Aeschylus,
Agamemnon 855-1398:
The Arrival and Death of
Agamemnon

Translated by Eugenio Benitez

Clytemnestra: Men! Citizens! Elect of Argos gathered:
I am not ashamed to tell you my affectionate ways.
In time the opprobrium wears off.
It’s not from others that I learned.
I’ll tell you myself the hard life I endured
While my husband was in Troy.
In the first place, a woman parted
From her man is monstrous evil,
Left alone, listening to malignant rumours.
First one, then another, and another, until
Woe after woe arrives at the door.
And as for wounds, if my husband took
As many as were reported here,
He’d have more holes than a net.
And if his deaths were as numerous as the stories,
He might have compared himself to Geryon
Wearing a triple cloak of earth,
At least that much above, and plenty more below him.
Though he died each time as it were once.
And because of these malignant rumours
Many ropes had to be loosened from my neck,
From above, while others held me up.
That’s why my son does not stand beside me,
Who justly holds our pledges, Agamemnon.
Yours and mine. Our son, Orestes —

Don't look surprised,

He’s being raised by Strophios the Phokian,

Our friend and ally, since I was foretold

Two woes: the one at Troy, where you were in danger,

And the other, should the lawless rabble here

Overwhelm the council, —well, it’s only human

Nature to kick a man when he’s down.

So there is pretext, but no guile in my actions.

And as for me, the gushing streams of tears

Have dried up: there is not one drop left,

And my sleepless eyes are sore

From staring at the beacons that were

Never lit. From my dreams

I’d be awoken by the delicate fluttering

Of a gnat, who saw worries

Far too great for sleep.

But now that all’s done, without grief

I’d call this man the ‘dog o’ the stables’,

‘Saviour of ships”, “pillar of the lofty roof’,

‘eldest son of the father’,

‘Land to sailors past all hope’ —

For the sight of day is loveliest after a storm

<to the thirsty wayfarer a gushing stream>

And pleasant is escape from need.

I think him worthy to be so described.

Grudges be gone!—We endured those ills

Long ago. Now come to me dear lord,

Step down from this car, but do not set your foot

Aground, O king, sacker of Troy.

Servants! Why do you wait? Your task was

To strew the road with carpets—

Straightaway spread his path in purple cloth.

Let justice bring him to the home he never hoped to see.

As for the rest, perhaps someone not overcome by sleep

Shall accomplish, with God’s help, what’s duly fated.

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Agamemnon: Child of Leda, Guard of my house,

You spoke appropriately of my absence,

Though you stretched it out at length. But really
The praise ought to come from others. 917
As for the rest, don't coddle me, as women do. 918
Don't grovel and clamour before me. 919
Like some barbarian, mouth agape. 920
Don't make me the object of envy, by strewing my path 921
With vestments—the gods you should honour so— 922
But for a mortal to tread on such elaborate 923
Beauty ... I am filled with fear. 924
So revere me as a man, not a god. 925
Away with these fancy foot-mats! 926
Fame speaks loud enough. And not to be conceited 927
Is God's greatest gift—For he should be happy 928
Who lives out his days well-loved and prosperous. 929
If I could but live this way, I'd be safe. 930

Clytemnestra: Come now, don't oppose me. 931
Agamemnon: You must know my resolve. 932
Clytemnestra: Wouldn't you have promised the gods, in fear, to do this? 933
Agamemnon: Only if someone wise had declared it my duty. 934
Clytemnestra: What do you think Priam would do, had he won? 935
Agamemnon: Doubtless he'd have walked on tapestries. 936
Clytemnestra: Then do not fear the reproach of men. 937
Agamemnon: But the voice of the people is very powerful. 938
Clytemnestra: But without spite you won't be envied. 939
Agamemnon: Such arguments don't become a woman. 940
Clytemnestra: But it becomes a winner to surrender. 941
Agamemnon: Do you really want to win this battle? 942
Clytemnestra: Yield to me—You show yourself king if you do so willingly. 943
Agamemnon: Then if it seems so to you ... Quick! Have someone loosen these shoes, the good servants of my feet; and I'll stride forth upon these godly sea-rich dyeings. May no eye's distant envy strike me. What a shame to soil these expensive tapestries by treading them underfoot.

(re: Cassandra) But let it be so. —My consort here, kindly escort her. Whoever rules with gentle hand, God watches over from afar. For no one willingly takes on the yoke of slavery, but she accompanies me as the pick of flowers, of many rich spoils, the army's gift to me.

(to Clytemnestra) But since I have your word on it, I'll follow this purple path into the house.

Clytemnestra: There is the sea—who will drain it? Our cloth is fed on fresh porphyrian dye, worth its weight in silver. We have a palace, lord, and gods who provide; we have never known shortage. I would have vowed to tread these vestments, if oracles had demanded it. As the price for procuring you. So long as the root lives, leaves cover the house, spreading shade under Sirius. Now you've returned to hearth and home, you bring warmth in Winter. And, when Zeus makes wine from bitter grapes, you bring coolness to the house. Husband, where you walk at will. Zeus, Zeus, Lord of all, fulfill my prayer; remember what you intend to do.

Chorus strophe Oh why does this persistent fear loom and hover before my heart's eye? It sings prophetic, unbidden, unhired, vomiting forth dreams of doubtful worth. While assurance, so hard won,
Still won't sit atop my heart's throne.
But time has passed
Since ruin cast
Ship cables in the Trojan sand,
When the army rushed upon the land

antistrophe
With my own eyes I ascertain,
For I'm a witness, his return.
Yet without a harp it sings, my breast,
Taught from within, unimpressed,
The Furies' dirge, not at all possessed
Of hope, or love, or boldness.
But my inward feelings are not idle.
My thoughts dwell on justice all the while
My heart reels round and round.
Yet I pray my dread's unsound
And falls out false
And unfulfilled.

strophe
Of health, so great, there is no limit,
Though neighbour to it there is sickness.
They lean against a common wall,
While destiny, inflexible,
Strikes a hidden shoal.
And one's acquired wealth of gold,
That caution keeps by flinging
Part from well aimed slings ...
It does not founder the whole estate,
Though she's loaded down with freight,
Nor plunge her 'neath the sea.
The fulsome gift of Zeus exceeds,
And from his yearly ploughshares,
Destroys the ill of hunger.

antistrophe
But once in death a man's black blood
Has spilt upon the ground,
Who can call it back with charms?
Not even him with knowledge sound
How to raise men from the dead
Did Zeus neglect to harm.
But had not one appointed fate, 1025
By God's will, stopped another 1026
From having more than e'er it ought, 1027
My heart, outstripping tongue, 1028
Would pour all these things forth. 1029
Yet now she mutters in the darkness. 1030
She aches, expecting never more 1031
A timely action to accomplish 1032
While my head's on fire. 1033/4

Clytemnestra: Take yourself inside Cassandra, 1035
Since Zeus placed you so hospitably among us 1036
To share a common basin with all those 1037
Slaves stationed around his altar. 1038
Step down from the car and don't be haughty. 1039
For it is said even Heracles once 1040
Endured being sold, and lived on slave's bread. 1041
So if necessity casts your lot our way, 1042
We must be grateful, your old-wealth masters. 1043
For those who are but newly rich 1044
Are cruel complete to slaves, beyond measure. 1045
So now you know how we regard things here. 1046

Chorus: It's you she addressed, with such cold candour. 1047
(to Cassandra) You are caught in fatal snares. 1048
Obey if you can—but perhaps you won't ... 1049

Clytemnestra: Unless she is possessed, like a swallow, 1050
(to Chorus) Of an obscure and foreign tongue. 1051
I will persuade her. 1052

Chorus: Follow her command. It's for the best, she says. 1053
(to Cassandra) Depart this car and its throne. 1054

Clytemnestra: With her at my door I can't bide time, 1055
They should be 'round the hearth already, 1056
Like sheep set for fire and slaughter 1057
By those who never expected any 1058
(to Cassandra) Such boon. If you will obey me, don't delay. 1059
But if you don't understand a word I say 1060
Then tell me, Speechless, with your foreign hand.  

Chorus: It seems plain our guest needs an interpreter.  
She has the manners of a newly captured beast.  

Clytemnestra: She is mad! She heeds only wicked thoughts!  
She comes here from a captured city,  
And before she even tastes the bit  
She's foaming blood.  
I won't shame myself by saying more.  

Chorus: But I'm compassionate. I won't be angry  
(to Cassandra)  
Come, poor thing, leave this carriage.  
Accept what must be; take up your new yoke.  

Cassandra: Oh! Aaagh! Aaagh!  
strope 1  
Apollo! Apollo!  

Chorus: Why these wailings unto Loxias?  
Mourning ill befits the god of healing.  

Cassandra: Oh! Aaagh! Aaagh!  
antistrophe 1  
Apollo! Apollo!  

Chorus: Again, ill-omened, she invokes the god.  
It suits him not to abide such woe.  

Cassandra: Apollo! Apollo!  
strope 2  
My guide and destroyer—  
You have destroyed me once again.  

Chorus: She foretells her own doom—  
The mind of a slave, yet still divine.  

Cassandra: Apollo! Apollo!  
antistrophe 2  
My guide and destroyer—  
Where have you led me? What house is this?  

Chorus: The house of Atreides, if you didn't know.  
I tell you plain and truly.
Cassandra: Ah! Ah! It hates the gods! So many crimes it knows! It lent a hand with binding ropes and murders of kin. A human slaughterhouse with a reeking floor.

Chorus: She's keen-scented, this stranger, like a dog. She sniffs the blood of victims.

Cassandra: By these ghosts I am convinced; The infants screaming of their slaughter; Roasted flesh, devoured by the father.

Chorus: We've heard of your fame as a divine, But we aren't seeking a prophet now.

Cassandra: Oh god! What is she scheming What is this new pain? Vast, Vast evil in this house she plots; Unbearable evil, impossible to stop, While help stands off, far removed.

Chorus: These divinations are new and strange. But those others I recognised, the whole city cries out with them.

Cassandra: O wretched girl, to have reached this end! Your mate, who shares your bed, Bathed and washed and then—how can I say it? How soon it will happen! She's stretching out hand After outstretched hand.

Chorus: I don't understand, child. You pass From enigma to oracle; I am at a loss.

Cassandra: Aaa! Aaa! Oh God! What's this appears? Is it the net of Death? But she is the net, the wife, the murderous Accomplice. O let unslaked Faction come Crying out for a stoning.

Chorus: What sort of fury are you calling down On this house? Your words disturb me. That fatal terror creeps upon my heart,
Which ends life in a yellow hour,
Falling like the last rays of the sun.
How swiftly ruin comes!

Cassandra: Oh! Oh! See? See? Hold back the bull
antistrophe 5
From the cow. She catches him up in robes
And gores him with a black-horned weapon.
He falls into the bath,
The murderous cauldron ... Listen to me!

Chorus: I wouldn’t claim any skill in the art,
But I would say she augers evil.
Indeed, what good is ever prophesied?
For it is through ills
That the verbose arts of the prophets
Teach men terror.

Cassandra: O wretched girl, beset with an evil fate!
strophe 6
For I will cry out my suffering on top of his.
(to Apollo)
Why have you brought me to this wretched place?
For no reason but to die with him. Why else?

Chorus: You are possessed. Frenzied.
All around you you sing out this
Unmusical song, crying like that
Insatiable nightingale—fly!—who
From her miserable heart kept calling “Itus! Itus!”
Mourning her son’s murder by his parents.

Cassandra: Oh, for the life of the clear-voiced nightingale!
antistrophe 6
The gods threw wings around her,
And gave her sweet, untroubled life.
But all that awaits me is the slice of a two-edged sword.

Chorus: Where did you get these vehement
Foolish, otherworldly woes?
Why do you make such a terrible clang,
Chanting these shrill refrains?
Who set you on this prophetic path
That bodes only ill?
Cassandra: Oh! The wedding, the wedding of Paris, our bane! O Scamander, water of my fathers! Long ago, about your banks, headstrong I was nourished and grew. Now, by Cocytus and the shores of Acheron It seems I’ll soon be making prophecies.

Chorus: Why do you say such excessive things? A newborn babe could tell that they shatter us. I’m stung To hear you moan and whimper so At your painful fate.

Cassandra: O the grief, the grief of a city utterly laid waste. O the sacrifices and offerings my father made In the slaughter-fields. And that was not remedy enough That Troy would not suffer as she must ... But I shall soon fall, a-fevered, to the ground.

Chorus: It’s all the same as before, what you’ve just said; Some malevolent power moves you, Falling freshly from above, To cry these pitiful, fatal sufferings. And as to their end ... I am helpless.

Cassandra: Then my oracle-gleam I’ll no longer hide, A-veiled, like the eye of a newlywed bride. But just as the winds blow bright at sunrise, A far greater woe surges, like a tide, Towards the light. I’ll no longer teach in riddles. Mark me! With me now! Sniff out the track of evil Laid down long ago! For this house never stops singing discord And cacophony. It tells no good, And once blood’s been drunk, to make more courage, It keeps the feast inside the village— It can’t escape—of the kindred Furies. They hymn the Unbegotten Curse
Right here in the house, while each man in turn
Spits upon his brother's bed, and spurns
Him for defiling it. Have I missed the mark?
A false prophet? Do you think I bark
At doors? Bear witness. you, with an oath
That the ancient sins of this house I know.

Chorus: But how could our oath, if we swear it true,
Give comfort? I am amazed that you,
Brought up across the sea, should be able to
Describe this foreign city, as if you'd been here.

Cassandra: Divine Apollo set me at this task.

Chorus: What? Was he in love with you, though he's a god?

Cassandra: I once was ashamed to admit it.

Chorus: Anyone is proud, when she's faring well.

Cassandra: He was a vigorous lover, he breathed into me such joy ...

Chorus: So you were betrothed?

Cassandra: I consented. but I betrayed him.

Chorus: Even though you had a god inside you?

Cassandra: Even when I foretold the fate of Troy.

Chorus: How did you escape Apollo's wrath?

Cassandra: I've not convinced a soul of anything since I failed him.

Chorus: Your prophesy seems true to us. at least.

Cassandra: Aiee! Horrible!
Again the pain of prophecy comes upon me.
Compelling me with new overtures.
Do you see them sitting by the house.
Like figures from a dream?
The children murdered by their own,
Hands filled with flesh, a homely feast,
Entrails and organs, the wretched load
Which their father ate, I see them holding it.

(re Aegisthus)
For their deaths a lion plots revenge. Not bold,
But insipid, naked, to and from the bed
He rules in my returning master's stead.
<For I must bear the yoke of slavery>
The sacker of Troy, the commander of ships
Knows not the flagrant tongue of his bitch;
What things she's said, cheerfully and at large,
In secret aiming, with wicked luck, at the target
Of destruction. Such daring! That woman is the death
Of man. What should I call her? What loath-
Some beast? "Amphisbaina", the two-headed snake?
Or rock-dwelling Scylla, whom sailors hate?
The raging mother of Death, implacable, who
Breathes War on friends? How she ballyhooed
Triumphant, just as at a battle's turn,
She seems to revel in his safe come home.
And it's all the same if you don't believe me.
Why? For these things will be, and presently
"Pity!", you'll cry, "Too true a priest was she."

Chorus: Of Thyestes' feast on the flesh of his children
I knew and I shuddered, and fear grips me
To hear what's truly not imagined.
But as for the rest — I've lost the track.

Cassandra: I tell you, you will see the death of Agamemnon.

Chorus: Speak only good things, child, or let your mouth sleep!

Cassandra: But there's no comfort in my speech.

Chorus: Not if it's going to happen. But may it never come to pass!

Cassandra: While you're busy praying, they are about to kill.
Chorus: For whom is this death prepared?

Cassandra: How blind you are! I've told you.

Chorus: But I haven't grasped how it is to be done.

Cassandra: Even though I speak perfect Greek?

Chorus: So do the Pythian oracles, but they are hard to follow.

Cassandra: Oh God! Such fire! It consumes me!
Oh God! Lucian Apollo! Ai! I ...
She is a two-footed lioness, who sleeps with a wolf!
And when the noble lion at last is gone,
She's going to kill me—ah!—and she concocts
A poison for me; she'll mix my punishment well.
For she promises first, sharpening bright steel,
To pay him back with murder, for bringing me here.
Why then do I cling to these ridiculous things—
These priestly wands and necklaces?

(to Apollo) Before my own death comes I'll corrupt You.
Be gone! With Your downfall, thus, I requite You.
Enrich someone else with ruin, not me.
Look! Apollo himself strips me of my vestments.
He watched me even when, arrayed in
Costume, I was ridiculed by my own kin,
As though by enemies; obviously in vain.
They said I was mad; called me "waif"
And "vagabond" and "listless" and I look it.
Now He has undone me—His prophet!—
And carries me off to this deadly fate;
Instead of an altar, the block awaits,
Where I'm to be struck down in warm-blooded sacrifice.
But not dishonoured by the gods shall I die:
For another will come to avenge us hereafter—
The matricidal son, revenge of his father;
An exile he wanders, cast out from the land,
Now he'll return as the capstone of ruin.
For it has been sworn by the gods, a great oath,
"The death of the father will issue him home."
Why then do I groan?
From the start I saw Troy suffer
And suffer, but now those who took her—
They'll be gone, thus, by the gods' decree.
And I'll lead the way, I'm ready to die.
I offer these words at the gates of Hell:
May the blow come timely and well,
Without a struggle, so my blood flows
Out in swift death, and my eyes close.

Chorus: O wise, unhappy woman. You belabour
The point. If you really know your own death,
How is it you go so bravely to the block,
Like a sacrificial bull?

Cassandra: I can't avoid it, my hosts, there is no more time.

Chorus: But the last bit of time is the most precious.

Cassandra: The day has come, I gain little by fleeing.

Chorus: Then take courage from your brave spirit.

Cassandra: No one with any luck has to suffer so.

Chorus: But a glorious death, at least, is a boon.

Cassandra: O father! For you and your noble children!

Chorus: What is the matter? What fear still turns you back?

Cassandra: Fie! Fie!

Chorus: What's all this for? Some hatred still left in you?

Cassandra: This house reeks of bloody murder ...

Chorus: But that is only the smell of the recent sacrifices ...

Cassandra: ... Like vapour from a tomb ...
Chorus: ... Fine Syrian incense, don't you mean? 1312

Cassandra: But I go. Even as this house cries out my death, 1313
And Agamemnon's. Enough of life! 1314
Oh my hosts: 1315
I don't hold back from fear, like a bird 1316
Fluttering in the bush. Witness this when I've died: 1317
A woman shall die in answer to this woman's death 1318
And a man shall fall in answer to my king, ill-wed. 1319
This last courtesy I beg before I die. 1320

Chorus: O brave child! How I pity you! 1321

Cassandra: I have but one last speech, a dirge, my own: 1322
"I pray to the sun, and to his last light 1323
And to my avengers, that they shall requite 1324
My hateful slayers one and the same — 1325
The facile subdiction of a dead slave." 1326
Oh, the ways of men! Even the lucky ones 1327
Resemble but a shadow; but if they are unlucky, 1328
"The wet sponge wipes out the picture." 1329
And these I pity even more. 1330

Chorus: Want of prosperity insatiably grows 1331
in all men, there are none who refuse it; 1332
No one points a finger at his house and says, 1333
"Come no more, happiness! No more!" 1334
Just so the gods bestowed it on our king 1335
To take the city of Priam. 1336
And now honoured by god he comes home. 1337
But if he shall have to pay for first blood 1338
With his own, and by dying himself, 1339
Bring on more deaths still— 1340
Who, seeing this, would feel so sure 1341
that anyone has a guardian angel. 1342

Agamemnon: (off stage) Oh god! I'm stabbed. 1343

Chorus: Quiet! Did you hear something? 1344

Agamemnon: (Groans a second time) 1345
Chorus: It's happened, that was the king!
We must convene, and see if there's a safe way to...

voice 1— I'll tell you my opinion: Raise the alarm!
Let's call the people to the house.

voice 2— I think we ought to seize the killers immediately
And convict them while the sword's still wet.

voice 3— I'm of much the same opinion. I say
We do something; the point is: not to wait.

voice 4— It's plain to see;
Their acts betoken tyranny.

voice 5— Then we're wasting time deliberating,
While they don't rest a finger.

voice 6— I don't know what to say. I don't have a plan.
And before we do anything we must have a plan.

voice 7— I too urge caution; I'm ill equipped
To raise the dead with mere speeches.

voice 8— What, then: do we stretch out our own lives
And yield to shameless usurpers?

voice 9— Unbearable! Better to die!
Death is less bitter than tyranny.

voice 10— But wait! Must we preclude from the mere groan
That the king is in fact dead?

voice 11— Yes, we must know the facts of the matter.
All we have so far is conjecture.

voice 12— It prevails upon me to praise this view from all sides.
We must know clearly how Agamemnon is.

Clytemnestra: Although I said many things before, to suit the moment,
I won't be ashamed to say the opposite now.
For how else should I have treated my enemies—
They pretended to be friends—than to enclose them in a net of sorrows too high to overleap. When this contest fell to me long ago, I was not heedless of the ancient feud; but all in good time. I stand on the spot; my attack accomplished. Thus I have done, I won't disown these deeds, since he could not flee, nor ward off death. You see? Just like catching fish, I threw the net around him, one with no exit, a splendidly evil robe. And then I stabbed twice, and twice he shouted. He loosed his limbs on the spot, and fell, and I put a third blow in as a prayer of thanks to Zeus of the underworld, keeper of the dead. Then, like this, he fell, gasping for breath, and sharply spitting out his slaughter-blood, he struck me with a black spatter of the murderous dew. And I rejoiced, just as the crops rejoice when they burst from the calyx, in the splash of Spring rain. And that's how things stand, my reverend Argives. Rejoice too, if you can, but regardless, I exult. If it were seemly to pour a libation on the corpse, that had been right, or rather more than right, for in this very house he fill the cup with accursed evil, and he drained it himself, upon his return.