — anyone may guess.

CHORUS: How then? Let my age be taught by your youth.

ELECTRA: There is no one who could have cut it but myself.

CHORUS: Yes, for those who ought to have mourned with a lock of hair are enemies.

ELECTRA: And further, in appearance it is very much like —

CHORUS: Whose lock? This is what I would like to know.

ELECTRA: It is very much like my own in appearance.

CHORUS: Then can this be a secret offering from Orestes?

ELECTRA: It is his curling locks that it most resembles.

CHORUS: But how did he dare to come here?

ELECTRA: He has merely sent this cut lock to honor his father.

CHORUS: What you say is no less a cause of tears for me, if he will never again set foot on this land.

ELECTRA: Over my heart, too, there sweeps a surge of bitterness, and I am struck as if a sword had run me through. From my eyes thirsty drops of a stormy flood fall unchecked at the sight of this tress. For how can I expect to find that someone else, some townsman, owns this lock? Nor yet in truth did she clip it from her head, the murderess, my own mother, who has assumed a godless spirit regarding her children that ill accords with the name of mother. But as for me, how am I to assent to this outright, that it adorned the head of Orestes, the dearest to me of all mortals? No, hope is merely flattering me.

ELECTRA: Ah, woe! If only, like a messenger, it had a kind voice, so that I would not be tossed by my distracted thoughts. Rather it would plainly bid me to spurn this tress, if it was severed from a hated head. Or if it were a kinsman's, he would share my grief as an adornment to this tomb and a tribute to my father.

ELECTRA: But I invoke the gods, who know by what storms we are tossed like seafarers. Yet if I am fated to reach safety, a great stock may come

from a little seed.

ELECTRA: And look! Another proof! Footprints matching each other — and like my own! Yes, here are the outlines of two sets of feet, his own and some companion's. The heels and the imprints of the tendons agree in proportion with my own tracks. I am in torment, my brain is in a whirl!

ELECTRA: []

ORESTES: Give recognition to the gods that your prayers have been fulfilled, and pray that success may attend you in the future.

ELECTRA: What? Have I succeeded now by the will of the gods?

ORESTES: You have come to the sight of what you have long prayed for.

ELECTRA: And do you know whom among mortals I was invoking?

ORESTES: I know that you are pining for Orestes.

ELECTRA: Then how have I found an answer to my prayers?

ORESTES: Here I am. Search for no other friend than me.

ELECTRA: But surely, stranger, you are weaving some snare about me?

ORESTES: Then I am devising plots against myself.

ELECTRA: No, you wish to mock my distress.

ORESTES: Then my own also, if yours.

ELECTRA: Am I then to address you as Orestes in truth?

ORESTES: Now, even though you see him in me, you are slow to learn. Yet at the sight of this tress cut in mourning, and when you were scrutinizing the footprints of my tracks, your thought took wings and you knew you had found me. Put the lock of hair, your own brother's, in the spot it was cut from and observe how it matches the hair on my head. And see this piece of weaving, your handiwork, the strokes of the batten and the beasts in the design. Control yourself! Do not go mad with joy! For I know that our nearest kin are bitter foes to us both.

ELECTRA: O best beloved darling of your father's house, its hope of a saving seed longed for with tears, trust in your prowess and you will win back your father's house. O delightful eyes that have four parts of love for me: for I must call you father; and to you falls the love I should bear my mother, whom

I most rightly hate; and the love I bore my sister, victim of a pitiless sacrifice; and you were my faithful brother, bringing me your reverence. May Might and Justice, with Zeus, supreme over all, in the third place, lend you their aid!

ORESTES: O Zeus, O Zeus, regard our cause! Behold the orphaned brood of a father eagle that perished in the meshes, in the coils of a fierce viper. They are utterly orphaned, gripped by the famine of hunger: for they are not grown to full strength to bring their father's quarry to the nest. So you see both me and poor Electra here, children bereft of their father, both outcasts alike from our home. If you destroy these nestlings of a father who made sacrifice and revered you greatly, from what like hand will you receive the homage of rich feasts? Destroy the brood of the eagle and you cannot again send tokens that mortals will trust; nor, if this royal stock should wither utterly away, will it serve your altars on days when oxen are sacrificed. Oh foster it, and you may raise our house from low estate to great, though now it seems utterly overthrown.

CHORUS: O children, O saviors of your father's hearth, speak not so loud, dear children, in case someone should overhear and report all this to our masters merely for the sake of rumor. May I some day see them dead in the ooze of flaming pitch!

ORESTES: Surely he will not abandon me, the mighty oracle of Loxias, who urged me to brave this peril to the end and loudly proclaims calamities that chill the warmth of my heart, if I do not take vengeance on my father's murderers. He said that, enraged by the loss of my possessions, I should kill them in requital just as they killed. And he declared that otherwise I should pay the debt myself with my own life, after many grievous sufferings. For he spoke revealing to mortals the wrath of malignant powers from underneath the earth, and telling of plagues: leprous ulcers that mount with fierce fangs on the flesh and eat away its primal nature; and how a white down should sprout up on the diseased place. And he spoke of other assaults of the Furies that are destined to be brought to pass from paternal blood. For the dark bolt of the infernal powers, who are stirred by kindred victims calling for vengeance, and madness, and groundless terrors out of the night, torment and harass a man, and he sees clearly, though he moves his eyebrows in the dark. And with his body marred by the brazen scourge, he is even chased in exile from his country. And the god declared that to such as these it is not allowed to have a

part either in the ceremonial cup or in the cordial libation; his father's wrath, though unseen, bars him from the altar; no one receives him or lodges with him; and at last, despised by all, friendless, he perishes, shrivelled pitifully by a death that wastes him utterly away.

ORESTES: Must I not put my trust in oracles such as these? Yet even if I do not trust them, the deed must still be done. For many impulses conspire to one conclusion. Besides the god's command, my keen grief for my father, and also the pinch of poverty — that my countrymen, the most renowned of mortals, who overthrew Troy in the spirit of glory, should not be subjected so to a pair of women. For he has a woman's mind, or if not, it will soon be found out.

CHORUS: You mighty Fates, through the power of Zeus grant fulfilment in the way to which Justice now turns. "For a word of hate let a word of hate be said," Justice cries out as she exacts the debt, "and for a murderous stroke let a murderous stroke be paid." "Let it be done to him as he does," says the age-old wisdom.

ORESTES: O father, unhappy father, by what word or deed of mine can I succeed in sailing from far away to you, where your resting-place holds you, a light to oppose your darkness? Yet a lament in honor of the Atreidae who once possessed our house is none the less a joyous service.

CHORUS: My child, the fire's ravening jaw does not overwhelm the wits of the dead man, but afterwards he reveals what stirs him. The murdered man has his dirge; the guilty man is revealed. Justified lament for fathers and for parents, when raised loud and strong, makes its search everywhere.

ELECTRA: Hear then, O father, as in turn we mourn with plentiful tears. Look, your two children mourn you in a dirge over your tomb. As suppliants and exiles as well they have sought a haven at your sepulchre. What of these things is good, what free of evil? Is it not hopeless to wrestle against doom?

CHORUS: Yet heaven, if it pleases, may still turn our utterance to more joyfully sounding strains. In place of dirges over a tomb, a song of triumph within the royal halls will welcome back a reunited friend.

ORESTES: Ah, my father, if only beneath Ilium's walls you had been slain, slashed by some Lycian spearman! Then you would have left a good name for your children in their halls, and in their maturity you would have

made their lives admired by men. And in a land beyond the sea you would have found a tomb heaped high with earth, no heavy burden for your house to bear —

CHORUS: — Welcomed there below by your comrades who nobly fell, a ruler of august majesty, distinguished even beneath the earth, and minister of the mightiest, the deities who rule in the nether world. For in your life you were a king of those who have the power to assign the portion of death, and who wield the staff all mortals obey.

ELECTRA: No, not even beneath the walls of Troy, father, would I wish you to have fallen and to be entombed beside Scamander's waters among the rest of the host slain by the spear. I wish rather that his murderers had been killed by their own loved ones, just as they killed you, so that someone in a distant land who knew nothing of these present troubles should learn of their fatal doom.

CHORUS: In this, my child, your wish is better than gold. It surpasses great good fortune, even that of the supremely blessed; for it is easy to wish. But now the lash of this double scourge comes home: our cause already has its champions beneath the earth, while the hands of our loathsome opponents, though they have the mastery, are unholy. The children have won the day.

ORESTES: This has pierced the earth and reached your ear as if it were an arrow. O Zeus, O Zeus, who send long-deferred retribution up from below onto the reckless and wicked deeds done by the hands of mortals. . . . And yet it will be accomplished for our father's sake.

CHORUS: May it be mine to raise a hearty shout in triumph over the man when he is stabbed and over the woman as she perishes! Why should I try to keep hidden what nevertheless hovers before my soul? Full against the prow of my heart wrath blows sharply in rancorous hate.

ELECTRA: And when will mighty Zeus bring down his hand on them and split their heads open? Let it be a pledge to the land! After injustice I demand justice as my right. Hear, O Earth, and you honored powers below!

CHORUS: And it is the eternal rule that drops of blood spilled on the ground demand yet more blood. Murder cries out on the Fury, which from those killed before brings one ruin in the wake of another.

ORESTES: Alas, you sovereign powers of the world below, behold, you potent Curses of the slain, behold the remnants of the line of Atreus in their helpless plight, cast out from house and home in dishonor. Which way can we turn, O Zeus?

CHORUS: But again my heart throbs as I hear this pitiful lament. At once I am devoid of hope and my viscera are darkened at the words I hear. But when hope once again lifts and strengthens me, it puts away my distress and dawns brightly on me.

ELECTRA: To what could we more fittingly appeal than to those very miseries we have endured from the woman herself who bore us? She may fawn upon us, but they are past all soothing. For like a fierce-hearted wolf the temper we have acquired from our mother is implacable.

CHORUS: On my breast I beat an Arian dirge in just the same fashion as a Cissian wailing woman. With clenched fists, raining blows thick and fast, my outstretched hands could be seen descending from above, from far above, now on this side, now on that, till my battered and wretched head resounded with the strokes.

ELECTRA: Away with you, cruel and utterly brazen mother! You dared to give your husband a most cruel burial: unmourned, without lamentation, a king unattended by his people.

ORESTES: Ah me, your words spell utter dishonor. Yet with the help of the gods, and with the help of my own hands, will she not atone for the dishonor she did my father? Let me only take her life, then let me die!

CHORUS: Yes, and I would have you know he was brutally mangled. And even as she buried him in this way, she acted with intent to make the manner of his death a burden on your life past all power to bear. You hear the story of the ignominious outrage done to your father.

ELECTRA: My father was murdered just as you say. But all the while I was kept sequestered, despised, accounted a worthless thing. Kennelled in my room as if I were a vicious cur, I gave free vent to my streaming tears, which came more readily than laughter, as in my concealment I poured out my lament in plentiful weeping. Hear my tale and inscribe it on your heart.

CHORUS: Yes, let it sink deep into your ears, but keep inside a quiet steadfastness of soul. So far things are so. But you yourself be eager to resolve what is to follow. You must enter the contest with inflexible wrath.

ORESTES: Father, I call on you; side with your loved ones!

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

CHORUS: And let all our company blend our voices to echo the prayer. Hear! Come to the light! Side with us against the foe!

ORESTES: Ares will encounter Ares; Right will encounter Right.

ELECTRA: O you gods, judge rightly the plea of right!

CHORUS: A shudder steals over me as I hear these prayers. Doom has long been waiting, but it will come in answer to those who pray. Ah, inbred trouble and bloody stroke of ruin striking a discord! Ah, lamentable and grievous sorrows! Ah, the unstaunched pain! Our house has a cure to heal these woes, a cure not from outside, from the hands of others, but from itself, by fierce, bloody strife. This hymn is for the gods beneath the earth. O you blessed powers below, hear this supplication of ours, and with a favorable will send forth to these children your aid for victory!

ORESTES: O father, who perished by a death unbecoming a king, grant in answer to my prayer the lordship over your halls!

ELECTRA: And I too, father, have a like request of you: to escape when I have wrought great destruction on Aegisthus.

ORESTES: Yes, for then the customary funeral feasts of men would be established in your honor. But otherwise, at the rich and savory banquet of burnt offerings made to the earth, you will be without a portion of honor.

ELECTRA: And I will likewise at my wedding offer libations to you out of the fullness of my inheritance from my father's house, and before all else I will hold this tomb of yours in the highest honor.

ORESTES: O Earth, send up my father to watch my battle!

ELECTRA: O Persephone, grant us indeed a glorious victory!

ORESTES: Father, remember the bath where you were robbed of life.

ELECTRA: And remember how they devised a strange net to cast about you.

ORESTES: You were caught, my father, in fetters forged by no smith's hand.

ELECTRA: And in a fabric shamefully devised.

ORESTES: Father, are you not roused by taunts such as these?

ELECTRA: Are you not raising that dearest head of yours?

ORESTES: Either send Justice to battle for those dear to you, or grant us in turn to get a similar grip on them, if indeed after defeat you would in turn win victory.

ELECTRA: So listen, father, to this last appeal of mine as you behold these fledglings crouching at your tomb. Have compassion on your offspring, on the woman and on the man as well, and let not this seed of Pelops' line be blotted out: for then, in spite of death, you are not dead. For children are voices of salvation to a man, though he is dead; like corks, they buoy up the net, saving the flaxen cord from out of the deep. Hear! For your own sake we make this lament. By honoring this plea of ours you save yourself.

CHORUS: In truth you have drawn out this plea of yours to your own content in showing honor to this unlamented tomb. As for the rest, since your heart is rightly set on action, put your fortune to the test and get to your work at once.

ORESTES: It will be so. But it is in no way amiss to inquire how, from what motive, she came to send her libations, seeking too late to make amends for an irremediable deed. They would be a sorry gift to send to the senseless dead: I cannot guess what they mean. The gifts are too paltry for her offence. For though a man may pour out all he has in atonement for one deed of blood, it is wasted effort. So the saying goes. If indeed you know, tell me: I wish to learn.

CHORUS: I know, my child, for I was there. It was because she was shaken by dreams and wandering terrors of the night that she sent these offerings, godless woman that she is.

ORESTES: And have you learned the nature of the dream so as to tell it properly?

CHORUS: She dreamed she gave birth to a serpent: that is her own account.

ORESTES: And where does the tale end, and what is its consummation?

CHORUS: She laid it to rest as if it were a child, in swaddling clothes.

ORESTES: What food did it crave, the newborn viper?

CHORUS: In her dream she offered it her own breast.

ORESTES: Surely her nipple was not unwounded by the loathsome beast?

CHORUS: No: it drew in clotted blood with the milk.

ORESTES: Truly it is not without meaning: the vision signifies a man!

CHORUS: Then from out of her sleep she raised a shriek and awoke appalled, and many lamps that had been blinded in the darkness flared up in the house to cheer our mistress. Then she sent these libations for the dead in the hope that they might be an effective cure for her distress.

ORESTES: Well then, I pray to this earth and to my father's grave that this dream may come to its fulfilment in me. As I understand it, it fits at every point. For if the snake left the same place as I; if it was furnished with my swaddling clothes; if it sought to open its mouth to take the breast that nourished me and mixed the sweet milk with clotted blood while she shrieked for terror at this, then surely, as she has nourished a portentous thing of horror, she must die by violence. For I, turned serpent, am her killer, as this dream declares.

CHORUS: I choose your reading of this portent. Let it be so. As for the rest, give your friends their parts. Tell some what to do, others what to leave undone.

ORESTES: It is a simple story. My sister must go inside, and I charge her to keep concealed this pact with me, so that as by craft they killed a worthy man, so by craft they may likewise be caught and perish in the very same snare, even as Loxias decreed, lord Apollo, the prophet who has never before been false.

ORESTES: In the guise of a stranger, one fully equipped, I will come to the outer gate, and with me Pylades, whom you see here, as a guest and ally of the house. Both of us will speak the speech of Parnassus, imitating the accent of a Phocian tongue. And in case none of the keepers of the door will give us a

hearty welcome on the plea that the house is afflicted with trouble by the gods, then we will wait so that anyone passing the house will consider and say: “Why then does Aegisthus have his door shut on his suppliant, if in fact he is at home and knows?”

ORESTES: But if I indeed pass the outermost threshold of the gate and find that man sitting on my father’s throne, or if then coming face to face with me he lifts and casts down his eyes, know well: before he can even say “Of what land is this stranger?” I will skewer him with my swift sword and lay him dead. The fury that has no fill of slaughter shall for her third and crowning drink drink unmixed blood!

ORESTES: Now you, Electra, keep strict watch over what happens inside the house, so that our plans may fit together well. You [] had best keep a discreet tongue: be silent when there is need and speak only what the occasion demands. As for the rest, I call on him to cast his glance this way and direct the contest of the sword for me.

ORESTES: []

CHORUS: Many are the horrors, dread and appalling, bred of earth, and the arms of the deep teem with hateful monsters. Likewise between heaven and earth lights hung high in the air draw near; and winged things and things that walk the earth can also tell of the stormy wrath of whirlwinds.

CHORUS: But who can tell of man’s overweening spirit, and of the reckless passions of women hardened of soul, partners of the woes of mortals? Inordinate passion, overmastering the female, gains a fatal victory over the wedded unions of beasts and humans alike.

CHORUS: Let whoever is not flighty in his wits know this, when he has learned of the device of a lit brand contrived by Thestius’ heartless daughter: she destroyed her own child by burning the charred brand of the same age as he when, coming from his mother’s womb, he cried out, and it aged in pace with him through his life to the day decreed by fate.

CHORUS: And there is in legend another murderous virgin to be loathed, who ruined a loved one at the bidding of his foes, when, lured by Minos’ gift, the Cretan necklace forged of gold, she with her dog’s heart despoiled Nisus of his immortal lock as he drew breath in unsuspecting sleep. And Hermes overtook him.

CHORUS: But since I have recalled tales of pitiless afflictions, it is the right time to tell of a marriage void of love, an abomination to the house, and the plots devised by a wife's cunning against her warrior lord, against her lord revered with reason by his foes. But I honor the hearths of homes not heated by passion's fires, and in woman a spirit that shrinks from audacious deeds.

CHORUS: Indeed the Lemnian holds first place among evils in story: it has long been told with groans as an abominable calamity. Men compare each new horror to Lemnian troubles; and because of a woeful deed abhorred by the gods a race has disappeared, cast out in infamy from among mortals. For no man reveres what is hated by the gods. Is there one of these tales I have gathered that I do not justly cite?

CHORUS: But the keen and bitter sword is near the breast and drives home its blow at the bidding of Justice. For truly the injustice of him who has unjustly transgressed the sovereign majesty of Zeus lies on the ground trampled under foot.

CHORUS: The anvil of Justice is planted firm. Destiny fashions her arms and forges her sword quickly, and the famed and deeply brooding Fury is bringing the son into our house, to requite at last the pollution of blood shed long ago.

CHORUS: [
]

ORESTES: Boy! Boy! Hear my knocking at the outer door! Who is inside? Boy! Boy! I say again, who is at home? Again for the third time I call for some one to come out of the house, if by Aegisthus' will it offers welcome to strangers.

SERVANT: Yes, yes, I hear. Of what land is the stranger, and whence?

ORESTES: Announce me to the masters of the house, for it is in fact to them that I come bearing news. And hurry, since the chariot of night is speeding on with darkness, and it is time for wayfarers to drop anchor in some house friendly to all guests. Tell some one to come forth who has authority over the house, the mistress in charge. But the master would be more fitting, for then no delicacy in speaking makes words obscure: man speaks boldly to man and reveals his meaning without reserve.

ORESTES: [
]

CLYTAEMESTRA: Strangers, you have only to declare your need, for we have everything that suits this house: warm baths, beds to charm away fatigue, and the presence of honest faces. But if there is another matter requiring graver counsel, that is the concern of men, and we will communicate with them.

ORESTES: I am a stranger, a Daulian of the Phocians. As I was on my way, carrying my pack on business of my own to Argos, just as I ended my journey here, a man, a stranger to me as I to him, fell in with me, and inquired about my destination and told me his. He was Strophius, a Phocian (for as we talked I learned his name), and he said to me, "Stranger, since in any case you are bound for Argos, keep my message in mind most faithfully and tell his parents Orestes is dead, and by no means let it escape you. Whether his friends decide to bring him home or to bury him in the land of his sojourn, a foreigner utterly forever, convey their wishes back to me. In the meantime a bronze urn contains the ashes of a man rightly lamented." This much I tell you as I heard it. Whether by any chance I am speaking to those with whom the question rests and whose concern it is, I do not know. But his parent should know the truth.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Oh no! Your story spells our utter undoing. O curse that haunts this house, so hard to wrestle down: how far forward you look! Even what was laid well out of harm's way you bring down with your well-aimed shafts from far off, and you strip me of those I love, utterly wretched as I am. And now Orestes: he was indeed prudent in keeping his foot out of the mire of destruction, but now mark down as having abandoned us what was once the one hope in our house of a cure for its fine revelry.

ORESTES: As for me, I am sure that with hosts so prosperous I would rather have been made known and welcomed for favorable news. For where is goodwill greater than from guest to host? Yet to my mind it would have been irreverent not to fulfill for friends a charge like this when I was bound by promise and hospitality pledged to me.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Rest assured you will receive no less a reward than you deserve nor be the less welcome to this house: someone else might just as

well have brought your message. But it is the hour when strangers who have been travelling on a long day's journey should have their proper entertainment. [] Conduct him to the rooms where the men are hospitably lodged, him and his attendants here and his fellow-traveller, and let them be tended to there as is proper in our house. I command you to do this as you shall be held to strict account. Meantime we will communicate this matter to the master of the house, and since we have no lack of friends we will confer on this occurrence.

CLYTAEMESTRA: [A]

CHORUS: Ah, loyal handmaidens of the house, how long will it be before we display the power that lies in our mouths to do Orestes service?

CHORUS: O hallowed earth, and hallowed barrow raised high that now lies on the royal form of the commander of the fleet, now hear me, now lend me aid! Now is the hour for Persuasion with her guile to join forces with him, and for Hermes of the nether world, who works in stealth, to direct this encounter of the deadly sword.

CHORUS: []

Our stranger, I think, is working mischief: for over there I see Orestes' nurse all in tears. Cilissa! Where are you going? Why as you set foot in the palace gate do you have a grief as an unhired companion?

NURSE: My mistress commands me to summon Aegisthus for the strangers in all haste, so that he may come and learn more clearly, from man to man, these tidings that have just arrived. Indeed, before the servants, behind eyes that feigned grief she hid her laughter over what has occurred fortunately for her. But the news so plainly told by the strangers means utter ruin for this house. I expect that when he hears it he will rejoice in his heart to know the story. Miserable woman that I am! How the old unbearable troubles of every sort that occurred in this house of Atreus have always made my heart ache within my breast! But never yet have I endured a blow like this. For all the other troubles I bore patiently, but my beloved Orestes, on whom I spent my soul, whom I took from his mother at birth and nursed, and the many and troublesome tasks, fruitless for all my enduring them, when his loud and urgent cries broke my rest . . . For one must nurse the senseless thing like a dumb beast, of course one must, by following its humor. For while it is still a

baby in swaddling clothes, it has no speech at all, whether hunger moves it, or thirst perhaps, or the call of need: children's young insides work their own relief. I would anticipate these needs. Yet many a time, I think, having to wash the child's linen because of my own errors, laundress and nurse had the same function. It was I who, with these two handicrafts, received Orestes for his father. And now, wretch that I am, I hear that he is dead. But I am on my way to fetch the man who wrought destruction on our house, and he will be glad enough to hear this news.

CHORUS: Then arrayed how does she tell him to come?

NURSE: Arrayed how? Say it again so that I may catch your meaning better.

CHORUS: With his guards or perhaps unattended?

NURSE: She tells him to come with his retinue of spearmen.

CHORUS: Well, do not give this message to our loathed master, but with all haste and with a cheerful heart tell him to come himself, alone, so that he may be told without alarm. For in the mouth of a messenger a crooked message is made straight.

NURSE: What! Are you gladdened at heart by the present news?

CHORUS: Why not, if Zeus at last may cause our ill wind to change?

NURSE: But how can that be? Orestes, the hope of our house, is gone.

CHORUS: Not yet; he would be a poor prophet who would so interpret.

NURSE: What are you saying? Do you know something beyond what has been told?

CHORUS: Go, deliver your message! Do what you are asked to do! The gods take care of what they take care of.

NURSE: Well, I will go and do your bidding. With the gods' blessing may everything turn out for the best!

[]

CHORUS: Now at my supplication, O Zeus, father of the Olympian gods, grant that the fortunes of our house be firmly established, so that those who rightly desire the rule of order may behold it. Every word of mine has been uttered in justice. O Zeus, may you safeguard it!

CHORUS: O Zeus, set him who is within the palace before his foes; since, if you exalt him, he will gladly pay you with double and triple recompense. Know that the orphaned colt of a loved one is harnessed to the chariot of distress. And by setting bounds to his course may you grant that we see him keep a steady pace through this race and win the goal in the straining stride of a gallop.

CHORUS: And you who within the house inhabit the inner chamber that exults in its wealth, hear me, you gods, that feel with us! By a fresh award redeem the blood of deeds done long ago. May aged Murder cease begetting offspring in our house!

CHORUS: And you who occupy the mighty, gorgeously built cavern, grant that the man's house may lift up its eyes again in joy, and that with glad eyes it may behold from under its veil of gloom the radiant light of freedom.

CHORUS: May Maia's son, as he rightfully should, lend his aid, for no one can better sail a deed on a favoring course, when he would do so. But by his mysterious utterance he brings darkness over men's eyes by night, and by day he is no more clear at all.

CHORUS: And then at last with a loud voice we shall sing a song of the deliverance of our house, the song that women raise when the wind sits fair, and not the shrill strain of those who mourn: "The ship goes well. This grows to profit for me, for me, and calamity holds off from those I love."

CHORUS: But may you with good courage, when the part of action comes, cry out loud the name "Father" when she exclaims "Son," and accomplish the baneful but irreproachable deed.

CHORUS: Raise up Perseus' spirit within my breast. And for those dear to you below the earth, and for those above, exact satisfaction for their dire wrath by working bloody ruin in our house and obliterating the guilt of murder.

CHORUS: [A]

ÆGISTHUS: I have come not unasked but summoned by a messenger. I heard startling news told by some strangers who have arrived, tidings far from welcome: — that Orestes is dead. To lay this too upon our house would be a fearful burden when it is still festering and galled by the wound inflicted by an

earlier murder. How can I believe this tale is the living truth? Or is it merely a panic-stricken report spread by women which leaps up to die away in nothingness? What can you tell me of this to make it plain to my mind?

CHORUS: We heard the tale, it is true. But go inside and inquire of the strangers. The certainty of a messenger's report is nothing compared with one's own interrogation of the man himself.

AEGISTHUS: I wish to see the messenger and put him to the test again — whether he himself was present at the death or merely repeats from vague reports what he has heard. No! Be sure he cannot deceive a mind with eyes open.

[A]

CHORUS: O Zeus, O Zeus, what should I say? Where shall I begin this prayer of mine, this appeal to the gods? How in my loyal zeal can I succeed in finding words to match need? Now is the moment when the blood-stained edges of the blades that lay men low are utterly forever to destroy the house of Agamemnon. Or else, kindling a flaming light in the cause of freedom, Orestes will win both the rule over his realm and the rich possessions of his fathers. Our gallant Orestes, with no one to assist him, is now to meet with two in such a contest. And may it be to triumph!

CHORUS: [A]

AEGISTHUS: within Oh! Oh! O woe!

CHORUS: Ah! Ah! Alas! What is happening? What is being accomplished for our house? Let us stand apart while the matter is still unsettled so that we may be considered blameless in these ills. For the issue of the fighting has now been decided.

CHORUS: [
A]

SERVANT: O woe, oh utter woe! My master is slain! O woe! I cry yet again, for the third time. Aegisthus is no more! Come, with all speed! Unbar and open the women's door! And a strong arm indeed is needed, but not to help him who is already slain: what good is there in that? Help! Help! Am I shouting to the deaf and fruitlessly wasting my voice on people who are asleep? Where has Clytaemestra gone? What is she doing? Her own neck, near

the razor's edge, is now ready to fall beneath the stroke.

SERVANT: []

CLYTAEMESTRA: What is this? What cry for help are you raising in our house?

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

CLYTAEMESTRA: Ah! Indeed I grasp the meaning of the riddle. We are to perish by treachery, just as we committed murder. Someone give me a battle-axe, and quickly! Let us know if we are victors or vanquished: for I have even come to this in this wretched business.

CLYTAEMESTRA: [

A

]

ORESTES: It is you I seek. He over there has had enough.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Oh no! My beloved, valiant Aegisthus! You are dead!

ORESTES: You love this man? Then you will lie in the same grave, and you will never abandon him in death.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Wait, my son! Have pity, child, upon this breast at which many times while you slept you sucked with toothless gums the milk that nourished you.

ORESTES: Pylades, what shall I do? Shall I spare my mother out of pity?

PYLADES: What then will become in the future of Loxias' oracles declared at Pytho, and of our sworn pact? Count all men your enemies rather than the gods.

ORESTES: I judge you victor: you advise me well. []

Come, this way! I mean to kill you by his very side. For while he lived, you thought him better than my father. Sleep with him in death, since you love him but hate the man you were bound to love.

CLYTAEMESTRA: It was I who nourished you, and with you I would grow old.

ORESTES: What! Murder my father and then make your home with me?

CLYTAEMESTRA: Fate, my child, must share the blame for this.

ORESTES: And fate now brings this destiny to pass.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Have you no regard for a parent's curse, my son?

ORESTES: You brought me to birth and yet you cast me out to misery.

CLYTAEMESTRA: No, surely I did not cast you out in sending you to the house of an ally.

ORESTES: I was sold in disgrace, though I was born of a free father.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Then where is the price I got for you?

ORESTES: I am ashamed to reproach you with that outright.

CLYTAEMESTRA: But do not fail to proclaim the follies of that father of yours as well.

ORESTES: Do not accuse him who suffered while you sat idle at home.

CLYTAEMESTRA: It is a grief for women to be deprived of a husband, my child.

ORESTES: Yes, but it is the husband's toil that supports them while they sit at home.

CLYTAEMESTRA: You seem resolved, my child, to kill your mother.

ORESTES: You will kill yourself, not I.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Take care: beware the hounds of wrath that avenge a mother.

ORESTES: And how shall I escape my father's if I leave this undone?

CLYTAEMESTRA: I see that though living I mourn in vain before a tomb.

ORESTES: Yes, for my father's fate has marked out this destiny for you.

CLYTAEMESTRA: Oh no! I myself bore and nourished this serpent!

ORESTES: Yes, the terror from your dream was indeed a prophet. You killed him whom you should not; so suffer what should not be.

ORESTES: []

CHORUS: Truly I grieve even for these in their twofold downfall. Yet since long-suffering Orestes has reached the peak of many deeds of blood, we

would rather have it so, that the eye of the house should not be utterly lost.

CHORUS: As to Priam and his sons justice came at last in crushing retribution, so to Agamemnon's house came a twofold lion, twofold slaughter. The exile, the suppliant of Pytho, has fulfilled his course to the utmost, justly urged on by counsels from the gods.

CHORUS: Oh raise a shout of triumph over the escape of our master's house from its misery and the wasting of its wealth by two who were unclean, its grievous fortune!

CHORUS: And he has come whose part is the crafty vengeance of stealthy attack, and in the battle his hand was guided by her who is in very truth daughter of Zeus, breathing murderous wrath on her foes. We mortals aim true to the mark when we call her Justice.

CHORUS: <Oh raise a shout of triumph over the escape of our master's house from its misery and the wasting of its wealth by two who were unclean, its grievous fortune!> The commands proclaimed loudly by Loxias, tenant of the mighty cavern shrine of Parnassus, assail with guileless guile the mischief now become inveterate. May the divine word prevail that so I may not serve the wicked! It is right to revere the rule of heaven.

CHORUS: Look, the light has come, and I am freed from the cruel curb that restrained our household. House, rise up! You have lain too long prostrate on the ground. But soon time that accomplishes all will pass the portals of our house, and then all pollution will be expelled from the hearth by cleansing rites that drive out calamity. The dice of fortune will turn as they fall and lie with faces all lovely to behold, favorably disposed to whoever stays in our house. Look, the light has come, and I am freed from the cruel curb that restrained our household. House, rise up! You have lain too long prostrate on the ground.

CHORUS: [

A]

ORESTES: Behold this pair, oppressors of the land, who murdered my father and ransacked my house! They were majestic then, when they sat on their thrones, and are lovers even now, as one may judge by what has happened to them, and their oath holds true to their pledges. Together they

vowed a league of death against my unhappy father, and together they vowed to die, and they have kept their promise well.

ORESTES: But now regard again, you who hear this account of ills, the device for binding my unhappy father, with which his hands were manacled, his feet fettered. Spread it out! Stand around in a circle, and display this covering for a man, that the Father may see — not mine, but he who surveys all this, the Sun — that he may see the impious work of my own mother, that he may be my witness in court that I justly pursued this death, my own mother's. For I do not speak of Aegisthus' death: he has suffered the penalty prescribed for adulterers.

ORESTES: But she who devised this abhorrent deed against her husband, whose children she bore, a burden under her belt, a burden once dear, but now a hateful ill, as it seems: what do you think of her? Had she been born a seasnake or a viper, I think her very touch without her bite would have caused anyone else to rot, if shamelessness and an immoral disposition could do so.

ORESTES: []

What name shall I give it, however tactful I may be? A trap for a wild beast? Or a shroud for a corpse in his bier, wrapped around his feet? No, rather it is a net: you might call it a hunting net, or robes to entangle a man's feet. This would be the kind of thing a highwayman might possess, who deceives strangers and earns his living by robbery, and with this cunning snare he might kill many men and warm his own heart greatly. May such a woman not live with me in my house! Before that may the gods grant me to perish childless!

CHORUS: Alas! Alas! Sorrowful work! You were done in by a wretched death. Alas! Alas! And for the survivor also suffering blossoms.

ORESTES: Did she do the deed or not? No, this is my witness, dyed by Aegisthus' sword. This is a stain of blood that helps time to spoil the many tinctures of embroidered fabric. Now at last I speak his praises. Now at last I am present to lament him, as I address this web that wrought my father's death. Yet I grieve for the deed and the punishment and for my whole clan. My victory is an unenviable pollution.

CHORUS: No mortal being shall pass his life unscathed, free from all suffering to the end. Alas! Alas! One tribulation comes today, another tomorrow.

ORESTES: But since I would have you know, for I do not know how it will end: I think I am a charioteer driving my team far beyond the course. For my ungoverned wits are whirling me away overmastered, and at my heart fear wishes to sing and dance to a tune of wrath. But while I am still in my senses, I proclaim to those who hold me dear and declare that not without justice did I slay my mother, the unclean murderess of my father, and a thing loathed by the gods.

ORESTES: And for the spells that gave me the courage for this deed I count Loxias, the prophet of Pytho, my chief source. It was he who declared that, if I did this thing, I would be acquitted of wrongdoing. But if I refrained — I will not name the penalty; for no bowshot could reach such a height of anguish.

ORESTES: And now observe me, how armed with this branch and wreath I go as a suppliant, an outcast for the shedding of kindred blood, to the temple set square on the womb of the earth, the precinct of Loxias, and to the bright fire said to be imperishable. To no other hearth did Loxias bid me turn. And as to the manner in which this evil deed was wrought, I charge all men of Argos in time to come to bear me witness. I go forth a wanderer, estranged from this land, leaving this repute behind, in life or death.

CHORUS: And you have done well. Therefore do not yoke your tongue to an ill-omened speech, nor let your lips give vent to evil forebodings, since you have freed the whole realm of Argos by lopping off the heads of two serpents with a fortunate stroke.

ORESTES: Ah, ah! You handmaidens, look at them there: like Gorgons, wrapped in sable garments, entwined with swarming snakes! I can stay no longer.

CHORUS: What fantasies disturb you, dearest of sons to your father? Wait, do not be all overcome by fear.

ORESTES: To me these are no imagined troubles. For there indeed are the hounds of wrath to avenge my mother.

CHORUS: It is that the blood is still fresh on your hands; this is the cause of the disorder that assails your wits.

ORESTES: O lord Apollo, look! Now they come in troops, and from their eyes they drip loathsome blood!

CHORUS: There is one way to cleanse you: the touch of Loxias will set you free from this affliction.

ORESTES: You do not see them, but I see them. I am pursued. I can stay no longer.

[]

CHORUS: Then may blessings go with you, and may the god watch benevolently over you and guard you with favorable fortunes!

CHORUS: Look! Now again, for the third time, has the tempest of this clan burst on the royal house and run its course. First, at the beginning, came the cruel woes of children slain for food; next, the fate of a man, a king, when the warlord of the Achaeans perished, murdered in his bath. And now, once again, there has come from somewhere a third, a deliverer, or shall I say a doom? Oh when will it finish its work, when will the fury of calamity, lulled to rest, find an end and cease?