

# Libation Bearers

By Aeschylus

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*At the tomb of Agamemnon. Orestes and Pylades enter.*

## Orestes

Hermes of the nether world, you who guard the powers [*kratos*] of the ancestors, prove yourself my savior [*sōtēr*] 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, **5** to hear me...

*[There is a gap in the text.]*

[Look, I bring] a lock of hair to Inakhos<sup>1</sup> in compensation for his care, and here, a second, in token of my grief [*penthos*]. For I was not present, father, to lament your death, nor did I stretch forth my hand to bear your corpse.

**10** What is this I see? What is this throng of women that advances, 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 **15** 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 [*penthos*]. Oh grant me, Zeus, to avenge my father's death, and may you be my willing ally! **20** Pylades, let us stand apart, that I may know clearly what this band of suppliant women intends.

*They exit. Electra enters accompanied by women carrying libations.*

## Chorus

*strophe 1*

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 **25** where my nails have cut fresh furrows. And yet through all my life [*aiōn*] 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, **30** the cloth of robes struck for the sake of my mirthless misfortunes.

*antistrophe 1*

For with a hair-raising shriek, the seer [*mantis*] of dreams for our house, breathing wrath out of sleep, **35** uttered a cry of terror in the untimely [*a-(h)ōr-os*] part of night from the heart of the palace, a cry that fell heavily on the women's quarter. And those who sort out [*krinein*] these dreams, bound under pledge, cried out from the god **40** that those beneath the earth cast furious reproaches and rage against their

murderers.

*strophe 2*

Intending to ward off evil with such a graceless grace [*kharis*], **45** 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 [*lutron*] is there for blood fallen to earth? Ah, hearth of utter grief! **50** Ah, house laid low in ruin! Sunless darkness, loathed by men, enshrouds our house due to the death of its master.

*antistrophe 2*

**55** The awe of majesty once unconquered, unvanquished, irresistible in war, that penetrated the ears and *phrēn* of the people, is now cast off. But there is still fear. And prosperity— **60** this, among mortals, is a god and more than a god. But the balance of *dikē* keeps watch: swiftly it descends on those in the light; sometimes pain [*akhos*] waits for those who linger on the frontier of twilight; **65** and others are claimed by strengthless night.

*strophe 3*

Because of blood drunk up by the fostering earth, the vengeful gore lies clotted and will not dissolve away. Grievous calamity [*atē*] distracts the guilty [*aitios*] man till he is steeped in utter misery.

*antistrophe 3*

**70** 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.

*epode*

**75** For since the gods laid constraining doom about my *polis* 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 [*phrenes*], **80** and submit to the wishes of my masters, whether just [*dikaia*] or unjust. But I weep beneath my veil over the senseless fate of my lord, my heart chilled by secret grief [*penthos*].

### **Electra**

<sup>84</sup> You handmaidens who set our house in order, <sup>85</sup> since you are here at this ritual of supplication as my <sup>86</sup> attendants, become my partners by giving advice about these things here: <sup>87</sup> what should I say while I pour [*kheîn*] these libations [*khoai*] of sorrowful caring? <sup>88</sup> How shall I say words that show good thinking [*eu-phrona*], how shall I make a prayer [*kat-eukhesthai*] to my father? <sup>89</sup> Shall I say that I bring these offerings from a woman who is near and dear [*philē*] to a dear a man who is near and dear [*philos*], <sup>90</sup> from wife to husband—from my own mother? I do not have the assurance for that, nor do I know what I should say as I pour this mixed offering onto my father's tomb. Or shall I speak the words that men are accustomed [*nomos*] to use: "To those who send these honors may he return benefits"—a gift, indeed, to

match their evil?

**95** 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? **100** In this, *philai*, be my fellow-counselors. 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. **105** 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 [*phrēn*], since you command me.

**Electra**

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

**Chorus**

While you pour, utter benedictions for loyal hearts.

**Electra**

**110** And to what *philo*i 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 [*stasis*]?<sup>2</sup>

**Chorus**

**115** Remember Orestes, though he is still away from home.

**Electra**

Well said! You have indeed admonished me thoughtfully [with *phrenes*].

**Chorus**

For the guilty [*aitioi*] murderers now, mindful of—

**Electra**

<sup>118</sup> What should I say? Instruct me, inexperienced as I am, and lead me in my thinking.

**Chorus**

<sup>119</sup> —Pray that some superhuman force [*daimōn*] or some mortal may come to them [= Clytemnestra and Aegisthus]—

## Electra

**120** As judge [*dikastēs*] or as bringer of vindication [*dikē*], do you mean?

## Chorus

<sup>121</sup> Very simply, just signal that you are acting as one who will kill in repayment for a killing.

## Electra

<sup>122</sup> And is it ritually correct [*eu-sebê*] for me, from the standpoint of the gods?

## Chorus

<sup>123</sup> —Why not? It is an act of repaying bad things with bad things.

## Electra

<sup>124</sup> Supreme herald [*kēruξ*] of the realm above and the realm below, O Hermes of the nether world, summon for me <sup>125</sup> the superhuman forces [*daimones*] beneath the earth to hear my <sup>126</sup> prayers—forces that watch over my father's house, <sup>127</sup> and [summon] Earth herself, who gives birth to all things, <sup>128</sup> and, having nurtured them, receives from them the flow that they produce. <sup>129</sup> And, meanwhile, as I pour [*kheîn*] these liquids of libation [*khernibes*] to the dead, <sup>130</sup> I say these things as I call on my father: "Have pity both on me and on *philos* Orestes! How shall we rule our own house? For now we wander like beggars, bartered away by her who bore us, by her who in exchange got as her mate Aegisthus, who was her accomplice in your murder. **135** 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 labors [*ponoi*]. But that Orestes may come home with good fortune I pray to you, father: Oh, hearken to me! **140** And as for myself, grant that I may prove far more circumspect [*sōphrōn*] than my mother and more reverent in deed.

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 [*dikē*]. **145** 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 *dikē* crowned with victory."

*She pours out the libations.*

Such are my prayers, and over them I pour out these libations. **150** It is the proper custom [*nomos*] 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 **155** against the loathsome pollution. Hear me, oh hear me, my honored lord, out of the darkness of your *phrēn*.

Woe, woe, woe! **160** Oh for a man mighty with the spear to deliver our house, an Arēs, brandishing in the fight the springing Scythian bow and wielding his hilted sword in close combat.

*Electra discovers the lock of Orestes' hair.*

**Electra**

My father has by now received the libations, which the earth has drunk. **165** But take your share of this startling utterance [*mūthos*].

**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-girdled maiden's?

**Electra**

**170** 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**

Then they are enemies [*ekhthroi*] who thought it fit to express grief [*penthos*] with a lock of hair.

**Electra**

And further, in appearance it is very much like...

**Chorus**

**175** 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**

**180** He has merely sent this cut lock as a favor [*kharis*] to 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. **185** 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, **190** my own mother, who has assumed godless *phrenes* 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 most *philos* to me of all mortals? No, hope is merely flattering me.

Ah, woe! **195** If only, like a messenger, it had a voice that has *phrenes* in it, 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 [*penthos*] **200** as an adornment to this tomb and a tribute [*tīmē*] to my father.

But I invoke the gods, who know by what storms we are tossed like seafarers. Yet if I am fated to reach salvation [*sōtēriā*], a great stock may come from a little seed.

**205** 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. **210** The heels and the imprints of the tendons agree in proportion with my own tracks. I am in torment, my *phrenes* are in a whirl!

*Orestes enters.*

**Orestes**

Give recognition to the gods that your prayers have found fulfillment [*telos*], and pray that success may attend you in the future.

**Electra**

What? Have I succeeded now by the will of the *daimones*?

**Orestes**

**215** 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 *philos* than me.

**Electra**

**220** 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**

**225** No, 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, **230** and observe how it matches the hair on your head. And see this piece of weaving, your handiwork, the strokes of the blade and the beasts in the design. Control yourself! Do not stray in your *phrenes* with joy! For I know that our most *philo*i kin are bitter foes to us both.

**Electra**

**235** O most *philon* object of care in your father's house, its hope of the seed of a savior [*sōtēr*] 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; **240** and to you falls the love I should bear my mother, she whom I hate with complete *dikē*; and the love I bore my sister, victim of a pitiless sacrifice; and you were my faithful brother, bringing me your reverence. May Might [*kratos*] and *dikē*, **245** with Zeus, supreme over all, in the third place, lend you their aid!

**Orestes**

O Zeus, O Zeus, become a sacred observer [*theōros*] of 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, **250** gripped by the famine of hunger: for they are not grown to full strength [*telos*] 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. **255** If you destroy these nestlings of a father who made sacrifice and gave you great *tīmē*, from what like hand will you receive the homage of rich feasts? Destroy the brood of the eagle and you cannot again send signals [*sēmata*] that mortals will trust; **260** nor, if this royal stock should wither utterly away, will it serve your altars on days when oxen are sacrificed. Oh foster [*komizein*] it, and you may raise our house from low estate to great, though now it seems utterly overthrown.

**Chorus**

O children, O saviors [*sōtēres*] of your father's hearth, **265** speak not so loud, 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,<sup>3</sup> **270** who urged me to brave this peril to the end and loudly proclaims calamities [*atai*] that chill the warmth of my heart, if I do not take vengeance on those who are guilty [*aitioi*] of my father's murder. He said that, enraged like a bull by the loss of my possessions, I should kill them in requital just as they killed. **275** And he declared that otherwise I should pay the debt myself with my *philē psūkhē*, after many grievous sufferings. For he spoke revealing to mortals the wrath of malignant powers from underneath the earth, and telling of plagues: **280** 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 [Erinyes] that are destined to be brought to fulfillment [*telos*] from paternal blood. **285** 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. **290** And with his body marred by the brazen scourge, he is even chased in exile from his *polis*. 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 *mēnis*, though unseen, bars him from the altar; no one receives him with *tīmē* or lodges with him; **295** and at last, despised by all, bereft of *philoī*, he perishes, turned into a mummy [*tarikhos*], in a most pitiful fashion, by a death that wastes him utterly away.

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. **300** Besides the god's command, my keen grief [*penthos*] for my father, and also the lack of property, and that my countrymen, who have the greatest *kleos* of mortals, who overthrew Troy with a spirit [*phrēn*] that is renowned, should not be subjected so to a pair of women. **305** For he has a woman's mind [*phrēn*], or if not, it will soon be found out.

## Chorus

*anapests*

You mighty Fates [*moirai*], through the power of Zeus grant fulfillment there where what is just [*dikaion*] now turns. "For a word of hate **310** let a word of hate be said," *dikē* cries out as she exacts the debt, "and for a murderous stroke let a murderous stroke be paid." "Let him suffer [*paskhein*] what he himself has done," says the *mūthos* of three generations.

## Orestes

*strophe 1*

**315** 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? **320** Yet a lament that gives *kleos* to the Atreidai who once possessed our house is none the less a joyous service [*kharites*].

## Chorus

*strophe 2*

My child, the fire's ravaging jaw **325** does not overwhelm the *phrenes* of one who is dead, but sooner or later he reveals what stirs him. The murdered man has his dirge; the guilty man is revealed. **330** Justified lament for fathers and for parents, when raised loud and strong, makes its search everywhere.

## Electra

*antistrophe 1*

Hear then, O father, our expressions of grief [*penthos*] in the midst of plentiful tears. Look, your two children mourn you **335** in a lament [*thrēnos*] over your tomb. As suppliants and exiles as well they have sought a haven at your burial place. What of these things is good, what free of evil? Is it not hopeless to wrestle against doom [*atē*]?

## Chorus

*anapests*

**340** Yet the god, if it so pleases him, may still turn our sounds to more joyfully sounding strains. In place of laments [*thrēnoi*] over a tomb, a song of triumph within the royal halls will welcome back [*komizein*] a reunited *philos*.

## Orestes

*strophe 3*

**345** Ah, my father, if only beneath Ilion's walls you had been slain, slashed by some Lycian spearman! Then you would have left a good *kleos* for your children in their halls, and in their maturity you would have made their lives admired by men. **350** And in a land beyond the sea [*pontos*] you would have found a tomb heaped high with earth, no heavy burden for your house to bear—

## Chorus

*antistrophe 2*

—*philos* there below to your *philoī* who nobly fell, **355** a ruler with august *tīmē*, distinguished even beneath the earth, and minister of the mightiest gods who rule as *turannoī* in the nether world. **360** 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

*antistrophe 3*

No, not even beneath the walls of Troy, father, would I wish you to have perished [root *phthi-*] and to be entombed beside Scamander's waters **365** 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 **370** who

knew nothing of these present troubles [*ponoi*] should learn of their fatal doom.

## Chorus

*anapests*

In this, my child, your wish is better than gold. It surpasses great good fortune, even that of the supremely blessed Hyperboreans, for it is easy to wish. **375** 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

*strophe 4*

**380** This has pierced the earth and reached your ear<sup>4</sup> as if it were an arrow. O Zeus, O Zeus, who send doom [*atē*] as punishment, sooner or later, up from below onto the reckless and wicked deeds done by the hands of mortals. **385** And yet it will come to fulfillment [*telos*] for our father's sake.

## Chorus

*strophe 5*

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 *phrēn*? **390** Full against the prow of my heart the *thūmos* blows keen in rancorous hate.

## Electra

*antistrophe 4*

And when will mighty Zeus, blossoming on both his father's and mother's side, bring down his hand on them **395** and split their heads open? Let it be a pledge to the land! After injustice I demand *dikē* as my right. <sup>399</sup> Hear, O Earth, and you forces of the earth below [*khthonioi*] who have your own honors [*tīmai*]!

## Chorus

**400** And it is the customary law [*nomos*] that drops of blood <sup>401</sup> spilled [*kheîn*] on the ground demand yet more <sup>402</sup> blood. The devastation [*loigos*] cries out for the Fury [*Erinys*], <sup>403</sup> which from those who died [*phthinesthai*] before brings one disaster [*atē*] <sup>404</sup> after another disaster [*atē*].

## Orestes

*strophe 6*

**405** Alas, you sovereign tyrannies of the world below, behold, you potent Curses of

the slain, behold the remnants of the line of Atreus in their plight of helplessness, cast out from house and home, bereft of *tīmē*. Which way can we turn, O Zeus?

### Chorus

*antistrophe 5*

**410** But again my *philon* heart throbs as I hear this pitiful lament. At once I am devoid of hope and my insides are darkened at the words I hear. **415** But when hope once again lifts and strengthens me, it puts away my grief [*akhos*] and dawns brightly on me.

### Electra

*antistrophe 6*

To what could we more fittingly appeal than to those very griefs [*akhos* pl.] we have endured [*paskhein*] from the woman herself who bore us? **420** She may fawn upon us, but they are past all soothing. For like a wolf with its savage *phrenes*, the *thūmos* we have acquired from our mother is implacable.

### Chorus

*strophe 7*

On my breast I beat a dirge from Aryan lands in just the same fashion as a Cissian wailing woman. **425** 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

*strophe 8*

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

### Orestes

*strophe 9*

Ah me, all your deeds are done without *tīmē*. **435** Yet with the help of the *daimones*, and with the help of my own hands, will she not atone for the loss of *tīmē* that she inflicted on my father? Let me only take her life, then let me die!

### Chorus

*antistrophe 9*

Yes, and I would have you know he was brutally mutilated. **440** 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 outrageous loss of *tīmē* inflicted on your father.

### Electra

*antistrophe 7*

My father was murdered just as you say. But all the while I was kept sequestered, **445** deprived of *tīmē*, accounted a worthless thing. Kenned 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. **450** Hear my tale [*mūthos*] and inscribe it on your *phrenes*.

### Chorus

*antistrophe 8*

Yes, let it sink deep into your ears, with a serene [*hēsukhos*] dance-step of the *phrenes*. So far things are so. But you yourself be eager to resolve what is to follow. **455** You must enter the contest with inflexible wrath.

### Orestes

*strophe 10*

Father, I call on you; side with your *philo!*

### Electra

And I in tears join my voice to his.

### Chorus

And let all our company [*stasis*]<sup>5</sup> blend our voices to echo the prayer. Hear! Come to the light! **460** Side with us against our enemies!

### Orestes

*antistrophe 10*

Arēs will encounter Arēs; *dikē* will encounter *dikē*.

### Electra

O you gods, bring the plea to fulfillment with *dikē*!

### Chorus

A shudder steals over me as I hear these prayers. Doom has long been waiting, **465** but it will come in answer to those who pray.

*strophe 11*

Ah, inbred trouble [*ponos*] and bloody stroke of ruin [*atē*] without a tune [*mousa*]! Ah, lamentable and grievous sorrows! **470** Ah, the unstaunched pain!

*antistrophe 11*

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 *eris*. **475** This hymn is for the gods beneath the earth.

*anapests*

O you blessed powers below [*khthonioi*], hear this supplication of ours, and with favorable *phrenes* send forth to these children your aid for victory!

**Orestes**

O father, who perished by a death unbecoming a king [*turannos*], **480** grant in answer to my prayer the power [*kratos*] 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, **485** you will be without a portion of *tīmē*.

**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**

**490** O Persephone, grant us indeed a glorious accession to power [*kratos*]!

**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**

**495** Father, are you not roused by taunts such as these?

**Electra**

Are you not raising that most *philon* head of yours?

**Orestes**

Either send *dikē* as ally to your *philoī*, or grant us in turn to get a similar power [*kratos*] over them, if indeed after defeat you would in turn win victory.

**Electra**

**500** So listen, father, to this last appeal of mine as you behold these fledglings crouching at your tomb. Have compassion on a song of lament performed by a woman and by a man as well, and let not this seed of Pelops' line be blotted out: for then, in spite of death, you are not dead. **505** For children are voices of salvation [*sōtēriā*] to a man, though he is dead; like corks, they buoy up the net, saving [*sōzein*] 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 [*sōzein*] yourself.

**Chorus**

**510** In truth you have drawn out this plea of yours to your own content in showing honor [*tīmē*] to this unlamented tomb. As for the rest, since your *phrēn* is rightly set on action, put your fortune [*daimōn*] to the test and get to your work at once.

**Orestes**

It will be so. But it is not off the track to inquire **515** from what motive she came to send her libations, seeking too late to make amends [*tīmē*] for an irremediable experience [*pathos*]. They would be a sorry return [*kharis*] to send to the dead who have no *phrenes*: I cannot guess what they mean. The gifts are too paltry for her offense [*hamartia*]. **520** 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 **525** 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 come full circle [*telos*], where is it completed?

**Chorus**

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

**Orestes**

**530** 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 this vision is not without meaning!

**Chorus**

**535** 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**

**540** I pray to this earth and to my father's grave that this dream may come to its fulfillment [*telos*] in me. As I sort it out [*krinein*], it fits at every point. For if the snake left the same place as I; if it was furnished with my swaddling clothes; **545** if it sought to open its mouth to take the breast that nourished me and mixed the *philon* milk with clotted blood while she shrieked for terror at this *pathos*, then surely, as she has nourished an ominous thing of horror, she must die by *bia*. **550** 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 *philoï* their parts. Tell some what to do, others what to leave undone.

**Orestes**

It is a simple tale [*mūthos*]. My sister must go inside, **555** and I say solemnly [*aineîn*] that she must keep concealed this pact with me, so that as by craft they killed a man of *tīmē*, so by craft they may likewise be caught and perish in the very same snare, even as Loxias made the decree [*phēmē*], lord Apollo, the seer [*mantis*] who has never before been false.

**560** In the guise of a stranger [*xenos*], one fully equipped, I will come to the outer gate, and with me Pylades, whom you see here, as a guest [*xenos*] and ally of the house. Both of us will speak the speech of Parnassus, imitating [*mimēisthai*] the voice of a Phocian tongue. **565** And in case none of the keepers of the door will welcome us with a radiant heart on the plea that the house is afflicted with trouble by *daimones*, 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, **570** if in fact he is at home and knows?"

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: <sup>575</sup> Before he [= Aegisthus] can even say "Who is the stranger [*xenos*] and where is he from?" he will become a corpse. <sup>576</sup> That is what I will do to him, skewering him with my swift sword. <sup>577</sup> The Fury [*Erinyes*] that has no fill of slaughter <sup>578</sup> will have unmixed blood to drink as her third and crowning drink!

Now, Electra, you keep strict watch over what happens inside the house, **580** so that our plans may fit together well. And you [the Chorus], I solemnly say [*epaineîn*] to you: best keep a tongue that is *euphēmos*:<sup>6</sup> 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 [*agōn*] of the sword for me.

*Orestes, Pylades, and Electra exit.*

## Chorus

*strophe 1*

**585** Many are the sorrows [*akhos* pl.], dread and appalling, bred of earth, and the embrace of the sea [*pontos*] teems with hateful monsters. Likewise between the sky and the earth lights hung high in the air draw near; **590** and winged things and things that walk the earth can also tell of the stormy wrath of whirlwinds.

*antistrophe 1*

But who can tell of man's overweening *phrenes*, **595** and of the reckless passions of women hardened of *phrenes*, partners of the woes [*atē* pl.] of mortals? **600** Inordinate passion, having *kratos* over the female, gains a fatal victory over the wedded unions of beasts and men alike.

*strophe 2*

Let whoever is not flighty in his wits know this, when he has learned **605** of the device of a lit brand contrived by Thestios' heartless daughter:<sup>7</sup> 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, **610** and it aged in pace with him through his life to the day decreed by fate.

*antistrophe 2*

And there is in stories another murderous virgin to be loathed,<sup>8</sup> **615** who ruined a *philos* at the bidding of his enemies, when, lured by Minos' gift, the Cretan necklace forged of gold, she with her dog's heart **620** despoiled Nisos of his immortal lock as he drew breath in unsuspecting sleep. And Hermes overtook him.

*strophe 3*

But since I have recalled tales of pitiless ordeals [*ponoi*], it is the right time to tell of a marriage void of love, **625** an abomination to houses, and the plots devised by a

wife's *phrenes* 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, **630** and in woman a spirit that shrinks from audacious deeds.

*antistrophe 3*

Indeed the Lemnian evil<sup>9</sup> 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; **635** 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 cite without *dikē*?

*strophe 4*

But the keen and bitter sword is near the breast **640** and drives home its blow at the bidding of *dikē*. For truly the injustice of him who has unjustly transgressed the sovereign majesty of Zeus **645** lies on the ground trampled under foot.

*antistrophe 4*

The anvil of *dikē* is planted firm. Destiny fashions her arms and forges her sword quickly, and the famed and deeply brooding Fury [*Erinys*] is bringing the son into our house, **650** to requite at last the pollution of bloodshed long ago.

*Orestes and Pylades enter with attendants before the palace.*

### **Orestes**

Boy! Boy! Hear my knocking at the outer door! Who is inside? Boy! Boy! I say again, who is at home? **655** Again for the third time I call for some one to come out of the house, if there is welcoming [*philon*] to strangers [*xenoi*] by Aegisthus.

### **Servant**

Yes, yes, I hear. Of what land is the stranger [*xenos*], and whence?

### **Orestes**

Announce me to the masters of the house, for it is in fact to them that I come bearing news. **660** And hurry, since the chariot of night is speeding on with darkness, and it is time [*hōra*] for wayfarers to drop anchor in some house friendly to all guests [*xenoi*]. Tell some one to come forth who has authority [*telos*] over the house, the mistress in charge. **665** But the master would be more fitting, for then no delicacy [*aidōs*] in speaking makes words obscure: man speaks boldly to man and reveals [*sēmainein*] his meaning without reserve.

*The Servant withdraws. Clytemnestra appears at the door with a maidservant in attendance.*

### **Clytemnestra**

Strangers [*xenoi*], you have only to declare your need, for we have everything that suits this house: **670** warm baths, beds to charm away fatigue [*ponoi*], and the presence of honest [*dikaia*] 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 [*xenos*], a Daulian from Phocis. **675** 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 [*historeîn*] about my destination and told me his. He was Strophios, a Phocian—for as we talked I learned his name—and he said to me, **680** “Stranger, since in any case you are bound for Argos, keep my message in mind with the utmost *dikē* and tell his parents that Orestes is dead, and by no means let it escape you. Whether his *philoî* decide to bring him home or to bury him in the land of his sojourn, a foreigner [*xenos*] utterly forever, **685** 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. **690** But his parent should know.

### **Clytemnestra**

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, **695** and you strip me of *philoî*, utterly wretched as I am. And now Orestes: he was indeed prudent in saving [*komizein*] his foot from the mire of destruction, but now you portray as fled what was once the one hope in our house of a cure for its evil revelry [*bakkheia*].

### **Orestes**

**700** As for me, I am sure that with hosts [*xenoi*] so prosperous [*eudaimones*] I would rather have been made known and been treated as guest [*xenos*] for favorable news. For where is goodwill greater than from guest [*xenoi*] to host [*xenoi*]? Yet to my mind it would have been irreverent not to fulfill for *philoî* **705** a charge like this when I was bound by promise and hospitality [*xeniā*] pledged to me.

### **Clytemnestra**

But rest assured you will receive no less a reward than you deserve nor be the less welcome [*philos*] to this house: someone else might just as well have brought your message [*angelia*]. **710** But it is the proper occasion [*kairos*] when strangers [*xenoi*] who have been traveling on a long day’s journey should have their proper entertainment.

*To her attendant.*

Conduct him to the rooms where the men are lodged properly as guests [*xenoi*], him and his attendants here and his fellow-traveler, and let them be tended to there as is proper in our house. **715** I give the word [*aineîn*] that you do this as you shall be held to strict account. Meantime I will communicate this matter to the master of the house, and since we have no lack of *philoî* we will confer on this occurrence.

*All withdraw except the Chorus.*

### **Chorus**

Ah, *philai* handmaidens of the house, **720** low long will it be before we display the power that lies in our mouths to do Orestes service?

O revered earth, and revered barrow raised high that now lies on the royal corpse of the commander of the fleet, **725** 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 [*khthonios*], he who works in stealth, to direct this ordeal [*agōn*] of the deadly sword.

*Orestes' Nurse enters.*

**730** Our stranger [*xenos*], I think, is working something no good: for over there I see Orestes' nurse all in tears. Cilissian slave-woman! Where are you going? Why as you set foot in the palace gate have you grief as your unhired companion?

### Nurse

My mistress commands me to summon Aegisthus for the strangers in all haste, **735** 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 [*penthos*] she hid her laughter over what has occurred fortunately for her. But the utterance [*phēmē*] so plainly delivered by the strangers [*xenoi*] **740** means utter ruin for this house. I expect that when he hears it he will rejoice in his *noos* to know the tale [*mūthos*]. Miserable woman that I am! How the old unbearable troubles of every sort **745** 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. All the other troubles I bore patiently, but my *philos* Orestes, on whom I spent my life [*psūkhē*], **750** whom I received 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 that little thing, which doesn't yet have any *phrenes*, as if it were a grazing animal, of course one must, by following its twists and turns that lead toward a *phrēn*. **755** 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 be the seer [*mantis*] who anticipates these needs. Yet many a time, I think, having to wash the child's linen because of my own errors, **760** laundress and nurse had the same function [*telos*]. It was I who, with these two handicrafts, received Orestes from his father's hands. 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, **765** and he will be glad enough to hear this news.

### Chorus

How does she tell him to come prepared?

### Nurse

How prepared? 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**

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

**Nurse**

What? Are you gladdened by the present news?

**Chorus**

**775** 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 an inept seer [*mantis*] 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! **780** 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!

*She exits.*

**Chorus**

*strophe 1*

Now at my supplication, O Zeus, father of the Olympian gods, **785** 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 *dikē*. O Zeus, may you safeguard it!

*epode 1*

**790** O Zeus, set him who is within the palace before his enemies [*ekhthroi*], since, if you exalt him, he will gladly pay you with double and triple recompense.

*antistrophe 1*

Know that the orphaned colt of a *philos* man **795** 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.

*strophe 2*

**800** And you who within the house inhabit the inner chamber that exults in its wealth, hear me, you gods, who share your *phrenes* with us! By a new judgment [*dikē*] redeem the blood of deeds done long ago. **805** May aged Murder cease begetting offspring in our house!

*epode 2*

And you who occupy the mighty, gorgeously built cavern,<sup>10</sup> grant that the man's house may lift up its eyes again in joy, and that with glad eyes **810** it may behold from under its veil of gloom the radiant light of freedom.

*antistrophe 2*

May Maia's son,<sup>11</sup> as he with *dikē* should, lend his aid, for no one can better bring to fulfillment a sea-voyage on a favoring course, **815** when he is willing to 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.

*strophe 3*

And then at last with a loud voice we shall sing **820** a song of the deliverance of our house, the song that women raise when the wind has a fair setting [*stasis*], and not the shrill tune [*nomos*] of those who mourn: "Things are going well for the *polis*. **825** This grows to profit [*kerdos*] for me, for me, and calamity [*atē*] holds off from my *philoī*."

*epode 3*

But may you with good courage, when the part of action comes, cry out loud the name "Father" when she exclaims "Son," **830** and bring to completion the ruin [*atē*] that is beyond blame.

*antistrophe 3*

Raise up the spirit of Perseus<sup>12</sup> within my *phrenes*. And for your *philoī* below the earth, and for those above, exact a return [*khāris*] for their dire wrath **835** by working bloody ruin [*atē*] in our house and obliterating the guilt [*aitiā*] of murder.

*Aegisthus enters.*

### **Aegisthus**

I have come not unasked but summoned by a messenger. I heard startling news told by some strangers [*xenoi*] **840** who have arrived, tidings far from welcome: the death of Orestes. 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 these things are true [*alēthea*]? **845** 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 clear to my *phrēn*?

### **Chorus**

We heard the tale, it is true. But go inside and inquire of the strangers [*xenoi*]. The certainty of messengers' [*angeloi*] reports **850** is nothing compared with one's own interrogation of the man himself.

### **Aegisthus**

I wish to see the messenger [*angelos*] 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 *phrēn* that is endowed with eyes.

*He exits.*

### **Chorus**

*anapests*

**855** 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 **860** when the bloodstained 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 **865** and the wealth [*olbos*] of his fathers. Our god-like Orestes, with no one to assist him, is now to meet with two in such a contest. And may it be to triumph!

*A shriek is heard from within.*

### **Aegisthus**

Oh! Oh! O woe!

### **Chorus**

**870** Ah! Ah! Alas! What is happening? What is being accomplished for our house? Let us stand apart while the matter is being brought to fulfillment [*telos*] so that we may be considered not responsible [*aitioi*] in these ills. For the outcome [*telos*] of the fighting has just now been made formal.

*A servant of Aegisthus rushes in.*

### **Servant**

**875** 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, **880** 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 Clytemnestra gone? What is she doing? Her own neck, near the razor's edge, is now ready to fall, in all justice [*dikē*], beneath the stroke.

*Clytemnestra hurries in unattended.*

**Clytemnestra**

**885** What is this? What cry for help are you raising in our house?

**Servant**

I tell you the dead are killing the living.<sup>13</sup>

**Clytemnestra**

Ah! Indeed I have understood the utterance [*epos*], sorting it out from the riddling [*ainigma* pl.]. We are to perish by treachery, just as we committed murder. Someone give me a battle-axe, and quickly!

*The Servant rushes out.*

**890** Let us know if we are victors or vanquished: for we have come even to this point of evil.

*The door opens displaying Orestes standing over the corpse of Aegisthus, with Pylades nearby.*

**Orestes**

It is you I seek. This one here has had enough.

**Clytemnestra**

Oh no! My most *philos*, valiant Aegisthus! You are dead!

**Orestes**

You love your man? Then you will lie in the same grave, **895** and you will never abandon him in death.

**Clytemnestra**

Wait, my son! Have respect [*aidōs*], child, for this breast at which many times while sleeping you sucked with toothless gums the nourishing milk.

**Orestes**

Pylades, what shall I do? Shall I spare my mother out of *aidōs*?

**Pylades**

**900** What then will become in the future of Loxias' oracles [*manteuma* pl.] declared at Delphi, and of our sworn pact? Count all men your enemies rather than the gods.

**Orestes**

I judge you victor: you give me good advice [*par-ainesis*].

*To Clytemnestra.*

Come this way! I mean to kill you by his very side. **905** 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.

**Clytemnestra**

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?

**Clytemnestra**

**910** Fate, my child, must share the blame [*aitiā*] for this.

**Orestes**

And fate now brings this destiny to pass.

**Clytemnestra**

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.

**Clytemnestra**

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

**Orestes**

**915** I was sold in disgrace, though I was born of a free father.

**Clytemnestra**

Then where is the price I got for you?

**Orestes**

I am ashamed to reproach you with that outright.

**Clytemnestra**

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

**Orestes**

Do not accuse him who went through ordeals [*ponoi*] while you sat idle at home.

**Clytemnestra**

**920** 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.

**Clytemnestra**

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

**Orestes**

You will kill yourself, not I.

**Clytemnestra**

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

**Orestes**

**925** And how shall I escape my father's if I leave this undone?

**Clytemnestra**

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.

**Clytemnestra**

Oh no! I myself bore and nourished this serpent!

**Orestes**

Yes, the terror from your dream was indeed a prophet [*mantis*]. **930** You killed him whom you should not; so suffer [*paskhein*] what should not be.

*He forces Clytemnestra inside; Pylades follows.*

**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.

*strophe 1*

**935** As to Priam and his sons *dikē* came at last in crushing retribution, so to Agamemnon's house came a twofold lion, twofold slaughter. The exile, the suppliant of Delphi, has fulfilled his course to the utmost, **940** justly urged on by counsels from the gods.

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, **945** its grievous fortune!

*antistrophe 1*

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 a genuine [*etumos*] daughter of Zeus, breathing murderous wrath on her foes. **950** We mortals aim true to the mark when we call her *dikē*.

*strophe 2*

The commands proclaimed loudly by Loxias, tenant of the mighty cavern shrine of Parnassus, assail **955** with guileless guile the mischief now become inveterate. May the divine prevail: that I not serve *kakoi*! **960** It is right to revere the rule of the sky-dwellers.

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.

**965** 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 [*atē*]. The dice of fortune will turn as they fall and lie with faces all lovely to behold, **970** favorably disposed to whoever stays in our house.

*The doors open, revealing Orestes and Pylades standing over the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.*

### Orestes

Behold this pair of royalty [*turannis*], oppressors of the land, who murdered my father and ransacked my house! **975** They were majestic then, when they sat on their thrones, and are *philo*i to each other even now, as one may judge by their suffering [*pathos* pl.], 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.

*He displays the robe.*

**980** 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 integument for a man, that the Father may see— **985** 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 pursued this death, my own mother's, with justice [*dikē*]. I do not speak of Aegisthus' death: **990** for he has suffered, as is the custom [*nomos*], the penalty [*dikē*] prescribed for adulterers.

But she who devised this abhorrent deed against her husband, whose children she bore, a burden under her girdle, a burden once *philon*, but now an enemy [*ekhthros*], as it seems: what do you think of her? Had she been born a seasnake or a viper, **995** I think her very touch without her bite would have caused anyone else to rot, if boldness and *phrenes* without *dikē* could do so.

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: **1000** 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 [*xenoi*] and earns his living by robbery, and with this cunning snare he might kill many men and warm his own *phrēn* greatly.

**1005** May such a woman not live with me in my house! Before that may the gods grant me to perish childless!

### Chorus

*anapests*

Alas! Alas! Sorrowful work! You were done in by a wretched death. Alas! Alas! And also for the survivor suffering [*pathos*] blossoms.

## Orestes

**1010** Did she do the deed or not? 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 praise [*aineîn*] him. Now at last I am present to lament him, **1015** as I address this web that wrought my father's death. Yet I grieve for the deed and the suffering [*pathos*] and for my whole lineage [*genos*]. My victory is an unenviable pollution.

## Chorus

*anapests*

No mortal being shall pass his life unpunished, free from all suffering to the end. Alas! Alas! **1020** One tribulation comes today, another tomorrow.

## Orestes

So that you may know, I do not know how it will reach fulfillment [*telos*]; I think I am a charioteer driving my team far beyond the course. For my ungoverned *phrenes* are whirling me away overmastered, and at my heart fear **1025** is ready to sing and dance to a tune of wrath. But while I am still in control of my *phrenes*, I proclaim like a herald [*kērux*] to those who hold me *philos*: I hereby declare [*phēmi*] that not without *dikē* did I slay my mother, that father-killing pollution [*miasma*], that thing loathed by the gods.

And for the spells that gave me the courage for this deed **1030** I count Loxias, the *mantis* of Delphi, my chief source. It was he who declared that, if I did this thing, I would be beyond responsibility [*aitiā*] for evildoing. But if I refrained—I will not name the penalty; for no bowshot could reach such a height of anguish.

And now observe me, how armed with this branch and wreath I go as a suppliant, an outcast for the shedding of kindred blood, **1035** to the temple set square on the navel of the earth, the precinct of Loxias, and to the bright fire that is called imperishable [*aphthiton*].<sup>14</sup> To no other hearth did Loxias bid me turn. **1040** And as to the manner in which this evil deed was done, I charge all men of Argos in time to come to bear me witness. I go forth a wanderer, estranged [*apo-xenos*] from this land, leaving this repute behind, in life or death.

## Chorus

And you have done well. Therefore do not yoke your tongue **1045** to an ill-omened speech [*phēmē*],<sup>15</sup> nor let your lips give vent to evil foreboding, 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 slave women, look at them there: like Gorgons, wrapped in sable garments, **1050** entwined with swarming snakes! I can stay no longer.

## Chorus

What visions disturb you, most *philos* 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**

**1055** It is that the blood is still fresh on your hands; this is the cause of the disorder that assails your *phrenes*.

### **Orestes**

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

### **Chorus**

There is only one kind of purification [*katharmos*] for you: the touch of Loxias **1060** will set you free from this affliction.

### **Orestes**

You do not see them, but I see them. I am driven out and can stay no longer!

*He rushes out.*

### **Chorus**

Then may blessings go with you, and may the god watch with favorable *phrenes* over you and guard you with timely fortunes!

*anapests*

**1065** Look! Now again, for the third time, has the tempest of this clan burst on the royal house and come to fulfillment [*telos*]. First, at the beginning, came the cruel woes of children slain for food; **1070** next, the suffering [*pathos*] 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 savior [*sōtēr*], or shall I say a doom? **1075** Oh when will it bring its work to completion, when will the fury of calamity [*atē*], lulled to rest, find an end and cease?

### **Notes**

[ [back](#) ] **1.** The river-god of Argos.

[ [back](#) ] **2.** In the metaphorical sense of 'division'.

[ [back](#) ] **3.** Apollo.

[ [back](#) ] **4.** The ear of Agamemnon.

[ [back](#) ] **5.** In the metaphorical sense of 'division'.

[ [back](#) ] **6.** The word *euphēmos* means 'uttering in a proper way' when it is applied in

a sacred context; it means 'silent' when it is applied in a non-sacred context.

[ [back](#) ] **7.** Althaia was the daughter of Thestios, king of Aetolia, and the wife of Oineus. When her son Meleager was a week old, the Fates appeared to her and declared that her son would die when the brand on the hearth was consumed by fire. Althaia took the brand and put it in a chest; but when Meleager, grown to manhood, slew her brothers, she threw it into the fire and her son died. (See *Iliad* 9.529-99 for a different version of the Meleager story.)

[ [back](#) ] **8.** Nisos was besieged in his *polis* of Megara by Minos, king of Crete. Nisos' daughter Scylla, in love with Minos, cut from the head of her father the purple hair on which his life depended, and he was slain by the Cretans.

[ [back](#) ] **9.** The women of Lemnos, jealous of Thracian slave-women, killed their husbands, so that when the Argonauts visited the island they found no men.

[ [back](#) ] **10.** The inner sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi was a narrow cave or vault in which, over a cleft, stood a tripod covered by a slab on which sat the Pythia, priestess of Apollo.

[ [back](#) ] **11.** Hermes.

[ [back](#) ] **12.** Perseus, famous for slaying the Medusa, was the grandson of Akrisios, an earlier Argive king.

[ [back](#) ] **13.** The Greek admits either meaning: 'the dead are killing the living man' or 'the living man is killing the dead'.

[ [back](#) ] **14.** Within the sacred precinct of Delphi there was an 'eternal flame'.

[ [back](#) ] **15.** See the previous note on *euphēmos*.

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