The
Oresteia
Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and The Holy Goddesses

Aeschylus
A verse translation by
David Mulroy,
with introduction and notes

The University of Wisconsin Press
The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street, 3rd Floor
Madison, Wisconsin 53711-2059
uwpress.wisc.edu

3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden
London WC2E 8LU, United Kingdom
eurospanbookstore.com

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Printed in the United States of America

This book may be available in a digital edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Aeschylus, author. | Mulroy, David D., 1943- translator, writer of
supplementary textual content. | Container of (expression): Aeschylus.
Title: The Oresteia: agamemnon, libation bearers, and the holy goddesses / a
verse translation by David Mulroy, with introduction and notes.
Other titles: Oresteia. English | Wisconsin studies in classics.
Description: Madison, Wisconsin : The University of Wisconsin Press, [2018]
| Series: Wisconsin studies in classics
| Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017044983 | ISBN 9780299315603 (cloth: alk. paper)
| ISBN 9780299315641 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Aeschylus — Translations into English. | Agamemnon, King of
Mycenae (Mythological character) — Drama. | Orestes, King of Argos
(Mythological character) — Drama. | Electra (Greek mythological
figure) — Drama. | LCGFT: Tragedies (Drama)
Classification: LCC PA3827.A7 M77 2018 | DDC 882/.01 — dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017044983
Libation Bearers
Characters

ORESTES, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra
PYLADES, Orestes' companion, son of Orestes' guardian, Strophius of Phocis
CHORUS, elderly serving women
CORYphaeUS, the leader of the chorus
ELECTRA, Orestes' sister
DOORMAN, a palace servant
CLYTAEMESTRA, Orestes' mother
CLYTAEMESTRA'S ATTENDANT
CILISSA, an elderly servant, the infant Orestes' nurse
AEGISTHUS, Clytemnestra's lover
SERVANTS

(Like Agamemnon, this play is set before Agamemnon's palace. A stone slab in the foreground marks his grave, the focal point of the action during the first half of the play. Thereafter attention shifts to the palace itself and its main entrance doors. There is a statue of Hermes beside the entrance to the palace. ORESTES and PYLADES enter from a parodos and stand by the tomb. ORESTES' hair is braided. He holds a sheared lock in his hand.)

ORESTES:
Hermes, who rules the lower world and guards1 my father's powers, be my ally! Be my savior! Hear my prayer. I've come. I've reached [my native land, in search of just revenge] for one who died by violent female hands, done in by surreptitious treachery. [Arriving here, I sacrificed] a lock of hair to Inachus2 for raising me, and now I'll place a second mournful lock here on the grave in which my father lies and also call on him to hear and heed. Father, I wasn't here to mourn your death or bid farewell as your procession passed.

(ORESTES stops abruptly, hearing the CHORUS of elderly slave women approach.)

What's this I see? What female company approaches, all decked out in pitch-black robes? There's some misfortune driving them, but what? Has some new sorrow touched our family? Or do these women bring my father gifts,

1. The beginning of Libation Bearers is missing from the single manuscript on which our texts depend. Eleven lines preserved as quotations in other works are used by editors to reconstruct the prologue. The version printed here follows Alan Sommerstein's edition of the Oresteia, with slight alterations of my own.
2. Inachus (i'-na-kos), a small river near Argos and also therefore a river god.
libations meant to pacify the dead?
That's surely it. I see my sister there,
Electra, drawing near, conspicuous
in grief. Let me avenge my father's death,
O Zeus! Become my willing comrade now!
Come, Pylades, let's back away and learn
more clearly what this supplication means.

(ORESTES and PYLADES conceal themselves by returning
  to the parados. Led by ELECTRA, the CHORUS
comes out of the palace and assumes positions in the
orchestra facing Agamemnon's tomb. Each CHORISTPER
  carries a jar.)

CHORUS:
We left the house as ordered,
a libation-bearing throng.
The sound of flesh being beaten
accentuates our song.
Our cheeks are red from scratching
with bloody fingernails.
Our hearts must always pasture
where someone weeps and wails.
One hears the linen ripping,
the rending of our gowns,
and folds across our bosoms,
struck when Fortune frowns.

The house's hair is bristling
because an angry dream,
which seemed all too prophetic,
provoked a midnight scream,
like enemies invading
where womenfolk recline.

The apparition experts
declared the dream divine.
Some under ground, they stated,
are feeling sorely tried.
Their deadly wrath's directed
at those by whom they died.

Sweet mother Earth, the gods must hate
the eager wife who sent me here,
to turn away her evil fate
with courtesies that aren't sincere.

I fear to ask the following:
when blood is spilled and soaked the plain,
have men discovered anything
that washes off the ugly stain?

The hearth is wretched. Grief upends
the house. The sun has left the sky.
The darkness all men hate descends
on homes when masters die.

Once Reverence never knew defeat;
it pierced the public ear and heart,
a power one could not unseat,
but now it's standing far apart.

Fears are ever-wider spread.
Success is now a god and more.
But justice watches overhead.
She holds the scales and keeps the score.

She deals with some at once by day.
In other cases pains don't come
till twilight does, and then they pay, and midnight handles some.

Revenge congeals when bloodshed blends with fertile soil. Then ruin rends the guilty man. It never ends.

As there's no cure for maid profaned, so every stream would wash a stained, polluted killer's hands in vain.

Since gods ordained my city's fall, enslaving me, I celebrate my rulers' actions, one and all—those just, those not—and stifle hate.

My veils conceal my secret pain. I mourn for kings who died in vain. I'm numb with hidden grief.

Electra: My serving women, household managers, since you're attending these solemnities, be my advisors. Tell me this. What words are right while pouring these sepulchral gifts? What gracious prayer would Father like to hear? Should I maintain that Mother's gifts are from "a loving wife for her beloved man"? Or what about a normal prayer like this? "Repay the persons sending you these gifts with all the kindness . . . evil deeds deserve!" Or should I come in silence, shamefully, as Father died, and spill this fluid, make a muddy stream, like someone emptying a common jar without a backward glance?

I'm not so bold. There's nothing I can say that fits this offering on Father's grave. Take part with me in these reflections, friends. We have a common enemy at home. Don't hide your inward feelings out of fear. One destined end awaits us all, the free and those enslaved by someone else's hand. If you've some better counsel, let me know!

Coryphaeus: Your father's tomb's a holy place for me. I'll speak my honest thought as you command.

Electra: Do so, in keeping with your reverence!

Coryphaeus: Pray as you pour that Fortune aid "true friends."

Electra: Who are the friends that you'd entitle "true"?

Coryphaeus: First you, then all who hate Aegisthus next.

Electra: In other words, I pray for me and you?

Coryphaeus: I'll leave that up to you to figure out.

Electra: And should I add another to the group?
Corypheus:
Why, yes! Orestes, though he's far away.

Electra:
Well said! That isn't bad advice at all.

Corypheus:
Mention the murder next and those to blame.

Electra:
I need your guidance. Tell me what to say.

Corypheus:
Pray that some god or mortal man arrives.

Electra:
To judge the murderers or punish them?

Corypheus:
Just say: for deadly reciprocity.

Electra:
Is that a pious thing to ask of gods?

Corypheus:
Avenging injuries with evils? Yes!

Electra (praying):
Lord Hermes, greatest herald, messenger

3 Line 165 was probably omitted by mistake in the course of the manuscript tradition and then restored to the wrong position after line 164. Modern editors print it here, after line 123, where it fits well.

of higher gods and lower ones, be mine.
Instruct the ghosts of my ancestral home,
who dwell beneath the earth, and Mother Earth
herself, who bears all things and nurses them,
then takes her offspring back, to hear my prayers
while I dispense these lustral offerings,
praying to my father thus: O pity me!
And let Orestes light our house once more!
We might as well be servants sold abroad.
Our mother traded us and got a man,
Aegisthus—her assistant murderer.
I dwell in servitude, Orestes strays,
deprived of property that's rightly his,
and they exult in wealth your labors earned.
I pray the fated turns his journeys take
restore Orestes. Father, hear! For me,
I only ask to be more virtuous
than Mother was and act more righteously.
That prayer's for us. Regarding enemies,
father, I pray that your avenger comes
and that your killers die as they deserve.
I hide those words inside this friendly prayer.
An evil curse is all I have for them.
Arise! Bring noble gifts and allied gods,
bring Earth and Justice, source of victory.
To end my prayers, I'll pour libations now.

(Electra addresses the Chorus, then pours libations on her father's tomb while the Chorus performs a brief song.)

The custom is for you to ornament
the rite with mournful hymns that praise the dead.
CHORUS:
Shed splashing tears, the master’s dead.
He guarded well the good and true,
for all the evil things we dread
were healed by him or else withdrew.

Now that libations soak the ground,
O lord and master down below,
hear my heart’s unhappy sound:
O-O! O-O! O-Toi! Eeeo!

O set us free, some great warlord!
Wield weapons from your northern land,
the bows, the darts, the hilted sword
for use in fighting hand-to-hand.

ELECTRA:
Since Father has his muddy offerings now,
I’d like to share another bit of news.

CORYPHAEUS:
Do tell. My heart’s begun a fearful dance.

ELECTRA:
There’s hair atop the tomb, a curly lock.

CORYPHAEUS:
Some man’s? Or is a buxom maid the source?

ELECTRA:
The answer’s obvious to everyone.

CORYPHAEUS:
And might an older woman learn from youth?

ELECTRA:
Nobody could have cut it off but me.

CORYPHAEUS:
His other relatives are enemies. 4

ELECTRA:
Besides, the hair looks very similar . . .

CORYPHAEUS:
To whose? Speak up! We really want to know.

ELECTRA:
It bears a strong resemblance to my own. 5

CORYPHAEUS:
Is it a secret gift Orestes left?

ELECTRA:
The hair is very similar to his.

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4. Only relatives were likely to dedicate locks of hair at gravesites. The coryphaeus means that Clytaemnestra is the only other possible source, and she is too hostile to have sacrificed a lock of her hair.

5. Euripides’ Electra 513–546 ridicules the evidence that suggests Orestes’ presence to Aeschylus’ Electra. An elderly servant points out the absurdity of assuming that brother and sister would have identical locks of hair, to say nothing of identical footprints, or that Orestes would still be wearing a cloak that Electra wove for him as a child. Some commentators try to make sense of Electra’s suppositions, arguing, for example, that the footprints involved were identical in proportion, not size. I prefer to think that Aeschylus’ toleration of the irrational is an aspect of his authorial persona. I discuss this point in my introduction.
CORYPHAEUS:
Then did he dare to make the journey here?

ELECTRA:
He merely sent the lock for father’s sake.

CORYPHAEUS:
That explanation leaves me sad. It means his feet will never touch this land again.

ELECTRA:
A tidal wave of worry likewise washed across my heart. A piercing arrow struck, transfixing me, and ceaseless, desperate tears fall from my eyes like violent winter rains. But since I’ve seen these braided strands, can I believe they’re just some stranger’s offering? And yet the killer didn’t dedicate her hair. I mean my “mother,” as she’s called. The title doesn’t suit her godless heart. Well, then, dare I approve my other thought? Perhaps the dearest man of all, Orestes, left this gift, but no! That’s Hope deluding me. Phay-oo!
If only hair could talk and reason like a messenger, I wouldn’t waver so. I’d either learn to hate this twisted lock because a hostile head provided it, or it could weep with me, a kindred soul, honor my father, decorate his tomb. But look! Another piece of evidence!6

Footprints! Alike, resembling mine! No, wait! I see two pairs of feet in outline now—beside the man’s, some fellow traveler’s. I’ll measure one.

(She places one of her feet on top of a footprint on the ground.)

The heel and tendons both leave traces matching perfectly with mine! What agony I feel! I’m going mad! The gods to whom we pray know very well the violent storms by which we mariners are tossed, but if we’re fated to survive, a little seed could grow a giant tree.

(ORESTES steps forward from his hiding place.)

ORESTES:
Declare that gods have answered all your prayers and pray they do the same for future ones!

(ELECTRA reacts to ORESTES’ sudden appearance in a strangely calm manner, as if it was expected.)

ELECTRA:
Why? What’s the favor gods have granted me?

ORESTES:
Meeting with him you’ve often prayed to see.

6. Following the suggestion in Oliver Taplin, The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy, 337–38, I have transposed lines 201–204 to follow 211. The initial exchanges between Orestes and Electra flow more naturally in this way.
ELECTRA:
And who's this mortal man I've prayed to see?

ORESTES:
I've often heard you sing Orestes' praise.

ELECTRA:
But what has that to do with answered prayers?

ORESTES:
I'm he! You'll never find a better friend.

ELECTRA:
Please don't entangle me in some deceit!

ORESTES (smiling):
You think I'm weaving plots against myself?

ELECTRA:
You dare to laugh at my misfortunes now?

ORESTES:
If so, I'm mocking mine, since they're the same.

ELECTRA:
Should I be calling you Orestes then?

ORESTES:
You're slow to recognize me face-to-face, but when you saw a mourner's lock of hair and matched the tracks your footsteps left with mine,\(^7\)

your heart took flight. Those things persuaded you. Restore that hair to its position.

(He holds the lock against his own head, where some hair is missing.)

Look!
Your brother's hair, and not unlike your own!
Look at my cloak! The weaving's yours! You stroked the loom. You wove this frightening animal.

(ELECTRA reacts joyously. She and ORESTES embrace.)

Be still, however. Don't go mad with joy. Beware! Those nearest us are bitter foes!

ELECTRA:
O dearest treasure Father's house still owns! O rear-stained hope of better things to come! Take heart and win your patrimony back! O four-times-precious light! For I'm compelled to call you Father now, and I direct three other loves your way: the love I had for Mother, whom I justly hate; love for my sister, cruelly sacrificed; and you, my loyal brother, pride and joy. I only pray that Justice, Force, and Zeus, the third and greatest, stand beside you now.

ORESTES (praying):
Observe our circumstances, lord god Zeus! Behold the eagle father's lonesome brood, their sire dead in evil twists and coils, a fearsome viper's trap. Starvation racks

\(^7\) Lines 227–228 and 229–230 were transposed by earlier editors, a decision followed by Sommerstein.
the orphaned chicks. They're immature. They can't bring home the kind of spoil their father did. As you can see, Electra here and I are like the eaglets, orphaned progeny, and both exiled, deprived of rightful homes. Recall our father's sacrifices, how they honored you. If you permit his chicks to perish, where will you obtain the like? The signs you send to mortal men will cease to be believed. Come festive days, no ox will grace your altar, once this royal tree withers and dies completely, root and branch. Protect us! You can make a little house a palace, fallen though it seems to be.

Corypheus:
O children, you who've saved your father's hearth, be quiet, youngsters, lest somebody hear and mention all these things in idle talk to those in power—that I'd like to see covered in pitch and fatal flames some day!

Orestes:
The mighty oracle of Loxias, which ordered me to take this risk, will not betray me. He declared in piercing tones that constant storms would freeze my rebel heart unless I sought my father's murderers and murdered them in turn the selfsame way. As penalty for failure he declared I'd be destroyed by wrenching illnesses and sanctions worse than loss of property. He spoke of anger felt toward living men by those below. He cited dread disease, ulcers attacking flesh with hungry jaws, malignant sores corroding healthy skin, albino hair that sprouts where illness lies. He mentioned other things: the punishments that Furies born of fathers' blood inflict, the unseen bolt that's hurled by those beneath the ground, the fallen, vengeance-seeking kin. Then madness comes with nighttime's false alarms. One's roused, dazed, and driven out of town. His body's scarred by whips with metal prongs. He can't enjoy communal mixing bowls, partake in streams from which libations flow. No altar's safe. His father's wrath is there unseen. Nobody shares his bed and board. In time he dies dishonored, loved by none, a shrunken corpse done in by lethal fate. Who'd disregard prophetic words like those? But even if I did, there's work to do. For many motives merge: the god's commands, my father's bitter grief, the loss besides of my estate. That too distresses me. A pair of women shouldn't dominate those most distinguished citizens, those men whose celebrated spirit conquered Troy. That's right. I said two women. Time will tell.

Chorus:
Great Fates by appointment of Zeus, we seek a conclusion, the resting place Justice is straining to reach; for Justice cries out that a debt must be paid.

8. Line 285 is deleted by most editors, since it cannot be made to fit syntactically: "one seeing (someone) raising his bright brows in the darkness."
Let speech that is hateful be answered by hate, and murderous blows pay a murderous price. The words of antiquity ring in our ears: the deed must suffer the deed.⁹

ORESTES:
Unhappy father, tell me what I need to do or say
you lie so far away.

The worlds of light and dark diverge,
but eulogies are said
to please the Atreids who lie
out here among the dead.

CHORUS:
The fire's hungry jaw, my son,
does not destroy the dead man's will.
He shows his anger later on.
He's dead and mourned but dangerous still.

The wild, emotional laments occasioned by the homicide of fathers and begetters rouse just avengers far and wide.

ELECTRA:
O Father, hear our sorrows now,
see tears that flood our eyes,
two children visiting your grave.

⁹. Rather than saying that we should do unto others as we would have others do unto us, the chorus cautions that others will in fact treat us as we treat them; hence, we will suffer the same injuries that we inflict.
indeed, he was a king himself 
as long as he drew mortal breath.  
A royal scepter made of him  
an arbiter of life and death.

**ELECTRA:**

I’d not have wished for you to fall,  
dear Father, by the Trojan wall,  
buried with the rest.

the host that Trojan spears laid low  
beside Scamander’s stream. Oh no!  
I’d want your killers slain.

so even people far away  
and not involved would have to say  
they knew their deadly end.

**CHORUS:**

Such blessings, my daughter, are better than gold.  
They’re better than great, mythological luck.  
You speak of them. Yes. But that’s all you can do.  
Two lashes are landing with thuds on your back.  
Those who’d protect you are under the ground,  
while persons in power have blood on their hands.  
Of all the indignities you must endure,  
is any more hateful than that?\(^{11}\)

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11. A conjectural restoration of the closing sentiment. Some words have been omitted in the manuscript. Translated literally, the remaining words are: “of those hateful . . . but to children . . . more . . . has been.”

**ORESTES:**

That stabs my ear! By Zeus who sends the fury Ruin from below,  
so reckless villains make amends with punishment that’s sure but slow,  
parental debts will all be paid!

**CHORUS:**

A man struck down, a woman dead,  
that’s what I want to celebrate.  
Why keep the thought inside my head?  
My heart’s a windstorm full of hate.

**ELECTRA:**

Oh when will Zeus, almighty lord, 
brake their skulls with heavy fist?  
I’d have the nation’s faith restored 
and these injustices desist!

Hear, Earth and honored gods below!

**CHORUS:**

It’s surely the law that the spilling of blood 
requires additional blood to be spilled.  
Violent destruction cries out to a Fury.  
She comes from the side of the victims to add more ruin to previous ruin.

**ORESTES:**

Popoi-da! Kings of those below, 
poient dead men’s Curses, see!  
The house of Atreus stands so:  
helpless, homeless, her and me.  
Zeus, pray tell us where to go,  
having lost our family.

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Strophe 4 (380–385)

Strophe 5 (386–392)

Antistrophe 4 (394–399)

Antistrophe 3 (363–371)

Strophe 6 (405–409)

Anapests (372–379)

Anapests (400–404)
CHORUS:
To hear him mourning jolts my heart. My spirit’s dark. I’m in despair.
Then valor comes, distress departs, and suddenly a light is there.  

Electra:
What’s the perfect thing to say?
Speak of all that we endure
at Mother’s hands to our dismay?
Though she’s a skillful flatterer,
hers acts cannot be charmed away.
Our wolfish tempers come from her.

CHORUS:
I struck myself as though a Persian born
and wailed the way barbaric women mourn.
The beating was incessant. One could see
my outstretched hand attacking constantly.
My battered head was full of echoes of
the blows I struck from high, from high above.

Electra:
Ah! Hateful Mother, overbold—his funeral was bare.
He was a royal king, and yet
no citizens were there.
What arrogance! For even as
your husband was interred,

you let no tears be shed for him, and no lament was heard.

Orestes:
My father shamed in every way!
Oh, she will have a price to pay.
The gods and my two hands will see to that.
And once I’ve bidden her goodbye forever, I’ll be glad to die.

CHORUS:
His corpse was maimed, and you should know
that she’s the one who did that so
his death would be unbearable for you.
And now you’ve learned of all the sore indignities your father bore.

Electra:
You speak of Father’s rites. I had no share of family honors then. I wasn’t there, but scorned as worthless, locked away as though a rabid dog. I let my teardrops flow. I’d more of them than laughs. I wept apart. Inscribe these words of mine upon your heart.

CHORUS:
Do so! Permit her words to pierce your ears and calmly tread upon your heart. Those things were done exactly as she said. The king is watching eagerly. He’ll have no peace until

12. The end of this antistrophe is actually unintelligible as transmitted, and at least one word is missing: “But when once more a strong spirit displaced grief . . . toward a fair prospect for me.”
he sees the end. You'd better bring
a strong, unbending will.

ORESTES:
Father, come and help your friends! Strophe 10 (456–460)

ELECTRA:
Add to his my tearful plea!

CHORUS:
Theirs are prayers this group commends.
Hear! Arise triumphantly!
Destroy our enemies!

ORESTES:
Force fights with force and right with right. Antistrophe 10 (461–465)

ELECTRA:
O gods, dispose these matters well!

CHORUS:
Ab, the fears such prayers excite!
Fate takes its time, and time will tell.
It might respond to prayers.

Eeoo! for troubles families have and Ruin's raucous, bloody blow.
For mournful cares that can't be borne and pains that can't be stopped, eeeoo!

Now you yourselves must search your house Antistrophe 11 (466–475) for lint to staunch the bloody flow, enduring cruel and deadly strife.
So sing the gods who dwell below.

Blessed divinities under the earth, Anapests (476–478)
give heed to this prayer and your gracious consent by sending the children assistance for victory's sake.

ORESTES:
Father, who died deprived of royal rites,
I ask that I inherit your estate. 479

ELECTRA:
And Father, I've some things to ask as well:
marriage for me, and for Aegisthus death.13

ORESTES:
That way you'll be acclaimed at lawful feasts;
if not, you'll be despised in banquet halls where people offer savory gifts to Earth.

ELECTRA:
And I'll devote my dowry, all of it,
to pour libations come my wedding day
to honor this, your grave, before all else.

ORESTES:
Earth! send my father up to watch the fight!

ELECTRA:
Persephone, restore his comely strength! 490

ORESTES:
Father, recall the bath that murdered you!

ELECTRA:
Recall the hunter’s net that they devised!

ORESTES:
How you were trapped in fetters not of bronze!

ELECTRA:
Disgracefully indeed in scheming sheets!

ORESTES:
Won’t such indignities awaken you?

ELECTRA:
Won’t you awake and lift your cherished head?

ORESTES:
Send Justice forth to help, or else let us
secure the wrestling grip they used on you,
if you intend to win the second match.

ELECTRA:
And, Father, hear my final desperate prayer!

Behold! your nestlings importune your grave.
Pity us both, the male and female line!

ORESTES:
Do not exterminate Pelops’s seed!
Although you’ve died, cheat death by saving me!
[For children are a man’s immortal fame.
Like corks they keep the fishing net afloat
and save the lines from sinking out of sight.]  

14. Lines 505–507 are deleted as an interpolation by most editors.

ELECTRA:
Hear how we’re weeping, all for you. Your own
salvation lies in honoring our pleas.

CORYPHAEOS:
I do not fault your lamentation’s length,
the proper price for mourning long deferred,
but since your mind’s determined now to act,
go forth and learn what Fortune has in store!

ORESTES:
I will, but it’s in order first to ask
about the queen’s belated gifts. Are they
to compensate his fatal suffering?
What feeble courtesy in such a case!
I can’t invent the proper simile.
Her gifts are so much smaller than her crime.
In vain you’d empty every jar you own
to pay for one man’s blood, so people say.
So tell me what her motive was, if known.

CORYPHAEOS:
I know, my child, for I was present then.
The godless woman sent these offerings
in fear of dreams that startled her last night.

ORESTES:
Of dreams? Concerning what? Or can you say?

CORYPHAEOS:
She seemed to bear a serpent, so she said.

ORESTES:
A serpent! Such a dream’s significant.
Coryphaeus: She swaddled it as if it were a child.

Orestes: What did the infant reptile do for food?

Coryphaeus: She offered up her breast for it to suck.

Orestes: The loathsome creature must have hurt her teat.

Coryphaeus: The milk he sucked included clots of blood.

Orestes: How did the woman’s vision finally end?

Coryphaeus: She woke completely terrified and screamed. Then lanterns sunk in darkness came to life, since everyone was anxious for the queen. Later she sent these presents here. She hoped that somehow they’d eliminate her fear.

Orestes: I pray to Earth below and Father’s tomb that this dream vision come to life in me. I clearly fit the image rather well. For if the same location first revealed the snake and me, and it was swaddled too and sucked the very breasts that nourished me, mixing the kindly milk with clots of blood, and she let out an awful scream at that, it follows that she’s doomed to die because she nursed the dreadful beast, and I’m the snake who’ll be her killer. So the dream declares.

Coryphaeus: I like your view of that prophetic dream. So be it. Still, your allies need advice. Tell some to act. Have others standing by.

Orestes: The plan is simple. She’s to go inside (Indicating Electra.)

and there maintain the strictest secrecy, so those who killed an honored man by stealth will fall by stealth themselves and dying feel the noose that they employed. Apollo says it shall be so, and he has never lied. So I’ll arrive as though a foreign guest, baggage and all, outside the courtyard gates with this man, Pylades, a family friend and ally. We’ll affect the speech of Mount Parnassus, imitating Phocian men. Suppose a sullen doorman turns us back—it’s possible since evil dwells within. We’ll wait outside so people passing by the palace gossip, asking questions like: “Why does Aegisthus bar a suppliant, if he’s at home and knows the fellow’s there?” If I get through the courtyard gates and find Aegisthus sitting on my father’s throne, or he arrives and tries engaging me in talk, know this. The moment I catch sight...
of him, before he asks my native land,
I'll swing my flashing bronze and make a corpse.
Our family's bloated Fury will consume
a third libation, blood and blood alone.

(Addressing Electra.)

Now you attend to household matters well,
lest all these plans we're making come unglued.

(Addressing the Chorus.)

You others, please, when it's appropriate,
be silent. Otherwise, speak cautiously.

(Indicating the statue of Hermes by the palace entrance.)

As for the rest, I ask that Hermes watch
my struggles here and guide my sword aright.

(Electra exits into the palace. Orestes and Pylades
return to the parados.)

Chorus:
The earth sustains a multitude
of horrid beasts. Likewise the sea
conceals its own alarming brood,
and often injury

is caused by fire from the sky.
It strikes whatever's in its path,
winged or hoofed, and all de cry
a windsstorm's violent wrath.

But who could give the measure of
men's supreme audacity
or say how wild the shameless love
bold women feel can be?

It's ruinous. Allied with hate,
empowering the female mind,
it undermines the wedded state,
as beast and human find.

Let every man with thoughts well-grounded
know
the truth of this, which many stories show.

Think what the bold Althea, Thesitiad,
inflammatory female, planned and did!

She burned the log, coeval with her son,
age-mate from day of birth till life was done;

for once he gave her womb a parting scream,
is days were numbered by that flaming beam.

15. Althea (al'-the'-a), daughter of Thesitius (thes'-te-as; adj. thes'-te-id),
was the mother of the hero Meleager. On the day of his birth, the Fates told
her that her infant son would die when a certain log was completely burnt.
She retrieved the log from the fire, extinguished the flame, and kept it safe for
years. Meleager's claim to fame was that he killed the great wild boar of
Calydon. In the wake of that event, he quarreled with his uncles, Althea's
brothers, over the disposition of the spoils and ended up killing them.
Outraged, Althea threw the magic log into the fire. Meleager died, and
Althea killed herself. An early account of Meleager's death appears in an ode
by Bacchylides (5.93-155).
There is indeed another female who
was fit to hate, if what they say is true.

Thanks to a golden necklace she betrayed
her dear old man to death. The bloody maid:¹⁶

For gifts that Minos gave, that bitch would dare
steal her father’s death-preventing hair.

She did it while he slept, all safe and sound.
Next thing he knew, lord Hermes came around.¹⁷

In evil stories, Lemnos¹⁸ reigns supreme.¹⁹
Its infamy is everybody’s theme,

and “Lemnian” means anything that’s feared.
Thanks to its sin, the race has disappeared.

16. Nisos, the legendary king of Megara, was born with a lock of purple hair and could not be killed as long as he retained it. In time, the mighty King Minos (mi’-nus) of Crete laid siege to Megara. Unable to defeat Nisos by conventional means, he won over Nisos’ daughter Scylla with a golden necklace. She cut off her father’s hair, he was killed, and Megara fell. Aeschylus’ elliptical version is the earliest source for this legend. Ovid, in Metamorphoses 8.1–131, gives the earliest full account, in which Scylla betrayed her father because she had fallen in love with Minos.

17. Hermes guides the souls of the dead to the underworld.

18. Another instance of feminine evil. The women of Lemnos were said to have slain all the men of the island for consorting with Thracian concubines. The first detailed account is in Apollonius of Rhodes (1.609–626), but allusions in earlier authors, including Homer (Iliad 7.467–471), suggest that the story was well known at an early stage.

19. Here I follow Sommerstein, who reverses the order of 623–630 and 631–638 so that Clytemnestra culminates the chorus’s list of dangerous women.

for men dishonor what the gods despise.
Could all these stories be just baseless lies?

Regarding actions famously unkind,
a household-blighting marriage comes to mind,
together with a crafty female plan
against an august military man.²⁰

As fires in a hearth must be controlled,
beware a female temper growing bold!

When Justice lies abused,
kicked around in mud,
a piercing blade must spill
pulmonary blood,
for someone’s violated
custom’s strict decree
and shown their disrespect
for Zeus’s majesty.

Here Justice stands secure.
Her sword is honed by Fate.
A brooding Fury brings
a child to his estate,
polluted by the stains
of blood that linger yet.
He’ll wipe the stains away,
and pay the ancient debt.

(Öres tes and p ylades reenter via a parodos and
approach the palace door.)

20. The chorus is alluding to the murder of Agamemnon.
ORESTES (pounding on the door as he speaks): Hey, boy! I’m knocking at your courtyard door! 653

(ORESTES pauses for a moment, then resumes pounding.)

Hello! Who’s there? Is anybody home?

(ORESTES again pauses and resumes.)

Here goes my third attempt to summon help, in hopes Aegisthus welcomes foreign guests.

(He pauses and resumes pounding until the DOORMAN speaks.)

DOORMAN (from inside, over ORESTES’ pounding): I hear you, stranger! Tell me where you’re from.

ORESTES:
Just call the house’s masters. They’re the ones I’ve come to see. I’m bringing news to them. The dusky chariot of night draws near. We travelers need to find an anchorage that harbors every guest. So hurry up! I want to see the person who’s in charge, the lady running things, or better yet, her man—for in discussion modesty obscures your meaning. Men are less reserved with other men. Then meaning’s clear.

(The palace doors open, and CLYTAEMESTRA steps outside with her ATTENDANT.)

CLYTAEMESTRA:
What do you strangers need? For everything that prosperous houses ought to have, we do: hot baths, a bed to soothe your weary limbs, the company of honest gentlemen. But if you’re seeking something else that takes official action, I’ll inform the men.

ORESTES:
I’ve come from Phocis.21 I’m a Daulian.22 En route to Argos here, where I can rest my feet at last—I carried all my things myself!—an unknown man accosted me. He claimed to be a Phocian, “Strophius.” We talked about our journeys. Then he said: “Since you’re en route to Argos anyway, please let Orestes’ parents know he’s dead. They really must be told, so don’t forget. And bring instructions back when you return. Either they’ll want his ashes carried home or buried there, exiled eternally. An urn preserves his ashes now inside its metal walls. His death was duly mourned.” That’s all the stranger said. Do I by chance address Orestes’ legal guardian or relative? His father needs to know.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
I’m devastated, crushed, and overthrown!

21. Phocis (fō’-kēz), a district in central Greece where the oracle of Delphi was located.
22. Daulia (dō’-lē-ə; adj. dō’-lē-ən), a town in Phocis close to Delphi.
Old family curse, malicious wrestler!
You see so clearly, even distant things.
The arrows you release from far away
with pinpoint aim are stripping me of friends.
And now you’ve killed Orestes—even though
he’d sense enough to skirt this deadly swamp.
We’d hoped he’d be our frenzy’s antidote.
Well, call that hope just one more traitor now.

Orestes:
I only wish that I had better news
by way of introduction, seeing my hosts
so clearly blest as you. Does any bond
surpass the one uniting guest and host?
Yet I felt duty-bound to undertake
this heavy task. I told my friends I would,
and I was welcomed graciously by you.

Clytaemestra:
You’ll be rewarded no less worthily
for that, nor be considered less a friend.
We would have heard the news from someone else.
But now’s the time for daylong travelers
to have the comforts lengthy journeys earn.

(Addressing her attendant.)

Show him and his companion here the way
to where the men’s apartments are. Make sure
that their reception dignifies our house.
I’m holding you responsible for that.

(Turning back to Orestes and pylades.)

Meanwhile, I’ll see the master hears your news,
and since we haven’t quite run out of friends,
we’ll also be discussing it with them.

(All exit into the palace.)

Coryphaeus:
Dear women who serve in this house,
say when will we finally employ
the power of speech on behalf of Orestes.

Chorus (praying):
Your majesties, Earth and the mound
that covers the naval commander’s
royal remains, be attentive
and come to our aid, for it’s time
for deceptive Persuasion to enter
the fray and for underworld Hermes,
the lord of the night, to observe
these men in the deadly ordeal of the sword.

(Cilissa enters from the palace.)

Coryphaeus:
I think our guest is causing trouble now.
I see Orestes’ nursmaid full of tears.

(Addressing Cilissa.)

What brings you here, Cilissa, past the gates,
unhired grief your only company?23

23. Cilissa is not a paid mourner. Her grief is genuine.
CILISSA:
The queen instructed me to go and bring
Aegisthus back to see our visitors,
so he can hear their story man-to-man
in greater depth. Since there were servants there,
she tried to look distressed but barely hid
her inward joy at recent happenings—
so good for her, so evil otherwise.
I mean the strangers’ shocking news. And now,
Aegisthus! He’ll be overjoyed to hear
the story. What intolerable pain!
The ancient stew of grief inside this house
of Atreus is truly hard to bear.
It breaks my heart! But I have never yet
endured a sorrow comparable to this.
I soldiered on through all the other ones,
but dear Orestes gone! I gave my life
to him. I suckled him when newly born.
His shrill demands at night prevented sleep.
Nothing I tried accomplished anything.
A child’s irrational, an animal.
Its nurse’s guesses are the only guide.
A babe in diapers can’t express a thing:
its hunger, thirst, its need to urinate.
The immature intestine has no rules.
I tried to prophesy but often failed,
and had to be a washerwoman then,
an infant’s nurse and laundry maid in one.
Because I had that pair of homely skills,
the king entrusted him to me to raise.
So hearing that he’s dead was terrible.
And now I’m off to see this house’s bane,
and he’ll be very glad to hear the news.

CORYPHAEUS:
How did she order him to come equipped?

CILISSA:
How what? Ask that again—more clearly,
though.

CORYPHAEUS:
Was he to come with soldiers or alone?

CILISSA:
She said to bring attendants armed with spears.

CORYPHAEUS:
Don’t tell our hated master that, but say
to come alone “to ease the strangers’ fears.”
Do that as quickly as you can, and smile!
Good messengers assist a limping tale.

CILISSA:
You seem so happy. Why? The recent news?

CORYPHAEUS:
Zeus can reverse an evil wind, you know.

CILISSA:
But how? Our only hope, Orestes, died.

CORYPHAEUS:
Not yet. A bad diviner told you that.

CILISSA:
Say what? Have you got knowledge others don’t?
CORYPHAEUS:
Go! Follow orders! Be our messenger.
The gods watch over things they care about.

CILIASSA:
All right, I'll go and follow your advice,
hope for the best and gods' assistance too.

(Exit CILIASSA.)

CHORUS:
Father of the deities
of Mount Olympus, hear me please!
Let our masters find their way.
They yearn to see the light of day.
There's Justice in my every word.
Zeus, may you preserve it!

Zeus, let the man who's gone within
confront his enemies and win.
Let his reputation soar.
He'll pay you back two times or more.

The orphaned colt of your dear steed
is yoked to grief. Control his speed.
Establish rhythm in his run
until the race is finally won

24. Lines 785 and 786 are unintelligible as transmitted. The general sense is a wish that Orestes and Electra succeed. They are said to be yearning to see something. My conjectural reconstruction of the sense is based on Garvie, Choephoroi, 257, endorsed in Sommerstein, Oresteia, 311, that the word for light, phôs, was part of the original. For light as a metaphor for peace and prosperity, compare Agamemnon 522.

and we have seen the countryside
pass beneath his feet.

Friendly deities who guard
the house's wealth, pay heed!
Wipe blood away with just revenge
until this family's freed
from stains of ancient slaughter. Let
old murders cease to breed.

O awesome cavern's lord,25 we beg of you,
permit his house to raise its head and view
with happy eyes the light of freedom through
its murky veil.

And Maia's child26 should also help.
He wafis things on their way,
often bringing light to dark,
but also likes to play
with cryptic words, obscure by night
and just as dark by day.

At last to help the ship
that comes to set us free,
we'll cast a magic spell
to calm the winds at sea,
a female song like this:

25. By the process of elimination, the god invoked is probably Apollo, whose role in Orestes' story is so important. He is identified as one inhabiting a great and well-constructed stomion, the diminutive of stoma (mouth) used to denote cave mouths. The passage may refer to some feature of Apollo's temple at Delphi.

26. Hermes, the child of Maia (mâ'-a), a lesser goddess, and Zeus.
"How well the voyage ends! The gains belong to me, and Ruin spares my friends."  

Have courage when you start the deed, and if she calls you "Child!" exclaim: "That's right! My father's!" Then proceed. The act's a sin, but free of blame.

Show Perseus's heart, to those to whom you're bound, your ghostly friends below and those above the ground. Bring bloody ruin to the baneful Gorgon here. Pluck the seed of guilt and make it disappear.

(Enter Aegisthus.)

Aegisthus: I'm here! A messenger invited me. I hear some strangers brought the opposite of pleasing news: they said Orestes met his fated end. If so, our family has another blood-soaked burden hard to bear, while ancient murders sting and fester still. But is the strangers' story accurate?

27. See Garvie, Choephoroi, 268: "Such is the power of the spoken word that the Chorus think of it as effecting the action which more logically it merely accompanies. It has a ritual, even a magical, quality."

28. Perseus is the mythical hero who slew the Gorgon Medusa with help from Hermes.

or merely women's talk, just words that fly around, then finally fall to earth and die? Can you enlighten me in that regard?

Coryphaeus: Although we heard the story, you should go inside and ask the strangers. Second-hand reports can't vie with talking man-to-man.

Aegisthus: You're right. I'd better see the man and learn if he was there the day Orestes died or just repeats some hazy tale he heard. He won't deceive my sharp-eyed intellect!

(Exit Aegisthus into the palace.)

Chorus: O Zeus, tell me what I should say, tell me how to begin my appeal, what are the words I should use to signal my friendly intentions. For murderous blades are preparing their bloody endeavors, and either the Agamemnonian house will experience utter destruction, will perish eternally, or Orestes will celebrate freedom with fire and light and inherit the power to govern the city and the marvelous wealth of his father.

Divinely inspired, Orestes girds for a wrestling match,
a contest of two against one.
He sat through the previous round,
and now he will fight by himself.
May victory cap his attempt!

AEGISTHUS (within):
Eee! Eee! Otó otó!

CORYPHAEUS:
Oh, oh!
What's the noise from the house? What's occurred?
Let's give this troubled place a wider berth.
We need to look completely uninvolved.
The battle's done. It's been decided now.

(A SERVANT enters from the palace.)

SERVANT:
Oimoi! Oimoi! They've struck the master down!
Oimoi! again, a triple cry of grief!
Aegisthus isn't . . . any longer. Open up!
Come on! Be quick! Unbar the women's gates.²⁹
We'll also need a muscular young man,
but not to help the murdered one, of course.
Hello! Hello!
I'm wasting breath! They're deaf or sound asleep.
And where has Clytaemestra gone? And why?

The chances are her head's about to fall
beside a chopping block when Justice strikes.

(CLYTAEMESTRA enters from the women's quarters.)

CLYTAEMESTRA:
What is it? What's this shouting all about?

SERVANT:
Dead men are murdering the living now.³⁰

CLYTAEMESTRA:
Ah, so! I understand your riddling words.
We'll die the way we killed, by clever tricks.
Bring me a lethal weapon! Get an ax!
We'll either win or lose. So let's find out!
I've finally reached the peak of misery.

(Exit SERVANT frantically through the main doors. He passes ORESTES on the way out.)

ORESTES:
It's you I'm looking for. I'm done with him.

(Indicating the interior of the palace where he has killed AEGISTHUS.)

²⁹. The frantic servant's reference to the women's gates raises the possibility that the skênê's exterior had a second entrance reserved for women. It is equally possible and simpler to imagine that the women's quarters, with their locked entrance, were imagined to be inside the skênê and that the servant stood outside the main entrance shouting toward them.

³⁰. In the Greek, "the dead" is plural but "the living" is singular. The servant's meaning seems to be that the reputedly dead Orestes and Agamemnon's ghost are in the process of killing the living Aegisthus, but his words are ambiguous. They could be interpreted as a generalized observation: ghosts are killing living people these days. The Greek would even allow the subject and object to be interchanged: a living man, Orestes, is killing people who are as good as dead—first Aegisthus and next Clytaemestra.
CLYTAEMESTRA:
My dear Aegisthus, are you truly dead?

(PYLADES appears in the main doorway. Perhaps he has dispatched the servant who was looking for an ax for CLYTAEMESTRA.)

ORESTES:
Since he’s your lover, share a tomb with him. That way you won’t betray his lifeless corpse.

CLYTAEMESTRA (baring a breast):
No, wait, my child, my son, and pity this, the breast you sucked with infant gums while half asleep and drank the milk that nourished you.

ORESTES:
Well, should I spare her? Answer, Pylades!

PYLADES (emerging from the doorway):
Then what about Apollo’s oracles and binding vows exchanged at Pytho’s shrine? Offend all men before you anger gods.

ORESTES:
You win the contest, friend. That’s good advice.

(To CLYTAEMESTRA, while motioning toward the palace doors.)

You, follow me. I’ll kill you next to him, a better man than father while alive, or so you thought. You’ll join your lover there in death, while hating one you should have loved.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
I nursed you once. Let’s age together too!

ORESTES:
My father’s killer wants to live with me!

CLYTAEMESTRA:
Fate played a role in all those matters, child.

ORESTES:
And Fate has got another death in store.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
But don’t you fear a mother’s curse, my child?

ORESTES:
You bore me, then abandoned me to grief.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
That was an ally’s home I sent you to!

ORESTES:
You sold me cheaply, me a noble’s son!

CLYTAEMESTRA:
Then where’s the profit I received for you?

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31. Tragedians competing at the festival of Dionysus were limited in the number of speaking actors they could employ for financial reasons; the state paid the actors’ salaries. In composing the Oresteia, Aeschylus was limited to three actors. Hence, since actors one and two were needed to play Orestes and Clytaemestra, the third actor had to exit as the terrified servant and return as Pylades in order to speak his only lines in the play. He had less than a minute to change masks and personalities.
ORESTES:
The answer would humble us both.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
But weren't your father's follies just as bad?

ORESTES:
He labored mightily while you relaxed.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
It's hard for women—being without a man.

ORESTES:
Men work to feed their idle wives at home.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
You seem resolved to kill your mother, son.

ORESTES:
I'm not to blame. The killer's really you.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
Take care! Beware your mother's dogged curse.

ORESTES:
I can't escape my father's otherwise.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
I might as well be talking to a tomb!

ORESTES:
Yes. Father's blood decided everything.

CLYTAEMESTRA:
You! You're the deadly snake I bore and fed!

ORESTES:
Your dreams awoke prophetic fears. But now, for lawless murder, undergo the same!

(CLYTAEMESTRA, ORESTES, and PYLADES exit through the main doors.)

CORYPHAEOS:
I feel some pity seeing that couple fall, but since the bold Orestes is the one who's gained the peak of bloodshed, I approve. His family's light will not become extinct.

CHORUS:
As Justice reached the Priamids in time, with heavy-handed punishment for crime, so lion twins, twin votaries of war, have broken through King Agamemnon's door. His thoughts inflamed by god, the exiled man has crossed the finish line of Delphi's plan.

Raise up a cheer! The master's house is free from evil days and waste of property by that malignant pair. Oh horrid fate!

The crafty goddess Recompense was there— deceptive strategy her special care, but Zeus's daughter steered Orestes' hand throughout the battle. Men who understand her nature call her Justice, one who breathes destructive wrath against her enemies!

32. Recompense or Penalty personified (poinè in Greek) sees to it that people always pay for their sins, often by an indirect and unexpected route.
Loxias, who rules
the Delphic gorge, proclaimed
without deceit she'd been
deceitfully defamed.
But she's attacking now.
Her time has finally come.
God finds a remedy
for every evil done.
Heaven's government
must be revered.

Now we can see the light. You've loosed
your house's giant chain.
Dear house, arise at last—depart
the mud in which you've lain.

Soon our sovereign chief
will make his way outside,
once the house's hearth
is thoroughly purified
by rites of expiation,
purging deadly crimes.
He'll bring the fortunes back
we saw in former times,
with wholly friendly smiles
like gracious guests.\(^{33}\)

(Several servants enter from the palace carrying
what looks like a rolled-up rug.)

My listeners, there's evil yet to tell.
See what they trapped my wretched father with,
the thing that bound his hands and shackled feet.
Now this contrivance—what's the proper name?\(^{35}\)
A way to catch a hunted beast? A shroud?
A robe for bathing? No! The proper term's
a snare, a net, a foot-entangling gown.
A man who made a living swindling
his guests, relieving them of silver coins,
could use this cunning trap. He could amuse

34. A reference to the cliché that one can die happy (or is happy to die)
once some longed-for event has occurred; compare Agamemnon 539, 1610–
1611; Libation Bearers 438.

35. Orestes' speech from 973 to 1006 is somewhat incoherent. (Some
critics suggest that his madness has already set in!) Specifically, lines 997–
1004 seem clearly out of place. The preceding lines, 991–996, are a denunciation
of Clytemnestra. Instead of rounding that off with the statement that he
would never choose to live with such a woman (1005–1006), he reverts to a
horrified description of the robe she used in killing Agamemnon (997–1004).
Order seems to be restored by the suggestion in Garvie, Choréphori, 326–27,
of putting lines 997–1004 after line 982.
himself by killing everyone he met.  
You servants, coming close, unfold the thing
and show the people what a dread device[6]
it is for trapping victims hopelessly.

(The servants, stepping forward, unfold the robe, a
huge woolen garment. It was once brightly embroidered.
Those colors have faded, but not the bright red
bloodstains.)

Let Father see—not mine,

(Indicating Agamemnon’s tomb.)

but father Sun,
who sees all earthly things. Let him observe
my mother’s impure handiwork. Some day
he might bear witness, say her death was just.
I won’t discuss Aegisthus. He’s just paid
the customary price for lechery.
But she who made this loathsome thing to kill
the man whose babes her womb protected once—
her loving children, now her bitter foes—
what’s she? A snake? A moray eel perhaps?
Why not? Her very touch was poisonous,
so evil was her daring, twisted mind.
May no such woman ever live with me!
O gods, I’d rather die without an heir.

[6] The scholia to Euripides’ Orestes 25 attribute to Aeschylus a line saying, “a device that could not be resisted or stripped off.” M. L. West, in Studies in Aeschylus, 262, suggests that it belongs in this passage. The suggestion is adopted by Sommerstein, Oresteia, 338. My translation incorporates its sense in lines 983a–984.
he said. If not, I’d suffer horribly.
No archer’s shaft could reach that height of pain.
Take note of all my preparations now.
Wearing this wreath of olives, I’ll approach
Apollo’s sacred ground, the navel stone37
and its renowned immortal flame; and there
I’ll fight the charge of spilling kindred blood.
Apollo steered me toward that hearth alone.
I say to all the Argives: (keep) this tale
of evils (fresh in memory) and testify
for me (if) Menelaus (does return).38
Now I’ll become a banished vagabond,
in life and death, my reputation this:
(a loving son, I took my mother’s life).39

CORYPHAEUS:
You acted well! Don’t stain your mouth with foul
rebukes. Don’t utter such ill-omened words.
You freed the Argive state by cutting off
two serpent heads with great dexterity.

ORESTES:
Ah!
What sort of Gorgon women now appear

in pitch-black robes and wreaths of writhing snakes?
So many writhing snakes! I can’t stay here.

CORYPHAEUS:
What visions madden you? Stand still! Fear not!
You’ve won and earned your father’s fondest love.

ORESTES:
These aren’t mere visions tracking me. Oh no,
I see them clearly: Mother’s rabid hounds!

CORYPHAEUS:
Maternal blood still moistening your hands—
that’s surely why you’re feeling so distraught.

ORESTES:
O lord Apollo, how they multiply!
Their eyes are dripping ghastly tears of blood.

CORYPHAEUS:
Apollo’s touch alone will set you free
from suffering. The god’s your only hope.

ORESTES:
You cannot see the monsters hunting me.
I do. They’re getting close. I can’t stay here.

(Exit ORESTES terrified.)

CORYPHAEUS:
Farewell! Some kindly god watch over you,
with helpful bits of luck along the way!

(While chanting, the CHORUS marches back into
palace.)
CHORUS:
Three tempests have shaken this house, precipitous, perilous storms.
They howled and subsided. The first was the horrible slaughter of children.
A monarch’s ordeal happened next. The Achaeans’ commander and chief
was murdered while taking a bath.
And now, out of somewhere, a third salvation, or should I say “doom”?
Oh, where is the end, the completion, the day when the power of Ruin
will finally be lulled back to sleep?

The Holy Goddesses;
*formerly, Eumenides*