

Aeschylus
The Oresteia



Translated by Ian Johnston

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The Oresteia

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Richer Resources Publications
Arlington, Virginia

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The Oresteia

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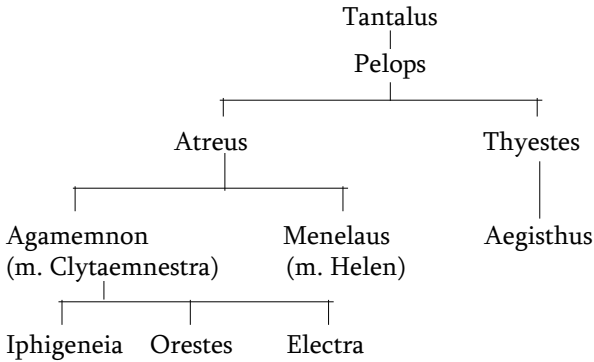
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A Note on the Mythological Background

House of Atreus (Simplified)



The family of Atreus, the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, traces its origins back to Tantalus, king of Sipylos, son of Zeus, a man famous for his eternal punishment in Hades. Tantalus had a son called Pelops.

Pelops wished to marry Hippodameia, daughter of king Oenomaus. Oenomaus set up a contest—a chariot race against the king—for all those who wished to woo his daughter. If the suitor lost, he was killed. A number of men had died in such a race before Pelops made his attempt. Pelops bribed the king's charioteer, Myrtilus, to disable the king's chariot. In the race, Oenomaus' chariot broke down, and the king was killed. Pelops then carried off Hippodameia as his bride. Pelops also killed his co-conspirator, Myrtilus, by throwing him in the sea. Before he drowned, Myrtilus cursed Pelops and his family. This act is the origin of the famous curse on the House of Atreus.

Pelops had a number of children, the most important of whom were his two sons, the brothers Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus married Aerope,

and they had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. And Thyestes had two sons and a daughter Pelopia (in some accounts three sons).

Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled. Thyestes had an affair with Atreus' wife, Aerope, and was banished from Argos by Atreus. However, Thyestes petitioned to be allowed to return, and Atreus, apparently wishing a reconciliation, agreed to allow Thyestes to come back and prepared a huge banquet to celebrate the end of their differences.

At the banquet, however, Atreus served Thyestes the cooked flesh of Thyestes' two slaughtered sons. Thyestes ate the food and then was informed of what he had done. This horrific event is the origin of the term Thyestean Banquet. Overcome with horror, Thyestes cursed the family of Atreus and left Argos with his one remaining child, his daughter Pelopia. In some versions, including Aeschylus' account, Thyestes had one small infant son who survived the banquet, Aegisthus. In other accounts, however, Aegisthus was the product of Thyestes' incestuous relationship with his daughter Pelopia after the murder of the two older sons, conceived especially to be the avenger of the notorious banquet.

Agamemnon and Menelaus, the two sons of Atreus, married Clytaemnestra and Helen respectively, two twin sisters, but not identical twins (Clytaemnestra had a human father; whereas, Helen was a daughter of Zeus). Helen was so famous for her beauty that a number of men wished to marry her. The suitors all agreed that they would act to support the man she eventually married in the event of any need for mutual assistance. Helen then married Menelaus. Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra had three children, Iphigeneia, Orestes, and Electra.

When Helen, Menelaus' wife, ran off to Troy with Paris and the Trojans refused to give her back, Agamemnon and Menelaus organized and led the Greek forces against the Trojans (the Trojan War). The army assembled at Aulis, but the fleet could not sail because of contrary winds sent by Artemis. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to placate Artemis. After the sacrifice, the winds changed, and the fleet sailed.

With Agamemnon and Menelaus off in Troy, Aegisthus, the son of Thyestes, returned to Argos, where he became the lover of Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife. They sent Orestes, Agamemnon's son, off into exile, to live with an ally, Strophius in Phocis, and

humiliated Electra, Agamemnon's surviving daughter, either treating her as a servant or marrying her off to a common farmer. When Agamemnon returned, the two conspirators killed him and assumed royal control of Argos.

Orestes returned from exile and, in collaboration with his sister Electra, avenged his father by killing Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. In many versions, this act made him lose his self-control, and he became temporarily deranged as a result of being tormented by the Furies, goddesses of blood revenge. He then underwent ritual purification by Apollo and sought refuge in the temple of Athena in Athens. There he was tried and acquitted. This action put the curses on the House of Atreus to rest.

The story of the House of Atreus, and particularly Orestes' and Electra's revenge for their father's murder, is one of the most popular and enduring of all Greek legends, a favourite among the classical poets and popular with modern playwrights, as well. However, different writers tell the story in very different ways. Homer, for example, in the *Odyssey*, sets up Orestes' killing of Aegisthus as an entirely justified way to proceed. In fact, the action, which is not part of the narrative directly, is repeatedly mentioned as a clear indication of divinely supported justice. There is no specific mention of the killing of Clytaemnestra, the central event in Aeschylus' trilogy. Euripides transforms the tradition by depicting Orestes and Electra as hateful, while Sophocles, perhaps in response to Euripides' version, makes the main characters, Orestes and Electra, much more conventionally righteous.

Aeschylus confines his attention to Atreus' crime against his brother, the Thyestean banquet, and what followed from it. There is no direct reference to Thyestes' adultery with Atreus' wife, although Cassandra makes a reference to a man sleeping with his brother's wife, or to the events from earlier parts of the story, unless the images of chariot racing are meant to carry an echo of Pelops' actions. This has the effect of making Atreus' crime against his brother the origin of the family curse, rather than the actions of Pelops or Tantalus, and tends to give the reader somewhat more sympathy for Aegisthus than some other versions do.

Translator's Note

In the following text the line numbers of the Greek text are indicated in square brackets. The line numbers of the translated text appear without brackets. Normally a short indented line is included with the line immediately above (i.e., two short lines count as a single line).

Note that the allied forces under Agamemnon are called *Argives*, *Achaean*s, or *Danaans*, as in Homer's *Iliad*—not *Greeks*. Priam's city is called *Troy* or *Ilion* interchangeably.

Agamemnon

Dramatis Personae

WATCHMAN: servant of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.

CHORUS: old men, citizens of Argos.

CLYTAEMNESTRA: wife of Agamemnon.

HERALD: soldier serving with Agamemnon.

AGAMEMNON: king of Argos, leader of army against Troy

MESSENGER: a servant in the palace.

CASSANDRA: a captured Trojan princess, a prophet of Apollo.

AEGISTHUS: son of Thyestes, Clytaemnestra's lover.

SOLDIERS and SERVANTS

[The scene is in Argos immediately in front of the steps leading up to the main doors of the royal palace. In front of the palace there are statues of gods. The Watchman is prone on the roof of the palace, resting his head on his arms. It is just before dawn.]

WATCHMAN

I pray the gods will give me some relief
and end this weary job. One long full year
I've been lying here, on this rooftop,
the palace of the sons of Atreus,
resting on my arms, just like a dog.

I've come to know the night sky, every star,
the powers we see glittering in the sky,
bringing winter and summer to us all,
as the constellations rise and sink.

I'm still looking for that signal flare,
the fiery blaze from Troy, announcing
it's been taken. These are my instructions
from the queen. She has a fiery heart,
the determined resolution of a man.

When I set my damp, restless bed up here,
I never dream, for I don't fall asleep.

No. Fear comes instead and stands beside me,
so I can't shut my eyes and get some rest.

If I try to sing or hum a tune,
something to do instead of trying to sleep,
since I'm always awake, I start to weep,

10

[10]

20

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as I lament what's happened to this house,
where things are not being governed well,
not like they used to be. How I wish
my watching could end happily tonight,
with good news brought by fire blazing
through this darkness.

[20]

[The signal fire the Watchman has been waiting for suddenly appears. The Watchman springs to his feet]

Fire gleaming in the night!
What a welcome sight! Light of a new day—
you'll bring on many dancing choruses
right here in Argos, celebrations
of this joyful news. *[Shouting]* It's over! It's over!
I must call out to wake the queen,
Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife,
to get her out of bed, so she can raise
a shout of joy as soon as possible
inside the palace, welcoming this fire—
if indeed the city of Troy's fallen,
as this signal fire seems to indicate.
For my part, I'll start things off by dancing,
treating my king's good fortune as my own.
I've had a lucky dice roll, triple six,
thanks to this fiery signal

30

[30]

40

[His mood suddenly changes to something much more hesitant]

But I hope
the master of this house may come home soon,
so I can grasp his welcome hand in mine.
As for all the rest, I'm saying nothing.
A great ox stands on my tongue. But this house,
if it could speak, might tell some stories.
I speak to those who know about these things.
For those who don't, there's nothing I remember.

[The Watchman goes down into the house. Enter the Chorus of Argive elders, very old men who carry staves to help them stand up. As they speak, servants come out of the palace and light oil lamps in offering to the statues of the gods outside the palace doors]

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CHORUS

It's now ten years since Menelaus, 50 [40]
Priam's great adversary,
and lord Agamemnon,
two mighty sons of Atreus,
joined by Zeus in double honours—
twin thrones and royal sceptres—
left this country with that fleet,
a thousand Argive ships,
to back their warrior cause with force,
hearts screaming in their battle fury,
two eagles overwhelmed by grief, 60
crying for their young—wings beating [50]
like oars, they wheel aloft,
high above their home, distressed
because they've lost their work—
their fledglings in the nest are gone!

Then one of the supreme powers—
Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus—
hears the shrill wailing cry,
hears those screaming birds,
who live within his realm, 70
and sends a late-avenging Fury
to take revenge on the transgressors.
In just that way, mighty Zeus, [60]
god of hospitality,
sends those sons of Atreus
against Alexander, son of Priam—
for that woman's sake, Helen,
the one who's had so many men,
condemning Trojans and Danaans
to many heartfelt struggles, both alike, 80
knees splintering as the fighting starts.¹

Now things stand as they stand.

¹Menelaus and Agamemnon are joint kings in Argos. Agamemnon is the senior of the two. Alexander is an alternative name for Paris of Troy, who ran off with Helen, Menelaus' wife, and thus started the Trojan War.

What's destined to come will be fulfilled,
and no libation, sacrifice, or human tears
will mitigate the gods' unbending wrath
of sacrifice not blessed by fire.

But as for us, whose old bodies
confer no honour, who were left behind
when the army sailed so long ago,
we wait here, using up our strength 90
to support ourselves with sticks,
like children, whose power,
though growing in their chests,
is not yet fit for Ares, god of war.
And so it is with old men, too,
who, when they reach extreme old age,
wither like leaves, and go their way
three-footed, no better than a child, [80]
as they wander like a daydream.

But you, daughter of Tyndareus, 100
queen Clytaemnestra,
what's going on? What news?
What reports have you received
that lead you to send your servants out
commanding all this sacrifice?
For every god our city worships—
all-powerful gods above the earth,
and those below, and those in heaven, [90]
and those in the marketplace—
their altars are ablaze with offerings. 110

Fires rise here and there and everywhere,
right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils
brought from the palace—sweet and holy,
their purity sustains those flames.
Tell us what you can,
tell us what's right for us to hear.
Cure our anxious thoughts.
For now, at one particular moment, [100]
things look grim, but then our hopes,
rising from these sacrificial fires, 120

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make things seem better, soothing
corrosive pains that eat my heart.

I have the power to proclaim
that prophecy made to our kings,
as they were setting on their way,
a happy outcome for their expedition.
My age inspires in me Persuasion still,
the power of song sent from the gods,
to sing how two kings of Achaea's troops,
united in a joint command, led off 130 [110]
the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears,
marching against Troy, land of Teucer.

They got a happy omen—two eagles,
kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships.
One bird was black, the other's tail was white,
here, close to the palace, on the right,
in a place where everyone could see.
The eagles were gorging themselves,
devouring a pregnant hare
and all its unborn offspring, 140
struggling in their death throes still. [120]

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

Then the army's prophet, Calchas,
observing the twin purposes
in the two warlike sons of Atreus,
saw the twin leaders of the army
in those birds devouring the hare.
He then interpreted the omen, saying,
"In due course this expedition 150
will capture Priam's city, Troy—
before its towers a violent Fate
will annihilate all public goods. [130]
But may no anger from the gods
cast its dark shadow on our troops,
our great bit forged to curb Troy's mouth.
For goddess Artemis is full of anger
at her father's flying hounds—she pities

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the cowering sacrificial creature in distress,
she pities its young, slaughtered 160
before she's brought them into life.
Artemis abominates the eagles' feast."

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

"And lovely Artemis— [140]

though you're gentle with the tender cubs
of vicious lions and take special joy
in the suckling young of all wild living beasts,
promise things will work out well,
as this omen of the eagles indicates,
an auspicious sign, but ominous. 170
And I call Apollo, god of healing,
to stop Artemis delaying the fleet,
by sending hostile winds
to keep the ships from sailing, [150]
in her demand for another sacrifice,
one which violates all human law,
which no feast celebrates—
it shatters families and makes the wife
lose all respect and hate her husband.
For in the home a dreadful anger waits. 180
It does not forget and cannot be appeased.
Its treachery controls the house,
waiting to avenge a slaughtered child."
Calchas prophesied that fatal destiny,
read from those birds, as the army marched,
speaking by this palace of the kings.

And to confirm all this
sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

O Zeus, whoever he may be, 190 [160]
if this name please him as invocation,
then that's the name I'll use to call him.
As I try to think all these things through,
I have no words to shape my thoughts,
other than Zeus—if I truly can succeed

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in easing my heart of this heavy grief,
this self-defeating weight of sorrow.

As for Uranus, who was once so great,
bursting with arrogance for every fight,
people will talk about that god 200
as if he'd never even lived. [170]

And his son, Cronos, who came after,
has met his match and is no more.¹
But whoever with a willing heart
cries his triumphal song to Zeus
will come to understand all things.

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,
has established his fixed law—
wisdom comes through suffering.
Trouble, with its memories of pain 210
drips in our hearts as we try to sleep, [180]
so men against their will
learn to practice moderation.
Favours come to us from gods
seated on their solemn thrones—
such grace is harsh and violent.

So then the leader of Achaean ships,
the elder brother, Agamemnon,
did not blame or fault the prophet,
but gave in to fortune's sudden blows. 220
For Achaea's army, stranded there, [190]
on the shores across from Calchis,
was held up by opposing winds
where tides ebb and flow at Aulis.

Troops grew weary, as supplies ran low.
Winds blew from the Strymon river,
keeping ships at anchor, harming men
with too much leisure. Troops grew hungry.
They wandered discontent and restless.
The winds corroded ships and cables. 230
The delay seemed endless, on and on, until

¹Uranus was the original god, who was overthrown by his son Cronos. Then Cronos, in turn, was overthrown by his son Zeus.

the men, the flower of Argos, began to wilt.
Then Calchas proclaimed the cause of this—
it was Artemis. And he proposed [200]
a further remedy, but something harsh,
even worse than the opposing winds,
so painful that the sons of Atreus
struck their canes on the ground and wept.¹

Then Agamemnon, the older king, spoke up:
“It’s harsh not to obey this fate— 240
but to go through with it is harsh as well,
to kill my child, the glory of my house,
to stain a father’s hands before the altar [210]
with streams of virgin’s blood.
Which of my options is not evil?
How can I just leave this fleet
and let my fellow warriors down?
Their passionate demand for sacrifice
to calm the winds lies within their rights—
even the sacrifice of virgin blood. 250
So be it. All may be well.”

But when Agamemnon strapped on
the harsh yoke of necessity,
his spirits changed, and his intentions
became profane, unholy, unsanctified. [220]
He undertook an act beyond all daring.
Troubles come, above all, from delusions
inciting men to rash designs, to evil.
So Agamemnon steeled his heart
to make his own daughter the sacrifice, 260
an offering for the Achaean fleet,
so he could prosecute the war
waged to avenge that woman Helen.

In their eagerness for war, those leaders [230]
paid no attention to the girl,
her pleas for help, her cries of “Father!”—
any more than to her virgin youth.

¹Calchas has told Agamemnon he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to appease Artemis and stop the hostile winds, so that the fleet can sail to Troy.

Her father offered up a prayer,
then ordered men to seize her
and lift her up—she'd fallen forward 270
and just lay there in her robes—to raise her
high above the altar, like a goat,
urging them to keep their spirits up.
They gagged her lovely mouth,
with force, just like a horse's bit,
to keep her speechless, to stifle any curse
which she might cry against her family.

As she threw her saffron robe onto the ground,
she glanced at the men, each of them, [240]
those carrying out the sacrifice, 280
her eyes imploring pity. She looked
just like a painting dying to speak.
She'd often sung before her father's table,
when, as host, he'd entertained his guests,
a virgin using her flawless voice
to honour her dear father with her love,
as he prayed for blessing
at the third libation.

What happened next I did not see.
And I won't say. What Calchas' skill 290
had prophesied did come to pass.
The scales of Justice move to show [250]
that wisdom comes through suffering.
As for what's to come—you'll know that
when it comes. So let it be.
To know would be to grieve ahead of time.
It's clear whatever is to happen
will happen, like tomorrow's dawn.

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the palace doors]

But I hope whatever follows will be good,
according to the wishes of our queen, 300
who governs here, our closest guard,
keeping watch all by herself,
protecting Peloponnesian lands.

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CHORUS LEADER

Queen Clytaemnestra, we've come here
in deference to your royal authority.
With our king far away, the man's throne [260]
is empty—so it's appropriate for us
to pay allegiance to his wife, the queen.
I'd really like to hear your news,
whether what you've heard is good or not. 310
Your sacrificial offerings give us hope.
But we won't object if you stay silent.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

It's a welcome message. As the proverb says,
"May Dawn be born from mother Night."
You'll hear great news, greater than all your hopes—
the Argives have captured Priam's city!

CHORUS LEADER

What's that you say? I misheard your words—
what you've just said—it defies belief!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I say Troy is now in Achaean hands.
Is that clear enough?

CHORUS LEADER

That fills me with joy. 320
So much so I can't stop crying. [270]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Then your eyes reveal your faithful loyalty.

CHORUS LEADER

Is this report reliable? Is there proof?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Of course there is. Unless some god deceives me.

CHORUS LEADER

Has some vision persuaded you of this,
something in a dream, perhaps?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Not at all.

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As if I'd listen to some dozing brain.

CHORUS LEADER

Perhaps some unfledged rumour raised your hopes?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're insulting my intelligence,
as if I were a youngster, just a child.

330

CHORUS LEADER

When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I'll tell you. It was the very night
that gave birth to this most glorious day.

CHORUS LEADER

How could a messenger get here so fast?

[280]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Hephaestus, god of fire, sent his bright blaze
speeding here from Ida, his messenger,
flames racing from one beacon to the next—
from Ida to Hermes' rock in Lemnos.

From that island the great flames sped
to the third fire, on the crest of Athos,
sacred to Zeus, and then, arcing high,
the beacon light sprang across the sea,
exulting in its golden fiery power,
rushing on, like another sun, passing
the message to the look-out towers

340

at Macistus. The man there was not sleeping,
like some fool. Without a moment's pause,
he relayed the message, so the blazing news

[290]

raced on, leaping across Euripus' stream,
to pass the signal to the next watchmen,
at Messapion. Those men, in their turn,
torched a pile of dried-out heather, firing
the message onward. The flaming light
was not diminished—its strength kept growing.

350

Like a glowing moon, it jumped across
the plain of Asopus, up to the ridges
on Mount Cithaeron, where it set alight

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the next stage of the relay race of fire.
 Those watching there did not neglect their work—
 that light which came to them from far away 360 [300]
 they passed on with an even greater blaze,
 which dashed across the shores of Gorgopus,
 to reach Mount Aegiplanctus, with orders
 for those there to keep the beacon moving.
 They lit a fire, a huge flaming pillar,
 with unchecked force, speeding the message on—
 its light visible even at the headland
 by the Saronic Gulf. It swooped down,
 once it reached the crest of Arachnaeus,
 that look-out near our city—and from there 370
 jumped down onto the roof of Atreus' sons,
 flames directly linked to blazing Troy. [310]
 I organized these messengers of fire,
 setting them up in sequence, one by one.
 In that race the first and last both triumph,
 the ones who sent the message and received it.
 That's the evidence I set before you,
 a message from my husband, dispatched
 all the way from burning Troy to me.

CHORUS

My queen, I'll offer up to all the gods 380
 my prayers of thanks, but now I'd like to hear
 the details of your wonderful report.
 Can you tell me the news once more?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

On this very day Achaea's army [320]
 has taken Troy. Inside that town, I think,
 voices cry out in mass confusion.
 If you place oil and vinegar together
 in the same container, you'll observe
 they never mix, but separate themselves,
 like enemies—well, in Troy the shouting
 of conquerors and conquered is like that, 390
 matching their very different situations.
 Trojans fall upon their family corpses,
 husbands, brothers. The children scream

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over dead old men who gave them life.
As captives now, they keep lamenting
all their slaughtered loved ones. But the Argives,
famished after a long night's roaming [330]
and weary after battle, are set to eat,
to gorge themselves on what the town affords. 400
They're quartered now in captured Trojan homes,
sheltered from the night sky's frost and dew,
but not according to official rank,
rather as luck determines each man's lot.
They're happy. They'll sleep straight through the night,
without posting a guard. Now, if these troops
fully and piously respect Troy's gods,
a captured land's divinities and shrines,
those who've conquered may not, in their turn, [340]
be conquered. But let no frenzied greed, 410
no overpowering lust for plunder,
fall upon the army from the start,
so they ravage what they should leave alone.
For to get safely home, the army needs
to make that long journey back again.
But even if the soldiers do reach home
without offending any god, harsh sorrow
for the dead may still be watching for them,
unless some new disaster intervenes.
Well, I've let you hear my woman's words. 420
May good things now prevail for all to see.
I take this news as cause for common joy. [350]

CHORUS LEADER

You speak wisely, like a prudent man.
But now I've heard that I can trust your news,
we must prepare ourselves to thank the gods,
who've given a blessing worthy of our toil.

[Clytaemnestra goes back into the palace]

CHORUS

O Zeus, my king, and friendly Night,
you've handed us great glories
to keep as our possession.

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You cast upon the towers of Troy
your all-encompassing hunting net,
and no one, young or old, escaped
its enslaving fatal mesh
that overpowered them all.

430

[360]

I worship mighty Zeus,
god of hospitality,
who made this happen.
For a long time now
he's aimed his bow at Paris,
making sure his arrow
would not fall short or fly
above the stars and miss.

440

Men will say it's a blow from Zeus
and trace his presence in all this.
He acts on what he himself decides.
Some people claim that gods
don't really care about those men
who trample underfoot
favours from the pure in heart.

[370]

Such people are profane.
For we now clearly see
destruction is the penalty
for those with reckless pride,
who breathe a boastful spirit
greater than is just,
because their homes are full,
stuffed with riches to excess,
beyond what's best for them.

450

Let men have sufficient wealth
to match good sense, not so much
it piles up their misfortunes.
There's no security in riches
for the insolent man who kicks aside
and pushes from his sight
great altars of righteousness.

460

[380]

Such a man is overpowered
by perverse Persuasion,

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insufferable child of scheming Folly.
And there's no remedy.
His evil's not concealed— 470
it stands out, a lurid glitter,
like false bronze when rubbed. [390]
All men can judge his darkness,
once he's tested by events.
He's like a child chasing a flying bird.
He brands his city with disgrace
which cannot be removed,
for no god hears his prayers.
The man who lives this way,
doing wrong, the gods destroy. 480
Such a man was Paris. He came
to the home of the sons of Atreus, [400]
and then abused their hospitality,
running off with his host's wife.

But she left her people
the smash of shield and spear,
a fleet well-armed for war.
To Troy she carried with her
no dowry but destruction.
Daring what should not be dared, 490
she glided through Troy's gates.
The prophets in this house cried out,
"Alas, alas for house and home, [410]
and for the royal leaders here.
Alas, for the marriage bed,
still holding traces of her body,
the one who loved her husband."¹

As for him, he sits apart,
in pain, silent and dishonoured.
He does not blame her— 500
no, he aches to be with her,
the woman far across the sea.
Her image seems to rule the house.
Her husband finds no beauty now

¹The lines following describe Menelaus' reaction to Helen's disappearance.

in graceful statues, for to his blank eyes
all sexual loveliness has gone.
In his dreams he sees sad images, [420]
with memories of earlier joy—
a vain relief, for when the man
thinks he sees such beauty there, 510
all at once it's gone, slipping
through his hands, flying away
along the paths of sleep.

These are the sorrows in the house,
around the hearth, and pain
much worse than this. For everywhere,
throughout the land of Greece,
in every home where men set out [430]
to gather in that army
there is insufferable grief. 520
Many disasters pierce the heart.
People know the ones who leave,
but every house gets back
weapons and ash, not living men.

For Ares, god of war, pays gold
for soldiers' bodies. In spear fights
he tips the scales, then back from Troy [440]
he ships a heavy freight of ash,
cremated bodies of the dead,
sent home for loved ones to lament. 530
He trades funeral dust for men,
shiploads of urns filled up with ashes.
Back home the people weep,
praising one man for his battle skill,
another for courageous death.
Some complain about that woman,
how she's to blame for all of this—
but do so quietly. Nonetheless, [450]
this sorrow spreads resentment
against the leaders of the war, 540
the sons of Atreus. Meanwhile,
over there, across the seas in Troy,
around the city walls, the hostile ground

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swallows our beautiful young men,
now hidden in the earth they conquered.

The people's voice, once angered,
can create dissent, ratifying a curse
which now must have its way.
And so, in my anxiety, I wait,
listening for something murky, 550
something emerging from the gloom. [460]
For gods aren't blind to men who kill.
In time, black agents of revenge,
the Furies, wear down and bring to nothing
the fortunes of a man who prospers
in unjust ways. They wear him out,
reverse his luck, and bring him at last
among the dead. There's no remedy.
To boast too much of one's success
is dangerous—the high mountain peak 560
is struck by Zeus' lightning bolt. [470]
I'd choose wealth no one could envy.
May I never be the sort of man
who puts whole cities to the sword.
Let me never see myself enslaved,
my life in someone else's power.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

This welcome fiery message has spread fast—
it's gone throughout the town. But is it true?
Sent from the gods or false? Who knows?

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

What man is such a senseless child 570
he lets his heart catch fire at this news, [480]
and then is shattered by some fresh report?

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

That's just the nature of a woman—
to give thanks before the truth appears.

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR

Yes, they're far too trusting.
The proper order in a woman's mind

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is easily upset. Rumours women start
soon die out, soon come to nothing.

CHORUS LEADER

We'll quickly know about these signal fires,
flaming beacons passed from place to place. 580 [490]
We'll find out if that really did occur
or if, just like a dream, this joyful light
has come in order to deceive our hopes.
For I see a herald coming from the shore—
an olive bough of triumph shades his face.
The dry dust on him, all those muddy clothes,
tell me he'll report the facts. Nor will he
light some flaming pile of mountain wood
to pass a signal on with smoke. No—
he'll shout out to us what he has to say, 590
and we can then rejoice still more,
or else . . . but I won't think of that. Let's have
good news to add to what we know already. [500]
If anyone is praying for something else
to happen to our city, let him reap
the harvest of his own misguided heart.

[Enter Herald]

HERALD

Greetings to this Argive soil, my father's land.
On this day, ten years later, I've come back.
I've seen many hopes of mine destroyed,
and only one fulfilled—I've made it home. 600
I never dreamed I'd die here in Argos,
with a burial plot in this land I love.
I bless the land, the bright light of this sun—
and I give thanks to Zeus, our highest god,
and to Apollo, lord of Pytho.
May you never shoot your arrows at us 610
any more. We had enough of those, [510]
my lord, beside Scamander's banks,
when you took your stand against us.¹ But now,

¹The Scamander is the river beside Troy. Apollo supported the Trojans in the war and killed many Argive warriors.

Apollo, may you preserve and heal us. 610
 And I greet all gods assembled here,
 including Hermes, whom I honour,
 the well-loved herald god, worshipped
 as the herald's patron. And next I pray
 the heroic spirits who sent us off
 will welcome back the remnants of our army,
 those spared being slaughtered by the spear.
 O you hall of kings, you roof I cherish,
 you sacred seats and gods who face the sun,
 if your shining eyes in days gone by 620 [520]
 have welcomed our king home, then do so now,
 after his long absence. He's coming here,
 carrying light into this darkness, for you
 and all assembled here—our mighty king,
 lord Agamemnon. Greet him with full respect.
 For he's uprooted Troy—with the pick axe
 of avenging Zeus he's reduced her soil.
 The altars of the gods and all their shrines
 he has obliterated, laying waste
 all that country's rich fertility. 630
 Around Troy's neck he's fixed destruction's yoke.
 Now he's coming home, king Agamemnon,
 the fortunate elder son of Atreus, [530]
 among all men he merits the most honour.
 For neither Paris nor his accomplice,
 the Trojan city, can ever boast again
 their deeds were greater than their suffering.
 Guilty of rape and theft, he's lost his loot.
 He's utterly destroyed his father's house,
 the land, too, which sustained his people. 640
 So Priam's sons have paid the price twice over.

CHORUS LEADER

All joyful greetings to you, herald,
 as you come back from our army.

HERALD

I, too, rejoice.
 Now I don't fear death—it's as the gods decide.

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CHORUS LEADER

Did your love of this land cause you distress?

[540]

HERALD

Yes. That's why my eyes are filled with tears.

CHORUS LEADER

It's as if you had some pleasing sickness.

HERALD

How so? Tell me exactly what you mean.

CHORUS LEADER

You suffered from love for those who loved you.

HERALD

You mean the country and the army
both missed each other?

650

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, so much so,
often my anxious heart cried out aloud.

HERALD

What caused this gnawing trouble in your heart?

CHORUS LEADER

Long ago I learned to keep my silence—
the best antidote against more trouble.

HERALD

Why's that? Were you afraid of someone,
once the kings were gone?

CHORUS LEADER

Indeed I was.
In fact, as you have said, there'd be great joy
in dying now.

[550]

HERALD

It's true we have done well.
As for what happened long ago, you could say
some worked out happily, and some was bad.
But who except the gods avoids all pain
throughout his life? If I told what we went through—

660

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the hardships, wretched quarters, narrow berths,
 the harsh conditions—was there anything
 we did not complain about? We had our share
 of trouble every day. And then on shore
 things were even worse. We had to camp
 right by the enemy wall. It was wet—
 dew from the sky and marshes soaked us. 670 [560]
 Our clothes rotted. Our hair grew full of lice.
 And it was freezing. The winters there,
 beyond endurance, when snows from Ida
 froze birds to death. And then the heat,
 so hot at noon, the sea, without a ripple,
 sank to sleep. . . . But why complain about it?
 Our work is done. It's over for the dead,
 who aren't about to spring to life again.
 Why should the living call to mind the dead? [570]
 There's no need to relive those blows of fate. 680
 I think it's time to bid a long farewell
 to our misfortune. For those still living,
 the soldiers left alive, our luck's won out.
 No loss can change that now. We've a right,
 as we cross land and sea, to boast aloud,
 and cry out to the sun, "Argive forces once,
 having captured Troy, took their spoils of war
 and nailed them up in gods' holy shrines,
 all through Greece, glorious tribute from the past!"
 So whoever hears the story of these things 690
 must praise our generals—our city, too. [580]
 Full honour and thanks to Zeus who did the work.
 That's my full report.

CHORUS LEADER

What you say is true.
 I was in the wrong—I won't deny that.
 But the old can always learn from younger men,
 and what you've said enriches all of us.

[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace]

But your news will have a special interest
 for Clytaemnestra and her household.

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CLYTAEMNESTRA

Some time ago I cried out in triumph,
rejoicing when that first messenger arrived, 700
the fiery herald in the night, who told me
Troy was captured and was being destroyed.
Some people criticized me then, saying, [590]
“How come you’re so easily persuaded
by signal fires Troy’s being demolished?
Isn’t that just like a woman’s heart,
to get so jubilant?” Insults like these
made it appear as if I’d lost my wits.
But I continued with my sacrifice,
and everywhere throughout the city 710
women kept up their joyful shouting,
as they traditionally do, echoing
their exultation through all holy shrines,
tending sweet-smelling spicy flames,
as they consumed their victims. So now,
why do I need you to go on and on
about all this? I’ll hear it from the king.
But, so I can give my honoured husband [600]
the finest welcome home, and with all speed—
for what light gives a woman greater pleasure 720
than to unbar the gates to her own husband
as he comes home from battle, once the gods
have spared his life in war?—tell him this,
and give him the message to come home
as soon as possible. The citizens
will love to see him, and when he gets back,
in this house he’ll find his wife as faithful
as when he left, a watch dog of the home,
loyal to him, hostile to his enemies,
and, for the rest, the same in every way. 730
In this long time, I’ve not betrayed our bond— [610]
I’ve known no pleasure with another man,
no breath of scandal. About such things
I understand as much as tempering bronze.
I’m proud to state this, for it’s all true—
nothing a noble lady should feel shame to say.

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[Clytaemnestra exits back into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER

She seems to speak as if she really wants
to tell you something, but, in fact,
to those who can interpret her words well
she's only saying what she ought to say. 740
But tell me, herald, can I learn something
of Menelaus, this country's well-loved king—
did he make it back safe and sound with you?

HERALD

I can't lie with false good news of Menelaus, [620]
so his friends can enjoy themselves for long.

CHORUS LEADER

I wish your news of him was true and good.
It's hard when both of these don't go together.

HERALD

Menelaus disappeared—the army
lost sight of him and his ship. That's the truth.

CHORUS LEADER

Did you see him sail off from Ilion, 750
or did some storm attack the entire fleet
and cut him off from you?

HERALD

Like a master archer, you hit the mark—
your last question briefly tells the story.

CHORUS LEADER

According to the others in the fleet [630]
what happened? Is he alive or dead?

HERALD

No one knows for certain, except the sun,
moving around the earth sustaining life.

CHORUS LEADER

Tell me how that storm struck the soldiers' ships.
How did the anger of the gods come to an end? 760

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HERALD

It's not right I talk of our misfortunes
and spoil such an auspicious day as this.
We ought to keep such matters separate
in deference to the gods. When a messenger
arrives distraught, bringing dreadful news
about some slaughtered army, that's one wound [640]
inflicted on the city. Beyond that,
from many houses many men are driven
to their destruction by the double whip
which Ares, god of war, so loves— 770
disaster with two prongs, a bloody pair.
A messenger weighed down with news like this
should report the Furies' song of triumph.
But when he brings good news of men being saved
to a city full of joyful celebrations . . .
How can I mix the good news and the bad,
telling of the storm which hit Achaeans,
a storm linked to the anger of the gods?
For fire and sea, before now enemies, [650]
swore a common oath and then proclaimed it 780
by destroying Achaea's helpless forces.
At night malevolent seas rose up,
as winds from Thrace smashed ships together.
Pushed around by the power of that storm
and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships
scattered, then disappeared, blown apart
by the evil shepherd's whirlwind. Later,
when the sun's bright light appeared again,
we witnessed the Aegean sea in bloom
with corpses of Achaean troops and ships. 790 [660]
As for us, some god saved us in secret
or interceded for us—our boat survived,
its hull intact. That was no human feat.
Some divine hand was on our steering oar,
some stroke of Fortune wanted our ship saved,
not swamped by surf as we rode at anchor
or smashed upon the rocky coast. And then,
once we'd avoided Hades on those seas,
we couldn't believe our luck, as we brooded,

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in the bright light of day, on all our troubles, 800
this new disaster which destroyed our fleet, [670]
dispersing it so badly. So on those ships
if anyone's still breathing, he'll now say
we're the ones who've been destroyed. Why not,
when we say much the same of them?
But let's hope things all turn out for the best.
As for Menelaus, wait for his return—
that should be your first priority.
If some ray of sunlight finds him alive,
his vision still intact, thanks to Zeus, 810
whose crafty plans at this point don't include
destruction of the entire race, there's hope
he'll soon come home again. Now you've heard this,
you've listened to the truth. [680]

[Exit Herald]

CHORUS

Whoever came up with that name,
a name so altogether true—
was there some power we can't see
telling that tongue what to say,
the tongue which prophesied our fate?—
I mean the man who called her Helen, 820
that woman wed for warfare,
the object of our strife?
For she's lived up to that name—
a hell for ships, a hell for men,
a hell for cities, too.

From her delicately curtained room [690]
she sailed away, transported
by West Wind, an earth-born giant.
A horde of warriors with shields
went after her, huntsmen 830
following the vanished track
her oars had left, all the way
to where she'd beached her ship,
on leafy shores of Simois.
Then came bloody war.

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And so Troy's destiny's fulfilled— [700]
wrath brings a dreadful wedding day,
late retribution for dishonour
to hospitality and Zeus,
god of guest and host, 840
on those who celebrated with the bride,
who, on that day, sang aloud
the joyful wedding hymns.
Now Priam's city, in old age, [710]
has learned a different song.
I think I hear loud funeral chants,
lamenting as an evil fate
the marriage Paris brought.
The city's filled with songs of grief.
It must endure all sorrows, 850
the brutal slaughter of its sons.

So a man once raised a lion cub
in his own home. The beast
lacked milk but craved its mother's teat.
In early life the cub was gentle. [720]
Children loved it, and it brought
the old men great delight.
They gave it many things
and clasped it in their arms,
as if it were a nursing child. 860
Its fiery eyes fixed on the hands
that fed it, the creature fawned,
a slave to appetite.

But with time the creature grew
and its true nature showed—
the one its parents gave it.
So it paid back those who reared it,
preparing a meal in gratitude,
an unholy slaughter of the flocks, [730]
house awash with blood, 870
while those who lived inside the home
were powerless against the pain,
against the massive carnage.
By god's will they'd brought up

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a priest of doom in their own house.

I'd say she first arrived in Troy
a gentle spirit, like a calming breeze,
a delicate, expensive ornament— [740]
her soft darting eyes a flower
which stings the heart with love. 880
Then, changing her direction,
she took her marriage to its bitter end,
destroying all those she lived with.
With evil in her train and led by Zeus,
god of guest and host, she turned into
a bride of tears, a Fury.

Among men there's a saying, [750]
an old one, from times long past:
A man's prosperity, once fully grown,
has offspring—it never dies 890
without producing children.
From that man's good fortune
spring up voracious pains
for all his race. But on this
I don't agree with other men.
I stand alone and say
it's the unholy act that breeds
more acts of the same kind. [760]
A truly righteous house is blessed,
its children always fair and good. 900

Old violent aggression
loves to generate new troubles
among evil men—soon or late,
when it's fated to be born,
new violence springs forth,
a spirit no one can resist or conquer,
unholy recklessness,
dark ruin on the home, [770]
like the destructiveness
from which it sprang. 910

But Righteousness shines out
from grimy dwellings, honouring

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the man who lives in virtue.
She turns her eyes away
from gold-encrusted mansions
where men's hands are black,
and moves towards integrity,
rejecting power and wealth,
which, though praised, are counterfeit. [780]
Righteousness leads all things 920
to well-deserved fulfillment.

[Enter Agamemnon in a chariot with Cassandra and a military escort]

CHORUS LEADER

Welcome, son of Atreus, my king,
Troy's destroyer. How shall I address you?
How honour you without extravagance,
without failing to say what's suitable?
For many men value appearances
more than reality—thus they violate
what's right. Everyone's prepared to sigh [790]
over some suffering man, though no sorrow
really eats their hearts, or they can pretend 930
to join another person's happiness,
forcing their faces into smiling masks.
But a good man discerns true character—
he's not fooled by eyes feigning loyalty,
favouring him with watered-down respect.
Back when you were gathering the army
in Helen's cause—I won't deny the fact— [800]
I saw you in an unflattering light,
an unfit mind steering our ship astray,
trying with sacrifice to boost the spirits 940
of dying soldiers. But now, with love,
with a full heart, I welcome your return.
For those who've won final success, the joy
is worth the toil. If you enquire, in time
you'll learn about the men who stayed at home,
those who with justice stood guard for the city
and those who failed to carry out what's right.

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A Note on Aeschylus

Aeschylus was born in Eleusis, a town near Athens, around 525 BC. He grew up during the development of Athenian democracy and fought at the battle of Marathon in 490 BC, a high point of Greek culture, when the Greek army, predominantly Athenians, defeated a force of Persian invaders.

Aeschylus wrote many plays (probably around ninety), only seven of which have survived. His *Oresteia*, the only complete surviving trilogy of plays by an ancient Greek dramatist, won the annual drama competition in Athens in 458 BC.

Aeschylus died in Sicily in 455 BC. Some legends have it that the cause of death was a turtle dropped onto his head by a bird flying above him.

A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in England and Canada. He has a BSc from McGill (Geology and Chemistry), a BA from Bristol (English and Greek), and an MA from Toronto (English). For many years he taught literature (English, Classics, and Liberal Studies) in the British Columbia college and university-college system, mostly at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, before retiring in 2004. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (1988) and some justly forgotten satirical musical dramas. He now lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia. His numerous translations from German, French, and Greek are available on his web site at the following address: <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/index.htm>, and his translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in the United States by Richer Resources Publications. Sound recordings of his complete translations of these two poems are available at Naxos Audiobooks: <http://www.naxosaudiobooks.com>.

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Aeschylus

The Oresteia

A New Translation by Ian Johnston

William von Humbolt wrote of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* that "among all the products of the Greek stage, none can compare with it in tragic power; no other play shows the same intensity and pureness of belief in the divine and good; none can surpass the lessons it teaches and the wisdom of which it is the mouthpiece." A sequence of three plays, *The Oresteia* relays the final tragedies which befall the House of Atreus following the end of the Trojan War. The first play, "Agamemnon," tells of the return of King Agamemnon from Troy and of his murder by his wife and her lover. The second, "The Libation Bearers," details the revenge exacted by Agamemnon's son, Orestes, and daughter, Electra, for their father's death. In the third play of the trilogy, "The Eumenides," Orestes and Apollo go before an Athenian jury to determine their ultimate fate. The only full trilogy to have survived from the ancient Greek playwrights, *The Oresteia* was first performed at a festival in Athens in 458 B.C. where it won first prize. *The Oresteia* today remains one of the most popular plays of all time.



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years, he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been published in both book and audiobook form. He is now retired and living in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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