

# **SENECA'S THYESTES**

A Version by

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## Contents

SYNOPSIS.....	3
NOTES.....	4
Cast of Characters.....	10
ACT ONE.....	12
FIRST CHORAL ODE.....	14
ACT TWO.....	15
SECOND CHORAL ODE.....	20
ACT THREE.....	21
SCENE ONE.....	21
SCENE TWO.....	24
THIRD CHORAL ODE.....	26
ACT FOUR.....	27
FOURTH CHORAL ODE.....	31
ACT FIVE.....	32

## SYNOPSIS

This tragedy is concerned with the revenge that Atreus (king of Argos) took on his brother Thyestes, luring him back from exile, killing his three sons and serving them up as a meal to him. It takes the form of five acts separated by short odes in which the chorus comment on the action.

In act one a dreadful Fury (goddess of the Underworld) brings the tormented ghost of Tantalus (grandfather of Atreus and Thyestes) to Argos and compels it (despite its great reluctance) to drive the royal family mad with a murderous rage. In the second act Atreus psychs himself up to get his awful vengeance, recalling Thyestes' former crimes against him (the theft of his wife and the throne), and forms his demented plan to bring his brother back and get him to eat his own children unwittingly. An attendant tries to restrain the king, but he brushes aside his objections and cows him into submission. In act three a dirty and ragged Thyestes turns up at the palace with his children, suspicious of Atreus and his offer to share power, but craving the wealth and prestige that go with the throne. He allows his son to persuade him to meet with Atreus, and then allows the play-acting Atreus to allay his fears and press a share of the kingship on him. He and his sons enter the palace with Atreus, suspecting nothing now. In the fourth act a distraught messenger relates at length and in detail how in a mysterious haunted grove in the depths of the palace Atreus murdered Thyestes' sons as if they were sacrificial victims, then cut them up, cooked them and served them up to their father. In act five Atreus comes on stage, exulting as Thyestes eats the terrible meal, and has the palace doors opened so that he can see him enjoying the luxurious feast. He toys with his brother, who feels a growing unease. He then produces the children's heads and tells the horrified Thyestes what he has just eaten, bitterly regretting the fact that he did not make him drink the blood from their living bodies and dismember and cook them himself. Thyestes calls wildly and in vain on Jupiter to blast the killer, and the play peters out in frustration and an illogical exchange between the two brothers.

## NOTES

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.

Thyestes' 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 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 out Thyestes and Aegisthus. They then married the Spartan king's daughters. Agamemnon married Clytaemnestra and became king of Argos. He later became commander of the Greek army that fought at Troy to get back Helen (Menelaus' wife), and to secure favourable winds, so that the Greek fleet could sail to Troy, he had to sacrifice his own daughter. 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 at Troy, those two began an affair and began plotting. When Agamemnon returned from the Trojan War, they trapped and killed him.

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 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 the god 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 *Thyestes* is a bleak and powerful revenge-tragedy, but there is more to it than just violence and sensationalism. It is a study in evil, which portrays the terrible consequences of anger (in line with his philosophical treatise *On Anger*, in which Seneca depicts it as a form of madness and discusses its various harmful effects). The play also shows, in the figure of Atreus, the pleasure that many people derive from cruelty. It presents a dark vision of a world without comfort in which the gods do not care for or help humans, reason and order are flimsy, power is horribly misused, and the best one can hope for is a quiet life of obscurity. In its own day it would have had particular resonance (given the crimes of the contemporary emperors Caligula and Nero), and it has reverberations in our times too (when there are many despots who turn on their own family and friends). In addition, the tragedy poses serious questions about revenge as a procedure for redress (the vengeance here is shown to be repellent and ultimately unsatisfying). It also raises other major issues that still have definite relevance (most notably, uncertainties concerning god; deception and misuse of power by people in high positions; the gullibility and malleability of the public (like the chorus); man's capacity for violence and cruelty; the way in which crime begets crime; the justification of barbarous acts as revenge; the savagery and madness at the heart of 'civilization'; and the triumph of evil in the world).

In ACT ONE one of the dread nether goddesses called Furies brings the ghost of Tantalus from his protracted punishment in the Underworld to the palace of Atreus at Argos and forces him to infect the house and the family with madness and blood-lust. As well as informing the audience of the background, this prologue gets the play moving with real power. It is a lurid and uncanny opening, which gives the drama a supernatural aspect (but there is no divine concern or pity here - only the Fury's malevolence). It aptly foregrounds death, evil, violence and insanity, and creates a strong sense of inevitability (foreshadowing the killing and cooking of Thyestes' children, and going beyond that to open up a bleak vista of a whole family locked into a cycle of violence). The grimly appropriate themes of food and fulness figure from the start, and Tantalus' inability to withstand the ferocious Fury with her malicious design prefigures the later triumph over Thyestes of the ferocious Atreus with his malicious design.

In the FIRST CHORAL ODE the citizens of Argos who form the chorus show the impact on the ordinary people of the crimes of the royal house, as they anxiously pray to the gods to bring them to an end. They also show human blindness (knowing nothing of the powerful forces at work in the background). They love their country and uphold traditional moral values, but they are sadly unenlightened and deluded. There is grim irony

in their opening prayer right after the Fury has ensured that the wrongs will in fact continue (making it seem that there will be no divine providence here). Their ignorance of local phenomena (the disappearance of sea, rivers and snow just described by the Fury) underlines how out of touch they are, as does their belief that the royal family have sinned enough, and that Tantalus is permanently confined to the Underworld. Their references to Pelops' treachery and Tantalus' barbarism reinforce the foreboding, while the suffering of the latter (as well as continuing the motif of eating) highlights the absence of divine concern and punishment in this play.

In ACT TWO we see at once the influence of the Fury and the ghost of Tantalus, as Atreus forms his insane plan for revenge, over-riding counsel of restraint by an attendant and making for a still stronger sense of inevitability. Our first view of Atreus establishes him as a truly villainous protagonist and a formidable opponent for Thyestes. Brusque, harsh and cynical, he is a murderous tyrant crazed with power. He is also a crafty schemer and a lord of language (as well as a lord of people). He will not be deflected either, and seems unstoppable. The only (slight) check on him is his own passion, which results in some chopping and changing and renders him incapable of deciding on the fine details of his vengeance (although he is definite enough about the main outline). Certainly the lowly attendant (who represents conventional morality, before he is cowed) is completely ineffectual and is contemptuously swept aside by the king (who dominates the scene by means of his lengthy speeches and his drive and animation). Here, as later in the play, evil triumphs over all resistance.

In the SECOND CHORAL ODE, believing a report that peace has been established between the royal brothers, the chorus reflect on it and come out with their own definition of what constitutes a king (the wise man is the only true king). They produce an appealing ode, which contains the only positive message in the play, but which tragically counts for nothing in this context. They are still sadly out of touch, as is stressed at the start (they believe that the feud is over, cannot conceive that people would be so mad as to fight for power, ironically accusing them of ignorance, and are unaware that the fury is still in operation now and will continue to be so in the future). With its philosophical (Stoic) conception of kingship the ode looks both backwards and forwards and points up the failings as ruler of both Atreus (who dominated the previous scene) and Thyestes (who will figure largely in the next scene). Atreus has just demonstrated that (unlike the real king) he is not free from evil intentions, does not look at the world with detachment, did not willingly embrace his fate (when exiled), does not possess wisdom, will use a weapon, and is not free from fear and craving. Thyestes also does not live up to the chorus' ideal: despite his claims that he is indifferent to wealth and death and feels secure, in his opening speech he will betray the appeal to him of Argos' wealth and the people's acclaim (rather than scorning them), and he will show fear (rather than being unafraid and undismayed). There is a darkly ironical close to the ode, as it would be much better for Thyestes if he too let another be king and opted for a peaceful life as a private citizen.

ACT THREE consists of two scenes. In the first of them Thyestes enters with his sons, back from exile. He professes to be happy with the simple life that he led when banished and makes fine speeches about it, posing and trying to convince himself. But from the start he betrays the fact that Argos' wealth and fine buildings and the chance to win acclaim there really appeal to him and (despite his protestations) he has not enjoyed

his hard life as an exile. Clearly he would like to be king (as Atreus suspected), but he quite correctly mistrusts and fears his brother. He wavers about entering the palace, but the temptation proves too great, and after a long speech rejecting greatness and luxury he foolishly gives in (most obviously because he has just reminded himself of the benefits of being king). When his son Tantalus tries to persuade him to enter the palace, he allows several dubious remarks by the boy to pass unchallenged and consents with a quite fatuous piece of justification ('it's too late to be on your guard when you're already in trouble').

Unlike his brother, Thyestes is full of hot air (long-winded and rather dull as a speaker) and also weak-willed (allowing another to sway him). In the second scene, when Atreus enters, he allows himself to be swayed again, by Atreus (who is his superior in diction, determination, drive and cunning). In marked contrast to his brother, Atreus controls his desires and manipulates others. He craftily uses language (and gesture) to be plausible, totally convincing his brother that the feud is over, and then with a masterful stroke proffers the royal robe and crown (the concrete symbols of the rank that Thyestes craves). He induces him to accept a share of the throne by threatening to resign as king (which would mean that Thyestes would lose the wealth and prestige that he would enjoy as the king's brother). Once Thyestes has accepted, Atreus reverts to the verbal mastery, in his final words (the ironic 'venerable' and the double-edged 'bind you' and 'sacrifice the victims I have chosen'). The act ends with the formidable Atreus completely dominating his weak and passive brother and well advanced on his way to vengeance.

In the THIRD CHORAL ODE, like Thyestes, the chorus have been completely taken in by Atreus and don't know what is really going on. Their pathetic optimism will soon be completely crushed. The first half of their song is shot through with delusion and irony (increasing the suspense). In the second half their thoughts on kings and on the mutability and unpredictability of human affairs have particular relevance for Thyestes (although they do not realize this). The stress there on unhappiness, fear and uncertainty about the future (especially the rapidity of a man's fall) make for a growing gloom and effectively usher in the messenger's speech in the next act.

ACT FOUR begins with the messenger's dramatic and disquieting entrance, and that is succeeded by a powerful narration of Atreus' crime, with occasional interjections by the chorus that break it up in an enlivening fashion (so that it does not become one very long speech) and enhance the emotional effect. After some initial retardation (to heighten the suspense), the messenger creates an increasingly sinister and eerie atmosphere as he sets the scene with his description of the grove where the slaughter took place. Then he highlights the holiness of the place just prior to the king's desecration of it, as he moves on at last to action, and Atreus enters with his victims. But again there is a deliberately gradual build-up, with the narrator lingering on all the details of the obscene parody of a sacrifice and on the portents, before finally getting down to the killing, when prompted by the chorus' question about who was the first to die. In response to that he depicts the murders at some length, with several grimly graphic touches, so they do have impact. But worse is to follow. After an exchange with the chorus over several lines that arouses anticipation and foreboding, he dwells in more detail and with more vividness on the appalling sequel. With a careful gradation in horror, first comes the dismemberment and taking of omens from the boys' entrails; next he portrays the cooking of corpses and nature's revulsion at that; and then by way of a climax he shows Thyestes actually eating the flesh of his own children (in fact cramming it down at a drunken banquet). The

messenger's final words look forward to the next act, in which Thyestes is told what he has just devoured.

In the FOURTH CHORAL ODE there is an extraordinary reaction by the chorus to the messenger's news. He has just said that the sun fled specifically because of Atreus' crime, but the chorus now make no mention of that crime, and come up with other explanations of the sun's flight (it is because the Giants are escaping from the Underworld, or this is the beginning of the end of the world). They may just be in shock at the cooking and eating of the bodies, and terrified by the disappearance of the sun. More probably they just cannot believe their king capable of the cannibalistic meal and so now (after earlier accepting what the messenger said) refuse to believe his whole narrative; they cannot deny the absence of the sun, but they come up with other plausible reasons for it (which amounts to an implicit rejection of his interpretation). This would explain better where the mention of the Giants and the end of the world came from, and would be very much in character for the chorus (who have been ignorant and deluded, and keen to believe that the feud is over and brotherly love now prevails). In either case the chorus are (effectively) all fear, confusion, uncertainty and pessimism, and aptly this is a dark and doomy ode which conjures up abnormality, anarchy, violence, chaos and gods absent and not ordering the universe. Their final words show the chorus as out of touch as ever: they mistakenly assume that the world is in fact ending, and (in view of what immediately follows) their rejection of lamentation and their calm acceptance of death are particularly inappropriate.

ACT FIVE provides a grim and sour close to the play. Atreus enters and appalls with his gloating and malicious relish, but then the banqueting Thyestes' greed, drunkenness and belching militate against sympathy for him. Thyestes' first speech (shot through with unconscious irony) moves from smug self-congratulation to jittery foreboding (which heightens anticipation for us). Atreus then plays sadistically with his befuddled brother, coming out with some ghastly double entendres (the black humour in this act also undermines seriousness and feelings of sadness). When Thyestes tries to drink the wine mixed with his sons' blood, a strange, supernatural wave of revulsion passes through the world (with an apt stress on darkness), and then (even more disturbing) as Thyestes' stomach rebels, he can hear his sons groaning inside him (how and why?). Atreus' vengeance includes informing Thyestes that his sons are dead (and Thyestes' response to that reminds us that he is a criminal himself) and telling him that he has eaten them (and Thyestes' response to that also diminishes any pity for him, when he foolishly asks his brother for help and imagines that he can break open his midriff with his fists, and comes out with the bizarre idea that he is pounding his own sons and the grotesque play on 'getting down'). Atreus' next speech, as well as being repellent, reveals that he is in fact unsatisfied and sees his revenge as imperfect, because he acted too soon in his mad anger (so too, compounding the frustration, Thyestes did not actually drink the bloody wine). The final substantial speech by Thyestes is impassioned and initially powerful, but the conceit of getting his sons inside him cremated by being blasted with a thunderbolt himself seems tasteless, and his words end in impotence and futility (with a bleak picture of heaven not punishing sin). After that the play peters out with a series of illogical remarks made by both Thyestes (who is in shock and at a loss) and his brother (who is enraged and frustrated, trying to convince himself that he is content with his vengeance, and suffering from paranoid delusions about Thyestes' plan to kill and cook Atreus' children). Atreus' final line is puzzling: is he referring to intestinal discomfort caused by

his brother's sons, or the thought of their fate and Thyestes' part in it, or punishment by their ghosts of Thyestes for eating them, or something else? This seems to be a deliberately distracting and inadequate conclusion, as Atreus' rage does not permit him to make his point clearly and score a completely satisfying victory over his brother here. There is no real sense of closure, aptly enough, as the cycle of violence and revenge will continue.

## Cast of Characters

GHOST OF TANTALUS (*grandfather of Atreus and Thyestes*)

FURY (*a goddess from the Underworld*)

ATREUS (*king of Argos*)

ATTENDANT *to Atreus*

THYESTES (*exiled brother of Atreus*)

SONS *of Thyestes (one of whom is called TANTALUS)*

MESSENGER

CHORUS *of citizens of Argos*

Scene

*The action takes place outside and (in Act 5) inside the royal palace in the Greek city of Argos.*

## ACT ONE

*(Enter slowly the GHOST OF TANTALUS, driven on by a FURY)*

### GHOST OF TANTALUS

*(Broken and fearful)*

Who?...Who's dragging me here from hell?...It's some god...making me look at the upper world again.

*(Groans)*

This is where I served my son up...as a feast for the gods...to test their wisdom.

*(Sighs)*

Is this some new punishment for that? Something worse than being permanently parched...rooted to the spot in a river of water...that runs off when I try to drink? Worse than starving beneath branches of fruit...that are snatched away out of my reach?...Hunger gaping...Among the sinners down there Tityos staked out...guts ripped open and gaping...In his cave of a wound dark birds devour his liver...which grows again of a night...provides a new meal the next day... Am I going to get his punishment?...But I deserve even greater torment...something to make Hades itself shudder...for fathering this family, prodigies of evil...They make me look harmless. They'll keep hell's judges busy. They'll pack the place of punishment - grim Tartarus.

### FURY

*(Vehement, commanding, enraged)*

Don't hold back, Tantalus, you hateful spectre, drive this evil family mad. Make them outdo each other in sin, hack each other down, permanently enraged, in a blind fury. Make this frenzy pass down from the parents into generation after generation. I want to see them all committing new crimes constantly, even while being punished, and Atreus and Thyestes in turn driven out from this kingdom and then returning to it, and devastating this violent house. Let the ruler be ruined, and the ruined become ruler, loathed by all, himself included. Make brother fear brother, parent fear child, child fear father. Let children die shamefully, be conceived more shamefully. Make hostile wives threaten their husbands, make adultery the least of crimes in this palace of evil. Let them sail away to war and flood the whole world with blood. Let lust triumph over these mighty kings, and the heavens in horror extinguish their stars and sun.

Convulse this house! Summon hatred, carnage, death! Pervade the palace! Let the children be slaughtered, Thracian-style. Why isn't Thyestes mourning them already? Why aren't Atreus' hands raised to strike them down? I want the fires lit now, the cauldrons bubbling, their bodies cut up, their blood befouling their uncle's floor, as the meal is prepared. You'll be a guest at that banquet of crime. Go and fill your famished belly: you're free for today from your punishment. You'll see Thyestes drinking their blood in his wine. I've found a feast to repulse even you.

*(GHOST OF TANTALUS recoils and tries to run away)*

Stop! Where are you rushing?

### GHOST OF TANTALUS

Back to the river...the branches of fruit that torment me...Let me go back to that black prison!...If you think I don't suffer enough there...set me down in the middle of Phlegethon's fiery stream...Those souls in hell that endure punishment decreed by fate...lying in a cave, forever afraid that it will collapse...or terrified by the ravening jaws of lions...or chained and burned by the terrible Furies...they should love their punishment. Anything's better than this. When can I go back to Hades?

### FURY

When you've plunged the palace into chaos. Bring war with you and blood-lust. Make their minds reel with violence and madness.

### GHOST OF TANTALUS

No. It's right for me to be punished...but not for me to inflict punishment. You want me to go in there like some sinister miasma...or deadly pestilence...incite my own descendants to heinous crimes? Jupiter, father of the gods, and (to your shame) my father too, I won't keep quiet about this, even if I am punished severely for speaking out. My family, listen to me: don't defile your hands with murder, don't spatter the altars with blood. I'll stay here and prevent such wickedness, such madness.

*(To the FURY, who is flogging him)*

Ai! What's that? Knotted snakes! You fiend, don't. Ah, my hunger's back...I'm burning with thirst...throat's on fire...Stop it, stop it! I give in.

### FURY

Make them all feel that frenzied thirst, all of them, savages craving each other's blood!

*(Flogs the GHOST OF TANTALUS into the palace)*

Drive them on like this, like this!

*(Loud creak from the palace)*

The house senses you entering it, it shuddered at your evil touch.

*(GHOST OF TANTALUS infects the palace)*

That's it. You've done more than enough. Now you can go back to your river in the Underworld. And the earth is repelled and blighted by contact with you. See here - streams shrinking from you, clouds fleeing in a firewind, trees pale, branches bare, fruit fallen... and there - the sea cowering away from the Isthmus, and off in the distance lakes and rivers vanished, snow gone from Cithaeron's peaks, the whole land of Argos terrified of drought. The sun itself hesitates to rise, knowing its light will only recoil from you.

*(They both leave)*

## **FIRST CHORAL ODE**

*(Enter the chorus, anxious and animated)*

### CHORUS

If any god loves this land of ours, this Argos of ours,  
and the wave-washed Isthmus that has two ports and parts two seas,  
if any god loves our Taugetus' peaks with their far-seen snows  
and is fond of our river Alpheus' cool and translucent streams,  
then we pray that this god prevents the recurrence of wrong in this house  
and comes here to stop his descendants surpassing their ancestor's crimes.  
We pray that the evil offspring of Tantalus tire at last  
of violence and end their savage attacks on their own kith and kin.  
Surely they've sinned enough. After being revived by the gods,  
Pelops, the son of Tantalus, later murdered Myrtilus;  
Pelops himself as a child had run to his father for a kiss,  
but was skewered on his impious sword instead and carved and cooked.  
Permanent hunger and thirst punish that barbarous banquet.  
Permanently trapped in Hades, Tantalus stands there, mocked  
by branches that bend and quiver with fruit (such elusive prey).  
He averts his eyes, closes his lips and clenches his teeth,  
to fether his hunger. But the trees all lower their riches nearer,  
taunting and flaunting luscious fruit and languorous leaves.  
He grabs, but the nimble boughs go bounding off out of reach.  
Then thirst assails him, burning his blood, and there he stands  
in misery. He tries to drink from the river (which rapidly runs  
away and leaves behind only its bed), and he swallows dust.

*(Exit the chorus)*

## ACT TWO

*(Enter ATREUS and an ATTENDANT)*

ATREUS

*(To himself, psyching himself up)*

Tyrant? A coward, a spineless, gutless coward - that's what you are, Atreus. After all Thyestes' crimes and treachery, where's your revenge? No, your idea of action is whining, futile whining. You should have sent fleets of ships and men with swords to get him, made the entire kingdom a blaze of fire, a clash of arms. Sound the trumpet of war now! Send out cavalry, send out all your subjects; scour forests, fortresses, the whole land! Death for anyone who hides my enemy, and agony in the death! And if he's lurking in the palace, then it can crash down on me, so long as it crashes down on my hateful brother too. Do something, come on, do something that no-one in the future will ever praise, or forget, some black and bloody atrocity, bad enough to make him envious! A crime's only avenged by a worse crime. And it'll be hard to surpass his savagery. Things are bad for him now, but do you really think that someone as ambitious as that is cowed and beaten, and doing nothing about it? You know how stubborn he is. He can't be deflected, only broken. So, before he recovers and attacks you, attack him! If you don't destroy him, he'll destroy you. The killer will be the first to act.

ATTENDANT

Aren't you afraid of being criticized by your subjects?

ATREUS

*(Imperious, cynical)*

Subjects have to put up with what their master does and actually praise it. That's the best thing about being a king.

ATTENDANT

They praise out of fear. And fear makes enemies. Don't you want sincere praise, from the heart?

ATREUS

The lowest of the low gets sincere praise. Being flattered proves you're powerful. They must approve what they disapprove.

ATTENDANT

They'll approve if what you want is right.

ATREUS

A king who's only allowed what's right is seated on a precarious throne.

ATTENDANT

It's precarious when the king has no integrity or loyalty or honour.

ATREUS

Integrity, loyalty, honour - these are for subjects. Kings must act as they please.

ATTENDANT

To harm a brother, even if he's a bad man, must be wrong.

ATREUS

*(Enraged)*

Whatever it's wrong to do to a brother it's right to do to him. He has never shrunk from any crime. He seduced my wife and stole my kingdom. He caused chaos in the royal house, the traitor! He seized our ancient symbol of power - the mysterious ram with the fleece of gold that gilds our kings' sceptres. Whoever has that sacred ram rules supreme; which is why that traitor dared something massive - spiriting it away from its walled enclosure; and his accomplice in this was my wife! That was the start of our fatal feud. I was banished and roamed my own realm in fear for my life. He attacked everything that I had - my throne, my wife, my sons (I can't be sure that they are my sons; all I can be sure of is his hostility)...

*(To himself)*

So why the stupor? Get going, now, finally! Take Tantalus and Pelops as your models!

*(To ATTENDANT)*

How should I murder that monster?

ATTENDANT

*(Intimidated by now)*

Make him spit out his life on the point of a sword!

ATREUS

No! Death ends punishment. I'm thinking of the punishment itself. Kind kings just kill. Under me death is a favour people beg for.

ATTENDANT

But what about respect for the gods above?

ATREUS

Respect for them? Pah! Never existed in this house. Gods from hell, that's what I want - fearsome Furies by the battalion, brandishing the torches of discord. I want to burn with more madness, be gorged with more monstrosity.

ATTENDANT

What do you have in mind now?

ATREUS

Some exceptional, exquisite torment. There's nothing I wouldn't do; and yet nothing seems bad enough.

ATTENDANT

The sword?

ATREUS

Inadequate.

ATTENDANT

What about fire?

ATREUS

Also inadequate.

ATTENDANT

What weapon will you use then?

ATREUS

Thyestes himself.

ATTENDANT

You are embittered and enraged, but that goes too far.

ATREUS

Granted. But I'm in a frenzy, heart heaving, driven on, I don't know where, just driven on...

*(Loud noises offstage; the lights blink)*

So, groans from the ground...thunder from a cloudless sky...crashes from the palace...the household gods averting their gaze in horror. But this crime that the gods fear must take place, it must.

ATTENDANT

What are you planning to do?

ATREUS

Something huge, inhuman, extraordinary. It's growing in my mind, it's making my hands twitch. I don't know exactly what it is, but it is massive - a crime worthy of Thyestes, worthy of Atreus - and both of us must be involved in it... All right then! King Tereus' wife and her sister served up his son to him as a meal. That was horrible, unspeakable, admittedly, but it's already been done. I want something worse for him...I need some inspiration...No, nothing. So, for now it's punishment enough if he just eats his own children, bolting down his own flesh and blood, enjoying his food.

But where is he? I want to get on with it. I can see the slaughter, every detail, here, floating before my eyes - bereavement stuffed down the father's throat.

*(Recoils; then says to himself)*

What - afraid again, holding back? Coward! The worst part in this enormity will be his.

ATTENDANT

But how can we trick him into walking into our trap and seize him? He sees danger everywhere.

ATREUS

He'll be seized because he longs to seize something himself - my kingdom. For that he'll face the terrors of the stormy sea, the African Syrtes' perfidious straits and lord Jupiter himself brandishing his thunderbolt; for that he'll endure what is to him the worst thing in the whole world - the sight of me.

ATTENDANT

Who could convince him that the feud is over? Who would he trust?

ATREUS

High hopes trust anyone. But I'll send my sons to him with a message from me: 'no more wandering and misery, return from exile, rule over Argos with me'. If he turns down my offer, his children will be taken in by it - they're inexperienced and worn out by all they've gone through. But, even though he's stubborn, he will give in: he's always been mad for power, and he's desperately poor, and life is hard for him.

ATTENDANT

But he'll have learnt how to put up with his misfortunes by now.

ATREUS

Wrong! The longer you suffer, the more you're aware of suffering. Endurance is easy.

ATTENDANT

Well, don't use your sons. Young men are quick to learn bad lessons. They'll use the same trickery on you. Crimes often rebound.

ATREUS

Power will teach them treachery and crime, without any lessons from me. You're afraid they'll turn bad? They were born bad. You think my plot is harsh and cruel and savage - my brother is quite possibly plotting the same thing.

ATTENDANT

Are you going to tell your sons they'll be deceiving their uncle?

ATREUS

No. They might reveal the plot. You can't count on youngsters keeping quiet. Experience, bitter experience, teaches the need for discretion.

ATTENDANT

So, while using them to trick Thyestes, you'll trick them?

ATREUS

Yes, so they won't be guilty. There's no need to implicate them completely in my crime. I'm the one who should bring the feud to a conclusion...No, that's wrong, that's backing off. If I spare my own sons, then I'll spare his too. My Agamemnon and Menelaus must know all about what they'll be doing to help me. And this is a way of finding out if I really am their father: if they show no malice and won't attack him because he's their uncle, then they're no sons of mine. So, off with them...But they might look nervous, being on such an important mission, and give themselves away against their will. No, I won't let them know what their mission is after all.

*(To ATTENDANT)*

And you keep silent about it too!

ATTENDANT

I don't need warning. Loyalty and fear will seal my lips - loyalty in particular.

*(They both leave)*

## **SECOND CHORAL ODE**

*(Enter the chorus, calm and reflective)*

### CHORUS

The brothers have finally finished feuding, we hear.  
What fury induces this family to shed so much blood  
and to try to win by crime the throne of Argos,  
unaware of where kingship really resides?  
Wealth doesn't make a man king, nor do purple robes  
or a crown on his head or a palace glinting with gold.  
The real king is the man who knows no fear,  
who is free from evil intentions and intense ambition,  
the man who scorns the support of the fickle people  
and all the treasure mined in the west and all  
the golden silt that's rolled along by the Tagus.  
Unafraid, undismayed, he's at peace in a place of safety,  
looking down at the world below with detachment,  
embracing his fate and gladly facing death.  
Wisdom makes a man truly a king. No need  
for weapons: by fearing nothing, by craving nothing  
all can bestow this kingship on themselves.  
Other rulers are raised on high, but stand  
on a slippery palace roof. I don't want that.  
I want to be sated with sweet, unbusy peace,  
I want the stream of my life to glide through silence.  
And when my days have passed without titles or tumult,  
I'll happily die, an old and ordinary man.  
But death's an oppressive prospect for a person in power,  
who is known to all, but does not know himself.

*(Exit the chorus)*

## ACT THREE

### SCENE ONE

*(Enter THYESTES, filthy and in rags, together with his three sons)*

#### THYESTES

This is what I've longed to see - the buildings and riches of Argos, and (the best sight of all for an exile) my native soil and the statues of my ancestral gods (if there really are gods) and the majestic city walls (built by the superhuman Cyclopes) and the racetrack where I often won glorious victories in my father's chariot. The people of Argos will come to meet me, they'll come to meet me in crowds...

*(To himself)*

Yes, but so will Atreus...Better go back to my refuge deep in the woods, living with the animals, like an animal. Don't be seduced by kingship's bright glitter and deceptive splendour. When you look at a gift, examine the giver as well. Everyone thinks that the kind of life I had as an exile is hard, but I was strong and happy then. Now I'm afraid and uncertain. I don't want to go on. I want to go back.

#### TANTALUS

*(To his brothers)*

What's up with father? He's stumbling and looking back. He's in a daze.

#### THYESTES

*(To himself)*

Why are you wavering? It's an easy decision. Why go over it again and again? Can you really trust your brother or rely on sharing power with him? And what's wrong with returning to that miserable exile? You overcame the hardships and learned a lot from your sufferings. So turn back and save yourself, while you can.

#### TANTALUS

*(To THYESTES)*

Why are you backing off at the sight of home? You're turning down so much happiness. Atreus isn't angry any more. He's giving you back part of the kingdom and reuniting our dismembered family.

#### THYESTES

I don't know why I'm frightened myself. I can't see anything to be frightened of, but I'm still frightened. I'm trying to go forward, but there's no strength in my legs, and I end up tottering backwards in spite of myself, like a ship driven back by a current stronger than its oars and sails.

#### TANTALUS

Whatever's stopping you, get over it. Look at the rewards that await you. You can be king.

THYESTES

Yes, since I can die.

TANTALUS

But royal power is -

THYESTES

Nothing, if there's nothing you covet.

TANTALUS

You'll leave it to your sons.

THYESTES

There isn't room for more than one on a throne.

TANTALUS

Who'd rather be miserable than happy?

THYESTES

*(Full of hot air, and trying to convince himself)*

Believe me, nobody should be attracted by so-called greatness, and there are no grounds for fearing what is termed hardship. While I was in a position of eminence, I was never free from fear. I was afraid of the very sword at my side. Oh, it's a blessing not to stand in anybody's way to power and to dine simply, lying on the grass, not worried about what one might be eating. Criminals don't bother with huts. One drinks safely from cheap goblets: the poison is in the golden chalice. I speak from experience: it can be better to be 'unfortunate' than 'fortunate'.

*(More and more wistful)*

I don't have a palace on a lofty mountain-peak to overawe the common people down below or high ceilings glittering with bright ivory or a bodyguard to protect me while I sleep. I don't employ whole fleets to catch fish for my banquets or have a luxurious mansion on an embankment out at sea or spend the tribute of nations so I can gorge myself on masses of delicacies or have fertile estates in the far north or far east. Men don't worship me with incense or adorn altars to me instead of Jupiter. Roof gardens with nodding trees, and steaming pools heated by hundreds of slaves...are not for me. Drinking all night and sleeping all day...is something I don't do. But I'm not feared, and so I'm safe at home and don't need weapons. I have little, but enjoy great peace. If you can cope with not having power, that shows you have real power.

TANTALUS

But kingship shouldn't be refused if a god grants it. Your brother is asking you to rule.

THYESTES

Asking? That's what scares me. It's a trick.

TANTALUS

Brotherly love often returns and becomes as strong as before.

THYESTES

Thyestes loved by his brother? Impossible. Corn will grow out of the sea and black night will light up the earth before that happens.

TANTALUS

What kind of a trick are you afraid of?

THYESTES

Every kind! There's no end to my fear. His hatred is boundless, like his ability to inflict harm.

TANTALUS

But how can he harm you?

THYESTES

Well, I'm not afraid for myself now. But I am frightened about what he'll do to you children.

TANTALUS

How can you be tricked when you're on your guard?

THYESTES

It's too late to be on your guard when you're already in trouble. So, all right, on we go! But as your father I solemnly state that I am following you, not leading you.

TANTALUS

I've given you good advice. God will watch over us. Go on; don't worry!

## SCENE TWO

*(Enter Atreus and the chorus, who are carrying a robe and crown)*

ATREUS

*(Aside)*

Got him! The trap worked! The beast is caught. There he is, and his hateful children. Now nothing can stop my revenge. He's come, he's finally fallen into my hands, and his whole family with him. I can hardly control myself, hardly restrain my resentment. I'm like a hunting-dog closing in on its prey, straining to get at it. When rage smells blood, it can't be concealed...But I must conceal it...

*(Gloating)*

Look at the filthy hair hanging down over his gloomy face, and that dirty drooping beard.

*(Pulls himself up short)*

Now, be believable!

*(To THYESTES)*

Brother! It's good to see you. Give me a hug.

*(They embrace)*

I've been longing to do that. No more anger, and no more hate! We're brothers. What we need now is brotherly love.

THYESTES

*(Taken in)*

I came here quite ready to explain away all my actions, but your welcome has disarmed me. So, I confess, Atreus, I confess: I did do everything that you thought I did. The brotherly love that you've shown today has made my case indefensible. Anyone guilty of criminal conduct towards a brother as good as you is a real criminal. So all I can do is appeal to you in tears.

*(Grovels at his feet)*

I've never lowered myself like this before anyone else. Please, let's have a complete end to all our anger and animosity. Take these innocent children as pledges of my good faith, brother.

ATREUS

Don't grovel down there, come to my arms. And you hug me too, boys (so many of you)!

*(They all embrace)*

Thyestes, I hate seeing you dressed like that; take off those filthy clothes, put on this royal robe, just like mine.

*(The robe is held out to THYESTES by a member of the CHORUS)*

Share power with me, and be happy again. I get greater glory by not harming you and restoring the ancestral crown to you.

*(He takes a crown from a member of the CHORUS and holds it over THYESTES' head)*

Holding a throne is simply luck; bestowing one is a good deed.

THYESTES

Atreus, this is very kind of you. God bless you for it. But you can't put a crown on dirty hair like this, and the evil that I've done makes me not fit to rule. Let me just blend in as one of the crowd.

ATREUS

No. This kingdom has room for two rulers.

THYESTES

If it's yours, then it's as good as mine.

ATREUS

But who rejects Fortune's gifts when they come pouring in?

THYESTES

The man who knows how easily they flow away.

ATREUS

Come on, Thyestes; you won't stop me winning great glory like this, will you?

THYESTES

You've already won it by offering to share the throne. I'll win it by refusing (my mind's made up on that).

ATREUS

Well, I'll give up my share of power, if you won't accept yours.

THYESTES

...All right...I accept. I'll put up with this title you've forced on me. But you'll be the one in control, of the laws and the army and me.

*(He accepts the crown and robe, smiling. A sombre fanfare sounds)*

ATREUS

*(Crowning THYESTES)*

Let me bind you with this crown on your venerable head...

*(Looking at the children)*

I will go now and sacrifice the victims I have chosen.

*(They all leave, apart from the CHORUS)*

### THIRD CHORAL ODE

#### CHORUS

Who could credit it? Atreus the fierce, the ferocious Atreus  
who cannot control himself, stopped, stunned at the sight of his brother.  
There isn't a power more powerful than genuine brotherly love.  
People bound by genuine love are bound forever.  
Brotherly love restrains the sword and joins together  
even reluctant relatives' hands in a clasp of peace.  
Some god's been at work, abruptly throttling the violence here.  
Just now the weapons of civil war were clanking and clanging,  
white-faced mothers clung to their children, wives were afraid  
for their husbands in arms, and guards were crouching in dread on battlements;  
but now the menace of savage steel has collapsed and died,  
and deep peace has reappeared in this happy city of ours.  
No human condition lasts for long. Pain and  
pleasure pass in turn; pleasure passes quickest.  
You kings with power of life and death (bestowed by Jove,  
the king of heaven and earth), remove that mask of arrogance:  
what lesser men fear from you, you should fear from Him.  
Every ruler is subject to a harsher ruler.  
Dawn sees a man exalted, night sees the man prostrated.  
Don't put too much trust in success. No matter how  
good the gods are to you, you cannot count on tomorrow.  
Our fortunes shift, they're whirled about in a blur of speed  
by the hand of god.

## **ACT FOUR**

*(Enter a MESSENGER, horrified and weeping)*

MESSENGER

God, take my sight, my senses, so I can't picture it any more!...Even Pelops and Tantalus would be horrified, appalled by it.

CHORUS

What?

MESSENGER

That happened here! What kind of a place is this?...Is it Greece, or some land of savages at the ends of the earth?

CHORUS

However awful it is, tell us your news.

MESSENGER

Once my mind's stopped racing, and I've stopped shaking...I can still see it before my eyes, can't get rid of it...What a family!

CHORUS

What's happened? One of the brothers has done something terrible, hasn't he? Which one? Please tell us.

MESSENGER

*(Collects himself with difficulty)*

On the summit of the citadel, this building's outer wing rises up like a menacing mountain and has a huge hall, with gleaming golden roofbeams and multi-coloured columns, where whole peoples pay court. Beyond this public area the palace extends far back, room after room, of great luxury. Deep down in its innermost precincts there is a secret courtyard with an age-old vale and grove, the kingdom's holy of holies. Its trees are sombre - yews, cypresses and black ilex, swaying in gloom, and dominated by a towering oak.

*(The lighting dims a bit)*

This is where our rulers inaugurate their reigns, and pray for help in dilemmas and disasters. To commemorate their crimes and exploits, they have affixed to these trees votive offerings - war-trumpets, a smashed chariot (sabotaged so Pelops would win the race), an embroidered cloak taken from the enemy and other barbaric spoils.

*(The lighting dims further)*

In the shadows a dismal, sluggish stream oozes slowly through a black marsh, like hell's unsightly river Styx. They say that here in the blind night the deathgods groan the grove echoes with shaken chains shades shriek things caper about, mocking, monstrous beyond conception. tall trees burn without fire hell's guard-dog howls through his three throats the palace cowers at massive apparitions. Daylight doesn't dispel the terror: the grove has a night all of its own.

Here destiny is revealed to petitioners by a voice of thunder, and the cavern bellows as the god speaks. Here Atreus came, in a frenzy, dragging his miserable victims, their hands tied behind their backs.

*(The lights come up a bit, to reveal ATREUS and THYESTES' children acting out the messenger's narrative as he speaks it, watched by the GHOST OF TANTALUS)*

The altar was adorned. Headbands were bound on the victims. There was incense, wine, salted meal, the killing-knife. Every formality was carefully observed, so that this sinful sacrifice would be ritually correct.

#### CHORUS

Who held the knife?

#### MESSENGER

Atreus himself was the priest. Atreus himself intoned death-prayers and a murder-chant, handling the doomed boys and readying them for the knife, meticulously...The trees all trembled...the palace staggered...the gods' statues wept...his crown kept falling off...the sacred wine turned bloody...and a star streaked darkly through the sky. Everyone was disturbed by these portents, except for the king. He outmenaced the gods. He stood by the altar, with a savage sideways glare at his victims, like a hungry tigress eying two bullocks, not sure which one to attack, and wanting them both. He wavered over which boy to sacrifice first to his rage, and which second. It made no real difference, but he took pleasure in getting the order right.

#### CHORUS

Who was the first to die?

#### MESSENGER

To show his devotion to old Tantalus, he dedicated to him young Tantalus and killed that boy first.

#### CHORUS

Did he die bravely? How did he look?

*(ATREUS and co. are bathed in a red light now)*

#### MESSENGER

Unconcerned. No futile pleading.

But that animal buried the knife in him, plunged it right in, until his hand slammed into the boy's throat. When he pulled the weapon out, the corpse stayed upright for a long time, unsure which way to fall, then fell on its uncle.

That savage dragged another child to the altar, hacked off his head and hurled it away, still sobbing and muttering, as the body pitched forwards.

#### CHORUS

And then? Did he spare the other boy, or butcher him too?

MESSENGER

He was like a lion that has fallen on a herd and slaughtered several of them; its jaws are dripping with gore, it has eaten its fill, but it keeps on attacking bulls and calves in its killing-frenzy. Forgetting that this was a mere child, Atreus drove the bloodstained knife right through the other boy's body and out the other side. He collapsed on to the altar and put out its fire with the blood that fountained from the two fatal wounds, in his chest and his back.

*(The lights dim, so that ATREUS and co. are no longer visible and only three flickering fires can be seen where they were.)*

CHORUS

That's inhuman!

MESSENGER

You think that's horrifying? That's noble compared to what he went on to do.

CHORUS

Is there anything worse than that?

MESSENGER

Do you think the crime ended there? That was just the beginning.

CHORUS

What more could he do? Throw the bodies out for scavengers? Or not let them be cremated?

MESSENGER

*(Increasingly disturbed.)*

I wish he had, and their father could view their unburied bodies, half-eaten by birds and wild animals - a torment for most parents, but Thyestes would pray for that. What Atreus did instead - oh, people won't believe it, you couldn't imagine such a thing happening, ever...He ripped the internal organs from their chests while they were still alive and their hearts still throbbed in terror. The entrails were quivering, the veins on them were warm and pulsing, but he turned them round, this way and that, inspecting their markings for a sign from fate. The omens were favourable. So he relaxed, and turned to preparing a feast for his brother.

*(He shudders violently.)*

With his own hands he chops the bodies into chunks...severs shoulders and sinewy arms...hacks out the joints and bones...He holds back the heads and hands...the rest he cooks...Some of the flesh is stuck on spits...and drips over slow fires...other bits bubble in a boiling cauldron.

*(He groans loudly.)*

The hearth shudders...the fire leaps away from the meat...burns unwillingly...livers sputter on skewers...flames and flesh squeal...a disfiguring cloud...of gloomy, pitchy smoke...hangs heavy...smothers the household gods...The sun recoiled in horror...set, at noon...

*(The lights dim almost to darkness; the three fires go out.)*

but couldn't escape seeing

*(He sobs.)*

Thyestes chewing his children...Even now...his own flesh and blood...bolted down...that  
tomb of a mouth...partying...perfumed hair...heavy with wine...gorging...guzzling...  
choking...

*(The CHORUS cover their ears and turn away.)*

Ah, Thyestes, at least you don't know...But that won't last...The sun has fled, a  
strange dark conceals the sinister sin. But you will see...and understand the full horror.

*(Exit the MESSENGER.)*

## **FOURTH CHORAL ODE**

### CHORUS

*(Animated, and reaching out to the sky)*

Havoc! Lord Sun, tell us, where have you gone and why have you gone?  
There was no sign of evening approaching and no sign of night on its way.  
Did you suddenly hurry away at mid-day to escape from the Giants?  
Have the furious Giants now torn themselves free from their prison in Hades?  
Are they shattering the gates of Hades, are they warring on heaven again?  
Havoc! The regular cycles of the sky have all died, they've all died,  
and Dawn's kingdom's in stunning confusion, with sunset and sunrise reversed.  
Whatever this is, we pray that it's night, nothing more than night.  
Our hearts are all lurching, all lurching with fear, with a jolting fear  
that the world's now crumpling and crashing in ruins, as ordained by fate,  
and that formless chaos is engulfing the gods and mortals once more  
and the earth and the sea and the nomad stars that bejewel the skies.  
The sun won't mark off the seasons, the moon won't murder night's terrors,  
and the sacred stars and planets will plunge into one vast abyss.  
The zodiac will see constellations fall and will fall itself;  
Aries will fall and Taurus will fall and Cancer will fall,  
Leo and Pisces will fall, and all the others will fall.  
Out of all the humans who've ever existed do we deserve  
to be crushed by a cosmic collapse and witness the end of time?  
Whether we lost the sun through misfortune or drove him away,  
we all curse the day we were born to such a sinister fate.  
But no more laments or fears! A man who's unwilling to die  
when the world is dying around him is far too greedy for life.

## ACT FIVE

*(Enter ATREUS, exulting and carrying a wine-jug)*

ATREUS

I'm striding among the stars, exultant, exalted to high heaven, towering over everyone. Now I've really secured my power as king: now there's nobody to challenge me in all my glory. Away with the gods! (There's nothing more to pray for from them.)...This is good, this is fine, even I am satisfied...But is it enough?...No, I must do something more to Thyestes...

*(Smiling at his own pun, and patting his stomach)*

*How about full* realization that he's eaten his own sons? Yes, I'll make his misery perfectly clear to him. I'll put a stop to his partying, I'll splinter that carefree smile. He doesn't need any more food or drink: he has to be sober enough to take in this crippling news.

Slaves, open the palace doors! I want to see what colour he goes when I show him his sons' heads, I want to see him gasping, rigid, in shock, and hear his first horrified words. I want to see him not just crushed, but actually being crushed. That'll be my reward for all my hard work.

*(The doors are opened, and the lights come up to reveal THYESTES feasting, watched by the GHOST OF TANTALUS)*

There he is, stretched out on a rich couch, drunk and belching. Oh, I'm the king of kings, the lord of heaven: this is all that I wished for and more. He has eaten his fill; and now he's swilling wine from a large goblet. Keep on drinking, Thyestes! There's still the blood of my three victims mixed in with some vintage red wine here. Yes, yes, have a goblet of this to round off the banquet! Look, now he's singing, stupid with wine.

THYESTES

*(Not seeing ATREUS, and singing the first four lines to the tune of 'One more day to go')*

No more fear for me,  
no more sadness either,  
no more shame and poverty,  
now all my trouble's over...

*(Slurring his words)*

Yes, my long, miserable exile's over...It was a great thing, the way I endured my fall from a lofty height with such firmness, bearing up with head unbowed, unconquered by calamity...yes, a great thing...But you've got to forget that unhappy time now. Drive away the gloomy clouds of fate! Everything's fine, so smile again, get rid of the old sad Thyestes!

*(Tries to smile)*

The trouble is: if you've suffered, you never believe that things will stay fine, and you find it hard to be happy...

*(Weeps and groans)*

I just can't celebrate, I'm in tears, for no good reason that I can see. What's stopping me? What is stopping me? Why's my hair suddenly standing on end, why am I crying and groaning despite myself?

*(Thinks)*

People who have suffered have got used to mourning, that's it. That's why I want to tear my fine clothes and wail and howl out loud...

*(Frowns)*

No, my mind's warning me that something bad is coming. When a calm sea swells with no wind to ruffle it, there's a fierce storm on the way...

*(Shakes his fist)*

Ach no, you fool! You're imagining trouble. Trust your brother! Whatever it is, there's nothing to fear; or it's too late now...

*(Shakes his head)*

I don't want to be miserable, but terror stalks me, and I keep on crying all of a sudden (I don't know why). Is it grief or fear? Or are these tears of joy?

ATREUS

*(With fake heartiness)*

Brother, let's celebrate this happy day as two good friends together. This day will consolidate my royal power and put peace between us beyond any doubt.

THYESTES

I've had more than enough to eat and drink. My pleasure would be complete if I could share this happy occasion with my boys.

ATREUS

*(Smirking, and gesturing towards THYESTES)*

They're as good as here already, in your loving embrace. Here they are, and here they'll stay. Your family won't be taken away from you, not a bit of it. You're longing to see their faces, and you soon will. You'll be satisfied, never fear; you'll have your fill of your sons. They're off dining with my boys just now, enjoying themselves (they're good mixers), but I'll bring them to you.

*(Pours out some of the bloody wine into THYESTES' goblet)*

Have some of this. It's an immature, boyish little wine, but from our own vintage.

THYESTES

Thank you, Atreus. I'll pour some of the wine as a libation to our ancestral gods, and then drink the rest.

*(He pours the libation and tries to drink, dropping the goblet)*

What the...? The wine recoiled...goblet's suddenly so heavy!

*(There is a loud rumbling, and the lights dim)*

Ah! Is that the floor shaking? Why's it gone so dark?...Something's wrong!...The sky's stunned...lurching...no stars...just black...black...night buried in night...Whatever this is should attack me, not my brother and sons - I'm the criminal.

*(He turns to ATREUS)*

Bring me my boys, please, now.

ATREUS

I will. And they'll always be with you.

THYESTES

*(Doubles over, clutching his stomach)*

Uh! My stomach's churning...heaving...The food's lying heavy on me...It jerked...moaned! Sons, come here, come to your poor father. Seeing you will make my pain disappear.

*(He straightens up, bewildered)*

I heard them groaning! Where are they?

ATREUS

*(Beckons to a slave, who brings to him the severed heads of the children)*

Hold out your arms, father. They've come. Don't you recognize your sons?

*(The heads are revealed to THYESTES, who screams, while the CHORUS recoil in horror)*

I recognize my brother, see what he really is...

*(He groans)*

Mother Earth, how can you bear all this evil? Why don't you burst open    plunge us both into Hades    smash this city    drag this kingdom and its king down into the abyss?

          We should both be imprisoned beside Tantalus    or sunk in some vast chasm,  
          in a deeper hell,    buried beneath the fiery, raging river Phlegethon    and the  
souls of the damned...Nothing. The earth's doing nothing...The gods have abandoned us.

ATREUS

Enough of that! You've been asking for your sons for long enough - now have them! It's fine by me. Hug them, kiss them...enjoy!

THYESTES

*(ATREUS nods delightedly at each of his questions)*

Is this what we agreed? What you promised, as a friend and brother? Is this how you give up hatred? ...I'm asking you, brother to brother - not for my sons back safe and sound (your revenge can stay intact). I just want to have their bodies back for cremation (which you can witness in person).

ATREUS

*(First holding up the heads, then pointing to THYESTES' stomach)*

You have what remains of them here; and what no longer remains of them you also have.

THYESTES

Have their bodies been thrown out for birds of prey or wild animals to eat?

ATREUS

You ate them yourself. A fine father, feasting on your own children.

THYESTES

*(Shrieks and collapses)*

That's why it went so dark, that's what the sun-god couldn't bear to see...Terrible...can't describe how terrible...heads hacked off...

*(He suddenly looks at his plate in horror)*

And here are hands and feet that were ripped from my sons - I didn't have room for them.

*(He convulses violently and groans)*

What I did gobble down...their flesh...that horror inside me...it's writhing, trying to escape!

*(He retches)*

It can't. Give me your sword, Atreus. I'll cut myself open to let it out. No? I'll use my fists then, on my midriff, batter it, smash it open.

*(He pounds himself, then stops abruptly)*

Ah no: I'm pounding my dead boys too...Atreus, Atreus, who has ever done such an awful thing? Not wild savages, not even monstrous Procrustes...I got my sons down, and now they are getting me down...Is this as far as your crime goes, or is there more?

ATREUS

You should go only so far when you commit a crime, not when you're avenging one.

*(Frustrated, but also gloating, and dwelling, to pain Thyestes)*

But all this isn't enough. I should have poured the warm blood straight from their wounds into your mouth, so you could drink their blood while they were still alive. My haste cheated my rage. I sacrificed them at the altar, slaughtering them, slamming the knife in; I chopped up their dead bodies and tore them to pieces, little pieces; I plunged some of the bits into boiling cauldrons, the rest I roasted, slowly, so they dripped into the fire; I severed sinews and limbs still warm with life; I skewered their livers on slender spits and watched them squeal; I heaped up the fire with my own hands...I did all this; but their father should have been made to do it instead. My anger has achieved nothing. He did what no father should ever do - chewed and tore his own sons' flesh with his teeth; but he didn't know it, and they didn't know it.

THYESTES

*(Impassioned)*

Earth and Sea, hear his wicked words! Hear him, you gods of heaven (wherever you've fled), and you powers of the Underworld! And you, Night, heavy with hell's black clouds, listen to my cry (I have been abandoned to you; you alone witness my misery). I won't pray for anything bad. I won't ask for anything for myself (how could anything help me now?). No, gods, my prayer will restore your standing.

Jupiter, almighty ruler of the skies, sovereign lord of heaven's court, enfold the whole world with your dread storm-clouds, send wars of winds from every side, thunder violence from pole to pole, hurling your blazing bolts (full force!) with the hand of wrath that shattered the charging Giants! Avenge the daylight that was driven away! Fling lightning to replace the vanished sunlight! Don't waste time on a judgement. Count both brothers guilty, punish both of us, or just me. Yes, attack me! Transfix my chest with triple forks of flaming fire! The only way of getting my sons cremated is for me to be incinerated myself...

*(Feebly, when he sees that his prayer has gone unanswered)*

If nothing moves the gods above, and none of them punishes the wicked, then let this night last forever, and hide this massive crime with endless darkness. Sun-god, if you continue to absent yourself, that's all right with me.

ATREUS

*(Trying to convince himself)*

Well done, Atreus! Victory! You're in pain, Thyestes, so my crime wasn't wasted. Now I believe that my sons really are mine, and that my wife was not unfaithful with you.

THYESTES

How did my children deserve this?

ATREUS

By being yours.

THYESTES

You gave sons to their own father to -

ATREUS

Yes, I did. And they were definitely your sons, I'm delighted to say.

THYESTES

I call on the gods who protect the righteous.

ATREUS

What about the gods who guard marriages?

THYESTES

Who repays crime with crime?

ATREUS

*(Enraged and ranting)*

I know why you're upset: it's because I committed that crime before you did. You're not miserable because you ate that monstrous meal; no, it's because you didn't cook one like that for me. I know what your plan was - to attack my sons, with their mother's help, and murder them and serve them up to me. The only thing that stopped you was you thought they were yours.

THYESTES

*(Trying to convince himself)*

The gods of vengeance will come. I pray that they will punish you.

ATREUS

Your sons will punish you.

*(Lights go out abruptly)*