

# **SENECA'S AGAMEMNON**

A Version by

Paul Murgatroyd

© Copyright 2021 Christopher Kelk, All Rights Reserved.  
Please direct enquiries for commercial re-use to  
[chriskelk@sympatico.ca](mailto:chriskelk@sympatico.ca).

## Contents

SYNOPSIS.....	3
NOTES.....	4
Cast of Characters .....	10
ACT ONE .....	12
FIRST CHORAL ODE .....	13
ACT TWO .....	14
SCENE ONE.....	14
SCENE TWO.....	16
SECOND CHORAL ODE.....	19
ACT THREE.....	20
THIRD CHORAL ODE.....	23
ACT FOUR.....	25
FOURTH CHORAL ODE.....	29
ACT FIVE.....	30
SCENE ONE.....	30
SCENE TWO.....	30
SCENE THREE.....	31
SCENE FOUR .....	31

## SYNOPSIS

This tragedy is concerned with the murder of king Agamemnon of Argos (on his return from victory in the Trojan War) at the hands of his wife (Clytaemnestra) and her lover (Aegisthus). Various characters view his death as vengeance, for various reasons. The play takes the form of five acts separated by short choral odes (the first two by a chorus of Argive women, the second two by a chorus of captive women from Troy).

In act one the ghost of Thyestes appears at the family palace. He is racked by guilt for his awful crimes, but before long is gloating over the prospect of bloody revenge for his maltreatment by his brother Atreus. He announces that Atreus' son (Agamemnon) will soon return from Troy and be killed by his wife, and he urges his own son (Aegisthus) to join in the slaughter.

In act two a conflicted Clytaemnestra tries to steel herself to kill Agamemnon and in an impassioned exchange with her nurse shows her fear of detection of her affair with Aegisthus and her resentment of how Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter (so the Greeks could sail to Troy) and took lovers (most recently the captive Trojan princess Cassandra). The nurse finally manages to talk her out of the murder. But then Aegisthus enters and mocks her hopes of being forgiven and taking up again as Agamemnon's faithful wife. When she angrily orders him to leave, he offers to commit suicide as well, and she then relents and takes him into the palace to work out a murder plan.

In act three Agamemnon's herald arrives and announces that the king has returned but his fleet has been scattered. When pressed by Clytaemnestra (who is eager for bad news), he produces a powerful description of the massive damage inflicted on the fleet by a violent storm and a vengeful Minerva and deliberately misleading beacons which lured ships to destruction.

In act four captive women from Troy lament their lot pitifully, and among them Cassandra has a prophetic vision of the murder of Agamemnon and of her relatives in the Underworld, who summon her to them. When the king enters, she compares what will soon happen at Argos to what happened recently at Troy, but he cannot understand her riddling allusions.

In act five an exultant Cassandra witnesses by clairvoyance the assassination of the king that is taking place there and then inside the palace. Electra and the boy Orestes (Agamemnon's children) come out, and she entrusts her brother to a friend of her father's, who takes him off to safety. She then contemptuously defies Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus and is led off to prison. Cassandra is sentenced to death by them, but embraces this, happy to be able to pass on to her dead relatives the news of what has just taken place at Argos. She leaves the stage with a veiled hint of the revenge that will come on Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus from Orestes.

## NOTES

What I present below is not a (faithful and full) translation of the play, and not an adaptation (with substantial additions, excisions and other alterations), but a 'version' (a rendering that pays particular attention to performance requirements). A literal translation would not be easy to perform on a modern stage (just read one!), so some sort of change seemed called for. I have not had the temerity to add anything to Seneca's drama. But I have made cuts - to the rhetoric, the verbiage, the forced and obscure expression and the erudite allusions (with the intention of removing obstacles to ready understanding and enjoyment), and to the songs of the chorus, restricting them to what has a close bearing on the action (but I have given them much of the poetry). I aimed at natural and direct (if dignified) language for the other characters, so that actors could speak the lines comfortably and the audience could follow them easily. Above all I have tried to bring out the dramatic power of the play, so that it will have an impact and make people think.

The mythological background is rather involved but darkly fascinating. The play concerns a violent and extremely dysfunctional family, and it looks both backwards and forwards from its own time period.

Agamemnon's great-grandfather Tantalus killed and served up his own son (Pelops) as a meal to the gods to test their wisdom, and as punishment for that was for all time appropriately tantalized in the Underworld, rooted to the spot in the middle of a river (which disappeared whenever he tried to drink) beneath branches of luscious fruit (which were whisked away whenever he tried to eat).

His son Pelops was restored to life by the gods. Later, when he grew up, he decided to marry the daughter of a king who forced all suitors to take part in a chariot race with him. The king always won, as he had divine horses, and put the suitors to death. Pelops bribed Myrtilus (the man who looked after the king's chariot) to sabotage it (promising to let him have intercourse first with his new bride as the bribe). When the king's chariot crashed, killing him, and Pelops duly won the race, he went back on his promise and murdered his helper by throwing him from a cliff into the sea, but before he died Myrtilus cursed Pelops' family.

The curse began to work itself out in the next generation, in connection with two of Pelops' sons - Atreus and Thyestes. These two fought bitterly over the kingship of Argos (also known as Mycenae). Atreus ruled there first, but Thyestes seduced his wife and with her assistance stole a ram with a golden fleece that was the city's ancient symbol of power; he then took over the kingship and banished Atreus. After wandering in exile for a time, Atreus managed to recover the throne and expelled Thyestes. Then, after learning about his wife's affair with Thyestes, he wanted revenge. He recalled his brother and his children, pretending to be reconciled to him and ready to share the throne with him. Then he secretly killed Thyestes' sons and served them up to him as a meal, producing their heads at the end to show him what he had just eaten. After that he exiled Thyestes, who later heard from an oracle of the god Apollo that he could get revenge if he had a son by his own daughter. So he promptly raped her. She gave birth to Aegisthus, and when he reached manhood he returned to Argos, assassinated Atreus and re-established Thyestes on the throne.

But Aegisthus played an even greater part in securing vengeance. Atreus had two sons (Agamemnon and Menelaus), who had to flee for their lives when he was killed. They subsequently returned and with the help of the nearby king of Sparta drove Thyestes and Aegisthus into exile. They then married the Spartan king's daughters. Agamemnon married Clytaemnestra and became king of Argos. He was later made commander of the Greek army that went to Troy to get back Helen (Menelaus' wife), who had eloped with the Trojan prince Paris. To secure favourable winds, so that the Greek fleet could sail to Troy, Agamemnon had to sacrifice to the goddess Diana (who he had offended) his own daughter Iphigenia, luring her with the false promise of a wedding for her to the great Greek hero Achilles. His wife Clytaemnestra never forgave him for that, and Aegisthus too wanted revenge (for his father Thyestes, who had died in exile). While Agamemnon was away for ten years fighting at Troy, those two started an affair and began plotting. When (after the fall of Troy and the death of its champion, Hector, and its king, Priam) Agamemnon returned victorious (accompanied by the captive Trojan princess and prophetess Cassandra as his concubine), they trapped him and killed him at a banquet. They also killed Cassandra.

The slaughter was not over yet. Agamemnon's young son (Orestes) was smuggled to safety after his father was assassinated. When he grew to manhood, he returned and with the help of his sister (Electra) killed both Aegisthus and his own mother. He was then pursued by the Furies (dread goddesses from the Underworld who punished crimes against family members in particular). On the advice of Apollo (who had told him to avenge his father's death) Orestes went to Athens and stood trial for murder. The Furies prosecuted him, Apollo defended him and the goddess Athena acted as presiding judge. After the jury split, she gave the casting vote in Orestes' favour and he was acquitted from guilt. So finally the curse was broken and all the horror was over.

Seneca's *Agamemnon* has much in common with his *Thyestes*. It is another revenge drama in five acts, concerning the same family, where a returning hero is duped and killed by way of vengeance, and there is a prologue with a ghost. The *Agamemnon* also has a bleak vision: it conjures up a world of flux and cruelty, in which law and decency are absent, prayers to the gods go unheeded, and death is the only peace that people can find, and it consistently diminishes the main characters, who are not heroic or impressive, with the exception (largely) of Cassandra. This play too has relevance, in connection with Seneca's day (when Rome was in a similarly rotten state, and there was infighting in the imperial household), and our own day (where passion so often leads to acts of savagery despite a pretence of civilization, and where people in high places misuse their power and commit crimes, often terrible crimes).

There are important differences between the two tragedies as well. The *Agamemnon* does not have the onward drive and lurid impact of the *Thyestes*, but it does have a more complex plot, and it presents a more probing investigation of revenge and its dire consequences (with each act exploring a different aspect). The vengeance issue in the *Agamemnon* is kaleidoscopic: Agamemnon takes revenge on the Trojans for the abduction of Helen, but then he himself is subjected to avengers; his murder is viewed by different people as retribution for his father's maltreatment of Thyestes, and for his own sacrifice of Iphigenia, and for the death of Priam and the sack of Troy; in addition the destruction of Troy and the rape of Cassandra then are punished by destruction of much

of the Greek fleet; and at the end of the play Electra and Orestes are incipient avengers. Generally in the *Agamemnon* vengeance entails violence and leads to instability and disorder (resignation appears to be the wiser response to maltreatment), and there is much on the victims of revenge to highlight the misery and horror that it brings about. Other themes are interwoven with all the crime and punishment, making for a rich and thought-provoking blend. Most notably, a series of falls from triumph to disaster illustrates fluctuation and mutability in human life (happiness is transient, and success and power are illusory); and the danger of allowing the passions to be rampant and to outweigh reason is also made evident, in line with (Stoic) philosophical thinking.

ACT ONE provides a short and sharp introduction to the action. It is an aptly dark and oppressive start, which stresses death and the Underworld, and which establishes the royal palace (the setting) as a place of horror and the royal family (the protagonists) as brutal and depraved (guilty of infanticide, cannibalism, rape, incest and vengeful fury). The first of a series of distinctly unheroic characters, Thyestes is uncertain and afraid, racked by guilt over his repellent conduct and desperate for revenge, and he alienates us further by gloating unpleasantly over the prospect of Agamemnon's death. The first act also raises themes which are important in this play - the role of Fortune; the mutability of human life; the way in which crime engenders further crime; and vengeance (here from Thyestes' point of view the murder of Agamemnon is presented as revenge for the sin of his father Atreus, who had killed Thyestes' children and served them up to him at a banquet).

The brooding FIRST CHORAL ODE picks up and develops the major themes of act one (without reacting to Thyestes specifically). It is a gloomy reflection on power and its drawbacks, which conjures up a bleak world (of treachery, flux, anxiety, crime, destruction and so on). It depicts power as something unstable, especially due to the malign influence of Fortune, but also due to human sin and the inherent vulnerability of greatness (because of its very eminence). This notion of the insecurity of power is highly relevant to the play in general, and the royal family at Argos is particularly prone to the mortal crimes mentioned in this ode. The chorus' words reinforce our foreboding in connection with Agamemnon. They also look backwards to Thyestes, the flawed and fallen king who has just been on stage, and forwards to Clytaemnestra, who will shortly enter and confirm some of the observations in these lines, and who will ultimately fall herself (along with Aegisthus).

In ACT TWO Seneca explores the psychology of revenge, giving us a real insight into the mind of Clytaemnestra in particular, and also showing us what spurs on Aegisthus. They demonstrate the awful results of an inability to control the passions. In the first scene we see a vacillating and conflicted Clytaemnestra (in line with the general diminution of heroic characters in this play) trying to steel herself to kill her husband. This is a very different figure from the dour and determined murderess of earlier literature (especially Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, which was very much in Seneca's thoughts as he wrote this tragedy). When her nurse tries to calm and dissuade her, Clytaemnestra reveals her varied motivation (which makes for a more complex and nuanced character than authors had given her so far) and then attacks her husband in an impassioned speech, which intimates that he too is flawed but which also contains exaggeration and irony (the incipient murderess criticizes him for murdering their daughter, and the adulteress

complains of his adultery). When she urges herself on again, the nurse comes out with a forceful if rather illogical speech (Clytaemnestra did manage to kill Agamemnon and was not subject to revenge), but still manages to dissuade her (because she is not thinking straight and is basically reluctant to murder her husband). In the second scene the equally degenerate Aegisthus enters, urging himself to act and really in need of Clytaemnestra as an accomplice. When she demurs, in desperation he plays on her fear and jealousy, and when she becomes so agitated that she orders him to leave, he offers to end his miserable life as well, so as to win pity and raise the prospect of her losing him for good. That ploy succeeds, and the act ends with her veering back to the idea of murder.

The two scenes contain contrast highlighting the queen's mercurial nature, as she first decides to kill but is dissuaded by the nurse, and then refuses to kill but is persuaded by Aegisthus. There is parallelism as well, to link the adulterous pair (both enter psyching themselves up, and first she and then he argues the case for assassination); so too they leave together to make a specific plan together. There is also a grim progression over the course of the two scenes, as Clytaemnestra moves from initial hesitation to final determination to murder, and at the very end takes on a leadership role.

In the SECOND CHORAL ODE the chorus of loyal Argive women (in ignorance of the plotting against their ruler) thank various divinities for Agamemnon's victory and invite them to attend the festivities. The chorus' great joy shows the natural reaction to the king's triumphant return, and so makes Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus look even worse. Their delight also stands in stark contrast to their brooding first Ode and the dark Acts one and two. But even as we hear these happy words we are aware of an underlying irony, because we know what will soon happen to Agamemnon, and we are given pointed reminders of that in the Ode's subject matter (rulers overthrown, death, the Underworld, powerful female assailants, punishment and grief). So too there are gloomy undercurrents in connection with the deities addressed by the chorus, who are not likely to be all that sympathetic to Greeks and the royal house. Apollo was a supporter of the Trojans, like his sister Diana; and he was involved in the birth of Aegisthus, while she had been offended by the king at the start of the war and had made him sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia (providing major motivation for Clytaemnestra). Juno (who was goddess of marriage and was plagued by a promiscuous husband herself) would not be too impressed by the adulterous Agamemnon. And Jupiter's altar was sacrilegiously spattered with the blood of Priam when he was slaughtered at it, and this enraged god allowed Minerva to use his thunderbolt to attack at sea one of Agamemnon's captains, the Greek hero Ajax, who had violated sanctuary by dragging Cassandra from her temple (as we will see in the description of the storm that wrecked the Greek fleet in the next Act). In fact the chorus' invocation highlights the absence of gods in connection with events at Argos, and is given a grim twist in that horrific divine intervention during the Greeks' voyage home mentioned in the following lines.

In ACT THREE Eurybates announces Agamemnon's imminent arrival, arousing anticipation, but then comes retardation in the lengthy description of the fleet's troubles. That makes for a build-up, as does the extensive foreshadowing in Eurybates' account, where we see (in the storm) success and joy suddenly succeeded by violence that catches people off guard, and (in Minerva) a vengeful female attacking a Greek hero connected with Cassandra and killing him with the help of a male, and (in Nauplius) a treacherous royal personage getting revenge on countrymen for the killing of his child. That is a

powerful narrative with a considered progression, and it adds to the play more turmoil, disorder and disintegration, and parallels the fluctuation and instability in human life. There is irony in Agamemnon escaping such danger at sea only to fall victim to his own wife in the seeming safety of his home; and we are alerted to that irony because Eurybates' account is framed by Clytaemnestra making ominously double-edged remarks (now so determined to kill her husband that she actually indulges in verbal play).

In the THIRD CHORAL ODE amid extensive gloom and pathos the second chorus (of captive Trojan women) completely invert the joy of the previous ode and provide a startling new point of view (seeing the Greek victory at Troy as a great disaster and tragedy). They also provide a new response to maltreatment: instead of longing for vengeance (they are themselves an example of the suffering caused by a desire for revenge), they present death as an escape from distress (an attitude subsequently embraced by Cassandra and Electra). There is yet more foreshadowing of Agamemnon's death here, building an even stronger sense of inevitability: the chorus end with a picture of a murdered king (in a prominent position in the ode), and before that they describe destruction brought about by treachery and a gift (like Clytaemnestra's gift of the robe for her husband later in the play) in a context of trust, security and happiness.

ACT FOUR begins by looking back to the grief of the Trojan captives in their choral ode (reinforcing it with Cassandra's even greater grief) and then looks forward to the murder of Agamemnon by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus (which Cassandra describes in a typically riddling prophecy; and then her vision of the vengeful Furies on their way presents that upcoming murder as revenge for the death of Priam and destruction of Troy). When Agamemnon enters, with Clytaemnestra right beside him, there is a suggestive collocation of the (silent, sinister) assassin and her two victims (Cassandra's fall from felicity already described, the king's fall soon to happen). Yet another unimpressive character in this play, Agamemnon the conquering hero is here diminished (shortly before his total diminution): in his brief appearance he has only a few lines to speak, and he is baffled and blind (beside the prescient Cassandra) and misguidedly complacent. There is also a bleak irony in his final speech (in view of various imminent inversions of his words), and we see in him a striking example of the impermanence of happiness and the illusoriness of success.

The FOURTH CHORAL ODE is on the surface a celebration of Argive greatness (and is intended as such by the chorus), and so it begins by presenting both Agamemnon and Hercules as mighty sons of Argos. But the focus soon shifts to Hercules alone and stays on him until close to the end of the ode (where there is an unflattering comparison of the king to the superhero). So Seneca ensures that Agamemnon's status is again reduced by a lack of textual prominence; and he makes him and his achievements at Troy look paltry beside the much greater hero, who (we are reminded) became a god, had Jupiter for a father (with an extraordinary conception), performed a full twelve remarkable Labours (dealing easily with formidable foes) and took Troy in a mere ten days. The lines range far afield in subject matter but finally come back to the situation in Argos and usher in the king's death with allusion to the Underworld, treachery, Agamemnon and the destruction of Troy.

ACT FIVE provides an animated conclusion to the play with its new characters and unexpected entrances, its rapid pace, the flurry of action and all the conflict. It also provides an unsettling conclusion: it is rather fragmented (which fits with a fragmented



world); Seneca chooses to end at the point when the two villains are in control and resistance to them is crushed; and yet there is no real sense of closure (as we are reminded in the last line and in several earlier ones that the grim cycle of vengeance will continue, with Orestes and Electra reversing the present success of the queen and her lover). In the first scene Cassandra's clairvoyant vision of the death of Agamemnon is an arresting way of conveying it (and a brand new form for the messenger speech), and her emotional involvement gives the narrative force as she dwells on the murder and savours the savagery. She draws clear parallels between the end of Priam and the fall of Troy, viewing the assassination as symmetrical repayment for all that (at the same time, as we know, Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus have their own motives for revenge here, and the banquet also recalls the banquet served up to Thyestes by Atreus in the same palace, so that there is vengeance for that too). In the urgent and nervy second and third scenes the dutiful conduct of Electra and Strophius make the two murderers (avengers) seem even worse, and that process continues in the fourth scene. There Electra shows a spirited defiance to her outrageous mother and her taunting lover; but Electra's standing too is lessened to an extent (she is reduced to begging for death, and is hurried off to prison, as Aegisthus has the last word over her). Cassandra is more impressive, choosing resignation rather than revenge as her response to maltreatment and seeing death as liberation from suffering (a Stoic lesson for us). But even she is slightly diminished in this final act by her (human but rather unpleasant) gloating at the start over the killing of Agamemnon and at the end over the coming slaughter of Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. So all in all there is an appropriately gloomy and sour close to this dark revenge-drama.

### **Cast of Characters**

GHOST OF THYESTES (uncle of Agamemnon)  
CLYTAEMNESTRA (wife of Agamemnon)  
NURSE of Clytaemnestra  
AEGISTHUS (son of Thyestes and lover of Clytaemnestra)  
EURYBATES (herald of Agamemnon)  
CASSANDRA (daughter of Priam and captive of Agamemnon)  
AGAMEMNON (king of Argos, leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War)  
ELECTRA (daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra)  
ORESTES (brother of Electra; non-speaking character)  
STROPHIUS (friend of Agamemnon)  
PYLADES (son of Strophius; non-speaking character)  
CHORUS I of Argive women  
CHORUS II of female Trojan captives

### Scene

The action takes place before the royal palace at Argos in a courtyard where there is an altar.

## ACT ONE

*(Enter the GHOST OF THYESTES, moving slowly towards the palace, in semi-darkness)*

### GHOST OF THYESTES

So, Thyestes, here you are, up on earth, released from the deep-dark pit of Hell...I don't know which world I loathe most: Hades is hateful, but there'll be no welcome for me here-

*(Wails, recoils and staggers, as he recognizes the palace)*

just horrors. Ai, this is the home of my father - no, the home of my brother, the ancient palace of our family, where kings sit enthroned on high, where their councils meet, where

*(Shudders)*

there are banquets.

*(His voice and body shaking with fear)*

I can't stay here. Even Hell's glooming rivers would be better than this, and its monstrous guard-dog with that snaky mane, even the abyss where the great sinners are punished for all time - Ixion (lashed to a whirling wheel of flame) and Tityos (his liver bolted down by vultures but growing back again) and Tantalus (parched by burning thirst in the midst of that mocking stream which always eludes his lips).

*(Speaking slowly and holding his head in pain)*

Tantalus served his son up as a feast for the gods...But my guilt is greater than his...greater than that of all the souls tormented in Hell (including my brother)...I have eaten my own sons, gorged on my own flesh and blood...at a banquet here given by my brother Atreus...But Fortune defiled me further, added an even worse offence...An oracle told me to have sex with my daughter, and I didn't shrink from that evil crime. No, I kept on ravaging my children's flesh by forcing her to bear a son worthy of me - Aegisthus...I've reversed the laws of nature: I'm father and grandfather to him, husband and father to her...

*(Gloating)*

But now at last (after the long years of suffering, after my death) the oracle's promise that this boy would avenge me is coming true: Atreus' son, Agamemnon, king of kings, lord of lords, whose thousand ships covered the Trojan seas, has finally conquered Troy and come home, only to yield his throat to Clytaemnestra, his own wife.

*(Clenches his fist in triumph)*

Revenge! The palace will swim in blood, very soon! I see swords, hatchets, spears, the king's skull hacked apart by a battle-axe. Here comes crime, and treachery and slaughter and gore! At a banquet. There's a banquet for him as well. This is why you were born Aegisthus - to take part in all that.

*(Angrily to AEGISTHUS, who he can somehow see inside the palace)*

Why's your face slack with shame? Why's your hand trembling? Don't be weak! No soul-searching! This was the whole point of the incest - to produce an avenger!

*(Frustrated, but resigned)*

But this long night won't end while I am here: the Sun can't bear to look upon such a sinner. So, I'll leave, and let the new day dawn.

*(Exit the GHOST OF THYESTES)*

## **FIRST CHORAL ODE**

*(Enter the CHORUS of Argive women)*

### **CHORUS**

Fortune, you're treacherous: you give people regal power and riches,  
thereby raising them up to the top of a slippery precipice,  
and rulers never relax, their minds are never at rest,  
they're forever exhausted by worries, worries and tempests of troubles.  
For with a wild sea-surge you batter and shatter their thrones;  
and monarchs rule through fear, but fear reprisals themselves,  
so at night they can't sleep safe or escape from smothering horror.  
Palace after palace is wearied by in-fighting families,  
comes crashing down because of crime avenging crime.  
Shame and Justice and Fidelity flee from royal courts,  
and in rush Strife with blood-stained hands and savage Fury,  
searing the proud and haunting their haughty, fragile homes.  
And if there's no-one plotting and no-one attacking, then greatness  
collapses by itself, crumpling beneath its own vast mass.  
The biggest bull in the herd is the one selected for sacrifice;  
lightning strikes the highest hills and the tallest trees;  
and the tower that mounts to the clouds gets pounded by gales.  
Fortune raises up, only to dash down.  
Ordinariness last longer. Happiness comes from being  
content to be just an average man, from sailing in safety  
very close to the coast, and not far out at sea.

*(Exit the CHORUS)*

## ACT TWO

### SCENE ONE

*(Enter CLYTAEMNESTRA, very animated)*

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You're hesitating! Stop it! There's no safe way. There's only one course open to you now. You had your chance to be a faithful wife and safeguard his throne while Agamemnon was away at Troy...Morality, honour, justice, fidelity - all long gone; and so is shame, which never returns. It's further crime that saves the criminal. So you have to do something heinous, and quickly. Come on, think! What have women done in the past? Stepmothers...unfaithful wives...Medea - she killed her own brother, hacked him apart. Something like that...So...A sword?...Poison?...Or I could just sail away with my lover...No! Don't be such a coward! That's what Helen did with Paris. Something much worse than that is fitting for you.

*(As CLYTAEMNESTRA falls silent and ponders, enter the NURSE)*

NURSE

Your majesty, why are you sitting there brooding, silently and savagely? I can tell you're furious from your face. Whatever's troubling you, just wait for a while. Things often come right simply with time.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I can't wait: I'm in absolute agony, I'm pounded by fear and rancour and jealousy; and there's my shaming, bruising desire for Aegisthus. I'm driven this way and that, a rudderless ship in a seething sea...I'll go where resentment and anger and hope take me. I can't think clearly, I'll give myself up to chance.

NURSE

Be led by chance? It's completely unpredictable.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What if it is? Things can't get any worse for me.

NURSE

But you can keep your love affair a secret.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, I can't: misbehaviour in a royal family never escapes attention.

NURSE

So, you regret what you did, but are planning a new crime?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Yes. Moderation in crime is stupid. This situation calls for desperate measures.

NURSE

But what about your sacred marriage-vows?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What? Bother about a husband who left me for ten years?

NURSE

But remember your children by him!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What I remember is how he lied to me and lured my Iphigenia to that make-believe marriage to Achilles, so she could be sacrificed.

NURSE

After that sacrifice the goddess Diana did send the wind our fleet needed to sail to Troy.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

*(Raging and shouting)*

I'm the daughter of a king, I'm descended from gods, and I gave birth to what - a sacrificial victim? I can't get it out of my mind - my daughter's 'wedding', which he made worthy of his murderous family - her own father, leading her to the altar to be butchered, buying the wind with blood, while the priest shuddered and the altar-flames recoiled. Actually that sacrifice didn't make Diana send the wind they needed. No, the harbour itself ejected the ships, to get rid of those criminals.

He was every bit as bad at Troy, scorched by lust. He had to have Chryseis, his captive, a slave-girl. Her father was an old priest of Apollo and begged for her back, but he held on to her stubbornly, even when Apollo was slaughtering the Greeks in retaliation and the funeral-pyres were blazing constantly. And while the army was being devastated like this, he found the time to languish with love for another barbarian girl and got himself a new mistress. Yes, he took Briseis to his bed, tearing her out of the arms of her man, shamelessly - this from the punisher of Paris! And now there's a third one. He's in flames, insane with love for the Trojan princess Cassandra. He's returning from his triumph at Troy as the husband of a prisoner, as Priam's son-in-law.

*(To herself, striding up and down)*

Get ready! It's war. Strike first! What are you waiting for? Until queen Cassandra takes over? What's holding you back? Thoughts of your children at home? What you should be thinking of is the hurricane hurtling towards them - the demented stepmother for them who's nearly here. Stop holding back! Throw your arms around him and plunge a sword into him and you, if that's the only way to kill him! Dying with someone who you want to die is a fine death.

NURSE

No, don't, please don't try that! You won't succeed anyway. This is the man who finally conquered the fierce Trojans and avenged Greece; Ajax went mad, tried to kill him, and failed; Achilles in his rage over Briseis didn't wound him with his savage sword; nor did any of the mighty warriors on Troy's side, not even their staunchest defender Hector, or Paris with his unerring arrows, or invulnerable Cycnus. And you think that you are going to murder him?

*(CLYTAEMNESTRA looks away, shaken)*

If you did succeed, Greece would avenge him. Picture it - the sea bristling with warships and weapons, the soil of Argos flooded with blood, and you and your men captives (just like the Trojans)! Calm down, control yourself!

*(CLYTAEMNESTRA sinks down, defeated; exit the NURSE, noting this with satisfaction)*

SCENE TWO

*(Enter AEGISTHUS, agitated and talking to himself)*

AEGISTHUS

This is it, Aegisthus - the crisis you've been dreading. And you want to give up and run away? Don't be such a coward! Face your cruel fate! You can't escape anyway: the gods want you to die.

*(Catches sight of CLYTAEMNESTRA and addresses her)*

Clytaemnestra, I need you to help me. Together we can make your cowardly husband pay for spilling your daughter's blood with his own...What's up? You're pale and trembling.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I can't do it. He is my husband. I'm going to be a faithful and loving wife again. It's not too late. If you repent, you're as good as innocent.

AEGISTHUS

Faithfully married to Agamemnon? You're mad. You know what you've done: you've got every reason to be terrified.

*(CLYTAEMNESTRA recoils in fear)*

And he'll be really arrogant now that Troy has fallen. He'll be a brutal tyrant. I can see his proud progress, amid great pomp, surrounded by a crowd of concubines. But one stands out from the crowd, clinging to him - the prophetess Cassandra. Will you share your marriage-bed meekly? She won't!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

*(Weeping and wringing her hands)*

Why are you driving me back to the abyss, igniting my rage all over again? He's allowed himself some liberty with a captive. Well, he is a conqueror and a king. And I can't judge him harshly, after what I've done. As I need to be forgiven, I'll forgive him.



AEGISTHUS

Do you really think you'll negotiate mutual forgiveness? Don't you know there's one law for kings and one for the rest of us; and kings relish being able to do what others can't?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

He pardoned Helen. She's returning with Menelaus, despite all the trouble she caused.

AEGISTHUS

Yes, he could show mercy then, in her case. But now his affections have been stolen by another woman, and he's already looking for a pretext to accuse you of something. If you'd done nothing wrong, it wouldn't do you any good. If your lord hates you, you're guilty. Maybe you think you'll get a divorce and go back to your father's house? No. Wives who kings discard don't escape.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

*(Desperate)*

I'll bribe the servants to keep quiet about us.

AEGISTHUS

Servants can be bribed to speak out too.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

*(More and more agitated)*

I still feel some shame at what I've done. But you keep on trying to persuade me to murder him. Why? So I'll marry an exile like you in place of the king of kings?

AEGISTHUS

He's no better than me. I am the son of Thyestes.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Yes, and his grandson.

AEGISTHUS

I'm not ashamed of my birth. Apollo's oracle was behind it.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You're involving a god in that rape, that incest? The only thing you're good at is stealing other men's wives - that's how you show your manhood. Get out of my sight! Now! You have brought dishonour on this palace...which is now waiting for its king, my husband.

AEGISTHUS

Banishment is nothing new to me. I'm used to suffering. I'll go...I'll even put an end to my miserable life, if you tell me to.

CLYTAEMNESTRA  
*(Recoils, and wavers)*

Ah, if only I could!...

*(Finally relents)*

No. We did wrong together, so I have to be loyal to you...Come inside. We need to work out a plan to deal with this crisis.

*(Exeunt, arm in arm)*

## **SECOND CHORAL ODE**

*(Enter the CHORUS of Argive women)*

### **CHORUS**

*(Lively and lilting)*

Peace has returned. Let's rejoice, let's give thanks to the gods.

O king Apollo, unstring your victorious bow,  
play on your lyre with those fingers that flicker and fly  
tunes that are lively and bright, that are silver and light;  
or you could sing a more serious song, as you did  
after the Titans (the rulers of heaven and earth)  
lost all their power, overwhelmed by Jove's smoulderous bolts.

Come to us, Juno, grand Jupiter's sister and wife.  
Conquering queen, kindly welcome our conquering king.  
All of our women are playing their pipes and their lyres,  
all of our women are waving their torches for you.  
You will receive soon a sacrosanct victim: a bull's  
snowy-white mate will be slaughtered in honour of you.

Come to us, far-famed Minerva. The young and the old  
pour out libations and roar out their thanks in their songs:  
turreted Troy was so frequently slashed by your spear.

Puissant Diana, we beg you to come to us too.  
Goddess of heaven and goddess of hell, thanks to you  
Delos, that free-floating island, stopped sailing the sea.  
Vengeance was yours when you punished Niobe for pride,  
killing her children and changing her into a crag,  
high on a mountain, a crag which still weeps, which weeps still.

Lord of the lightning-bolt, father of gods and of men,  
lord of the universe, you above all we revere.  
Jupiter, if these thank-offerings find favour with you,  
favour our ruler, that worthy descendant of yours.

### ACT THREE

CHORUS

But here comes a soldier, in a hurry...It's Eurybates, our king's herald, and he's smiling.  
(Enter *EURYBATES*)

EURYBATES

I can hardly believe it. I've made it, made it back...

(To the *CHORUS*)

Repay your vows to the gods: at long last Agamemnon, the glory of Argos, is coming home, a conquering hero.

(Enter *CLYTAEMNESTRA*, who hears his final words)

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Excellent news! Now I've got him, after all these years. But where is he? Has he landed?

EURYBATES

Yes, unharmed, and more illustrious than ever.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

This calls for a sacrifice...We must thank the gods for finally bringing him back to us...Is Menelaus alive? And where's Helen?

EURYBATES

I can't say for certain. The ships were scattered and we lost touch with each other. The sea inflicted heavier losses on the king than the war did. He has just a few battered ships left out of that vast fleet. It's like a defeat rather than a victory.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

(*Eagerly*)

How were the ships scattered? Tell me about this disaster.

EURYBATES

Don't make me describe it! It's too painful to -

CLYTAEMNESTRA

(*More eagerly*)

Tell me! Not knowing exactly what your troubles are makes them worse - you imagine all kinds of things then.

EURYBATES

When Troy fell and was fired by the Greeks, they shared out the spoil, sped down to the shore and rowed off joyfully on a calm sea with a gentle breeze behind them. When a stronger wind bellied out the sails, they downed oars and entrusted their ships to it. They

pointed out with pleasure the empty shores of Troy disappearing in the distance and recalled the war - how brave Hector was killed in the duel and disfigured, and how king Priam was slaughtered at the altar of Jupiter, spattering it with his blood.

As the sun set, a small cloud, swelling blackly, stained its rays, disquietingly...The stars came out and the wind fell...

*(There is a moan offstage, and the lights abruptly dim)*

But all of a sudden the coast and cliffs moan, the moon and stars are smothered, the darkness is doubled.

*(The CHORUS mime the storm in dance)*

Now all the winds at once swoop on the sea, warring with each other, hurling their weapons, heaving the water right up to the sky in a maelstrom of rain and spray and snow...as if the earth's being torn from its foundations and the gods are falling from rents in the heavens...

*(One light flashes on and off like lightning)*

Crushing blackness of hell...lanced by fitful lightning-bolts, flashing from shattered clouds...Blind ships smash into ships, plunge down into sea-gulfs, get battered by wave-walls...one is swallowed and spewed up again...another drifts, stripped, maimed, a hulk...The poor sailors are stupefied, terrified...They abandon their posts and pray, asking why they must die an ignoble death at sea after doing great things at Troy.

*(The CHORUS mime in dance the end of Ajax)*

Now another disaster. Minerva arms herself with angry Jupiter's thunderbolt and sends new storms gusting across the sky. To punish his rape of Cassandra, she flings a bolt at Ajax, full force. It hits his ship and slams him over the side. Scorched but unshaken, he breasts the wild waves. He grabs some burning wreckage and drifts along with it, glittering in the blackness. Then he scrambles up on to a rock. And there he thunders out madly: 'Ha! I've beaten the storm, the sea, Minerva, a thunderbolt. I'm not afraid of her throwing that weapon with her weak hand. Jupiter himself can hurl at me-' The god of the sea suddenly rears up, strikes the rock with his trident, beheads it. Its top sinks into the depths, taking Ajax with it.

*(The CHORUS mime in dance the shipwreck; one light represents the beacon)*

Worse follows. At Cape Caphareus deceptive shallows conceal a jagged reef. Here a Greek king takes cruel revenge on us, for executing his son at Troy. High on the headland Nauplius sets up a treacherous beacon to lure us on to the sharp rocks... Chaos! Ships stick fast, splinter, split in two, or back off and get rammed, wrecked and wrecking others.

*(The lights go up again)*

The madness finally ended at dawn. When we'd made this atonement to Troy, the sun returned, revealing the carnage.

*(Exit the CHORUS of Argive women, lamenting)*

#### CLYTAEMNESTRA

Should I be sad or glad at my husband's return? I am glad that he has come back. But I have to mourn the serious wound, the damage done to our kingdom...

Father Jupiter, whose thunderbolts make high heaven quake, reconcile the gods to the Greeks again...

All citizens must put joyful garlands on their heads...Let the flute of sacrifice pour out a sweet melody...And let a snowy-white victim be slaughtered before the great altar...

But look, here come the women of Troy, sad and mourning. The proud and untamed one in the lead, brandishing Apollo's prophetic laurel, must be Cassandra.

*(Exit CLYTAEMNESTRA, scowling in anger)*

### **THIRD CHORAL ODE**

*(Enter the CHORUS of captive Trojan women, wailing loudly, and CASSANDRA;  
some of the CHORUS stand among the audience)*

#### **CHORUS**

*(Slowly and mournfully)*

Humans are cruelly beguiled  
by an innate flaw in their nature -  
an appalling love of life,  
when a way out of all of their troubles  
lies wide, wide open -  
the freedom of death,  
a harbour of calm and abiding quiet,  
untouched by terror,  
by storms of fortune,  
by fire-fraught thunderbolts from hostile heaven.  
That deep peace does not fear fierce enemies besieging  
or flames eating the walls  
or the fall of a whole city, a whole nation,  
or the rampaging rage of the conqueror.  
Only the man who dares to die,  
who contemplates joyless Hades joyfully,  
will escape slavery.

*(They wail loudly)*

We saw our own Troy come crashing down  
on that night of death.  
No hero defeated Troy in ten years of warfare.  
Treachery killed Troy.  
In one night.  
We saw the enormous horse  
(that purported offering to Minerva),  
and trustingly we, with our own hands,  
hailed that feigned and fatal gift  
into our city.  
The enormous horse,  
with war and kings in its womb,  
stumbled again and again at the gate;  
inside it shields clattered, men muttered.  
But, free from fear,  
Trojan girls, Trojan boys  
rejoiced to touch those god-cursed ropes.  
Happy mothers, and happy fathers too,  
made thank-offerings to heaven.  
Everywhere in Troy there were joyful faces.

Even queen Hecuba smiled,  
for the first time since her Hector's death.

*(They wail loudly)*

But now,  
oh, so many things to mourn.  
Oh, sorrow, what will you mourn first?  
Our walls,  
which were built by divine hands,  
destroyed by the hands of man?  
Our shrines,  
which were fired,  
which collapsed in flames,  
on top of their own gods?  
No,  
there's no time to mourn all that.  
No,  
we must rather mourn our lord Priam.  
I saw, I saw  
Pyrrhus' sword  
stuck in our great king's aged throat,  
its blade scarcely stained by his thin blood.

*(They wail loudly)*



## ACT FOUR

CASSANDRA

*(Gently)*

You're crushed by the deaths in your own families - mourn for them. Don't cry for Priam as well. I'll weep deeply enough for Priam on my own.

CHORUS

But it helps to grieve with another. You're strong and enduring, but you won't be able to produce enough tears for the devastation in your palace. No-one has enough tears for such agony.

*(With a wail CASSANDRA rips off her headband)*

Cassandra! Why did you rip off your sacred headband? People in trouble need to revere the gods.

CASSANDRA

*(Becoming more and more animated)*

I've nothing to fear from them. There's nothing more that they can do to me. I have no homeland, no father, no sister...Graves and altars have drunk my family's blood...All my happy brothers...all dead...In Priam's palace only miserable old men, rejected as slaves, left behind, in empty rooms...My mother, the glorious queen Hecuba, survived...survived herself, changed into a bitch, barking madly among the ruins of her own home, her-

*(She stiffens, trembles all over and pants loudly)*

CHORUS

*(Recoiling and gasping)*

She's possessed by Apollo, trying to fight him...

*(CASSANDRA struggles and mutters)*

Words are forcing a way out...A prophecy!

CASSANDRA

*(Struggling violently)*

Ai! Ai! Get out, god, get out of me!...No mad goads,...holy rage!...Stop the fire,...mind-fire!...I'm not yours...Troy's gone...Apoll-

*(Convulses and collapses, then speaks in a prophetic trance)*

Where am I? The light's gone...it's black, black...No, now there are two suns, and Argos is two towns...Is that our Mount Ida? Is that Paris, prince of death?...Kings, beware of adulterers reared in the wilds - they'll smash your palaces flat...Now a madwoman...Spartan clothes...an Amazon's axe in her hands...Who's she hacking down? Who is that man?...Now what am I seeing?...The king of beasts, bitten bloody by a lioness, straddled by a snapping hyena.

*(Having a vision of the Underworld)*

Ghosts (my own family), why are you summoning me? Father, I'm coming. Brothers, I'm coming - Hector (you terror of the Greeks, now a mangled, bloody corpse), young Troilus, and - is it Deiphobus, so cruelly mutilated? I'm sailing to you on Charon's boat across the Styx...

*(Smiling and pointing)*

There's the savage hound of hell, there's the dark kingdom of Dis. This boat will carry today two royal souls - victor and vanquished. Powers of Hades, I pray to you, rivers of Hades, I pray to you: draw back the covering of your shadowy land, so the Trojan ghosts can see Argos...Look, you poor souls: fate is reversing itself!

Here come the Furies from the abyss, those squalid sisters, those dread goddesses of vengeance, rushing to Argos, brandishing smoky torches and snaky whips. Look at their cheeks (all bloated and pale), look at their wasted flanks, their black, funereal robes...I can hear the howls of horrors of the night...I can see giant bones mouldering and decayed, lying in a slimy marsh, and Tantalus mourning the imminent death, and our ancestor Dardanus dancing for joy.

*(She faints)*

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

She's collapsed, like a bull slaughtered at an altar...The prophetic frenzy is over. Let's lift her up.

*(They try to raise her up, in vain)*

Look! Here comes Agamemnon, with Clytaemnestra by his side, smiling.

*(Enter AGAMEMNON, with attendants and CLYTAEMNESTRA; the attendants go over to CASSANDRA; exit the CHORUS of Trojan captives)*

AGAMEMNON

Safely home at last! Dear Argos! Countless foreign races have yielded up spoil to you, and Troy, that flourished for so many years as the queen of all Asia, has submitted to you.

*(Notices CASSANDRA)*

Why's Cassandra lying there, trembling? You slaves, lift her up!

*(They raise her, and she starts to recover)*

Ah, she's come out of her faint. But her eyes are still dull. Gather your senses, Cassandra. All our troubles are over. This is a day of celebration.

CASSANDRA

There was a day of celebration at Troy too, when we thought the Greeks had gone.

AGAMEMNON

Let us worship at the altar.

CASSANDRA

My father was killed at an altar.

AGAMEMNON

Let us pray to Jupiter.

CASSANDRA

He died at Jupiter's altar.

AGAMEMNON

Do you think you see Troy?

CASSANDRA

*(Looking around, and then looking at AGAMEMNON)*

Yes, and Priam.

AGAMEMNON

*(Baffled)*

This isn't Troy.

CASSANDRA

*(Looking at CLYTAEMNESTRA)*

Where there's a Helen, it's Troy.

AGAMEMNON

*(Following her gaze)*

You are a slave, but don't be afraid of your mistress.

CASSANDRA

I will soon be free.

AGAMEMNON

Don't worry.

CASSANDRA

Death is my way out of worry.

AGAMEMNON

There's no danger for you here.

CASSANDRA

But there's great danger for you.

AGAMEMNON

*(Laughing, while CLYTAEMNESTRA looks alarmed and angry)*

What is there for a conqueror to fear?

CASSANDRA

What he does not fear.

AGAMEMNON

*(To his attendants)*

She's still possessed by Apollo. Restrain her and keep her quiet until she comes out of it.

*(Moves to the altar)*

Jupiter, lord of the savage thunderbolt, ruler of heaven and earth, to whom triumphant victors dedicate their spoil, and Juno (his sister and wife), I will gladly offer incense from Araby to you and sacrifice victims in your honour.

*(Exeunt all)*

## **FOURTH CHORAL ODE**

*(Enter the CHORUS of Argive women)*

### **CHORUS**

*(Stately and solemn)*

Argos, city famed for famous citizens,  
you've always suckled mighty sons like our lord.  
You've even added a god to the ranks of the immortals:  
by completing the twelve Labours your great Hercules  
gained a place for himself in high heaven.  
For his birth his father Jupiter shattered  
the laws of the cosmos, doubled the darkness-hours  
and made the moon go back, because he couldn't  
sire in a single night such a singular hero.  
Hercules crushed the lightning-swift lion of Nemea,  
carried off Crete's fearsome, bellowing bull,  
destroyed the deadly Hydra's snaky heads,  
clubbed to pulp gigantic, three-bodied Geryon,  
subdued Diomedes' savage, man-eating mares  
and fed his flesh to their awesome, gory jaws.  
He even chained and heaved up into the daylight  
the three-headed hound of Hades, silent and frightened.  
Long ago he led an army to Troy,  
when cheated by the treacherous Trojan king:  
Agamemnon took the town in ten years;  
Hercules took the town in ten days.

## ACT FIVE

### SCENE ONE

*(Enter CASSANDRA)*

CASSANDRA

*(At the altar, seeing the murder of the king by clairvoyance)*

Ha! Something massive is happening inside, repayment for our ten years of war! Fallen Troy has dragged down Argos, conquered Trojans are conquering! This is the clearest vision I have ever had. I don't just see what is happening - I'm in there, revelling in it.

*(A red spotlight shows the rear of the stage, where the murder is mimed)*

There's a banquet - like the last banquet in Troy - with golden goblets and purple tapestries (Trojan spoil!). Agamemnon's reclining in state, wearing a gorgeous royal robe (Priam's property!)...His wife's telling him to take off the enemy's clothing and put on a cloak that she wove for him herself (so her lover can kill him).

*(Shudders and clenches her fists)*

Death is here. This is the king's final banquet. His blood will spurt into the wine.

*(Gloating)*

He's putting on the cloak...the treacherous, deadly cloak...with its smothering folds...His head and hands are trapped...Aegisthus is stabbing him - but won't ram it right in...The coward, he's stopped, scared...But the boar's still caught in the net...frantic...can't escape...looking for his enemy, can't find his enemy...ensnared, all tangled up...The queen's gone berserk...grabbed an axe...weighing up where to strike, like someone sacrificing a bull...aiming...got him! It's over!

*(Red spotlight dims, leaving the rear of the stage dark)*

His head's hanging by a sliver of skin, not quite cut off...great gouts of blood from the neck...the face on the floor, babbling...And they won't leave him alone...now that he's dead, Aegisthus attacks him, gashing him again and again...she helps him by hacking the corpse...

*(She suddenly looks up and points)*

Look! In the sky. The sun has halted, in murder-shock.

*(CASSANDRA and the CHORUS sink to the floor, overcome)*

### SCENE TWO

*(Enter ELECTRA and ORESTES, running, stage right)*

ELECTRA

*(To ORESTES)*

You've got to escape. They've killed father and are after you now. You must escape. You're the only one who can get revenge for him.

*(Sees a chariot approach off stage)*

Ah, who's this in the chariot? Get behind me, out of sight!...Oh, it's all right, Orestes, don't be afraid. It's Strophius, a good friend, and protector.

### SCENE THREE

( *Enter STROPHIUS with a palm branch, talking to PYLADES, stage right*)

STROPHIUS

I just wanted to stop off here on our way home from the games to congratulate Agamemnon on his victory at Troy.

(*Sees ELECTRA*)

Who's this crying? Electra! Why the tears? You should be celebrating.

ELECTRA

Father's dead. My mother and her lover killed him. They've taken over here, and now they're looking for Orestes, to kill him too.

STROPHIUS

No!...Happiness doesn't last long at all.

ELECTRA

Please take Orestes and hide him, in memory of my father.

STROPHIUS

I will, gladly. But it's dangerous. Orestes, take this palm branch that I won at the games and hold it over your head. It'll hide your face, and be a good omen for the future. Come on, Pylades, let's get away from this treacherous palace quick!

(*Exeunt STROPHIUS, PYLADES and ORESTES*)

ELECTRA

...There goes the chariot, full speed...He's escaped!...Now I'll wait for my enemies, and let them kill me...

(*Sees CLYTAEMNESTRA approaching, stage right*)

Here she comes, her face dark with murder, her hands and clothes spattered with her husband's blood.

(*Joins CASSANDRA at the altar*)

Sanctuary!

(*To CASSANDRA*)

We're both in the same danger.

### SCENE FOUR

(*Enter CLYTAEMNESTRA*)

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Fine daughter you are! An enemy of your own mother! What are you doing out here? A virgin on her own in a public place - it's a disgrace!

ELECTRA

It's because I'm a virgin that I've left this house of adultery.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Who would believe that you're a virgin now, after you've been loitering in public?

ELECTRA

Who would ever believe that a daughter of yours was a virgin?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

That's no way to talk to your mother.

ELECTRA

You're telling me to show respect? The way you did to your husband?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So superior! Anyone would think you were a man. But I'll tame you. I'll make you act more like a woman.

ELECTRA

Wield an axe, you mean?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So. You'd attack us? Think you're a match for the pair of us? You're mad.

ELECTRA

The pair of you? Your husband is dead. Who's this other Agamemnon. You're a widow.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I'm a queen, and I'll break you, later. Where's your brother? Tell me! Quickly!

ELECTRA

Not in Argos.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Give me back my son, now!

ELECTRA

And you give me back my father!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Where is Orestes hiding?

ELECTRA

In a safe place, safe from the new regime. That's all a mother needs to know.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Right! You will be executed, today.



ELECTRA

Fine! So long as you are the executioner. Look, I'm leaving the altar.

*(Steps away from the altar, bares her throat and then her neck)*

Here's my throat, if you want to sink your weapon in that...Here's my neck, if you want to butcher me like an animal. Ready and waiting. Wash your husband's blood off your hands with my blood.

*(Enter AEGISTHUS, accompanied by attendants)*

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Aegisthus, this girl is insulting me, and won't tell me where Orestes is hidden.

AEGISTHUS

Don't talk to your mother like that! It's disgraceful! You must be mad.

ELECTRA

Is he going to tell me what to do - that criminal, born of crime, the son of his own sister, the grandson of his own father?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Kill her! Now! Cut her head off! Unless she reveals where Orestes is.

AEGISTHUS

*(Gloating)*

No, no. Let her live - live out her life in exile, buried in some black stony cell. And tortured. Yes, all sorts of tortures - then she might be willing to say where he is. She'll be helpless, and starving, covered in filth, in perpetual darkness; she'll be hated by everyone, widowed before she's wedded. Then, after many long years of imprisonment, her sufferings will finally prove too much for her, and she'll die.

ELECTRA

Let me die now!

AEGISTHUS

I'd only let you die now if you wanted to live. Putting people to death isn't the best way to punish them.

ELECTRA

Is anything worse than death?

AEGISTHUS

Yes - life, if you long to die. Guards, take this monster away, far away from Argos, to some remote corner of this kingdom. Keep her chained up in a cave as black as night. Prison will crush her.

*(Exit ELECTRA, escorted by attendants)*

CLYTAEMNESTRA

*(Pointing to CASSANDRA)*

But this one will be punished with death, the king's concubine, the slave-bride.

*(To attendants)*

Drag her away. She can join the husband she stole from me.

CASSANDRA

*(To attendants)*

Don't drag me. I'll walk in front of you of my own free will. I'm keen to be the first to take the news to my Trojans in Hades - how the sea was crammed with wrecked Greek ships, how Argos has fallen, and how the king of kings endured a fate similar to Troy's - destroyed by a woman's lust and a trick and a gift (the robe she gave him). Let's go. At once. Now I am happy to have outlived Troy (to have seen all this).

CLYTAEMNESTRA

She's mad. Kill her!

CASSANDRA

*(Staring into space, having a prophetic vision, and smiling)*

Somebody really mad will come for you.

*(Exit CASSANDRA, laughing, with attendants)*