

LEADER:

Poor creature, you
and the end you see so clearly. I pity you.

CASSANDRA:

I'd like a few words more, a kind of dirge,
it is my own. I pray to the sun,
the last light I'll see,
that when the avengers cut the assassins down
they will avenge me too, a slave who died,
an easy conquest.

1345

Oh men, your destiny.
When all is well a shadow can overturn it.
When trouble comes a stroke of the wet sponge,
and the picture's blotted out. And that,
I think that breaks the heart.

1350

She goes through the doors.

CHORUS:

But the lust for power never dies -
men cannot have enough.

1355

No one will lift a hand to send it
from his door, to give it warning,
'Power, never come again!'

Take this man: the gods in glory
gave him Priam's city to plunder,
brought him home in splendour like a god.

1360

But now if he must pay for the blood
his fathers shed, and die for the deaths
he brought to pass, and bring more death
to avenge his dying, show us one
who boasts himself born free
of the raging angel, once he hears -

1365

Cries break out within the palace.

AGAMEMNON:

Aagh!
Struck deep - the death-blow, deep -

LEADER:

but who? Someone's stabbed - Quiet. Cries,

AGAMEMNON:

Aaagh, again ...
second blow - struck home.

1370

LEADER:

The work is done,
you can feel it. The king, and the great cries -
Close ranks now, find the right way out.

*But the old men scatter, each speaks
singly.*

CHORUS:

- I say send out heralds, muster the guard,
they'll save the house.

- And I say rush in now,
catch them red-handed - butchery running on their blades.

1375

- Right with you, do something - now or never!

- Look at them, beating the drum for insurrection.

- Yes,
we're wasting time. They rape the name of caution,
their hands will never sleep.

- Not a plan in sight.
Let men of action do the planning, too.

1380

- I'm helpless. Who can raise the dead with words?

- What, drag out our lives? bow down to the tyrants,
the ruin of the house?

- Never, better to die
on your feet than live on your knees.

- Wait,
do we take the cries for signs, prophesy like seers
and give him up for dead?

- No more suspicions,
not another word till we have proof.

- Confusion
on all sides - one thing to do. See how it stands
with Agamemnon, once and for all we'll see -

*He rushes at the doors. They open and
reveal a silver cauldron that holds the
body of AGAMEMNON shrouded in
bloody robes, with the body of
CASSANDRA to his left and
CLYTAEMNESTRA standing to his
right, sword in hand. She strides
towards the chorus.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Words, endless words I've said to serve the moment -
now it makes me proud to tell the truth.
How else to prepare a death for deadly men
who seem to love you? How to rig the nets
of pain so high no man can overleap them?

I brooded on this trial, this ancient blood feud
year by year. At last my hour came.
Here I stand and here I struck
and here my work is done.
I did it all. I don't deny it, no.
He had no way to flee or fight his destiny -

*Unwinding the robes from AGAMEM-
NON's body, spreading them before
the altar where the old men cluster
around them, unified as a chorus once
again.*

our never-ending, all embracing net, I cast it
wide for the royal haul, I coil him round and round
in the wealth, the robes of doom, and then I strike him
once, twice, and at each stroke he cries in agony -
he buckles at the knees and crashes here!
And when he's down I add the third, last blow,
to the Zeus who saves the dead beneath the ground
I send that third blow home in homage like a prayer.

So he goes down, and the life is bursting out of him -
great sprays of blood, and the murderous shower
wounds me, dyes me black and I, I revel
like the Earth when the spring rains come down,
the blessed gifts of god, and the new green spear
splits the sheath and rips to birth in glory!

So it stands, elders of Argos gathered here.
Rejoice if you can rejoice - I glory.
And if I'd pour upon his body the libation
it deserves, what wine could match my words?
It is right and more than right. He flooded
the vessel of our proud house with misery,
with the vintage of the curse and now
he drains the dregs. My lord is home at last.

LEADER:

You appal me, you, your brazen words -
exulting over your fallen king.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

And you, 1425
you try me like some desperate woman.
My heart is steel, well you know. Praise me,
blame me as you choose. It's all one.
Here is Agamemnon, my husband made a corpse
by this right hand - a masterpiece of justice. 1430
Done is done.

CHORUS:

Woman! - what poison cropped from the soil
or strained from the heaving sea, what nursed you,
drove you insane? You brave the curse of Greece.
You have cut away and flung away and now
the people cast you off to exile, 1435
broken with our hate.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

And now you sentence me? -
you banish me from the city, curses breathing
down my neck? But he -
name one charge you brought against him then.
He thought no more of it than killing a beast, 1440
and his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece,
but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter,
the agony I laboured into love
to charm away the savage winds of Thrace.

Didn't the law demand you banish him? - 1445
hunt him from the land for all his guilt?
But now you witness what I've done
and you are ruthless judges.

Threaten away!
I'll meet you blow for blow. And if I fall
the throne is yours. If god decrees the reverse, 1450
late as it is, old men, you'll learn your place.

CHORUS:

Mad with ambition,
shrilling pride! - some Fury
crazed with the carnage rages through your brain -
I can see the flecks of blood inflame your eyes!
But vengeance comes - you'll lose your loved ones, 1455
stroke for painful stroke.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Then learn this, too, the power of my oaths.
By the child's Rights I brought to birth,
by Ruin, by Fury - the three gods to whom 1460
I sacrificed this man - I swear my hopes
will never walk the halls of fear so long
as Aegisthus lights the fire on my hearth.
Loyal to me as always, no small shield
to buttress my defiance.

Here he lies.
He brutalized me. The darling of all 1465
the golden girls who spread the gates of Troy.
And here his spear-prize . . . what wonders she beheld! -
the seer of Apollo shared my husband's bed,
his faithful mate who knelt at the rowing-benches, 1470
worked by every hand.

They have their rewards.
He as you know. And she, the swan of the gods
who lived to sing her latest, dying song -
his lover lies beside him.
She brings a fresh, voluptuous relish to my bed! 1475

CHORUS:

Oh quickly, let me die -
 no bed of labour, no, no wasting illness . . .
 bear me off in the sleep that never ends,
 now that he has fallen,
 now that our dearest shield lies battered -
 Woman made him suffer,
 woman struck him down.

1480

Helen the wild, maddening Helen,
 one for the many, the thousand lives
 you murdered under Troy, Now you are crowned
 with this consummate wreath, the blood
 that lives in memory, glistens age to age.
 Once in the halls she walked and she was war,
 angel of war, angel of agony, lighting men to death.

1485

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Pray no more for death, broken
 as you are. And never turn
 your wrath on her, call her
 the scourge of men, the one alone
 who destroyed a myriad Greek lives -
 Helen the grief that never heals.

1490

1495

CHORUS:

The *spirit*! - you who tread
 the house and the twinborn sons of Tantalus -
 you empower the sisters, Fury's twins
 whose power tears the heart!
 Perched on the corpse your carrion raven
 glories in her hymn,
 her screaming hymn of pride.

1500

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Now you set your judgement straight,
 you summon *him*! Three generations
 feed the spirit in the race.
 Deep in the veins he feeds our bloodlust -
 aye, before the old wound dies
 it ripens in another flow of blood.

1505

CHORUS:

The great curse of the house, the spirit,
 dead weight wrath - and you can praise it!
 Praise the insatiate doom that feeds
 relentless on our future and our sons.
 Oh all through the will of Zeus,
 the cause of all, the one who works it all.
 What comes to birth that is not Zeus?
 Our lives are pain, what part not come from god?

1510

1515

Oh my king, my captain,
 how to salute you, how to mourn you?
 What can I say with all my warmth and love?
 Here in the black widow's web you lie,
 gasping out your life
 in a sacrilegious death, dear god,
 reduced to a slave's bed,
 my king of men, yoked by stealth and Fate,
 by the wife's hand that thrust the two-edged sword.

1520

1525

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

You claim the work is mine, call me
 Agamemnon's wife - you are so wrong.
 Fleshed in the wife of this dead man,
 the spirit lives within me,
 our savage ancient spirit of revenge.
 In return for Atreus' brutal feast
 he kills his perfect son - for every
 murdered child, a crowning sacrifice.

1530

CHORUS:

And *you*, innocent of his murder?
 And who could swear to that? and how? . . . 1535
 and still an avenger could arise,
 bred by the fathers' crimes, and lend a hand.
 He wades in the blood of brothers,
 stream on mounting stream - black war erupts
 and where he strides revenge will stride, 1540
 clots will mass for the young who were devoured.

Oh my king, my captain,
 how to salute you, how to mourn you?
 What can I say with all my warmth and love?
 Here in the black widow's web you lie, 1545
 gasping out your life
 in a sacrilegious death, dear god,
 reduced to a slave's bed,
 my king of men, yoked by stealth and Fate,
 by the wife's hand that thrust the two-edged sword. 1550

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

No slave's death, I think -
 no stealthier than the death he dealt
 our house and the offspring of our loins,
 Iphigeneia, girl of tears.
 Act for act, wound for wound! 1555
 Never exult in Hades, swordsman,
 here you are repaid. By the sword
 you did your work and by the sword you die.

CHORUS:

The mind reels - where to turn?
 All plans dashed, all hope! I cannot think . . . 1560
 the roofs are toppling, I dread the drumbeat thunder
 the heavy rains of blood will crush the house
 the first light rains are over -
 Justice brings new acts of agony, yes,
 on new grindstones Fate is grinding sharp the sword of Justice. 1565

Earth, dear Earth,
 if only you'd drawn me under
 long before I saw him huddled
 in the beaten silver bath.
 Who will bury him, lift his dirge? 1570

Turning to CLYTAEMNESTRA.

You, can you dare *this*?
 To kill your lord with your own hand
 then mourn his soul with tributes, terrible tributes -
 do his enormous works a great dishonour.
 This god-like man, this hero. Who at the grave 1575
 will sing his praises, pour the wine of tears?
 Who will labour there with truth of heart?

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

This is no concern of yours.
 The hand that bore and cut him down
 will hand him down to Mother Earth. 1580
 This house will never mourn for him.
 Only our daughter Iphigeneia,
 by all rights, will rush to meet him
 first at the churning straits,
 the ferry over tears - 1585
 she'll fling her arms around her father,
 pierce him with her love.

CHORUS:

Each charge meets counter-charge.
 None can judge between them. Justice.
 The plunderer plundered, the killer pays the price. 1590
 The truth still holds while Zeus still holds the throne:
 the one who acts must suffer -
 that is law. Who can tear from the veins
 the bad seed, the curse? The race is welded to its ruin.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

At last you see the future and the truth!
 But I will swear a pact with the spirit
 born within us. I embrace his works,
 cruel as they are but done at last,
 if he will leave our house
 in the future; bleed another line
 with kinsmen murdering kinsmen.
 Whatever he may ask. A few things
 are all I need, once I have purged
 our fury to destroy each other -
 purged it from our halls.

1595

1600

*ÆGISTHUS has emerged from the
 palace with his bodyguard and stands
 triumphant over the body of
 AGAMEMNON.*

ÆGISTHUS:

O what a brilliant day
 it is for vengeance! Now I can say once more
 there are gods in heaven avenging men,
 blazing down on all the crimes of earth.
 Now at last I see this man brought down
 in the Furies' tangling robes. It feasts my eyes -
 he pays for the plot his father's hand contrived.

1605

1610

Atreus, this man's father, was king of Argos.
 My father, Thyestes - let me make this clear -
 Atreus' brother challenged him for the crown,
 and Atreus drove him out of house and home
 then lured him back, and home Thyestes came,
 poor man, a suppliant to his own hearth,
 to pray that Fate might save him.

1615

So it did.

There was no dying, no staining our native ground
 with his blood. Thyestes was the guest,
 and this man's godless father -

1620

Pointing to AGAMEMNON.

the zeal of the host outstripping a brother's love,
 made my father a feast that seemed a feast for gods,
 a love feast of his children's flesh.

He cuts

the extremities, feet and delicate hands
 into small pieces, scatters them over the dish
 and serves it to Thyestes throned on high.
 He picks at the flesh he cannot recognize,
 the soul of innocence eating the food of ruin -
 look,

1625

Pointing to the bodies at his feet.

that feeds upon the house! And then,
 when he sees the monstrous thing he's done, he shrieks,
 he reels back head first and vomits up that butchery,
 tramples the feast - brings down the curse of Justice:
 'Crash to ruin, all the race of Pleisthenes, crash down!'

1630

So you see him, down. And I, the weaver of Justice,
 plotted out the kill. Atreus drove us into exile,
 my struggling father and I, a babe in arms,
 his last son, but I became a man
 and Justice brought me home. I was abroad
 but I reached out and seized my man,
 link by link I clamped the fatal scheme
 together. Now I could die gladly, even I -
 now I see this monster in the nets of Justice.

1635

1640

LEADER:

Ægisthus, you revel in pain - you sicken me.
 You say you killed the king in cold blood,
 single-handed planned his pitiful death?
 I say there's no escape. In the hour of judgement,
 trust to this, your head will meet the people's
 rocks and curses.

1645

AEGISTHUS:

You say! you slaves at the oars -
 while the master on the benches cracks the whip? 1650
 You'll learn, in your late age, how much it hurts
 to teach old bones their place. We have techniques -
 chains and the pangs of hunger,
 two effective teachers, excellent healers.
 They can even cure old men of pride and gall. 1655
 Look - can't you see? The more you kick
 against the pricks, the more you suffer.

LEADER:

You, pathetic -
 the king had just returned from battle.
 You waited out the war and fouled his lair,
 you planned my great commander's fall. 1660

AEGISTHUS:

Talk on -
 you'll scream for every word, my little Orpheus.
 We'll see if the world comes dancing to your song,
 your absurd barking - snarl your breath away!
 I'll make you dance, I'll bring you all to heel. 1665

LEADER:

You rule Argos? You who schemed his death
 but cringed to cut him down with your own hand?

AEGISTHUS:

The treachery was the woman's work, clearly.
 I was a marked man, his enemy for ages.
 But I will use his riches, stop at nothing
 to civilize his people. All but the rebel:
 him I'll yoke and break -
 no cornfed colt, running free in the traces.
 Hunger, ruthless mate of the dark torture-chamber,
 trains her eyes upon him till he drops! 1675

LEADER:

Coward, why not kill the man yourself?
 Why did the woman, the corruption of Greece
 and the gods of Greece, have to bring him down?
 Orestes -

If he still sees the light of day,
 bring him home, good Fates, home to kill
 this pair at last. Our champion in slaughter! 1680

AEGISTHUS:

Bent on insolence? Well, you'll learn, quickly.
 At them, men - you have your work at hand!

*His men draw swords; the old men
 take up their sticks.*

LEADER:

At them, fist at the hilt, to the last man -

AEGISTHUS:

Fist at the hilt, I'm not afraid to die. 1685

LEADER:

It's death you want and death you'll have -
 we'll make that word your last.

*CLYTAEMNESTRA moves between
 them, restraining AEGISTHUS.*

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

No more, my dearest,
 no more grief. We have too much to reap
 right here, our mighty harvest of despair.
 Our lives are based on pain. No bloodshed now. 1690

Fathers of Argos, turn for home before you act
 and suffer for it. What we did was destiny.
 If we could end the suffering, how we would rejoice.
 The spirit's brutal hoof has struck our heart.
 And that is what a woman has to say.
 Can you accept the truth? 1695

CLYTAEMNESTRA turns to leave.

ABGISTHUS:

But these . . . mouths
that bloom in filth - spitting insults in my teeth.
You tempt your fates, you insubordinate dogs -
to hurl abuse at me, your master!

LEADER:

No Greek
worth his salt would grovel at your feet.

1700

ABGISTHUS:

I - I'll stalk you all your days!

LEADER:

Not if the spirit brings Orestes home.

ABGISTHUS:

Exiles feed on hope - well I know.

LEADER:

More,
gorge yourself to bursting - soil justice, while you can.

ABGISTHUS:

I promise you, you'll pay, old fools - in good time, too!

1705

LEADER:

Strut on your own dunghill, you cock beside your mate.

CLYTAEMNESTRA:

Let them howl - they're impotent. You and I have power now.
We will set the house in order once for all.

*They enter the palace; the great doors
close behind them; the old men disband
and wander off.*

THE LIBATION BEARERS

