

The Oresteia of Aeschylus

The Libation Bearers

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The Libation Bearers

Dramatis Personae

Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra

Pylades, his friend

Electra, his sister

Chorus of foreign serving women

A servant (doorkeeper)

Clytemnestra, now wife of Aegisthus

Cilissa the Nurse

Aegisthus

A follower of Aegisthus

Various attendants (all silent)

Orestes	<p>Lord Hermes, guide to the dead and guardian of my father's realm be now my safeguard and companion in answer to my prayers. For I have come back home, returned to this land of mine</p> <p>Here at the mound of my father's tomb I speak aloud to him, that he may hear and mark my words...</p> <p>one lock of hair I dedicate to Inachus who reared me, and here a second lock to mark my grief...</p> <p>I was not here to grieve your fate in person, father, nor did I stretch out my hand to carry out your corpse.</p> <p>But what is this I see? What is this group of women that hurries along all dressed in robes of black? What chance event should I imagine to have taken place? Or does some fresh disaster tyrannize the house? Perhaps these women bring my father gifts and offerings to pour for him as please the dead? That is the truth and nothing else; for there I do believe I see Electra. Yes, my sister shares their haste and grief. Zeus, grant that I may exact a vengeance for my father's death and be my willing ally in this task. Friend Pylades, come - let us clear their path, that I may learn what is the meaning of their enterprise.</p>	<p>10</p> <p>20</p>
Chorus		
[str.a.]	<p>Sent from the house I am come to bring drink offerings, beaten with harsh-handed blows. Bright my cheek, bloodied red, rent, fresh-furrowed with nails, finger nails, heart nurtured through life on a diet of pain. Ragged and rent are my clothes; torn to shreds in my grief are the garments I wear that cover my breast, ripped apart in disaster.</p>	<p>30</p>
[ant.a.]	<p>For Phoebus, clear-sighted reader of dreams, breathing a grudge out of sleep to stir the hair with fear, gave vent to a midnight cry from the intimate, innermost part of the house, fearful and heavy it fell inside the women's place and the readers of dreams, inspired by the gods, declared that those beneath the earth were unhappy still and harboured a grudge against their murderers.</p>	<p>40</p>

with me, I pray you advise me in this as to how to proceed;
 for what shall I say when I pour out these gifts at the grave?
 How can I speak any words of good will as I pray to my father?
 Am I to say I bring the well loved husband gifts as from
 a loving wife, when that woman is in fact my mother? 90
 I have not the heart for that and do not know what I
 can say when I pour this sacred mixture on my father's tomb.
 Or am I to speak the words laid down by our tradition:
 please grant a due repayment to those who have sent
 these garlands, a gift that is worthy of - their crime!
 Perhaps I'll keep unholy silence so to match the way in which
 my father died as I pour the offerings for the earth to drink,
 then hurry off, like someone who's thrown the rubbish out,
 my eyes averted as I hurl the bin away.
 Be sharers in this my pondering, my friends. 100
 We share a common enemy inside the house.
 Do not conceal your inner thoughts through fear of anyone.
 For fate and doom await the man who is free as well as
 the slave, who is subdued beneath another's hand.
 Please, speak, if you have anything to add to what I've said.
Ch. Although I feel a sense of modesty before your father's tomb,
 still I will speak from the heart, because of your request.
El. Please speak, inspired by the awe you feel for my father's grave.
Ch. Make offerings while speaking holy words - to the kindly ones.
El. But whom shall I call friends of those that are kin to me? 110
Ch. Primarily yourself and anyone else who hates Aegisthus.
El. I shall address these prayers then only to the two of us.
Ch. At last you understand the truth, give tongue to it yourself.
El. Is there anyone else I can add to our side?
Ch. Be mindful of Orestes, even though he's far from home.
El. That is true and you do well to remind me of that.
Ch. And be mindful of those that are guilty of murder, pray....
El. For what shall I pray? Advise and lead my youthfulness.
Ch. some god will come against them or some mortal man....
El. To be a judge, do you mean, or an agent of vengeance? 120
Ch. To put it simply you need someone to kill them in return.
El. And is it right that I should ask this of the gods?
Ch. Of course it is right to pay an enemy back with suffering.
El. Most mighty herald both of things below and things above, [164]
 Lord Hermes, guide to the dead, help me and, I pray,
 proclaim to the gods below to hear my plea that they
 should keep a watch upon my father's house and on
 this life-giving land which nurtures all and which
 in turn at the last receives the bounty of all
 to herself. And, as I pour these holy offerings to the dead,
 I call on my father, speak direct to him: 'Have pity on me 130
 and make my dear Orestes a flaming torch inside the house!

For as things are we are as purchased slaves and exiles
because of our mother, who turned you her husband over for
Aegisthus, the man who shared in the guilt of your death.
I live the life of a slave myself. Orestes lives an exile from
his fortune and his place, while they in arrogance
enjoy the high life of luxury at your expense.
I beg you bring Orestes home, both with your blessing and
good will. Hear me, father, hear my words I beg of you!
And grant that I may be a woman far more sensible than her, 140
my mother, also that my hand shall be more dutiful.
These are my prayers on our behalf, but as for them,
our enemies, father, I demand an avenger should appear
to kill in turn with justice those who first killed you.
Yes, this is the substance of the curse I lay before you,
wishing down this evil fate upon their heads.
Attend us in our noble enterprise above the earth,
along with the gods and land and justice crowned with victory.'
I pour these offerings and offer up my prayers.
The portion that is yours is to make my plea bear fruit, 150
by raising up a threnody in honour of the dead.

Ch. Let fall the plashing tear that fades and dies
for my master dead,
let it fall upon his grave, this touchstone of evil and good,
an object of reverent, unspeakable awe,
as we honour the dead with our gifts. So hear me, my lord,
hear as I pray from the heart's dark depths.
Ahhhhhh!
Would that some man might show himself, strong
with his spear, 160
someone to free the house! The back-bent Scythian bow
to hand! A war-god ready to fill the air with his shafts
from close range, backed up with the blows of his sword!

El. So, now, my father, the earth has her offerings to drink;
but see, friends, what is the meaning of this new sign? 166

Ch. What can you mean? My heart is dancing with fear.
El. I see a fresh cut lock of hair upon the grave.
Ch. Is it from some man or from some narrow waisted girl?
El. There's evidence here that anyone may see and understand. 170
Ch. Then speak so my age may learn from your youth.
El. This hair was cut from no other head but mine.
Ch. All else who's hair might match this lock of grief are enemies.
El. And yet there is a man whose plumage likely matches mine -
Ch. Who's hair can you mean? I want to know.
El. It is very like to my own hair to look upon.
Ch. Then has Orestes sent a secret offering?

El. This hair would seem most like to his of all mankind.
Ch. How has he had the nerve to journey here? 180
El. He sent the severed lock of hair to please our father's shade.
Ch. Then what you say still brings tears quickly to my eyes,
 if he will never ever set his foot upon this land.
El. I feel surge swells of grief within my heart also
 and am slashed to the quick with the sword's cross blow.
 Drought-breaking streams of tears fall from my eyes,
 unprepared as they were for this troublesome flood,
 but inspired by the sight of this hair. For how should I
 expect some other citizen to overcome his fear? Yet it
 was not my mother - mother only in name, possessed
 of an unholy loathing of me and Orestes - who cut 190
 this hair from her head. She it was killed Agamemnon.
 Yet how shall I claim without reserve that this
 is indeed a sign from the man I love the most in all
 the world, Orestes? - I am the fawning slave of hope.
 Oh!
 I wish this lock of hair might take the role of messenger,
 and speak in kindness to dispel the doubts that shake me;
 for then it might clearly recommend I hurl it from me, if
 it had been cut and taken from an enemy, or declare itself
 as kin, as one that suffered, sympathized with me,
 and was a gift and token of respect upon my father's tomb. 200
 Like sailors adrift in a storm we are whirled about upon
 the eddies of fate: but if we are to gain salvation's shore,
 the great beginning may come from clutching at such a straw.
 And here are footprints too, a second indication - and
 they also are a match for the prints my own feet make.
 There are in fact the prints made by two sets of feet,
 those of the man himself and those of some companion.
 The shape of the heels and the total outline of the foot
 fit into the very same patterns my feet make. 210
 My mind is filled with confusion and pain.

Orestes

You must pray for a happy future now, announcing that
 the gods have brought your former prayers to pass.
El. But why? For what have I won from the gods in fact?
Or. The answer to your prayers is here before your eyes.
El. And do you know the one what was the object of my prayers?
Or. I know Orestes often stirred your soul to prayer.
El. Well, then, how have I been successful in my prayers?
Or. I am the man himself. You have no need to seek me more.
El. What is this web of guile you weave around me, friend? 220
Or. If guile it is, whatever web I weave must be against my self.
El. Your wish it is to mock at my distress.

Or.	At mine then too, if I should mock at yours.	
El.	Shall I address you then as if you were in fact Orestes?	
Or.	Although you see my very self, you still are slow to understand. You have seen this lock of hair upon the tomb and have traced my tracks upon the path I trod so that your heart took wing at the thought you'd seen a sign of me. Now place this lock of hair against the place I cut it from. See how it matches here your brother's head, yours too. And look at this weaving, work of your own hand, observe the marks of the weaver's blade, the pattern of beasts... Control yourself! Control the joy you feel in your heart! For I know our closest kin are bitter enemies to us.	228 227 230 229 231
El.	You are the one I love the most of all our father's house, the one that was my seed of hope through all my tears. Trust in your strength and set our father's house to rights! You are the dearest object of my sight, four times the dearest, since I must talk to you as to a father and you show to me too a mother's love, as substitute for her I loathe - and loathe with total justice on my side - and the love of a sister, Iphigeneia, piteously killed; You always were the brother that I trusted, the only one who honoured me. May Might and Right and a third in line with them Lord Zeus, the greatest of them all, align themselves with us.	240
Or.	Zeus, Zeus, attend and be an observer of these things! Behold the orphaned offspring of the eagle sire, him dead in the toils and coiled entrapments of a deadly snake. The pangs of hunger crush the abandoned young. There is no father's prey brought to the nest for the adolescent chicks. I say this is my fate and that of Electra too - all plain for you to see - children robbed of their sire, both sharing an exile from their house. Destroy us, children of that murderess and of the man who honoured you so greatly, and then from whose like hand will you gain the feast of gifts that are your due? Destroy the eagle's children and how then ever again will you send signs to men that bring belief? Once this royal trunk decays in its entirety, your altars then will have no pleasing daily feasts of cattle beasts. Preserve it. From a tiny seed you have the strength to raise a mighty house, however much it now seems desolate.	250 260
Ch.	My children, saviours of your father's hearth and home, be silent now, my little ones, in case some person hears the sound of your joy and betrays it all to those who have control. I would that I might see them dead and burning in the flames, flesh bubbling in the pitch.	

- Or.** Apollo's oracles, big in strength, will not abandon me;
they ordered me to take this risk, they shouted much 270
aloud and promised storms of pain to gnaw beneath
the heart's moist warmth, if I should not pursue
the guilty ones, and said that I should kill
the killers in return, following the fashion that they set,
bull-savage at the loss of my wealth and my place.
Apollo also said that I might pay the penalty instead, inside
my very soul, and suffer many evil punishments.
There would bursts of anger from the disgruntled dead
beneath the earth, he said, and plagues to curse mankind,
that battened on the flesh with savage teeth 280
and ulcers that consumed the very quick of us;
the hair grows thick and white upon the leprous sores.
And other assaults the Furies would make, he said,
things brought to life from my father's flowing gore..
[an avenging spirit]
that all unseen itself observes its victim's grimaces of fear
in the dark, and the dark arrow-glance of the dead
that comes in supplication from our fallen kin,
and madness and empty terrors in and of the night stir
and shake a man confused and drive him from his city,
outraged in his flesh with the brazen whip of despite. 290
For such as him there is no share in the common bowl,
nor in wine offered and poured to the dear and the dead,
but the visible rage of his father made manifest thrusts
him away from the altars. No man will welcome him beneath
his roof, in time he will die without honour and friends,
decayed, done to death by the fate that destroys him utterly.
And should I not be swayed by forecasts such as these?
But were I not - swayed by them - there is still a job to do.
A single thing is brought about by many things: a man's desires,
the prompting of the gods, a father's heavy hurt. 300
The loss of my fortune aggrieves me and the fact that|
the citizens here, the most noble of men, the men
who sacked Troy in pursuit of the right now walk
in subjection as slaves to two women - for he
is all woman, or, if he is not, we shall very soon see.
- Ch.** Great messengers of Fate, bring all to pass in the way
of Zeus, the self-same way
that Justice shares.
Let hostile curse come to pass in place
of hostile curse. Justice at work cries out 310
aloud for that which is owed.
Pay back those deeds of blood and death

with death and blood. 'The agent must suffer',
cries out the age old truth.

Or. O father, dread father, what words should I speak,
[str.a. what things must I do
to summon you up from afar with my prayers,
from your detention of sleep,
to light up our darkness with light?
A lament is a glorious thing in itself, 320
men say, to gratify those of the house,
the chiefs of the house.

Ch. My child, the flame's devouring tooth cannot
[str.b. defeat the dead man's mind,
his anger flares in after time;
the dead man has his funeral song,
the criminal is revealed.
the just lament of sons
for fathers seeks him out, 330
and all is filled with restless grief.

El. Hear me, my father, also in my turn,
[ant.a. and hear my song of tear-filled pain.
Two children raise their voices in lament,
beside the burying place.
Your tomb makes welcome
supplicants and exiles both alike.
What here goes well, what here is free of ill?
Must ruin be unconquered?

Ch. The god may yet, should he so wish, give cause 340
to raise a sweeter sounding song from all of this;
In place of dirge and threnody beside the tomb
a song of victory inside the royal halls
to escort the newly conjured friend.

Or. I would you had been cut down
[str.c. beneath the walls of Troy, spear-struck,
my father, by some Trojan hand;
a legacy, then, of fame in the house for us,
a life fit to turn admiring heads,
a foreign tomb, high-heaped, for you across the sea,
but easy to bear for your kin...

Ch. A friend among friends nobly dead in that place,
[ant.b. a leader of men, full of honour,
respect in the grave,
vassal only to those most high

- of the dead, the kings in that place;
for he was a king while he lived, 360
a king among those who fulfilled
the rod-bearing duty of judge among men.
- El.** Not even beneath the walls of Troy
[ant.c.] would I have had you die, my father, to find,
with the rest of the spear-slain host,
a burial place beside Scamander's stream;
I had rather the ones
who had killed him had died in that way,
far away, so that none of their kin
might find that alien tomb 370
and so learn of their pain.
- Ch.** These prayers that you make are worth more than gold
and worth even more than the fabulous luck of the men
of the North. As if it were all up to you!
But the sounding crack of the double-edged lash,
it is come and help it is coming already
from under the earth, while the hands of those
hated ones that hold sway over us are unclean;
the lot of the children improves.
- Or.** This arrives, penetrating
[str.d.] the ear, arrow-like. 381
Lord Zeus, Zeus, send from below
belated destruction upon them,
on this wretch among men who dared all with his hand,
accomplish it, please, for my father.
- Ch.** Let me be the one to shrill out the end, bitter end,
[str.e.] of that man with a spear
in him, and of the woman,
her death. For why should I hide
the urge taking wing in my heart,
keen headwind of rage blowing hard 390
at the heart of my soul, bitter burden
of loathing, of hate.
- El.** And when will lord Zeus,
[ant.d.] in his strength, hurl down the force
of his thundering hand to splinter their skulls?
A pledge of good faith to the land!
I am begging for right out of wrong!
Hear me, Mother Earth, and those honoured below!

- Ch.** Fresh blood for blood, spilled red to splatter
the ground with its drops, is the call
of the law; death cries out for Vengeance
to flow from the formerly dead and to bring
a new round of death upon death. 400
- Or.** You, kings of the dead below,
[str.f] assembled mighty curses of the dead, observe,
see for yourselves the helpless remnants of our house,
dishonoured, deprived of Agamemnon's home.
Where, where, Lord Zeus, can anybody turn?
- Ch.** My heart within me churns and churns again
[ant.e.] to hear this pitiful cry.
And then I lose all hope,
as the dark descends on my heart
at your words.
Yet when I see your strength, fresh springs
of confidence remove distress
in the light of your fair epiphany. 411
- El.** But what can we say to succeed? Recount
[ant.f.] griefs suffered at, yes, a parent's hand?
Well, let her fawn, our griefs are not assuaged. 420
Wolf-savage my heart admits no fawning on
my mother's part.
- Ch.** I beat my breasts in pain and grief, an Arian I,
[str.g.] or a Kissian mourner in style,
a handbattering and flurry of blows you could see
in succession, the gifts of my hand,
from above, from below, they surge and break over
my head, all bloodied and beaten and bowed.
- El.** Oh, cruel mother, all daring you,
[str.h.] you dared to carry him out in cruel, lonely pomp, 430
a king without his people,
a king without due mourning,
unwept for you buried our king.
- Or.** You speak the ultimate disgrace.
[str.i.] And she will pay for it,
to gratify the gods below,
to gratify my hands.
But let me kill her, then let me die.
- Ch.** I want you to know that she cut off his hands,

[ant.i.	and buried him so; this she did to impose on your life in her madness a burden not to be borne. You hear of a father's grief and disgrace.	440
El. [ant.g.	You have described my father's fate, and I stood apart in disgrace, nothing worth. I was kennelled apart, a rabid bitch pup, I surrendered too soon to hysterical tears and poured out the floods of my imprisoned grief. Hear and inscribe these things in your heart.	450
Ch. [ant.h.	Inscribe it! Take it through your ears to join the silent process of the brain. Yes, this is the story to date, the rest learn yourself in your rage. And bring to your fight a passion implacable.	
Or. [str.j. El. Ch.	Ally yourself with your dear ones, my father, I pray. And I raise in addition my voice full of tears. There is a groundswell here of murmurous assent; Come into the light of day and hear, Join forces against your enemies.	460
Or. [ant.j. El. Ch.	War march with War and Right with Right. O gods, incline your heads in justice at our prayers. A shudder overtakes me when I hear their pleas. That which is fated has long been in waiting, let it come now to answer their prayers.	
[str.k.	O trouble inbred and discordant stroke of blood and lust. I grieve awful distress that cannot be borne; I grieve the insatiable pain.	470
[ant.k.	There is a salve for the things in the house, that lies inside themselves, no outside aid, but through the agency of cruel bloody strife; yes, this is my song to the gods below.	
Or.	Hear us, blessed deities of Earth, send the help and victory we want in answer to our children's gracious prayer. You died a death that was unkingly, father; grant me then, I pray, the power to rule your house.	480

El. I too, my father, want the same; I need from you
 [the strength to bring Aegisthus' doom upon him].
Or. For only so will you receive the feasts men make
 by custom, otherwise you'll be unhonoured at
 sweet feasts by steaming offerings on the ground.
El. And I will bring and pour you a bridal drink,
 brought from the wealth that is mine in the house;
 above all things I shall honour your grave.
Or. O Earth, raise up my father to witness our fight.
El. Persephone, restore to us his beautiful strength. 490
Or. Remember, father, the bath which stripped you of life.
El. Remember the casting net which they devised.
Or. The fetters that snared you were not made of bronze.
El. Yes, shameful the shrouds that they plotted for you.
Or. Arouse then yourself in the light of these slights.
El. Lift up erect that head I love the most in all the world.
Or. Send Justice to be a help to those you love,
 or show us in turn the kind of holds they used,
 if indeed you wish to turn your defeat to victory.
El. And, father, hear this last appeal I cry aloud: 500
 behold your children seated here beside your tomb
 and pity our cries, both male and female alike.
Or. Do not allow the seed of Pelops' house to fail,
 for although dead your strength has not yet died.
 [A dead man's children may keep alive and safe
 his reputation; as corks keep afloat the fishing net,
 preserving the flaxen lines from the deep.]
El. Attend us! In your interests we make these complaints
 that you too might be saved, if you honour our words.
Ch. I approve of the speech you have made, and its length 510
 that honours the tomb and the grief long unwept.
 But the time is now ripe - for your mind is set
 ready to act - to move and test the will of god.
Or. Quite so; yet it is relevant to our chase, I think, to ask
 the reason why she sent these offerings and why
 too late she honours a victim that knows no redress.
 The dead take no account of meagre offerings
 like these. I cannot guess the meaning of these gifts
 that are too small by far to match her foolishness.
 Pour offerings for all of time to expiate one crime 520
 of blood - the labour is in vain. One's reason has it so.
 If you have the answer tell me; for I wish to know.
Ch. I know, my boy, for I was there. Shaken
 by dreams and nightborn terrors, the godless
 woman came to send these offerings of drink.
Or. Do you know the dream that you may tell it right?
Ch. According to her she dreamed she gave birth to a snake.

Or. What was the end point and climax of her tale?
Ch. As if it were a child she wrapped it tight for sleep. 530
Or. This new born snake, what food did it want?
Ch. She said in the dream she gave it her breast.
Or. And was the nipple left undamaged by the incubus?
Ch. It sucked a clot of blood in with the milk.
Or. No empty dream, a vision from her husband this.
Ch. She came screaming and shivering out of her dream.
All through the house many torches were lit,
aroused from their blindness to comfort the queen;
and so she sends these pitiful offerings now,
in the hope they'll cut out the source of her pain.
Or. I pray to the earth where I stand and my father's grave 540
that this dream is a sign of my future success.
I read it so it fits and all makes perfect sense:
if the snake came out of the self-same womb as I
and coiled itself in my own swaddling clothes,
engorged itself upon the breast that gave me suck,
mixed gouts of blood with my mother's milk,
while she cried out in fear and in pain,
it follows then that she who raised this fearful beast
must die in violence; and I shall be the monstrous snake
that kills her, even as this dream prescribes. 550
Ch. I hope your reading of these things is accurate, that they
might turn out so. Now lead your friends through the rest,
explaining to each what they must and must not do.
Or. It is simply told: Electra is to go inside and keep
the secret of the plans we all have made,
so that, even as they killed an honourable man
by stealth, by equal stealth they will be ensnared
and die in the self-same trap foretold by Loxias,
our Lord Apollo, a prophet never known before to lie.
We two will come to the palace's outer gates, 560
adopting the guise of travelling men, of foreigners,
but guest friends both and spear friends of the house.
We both will speak like men of Phocis, mimicking
the accent of the Phocians and their dialect.
There might not be a cheery keeper of the gate to give
us welcome, since the house is cursed by gods.
Accordingly we'll wait outside the house until
some passer by grows puzzled enough to ask:
'Why does Aegisthus keep the suppliants outside
the gate, if he is in the house and knows they're here? 570
And once I've crossed the threshold of the courtyard gate
and find that man upon my father's throne, or if he has
to come to give me audience - be sure he will - to ask
me questions face to face, why then before he says

'Well, stranger, and where are you from?' I'll lay him dead
upon the floor and swiftly he'll embrace my sword.
And then the Fury, never starved of death, will drink
for a third time a draught of undiluted blood.
So you keep a careful watch inside the house,
that the close-knit plans we've made might come to pass; 580
and you I urge to keep a careful silence, to hold
your peace or say just what you ought to help our case.
As for the rest I ask the god close by to stand his watch
and guide aright the struggles of my sword.

Ch. Many the monsters nursed
[**str.a.** by the earth, a burden of dread,
the arms of the deep are alive with creatures
of death, they draw near,
lights grow and glow in the sky,
in mid-air one might tell 590
of winged things and things that crawl on the earth,
caught up in the wrath of the storm.

[**ant.a.** But can they match the mind
of man that dares all limit,
or the lust that risks all in the desperate heart
of womankind, infatuation's mate
and sleeping partner for men?
Unlovely the powerful urge,
corrosive of women it conquers the marriage yoke, 600
a lust common to men and brute beasts.

[**str.b.** Know, all able to learn, unafflicted by lightness
of mind, of Thestius' child,
an infanticide, harshly
devising her plan,
an incendiary she,
yes, Althaea,
burning to ashes the brand,
glowing red, the age of her son it had been,
from the time of his
birth- cry, made from the womb, 610
to the day that was set by his fate.

[**ant.b.** Another woman of myth it is proper to hate
is Scylla, deadly,
she killed for the enemies' sake
her dear man,
seduced
by the trinkets, fashioned

- in gold, Minos' gifts,
despoiling Nisus' hair,
ever-living, by guile, 620
breathing deep in his sleep, bitch cunning,
but Hermes escorts her now.
- [str.c. I am mindful now of crimes as grave,
a union unlovely, untimely,
accursed in this house,
of womanish schemes and devices
against her man, a warrior in arms,
against her man they launched their
vengeful, unholy attack.
I honour a house where the passion is spent,
the hearth, the docile woman have cooled. 630
- [ant.c. In the tale of horror the Lemnian crime holds
pride of place, notorious and despised
by the folk. Our crime is compared
in its turn to the Lemnian crime, it's so vile.
The race is destroyed,
despised among men, polluted, abhorred.
For no man respects what is loathed by the gods.
Which of these tales I collect makes no point?
- [str.d. But the sword, near the lungs,
bitter-sharp, piercing through, makes the wound, 640
Justice, the cause - their cause was unjust - just
the cut, as they're trod underfoot,
transgressing in sin the universal
majesty of Zeus.
- [ant.d. The anvil of Justice stands firm;
the blacksmith Destiny beats out the brazen sword;
a child has been brought to the house
to expiate the past abomination
of blood spilled long ago, is brought by the 650
gloriously deep-thinking Erinys.
- Or.** Slave, slave! Hear me! My knock at the gates!
Is anybody there? Slave, slave! Again, is anybody home?
A third time now I summon you from the house,
if indeed Aegisthus' house is kind to visitors.

Gatekeeper

All right, all right, I hear! Who are you, where you from?

Or. Please tell your masters in the house that I
 have come to see them and I bring them news.
 Make haste, night's dusky chariot is near,
 the hour is come for travellers to drop 660
 their anchor in some house hospitable to visitors.
 Let someone in authority come out to see
 us, the woman of the house - though I'd prefer the man;
 for modesty inhibits one's conversation with
 a female. Men speaks boldly always to
 their fellows and make their meaning crystal clear.

Clytemnestra

Friends, tell me what you need. For in this house
 is everything appropriate for visitors,
 hot water, beds to charm away your weariness 670
 and all the things a friendly face might need.

If you have business of a more deliberative kind,
 men's work, I mean, I'll pass it on to them.
Or. I seek your hospitality, a Daulian, from Phocis;
 I was hurrying on my way to Argos, carrying
 my own bags, to this very place where I'm resting my
 legs right now - I met a man, unknown to me as I
 to him; he asked my destination, told me his,
 he was a Phocian (Strophius by name, I learned), and said,
 'If by any chance you're on your way to Argos, friend, 680
 remember, please, be sure, to tell his parents there
 that Orestes is dead and don't let it slip your mind.
 If his relatives decide to bring his body home
 or bury him in perpetual exile where he lived,
 then forward their requests to me. His ashes are enclosed
 inside a brazen urn and he has been well mourned.'
 So much as I heard so have you; but still I do
 not know if I'm speaking to those in charge and whose
 concern this is. It is only right his father knows. 690

Cl. Your words have stormed us, body and soul!
 O the curse on this house! An antagonist bitter to match!
 Many things you observe which your arrows, well-aimed,
 bring down, when we thought them well out of your reach.
 Is it your wish to destroy me, strip me of all that I love?
 And now it's Orestes at last - and he was well advised
 to lift his feet from this quagmire of death -
 but the curse in the house is now rampant with joy
 and has marked down for death our last hope of relief.

Or. I had rather become known to hosts as rich as you 700
 through news far different from these griefs,
 and so be entertained accordingly. For what warmer tie
 exists than that between a guest and his hosts?

Cl. But my conscience and a sense of what is right
ensured that I fulfilled this duty for my friends,
since I was bound by a promise and a guest-friend's due.
You will not find yourself less worthily rewarded, friend,
nor will you be any less welcome in the house.
Someone else would have come to bring this same news. 710
And now is the time for those who have journeyed
all day on the lengthy road to reap their reward.
Take the strangers into the men's apartments, you,
and welcome them, along with any slaves they have;
be sure they there have all that is due them in
this house. I will call you to account for this.
I will share this news with those that hold sway
in the house and, since I have no lack of friends, we will
consider just what to do in the light of this turn of events.

Ch. Well then, my friends, fellow slaves in the house,
when shall we open our mouths 720
to sing strongly the strength of Orestes?
O mistress Earth, hallowed mound
of the tomb, pressing down on the corpse
of our king and commander,
give heed to us now and give help;
the time is now ripe for Persuasion,
descending to join us with Hermes, guide
of the dead in the dark of the night, to watch
over this conflict of death by the sword.

It seems the stranger's deadly plan's at work; 730
For I see, Cilissa, Orestes' nurse in tears.
Why are you wandering out here by the gates, Cilissa?
It seems a thankless grief is keeping you company.

Nurse

My mistress has ordered me as fast as I may
to summon Aegisthus here to meet these strangers, so
that when he comes he might learn their new-told message first
hand and man to man. he simulated anguish while the slaves
were there, concealing her glee at what was done
behind her eyes, things good for her perhaps, 740
but making disaster complete inside the house,
according to the tale the strangers bluntly told.
And when that man of hers hears this story his heart
will delight in the news. Oh, wretch that I am!
I long have found intolerable the ancient mass
of pain and crime enacted in this house of Atreus
and still it hurts the heart within my breast,

but never yet have I had to endure a grief like this.
For I patiently put up with all the normal tribulations
of a nurse ... ah, dear Orestes, you wore me to a shadow,
when I took you from your mother, brought you up... 750

the number of times you roused me from my bed at night
with your demands! And many the tasks, so pointless now,
you made for me, you mindless little monkey you! I had
to raise you, though, of course, for that's a nurse's job!
For but a baby in your swaddling bands you couldn't say
if you were hungry, needed a drink of water or had wet
yourself - a baby's tummy's a law to itself!
Although I tried to guess your needs I often got it wrong,
I fear, and had to wash your napkins -
a nurse fulfilling the washerwoman's role. 760

Yes, I grew skilled in these double tasks,
when I took charge for her of Agamemnon's child,
but I have learned that he is dead and so I grieve.
I'm hurrying off to find the master of this house, the house
that he's defiled - no doubt he'll be glad to get this news.

Ch. And how did she say that he should come?

Nu. How? What do you mean? Please, make yourself clear.

Ch. Did she say to come with a guard or on his own?

Nu. She ordered him to bring spear-carrying guards.

Ch. Omit that from our hated master's message, but rather tell
him with a show of cheerfulness to come in confidence and
alone, as quickly as he can, to learn good news. 770

The hidden agenda's success depends upon the messenger.

Nu. But are you pleased at what has been announced?

Ch. I am if Zeus someday will cause a wind-shift in our luck.

Nu. But how? The hope Orestes gave is lost from the house.

Ch. Not so! You are much mistaken to hold such a belief.

Nu. What's that? Do you have some other information?

Ch. Just go and give your message, do what you've been told.

The gods take care of what is their concern. 780

Nu. Well, I will go and be persuaded by your words in this.

May it all turn out for the best with the help of the gods.

Ch. Zeus, father supreme of gods and men, now grant,

[str.a. I pray, our masters of the house
good fortune, that we might see
again a sober rule through their
endeavours.

In search of justice I make my total plea, lord

Zeus, the justice you should guard!

- [mesod.a. Set justice in action against
the enemies within the house,
lord Zeus, and exalting justice
you will in gladness gain
a double and triple reward. 790
- [ant.a. Observe this young man that we love,
but a colt, in harness to a chariot
of griefs, centre him on
the track, make solid
the rhythm of those to be saved,
ensure that we see him, stretching his stride
to accomplish this course.
- [str.b. And gods that inhabit the innermost house,
delight in its storeroom of wealth,
you listen and sympathies too... 801
Come
Expiate the blood of crimes long past
with verdicts fresh and new-shed blood,
let ancient slaughter breed in the house no more.
- [mesod.b. Apollo, who lives in a temple huge and solid,
vaulted, allow Orestes' house to raise its head
in joy, allow the blazing light
of freedom to shine in the eyes
of his friends, after the veil of the dark. 810
- [ant.b. Hermes, son of Maia, join in justice with us,
and willingly guide
our task to fruition.
By his words he can lighten our darkness,
though his words are sometimes unclear,
as he masks our eyes with dark
in the night, and yet is no clearer by day.
- [str.c. And then already a famous
song of homecoming we'll raise,
for the house, a woman's song
sung, our breath coming free, fair-set,
shrill as the wind- should our voyage go well!
This will be to my gain I am sure, so long as disaster
comes not on my friends. 820
- [mesod.c. Be bold when you come to the moment to act,
shout down her appeals
to you, "Child!", hear rather, "Father"

and bring to an end
all blameless this curse. 830

[ant.c. Keep up your heart,
be both a second Perseus and a friend
to those beneath the earth and those
above, your cloak a shield against
the Gorgon's bitter glance within,
impose a penalty of blood and supervise
the ruin of the guilty one.

Aegisthus

I have come in answer to the summons I received;
I hear that certain strangers have arrived
with news that brings no pleasure in its train - 840
something of Orestes' fate? For this would be
a heavy load of bloodshed for the house to bear once more,
were fresh blood spilt to fester, poured upon the old.

But how shall I assess the living truth of this?
Or are these merely frightened women's words
that leap in the air, but fade and die to no effect?
Pray, tell me something of this news to clarify my mind.

Ch. We have heard the news, but go inside and learn
from the strangers yourself. Hearsay is hardly as
convincing as hearing the report first hand. 850

Ae. I wish to see the messenger and question him,
to learn if he was present at the death himself,
or if blind rumour is the source of his report.
My mind and eyes are clear. I shall not be deceived.

Ch. Zeus, Zeus, what can I say, how may I begin
this prayer, how appeal to the gods for help,
how speak to gain
at last the prize to match my wish?
For now the blood-splattered swing of the axe
that butchers men is on the brink 860
of wreaking total destruction for ever upon
the house of Agamemnon's child, or he
will kindle at last the flame and light of liberty,
restore the great and ancestral wealth
in his rule of this town.

Orestes, lonely challenger, is on the brink
of such a bout with his twin enemies,
Orestes, sent by god. May victory be his!

Ae. Ah! Ah! No, no, noooooo.....agh! 870

Ch. - Ah yes! Ah yes! Good, yes, good!!
- How do things stand? What is done in the house?

- Whatever is done, stand we aside
that we may seem quite innocent of any crimes
within; for the result of the fight is unclear.

Servant

I grieve and grieve again for my master's fate;
and again a third time I add to my cry of grief.
Aegisthus is no more. As quickly as you can
now, open up! Slide back the bolts that bar
the women's rooms: we'll need a man's great strength
though - though he's past helping now, of course. 880

Wake up, I say!

I address deaf ears, calling on those who waste their time
in sleep. Where's Clytemnestra? What is she doing?
For she is now at risk, her neck close by the butcher's block
and blade, at risk from retribution's blow.

Cl. What is the matter here? What is this appeal to the house?

Se. I say the dead have risen up to kill the ones who live.

Cl. I understand the hidden meaning here. We will be
destroyed by guile, as we destroyed our enemies.
So quickly someone give me an axe that will cleave
a man; let's see if we shall inflict defeat, or be defeated. 890
For here I have come at last to the critical point.

Or. You are the one I am looking for. His business is done.

Cl. Oh, no! Aegisthus, my own dearest life, you are dead.

Or. You love the man? Well, you will lie in the very same
grave. Fear no betrayal of this dead man.

Cl. Restrain yourself, my son, my baby, feel shame before
this breast at which your infant gums drowsily mumbled
and so often suckled the life-giving milk from the teat.

Or. Oh, Pylades, what should I do? For matricide brings shame!

Pylades

What then will be the future for Apollo's oracles of truth, 900
what then will be the fate of oaths that are fairly sworn?
Make enemies rather of all mankind than of the gods.

Or. You have persuaded me and your advice is sound.
You, follow me, I want to cut you down beside your man;
you thought more of him than my father while he lived.
Then sleep with him in death, since this is the man
you love, and since you hate the man you ought to love.

Cl. I brought you up and wanted to grow old with you.

Or. You killed my father and yet would live with me?

Cl. It was Fate, my son, that was in part the cause of that. 910

Or. And Fate it was that has brought about your death today.

Cl. Have you no proper horror of a mother's curse, my son?

- Or. No, once you gave me birth you hurled me into misery.
 Cl. I rather sent you off to refuge in an ally's house.
 Or. Though my father was free I was shamefully sold.
 Cl. Where then is the price that I was paid for you?
 Or. I am ashamed to make my taunt - explicit.
 Cl. I would your father's peccadilloes caused you equal shame.
 Or. Find no fault there! He fought while you lounged at home.
 Cl. It's painful for women to be kept from their men, my son. 920
 Or. The husband's labour keeps the woman safe at home.
 Cl. You seem to be set on killing your mother, my son.
 Or. It is you that has brought this fate upon yourself, not I.
 Cl. Watch out and beware of your mother's avenging hounds.
 Or. And how shall I escape my father's, should I fail in this?
 Cl. I might as well waste my living tears upon a grave.
 Or. My father's fate defines this destiny for you.
 Cl. Yes, this is the snake I birthed and reared.
 Or. The terror from your dreams was prophetic indeed.
 You killed whom you should not, now suffer accordingly. 930
 Ch. I feel distress, yes, grieve at the fate of even this pair.
 Yet since Orestes has endured to bring to a climax this
 succession of blood and death, then this is our choice,
 that freedom's face is not utterly lost in the house.
- [str.a. __ At the last justice came to Priam's sons,
 a heavy revenge;
 twin lions have come to Agamemnon's house,
 twin gods of war.
 The exile has come to the end of his course,
 steered by the Pythian oracles, 940
 inspired by the hints of the god.
- [mesod. Sing loud the song of joy for our masters' house,
 its escape from distress and wastage of wealth
 at the hands of two criminals, freed
 from the curse of ill luck.
- [ant.a The avenger has come, his battle plan hidden
 in guileful revenge;
 the daughter of Zeus was the guide of his hand
 in the fight - Justice we call her
 by name, yes, we 950
 that enjoy her good luck __
 that breathes dark death down on our foes.
- [str.b. Apollo, lord of the cave, huge in the ground
 on Parnassus, uplifted his voice in guile no guile;
 all has come true - to her cost

- at the last, and it always holds sway, somehow, the divine,
 so no ground is conceded to those who do wrong,
 the power residing of old in the sky is worthy of awe. 960
 Yes, now we may look on the light.
- [mesod. Yes, now we may look on the light, and the curb
 on the house has been taken away.
 Arise at last, you halls - too long, too long
 have you lain, prostrate on the ground.
- [ant.b. Soon time that works out all things in its train
 will enter the gates of the house, will drive out
 the pollution entire from the hearth,
 exorcising the furies with rites that make clean.
 All lies now open to view, disposed by fortune's fair
 face, as we cry, "Those dark strangers who shared 970
 in the house are now gone in their turn".
 Yes, now we may look on the light!
- Or.** Look now upon the two who tyrannized this land,
 who killed our father, sacked my father's house.
 Before they sat in dignity upon their thrones,
 and they are lovers even now, as anyone might judge
 their plight, and their troth remains intact.
 They swore together to kill my wretched father and
 together they have died. Their oath is well kept. 980
 See now again, as witnesses to their former crimes,
 the trap which they devised against my wretched father,
 as manacles for his wrists, as fetters for his feet.
 Stretch out the net, stand round about it, show
 it off, this snare for a man, that he might see it,
 - not my father, no, but one who watches over all,
 I mean the sun - might see my mother's unclean work,
 that he might be my witness, if someday I come to trial,
 and say that I pursued my mother's execution justly.
 About Aegisthus' death I have no more to say. 990
 He has paid the penalty for his lust, according to the law.
 But the woman who plotted in hate against her man,
 the weight of whose children she carried beneath her waist,
 a man once loved, now hated, it seems, an enemy to her -
 what do you make of her? Is not her nature that of a snake,
 a viper, whose bite makes putrid the flesh of a man,
 though he feels not her touch, because of her brazen injustice?
 How should I best describe this thing and yet be moderate
 in speech? A net for a beast? Bath-wrap for a corpse,
 to cover its feet? "Meshed hunting net" it might be called,
 or else - a dressing gown that reaches to the toes! 1000

A lover might possess just such a one; perhaps it's just
the thing with which to plunder strangers, steal
their silver, make a living. In fact, with such a trick a man
might rob a multitude of men to warm his heart!
Let no such objects come to share my house with me.
I'd rather that the gods would have me childless die.

- Ch.** I grieve, I grieve for these unhappy deeds;
you are yourself destroyed by this dreadful death!
I grieve, I grieve
that you must wait for suffering to bloom.
- Or.** Did she do it, or did she not? This robe is my witness 1010
she did, that she was the one that stained Aegisthus' sword.
The ooze of clotting blood conspires with time to spoil
the varied colours of the many-coloured cloak.
I now may sing my father's praises, grieve in person now
at last, as I speak before this woven net that brought
him down, lament those crimes and sufferings all our house
endured and yet hold the fruits of my victory spoiled.
- Ch.** No human being can run life's course
unharmd to the end with honour intact.
I grieve, I grieve,
for sorrow impends and will come. 1020
- Or.** I do not know where this will end, be sure of that,
I am as the charioteer who is out of control of his team
and is swept from his course; I am losing control
to my dominant passions, fear beats at a heart
that is ready to sing and to whirl in anger's dance.
So long as I still am sane, let me speak to my friends
and announce that I killed my mother not without right,
a woman who killed her man, was hated by the gods.
I claim as urgent accomplice in this bold attempt
the lord Apollo, god of prophecy, who said to me that I 1030
should have no part of evil guilt, when I had done the thing,
but should I fail - I will not tell the punishment he set.
No man could ever target such a tale of grief.
Observe me now, equipped with leafy branch
and garlanded, how I shall make my journey to
Apollo's central sanctuary, the level place of Loxias,
to the light of his fire that they say never dies,
to escape the charge of spilling common blood; Apollo said
I should approach no other holy hearth than his.
I say that in time to come that all the men of Argos 1040
<will guard safe in their minds> the manner of these crimes,
and be my witnesses and tell lord Menelaus <when he comes>.
And now I am a wanderer again, an exile from this land,
am leaving behind, in life and in death, report of what I did.

- Ch.** No! What you did was well done! There is no need to yoke
your mouth to words of ill repute, to slander yourself.
You liberated totally the city of the men of Argos
when nimbly you lifted the heads of those twin snakes.
- Or.** Ah, no! Ah, no!
Oh, women of the house! There they are, Gorgon faced,
and wreathed in dark robes and a tangle of snakes,
all twisted... I can stay no longer here! 1050
- Ch.** Orestes, loved most by your father, what fancies afflict you,
making you twist so and turn? Stay, fear not, you have won!
- Or.** No fancies these of affliction, no, no imaginings;
these are my mother's wrathful hounds, all too clear!
- Ch.** Her blood is still moist on your hands, and so
this confusion falls now on your senses.
- Or.** My lord Apollo, these creatures swarm upon me,
and from their eyes drip tears of hostile blood.
- Ch.** You have one chance of cleansing; the hand
of Loxias will serve to free you from these toils. 1060
- Or.** You do not see these things; for I alone can see them
and am driven by them and can linger here no more!
- Ch.** Good fortune be yours, may god in his providence
watch over you and keep you safe with timely luck.

This, the third of the storms to have broken
on these royal halls, in its turn,
is a storm to give life to the house.
The eating of children established the first
and the terrible grief of Thyestes;
Second came the sad fate of the man who was 1070
king, cut down in his bath, war-lord
of Achaea he was.
Now a saviour comes third from abroad __
Or am I a fool to say that?
Where at last will it end? When will the madness
of fate shift its bed and be still?