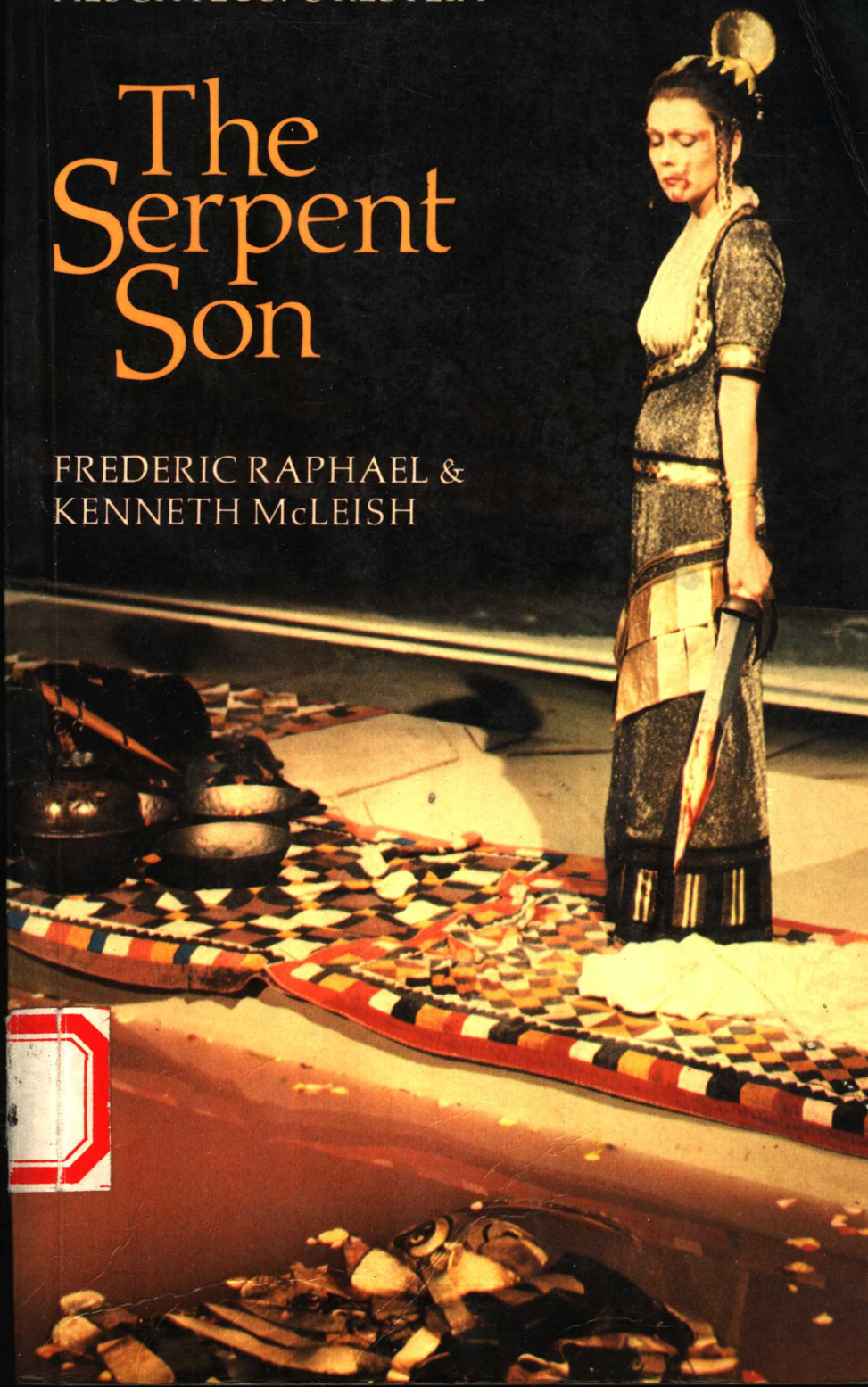


AESCHYLUS: ORESTEIA

# The Serpent Son

FREDERIC RAPHAEL &  
KENNETH McLEISH



# *The Serpent Son*

AESCHYLUS: ORESTEIA

Translated by Frederic Raphael  
and Kenneth McLeish

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The cover picture is a BBC copyright picture showing Diana Rigg as  
Klytemnestra in the BBC production of the *Oresteia: The Serpent Son*. BBC  
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*for Guy Lee*

## Translators' note

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There is no standardisation about the transliteration of Greek names. The main criterion was ease of reading.

In several places we have broken up long Greek lines into groups of shorter lines in English. The line-numbers, therefore, refer only to this translation, and do not correspond to the Greek text.

A short list of relevant books is given as note 20 on page 137.

In the preparation of this translation (first for the BBC, and now for publication) we were encouraged and helped by several of our friends, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge here our gratitude to Guy Lee, William Shepherd and Richard Broke. Pat Easterling read the book for the Press, and made many valuable suggestions.

This translation of the *Oresteia* was produced on BBC2 television in 1979. The producer was Richard Broke and the director Bill Hays. Klytemnestra was played by Diana Rigg, Athene by Claire Bloom, Cassandra by Helen Mirren, Leader of the Women by Billie Whitelaw, Kilissa by Dame Flora Robson, Leader of the Furies by Sian Phillips, Agamemnon by Denis Quilley, Leader of the Old Men by Alfred Burke, Orestes by Anton Lesser, Electra by Maureen O'Brien and Apollo by John Nolan. The music was composed by Humphrey Searle, and the production designed by Tim Harvey.

# Introduction

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## **The legend**

Pelops king of Argos had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. After their father's death they quarrelled over his throne; in addition, Thyestes seduced his brother's wife. He was driven into exile, but later returned and begged his brother for mercy. Atreus pretended to welcome him, and invited him to a banquet of reconciliation. But the meat for the feast was the flesh of Thyestes' own children (all but Aegisthus, the youngest, a baby). When he realised what he had eaten, Thyestes laid a curse on the royal house of Atreus, and fled with his baby son into exile.

After Atreus' death, his sons Agamemnon and Menelaus inherited the kingdom of Argos. They married Klytemnestra and Helen, daughters of King Tyndareus of Sparta. Four children were born to Agamemnon and Klytemnestra: three daughters (Iphigenia, Electra and Chrysothemis) and a son (Orestes).

Paris, prince of Troy, visited Sparta, seduced Helen and stole her away with him. The brothers, Agamemnon and Menelaus, organised a huge Greek fleet to sail after him, sack Troy and win her back. But the winds would not blow; the fleet was landlocked in harbour. At last Kalchas the prophet announced that this was the work of the goddess Artemis, who was angry because of a sacrilege by Agamemnon. The only way he could bring favourable winds was to sacrifice his daughter to her.

Reluctantly, Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia, and the fleet sailed for Troy. After ten years the city was taken and its people enslaved. Agamemnon's prize was Cassandra, princess of Troy, an infallible prophetess doomed never to be believed. The fleet set sail for Argos; but on the way the gods sent a huge storm and the ships were sunk or separated. Agamemnon's ship alone reached Argos.

During the ten years of the Trojan War, Aegisthus, now grown up, had returned to Argos. He and Klytemnestra had become

lovers, and plotted the death of Agamemnon. The young prince Orestes was sent for safety by his sister Electra to Phocis; but Electra and Chrysothemis had to stay in Argos watching their mother and her lover squander the royal wealth.

Agamemnon returned home, bringing Cassandra. Under the pretence of welcoming him, Klytemnestra bathed him, and then, as he rose from his bath, pinned his arms with an embroidered crimson cloth while Aegisthus cut him down. Cassandra, too, was killed. The murderers now ruled Argos in triumph: there was no one strong enough to punish them.

Later, Orestes returned to Argos, disguised as a traveller. Helped by his sister Electra, he killed Klytemnestra and Aegisthus. Their deaths had been foretold in dreams and omens; Orestes had been commanded to kill them by an oracle from the god Apollo. But the age-old Furies, who avenge the murder of kinsmen, drove him mad and pursued him from Argos.

Mad, Orestes roamed the world, until at last his blood-guilt was removed by purification and sacrifices. The Furies still pursued him, and finally he took refuge (on Apollo's instructions) in Athens, in the shrine of Athene. Apollo and the Furies demanded that Athene judge the case. She thought it too difficult and important a matter for one single judge, and established a special court, the Areopagus, with a human jury, to try the case. The judgement (after Athene's casting vote) went to Orestes, who returned to his rightful throne in Argos. Athene pacified the Furies by granting them a place of honour in Athens. They were named Eumenides ('The Kindly Ones'), and honoured as earth-spirits who protected and blessed the citizens. The Areopagus was established as a true court of homicide for evermore.

### **The trilogy**

The *Oresteia* was first produced (in the Theatre of Dionysos at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens) in 458 B.C. It is the only Greek trilogy to survive complete: three linked plays by a single dramatist on a single theme, produced on a single day. (Later, this practice became less common: most surviving Greek tragedies are self-contained works not intended to be parts of trilogies.)

In his own day Aeschylus was famous for grand, spectacular stage effects. The stirring of the Furies, for example (*The*

*Eumenides* line 141), is said to have caused panic and near-riot in the theatre at the first production. He seems to have favoured scenes where a single figure, standing still, is set against choral movement: examples are the scenes between Klytemnestra and the Chorus (*Agamemnon* 258 ff), Cassandra and the Chorus (*Agamemnon* 1017 ff), Orestes and the Chorus (*The Libation-bearers* 1114 ff) and Athene and the Chorus (*The Eumenides* 874 ff).

Nowadays, the stage-craft of the *Oresteia* is one of its most remarkable features. So far from hampering him, the restrictions of the Greek theatre seem to have liberated and inspired Aeschylus' creative imagination. He was a master of visual metaphor: the crimson cloth, the mourners at the grave, the Furies themselves. From the point of view of stage-craft alone, *The Eumenides* is one of the finest surviving Greek tragedies: its use of shifting 'dramatic time', its changing locations, and the way in which the audience is brought into the action of the trial, make a creative use of theatre conventions unparalleled by any other ancient dramatist.

One of the main elements in Aeschylean spectacle, necessarily missing from our texts today, was music. Large portions of the plays (perhaps as much as two thirds) were performed to music. The loss of this dimension is particularly severe in the great set-pieces of the plays: the opening chorus of *Agamemnon* (40-257), the Cassandra scene in *Agamemnon* (1017-1280), the grave-ritual in *The Libation-bearers* (359-596), the Furies' song of hate (*The Eumenides* 357-480) and the reconciliation and torchlight procession that end the whole trilogy (*The Eumenides* 1021-end).

### **Agamemnon**

One of the main themes of the *Oresteia* is the way men deal with the gods, the way our acceptance of supernatural forces changes as our understanding develops. The action moves on two levels at once: human and superhuman. Sometimes they are entirely separate; sometimes they move together in harmony; sometimes they clash, with disastrous results for men.

In *Agamemnon* the gods are presented as awesome, unbending figures. They are like gigantic men, with all men's powers and inconsistencies magnified. Most of them are as heedless of the wishes and purposes of men as men are of those of ants. The others – and especially Zeus, the power above all powers, the ultimate



authority for gods and men alike – oversee a system of justice where retribution always follows crime, where punishment is certain, swift and terrible.

Few mortals understand the gods' motives or comprehend their powers. All they know is that directives from heaven need no explanation, and must be obeyed, however devastating. Artemis is angry: Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter; the gods are for Menelaus: Troy must fall. When a mortal is taken into a god's confidence, the mortal is destroyed (as Cassandra is by Apollo).

Faced with this abrupt, implacable force, men live in a constant state of apprehension. Knowledge – harmony of men with gods – is to be pursued; but knowledge brings certain pain. Moderation – keeping out of the sight of the gods – is the safest course; but even that does not always save a man. In such a world, to be born great is to live in the very eye of heaven; great men live with greater risks than humble men, and part of their greatness involves accepting the likelihood of pain.

Each of the 'crimes' in the history of the house of Atreus is either a calculated risk, or an exceptional act of arrogance performed at a moment when the great man is blind to everything but his own greatness, when the gods are forgotten. Atreus' feasting Thyestes on his own children; Agamemnon killing Artemis' sacred stag; Klytemnestra's murder of her husband – all are actions sure to bring retribution. Arrogance rides for a fall; the sinner is always punished; the killer is always killed.

Of all the characters in *Agamemnon*, only Klytemnestra seems aware of this obligation of suffering. She knows the consequences, and knowing them still chooses the path she takes. Much of what she says (especially, for example, her speech as Agamemnon enters the palace, 927–943) shows an ironic self-consciousness, a kind of tragic 'nerve' in the face of fate, which lifts her to a dimension shared by none of the other characters. (For Agamemnon himself, for example, there is no relationship, no understanding with the gods. He is wholly in the grip of events; the gods work out their purposes in him, and he is unaware of it. Unlike many 'heroes' in Greek tragedy, and particularly unlike Klytemnestra, he never sees or acquiesces in the need to suffer: his blind arrogance, arrogant blindness, is the true picture of the great man doomed greatly to suffer.)

Because of its magnificent poetry and spectacle, *Agamemnon* is often performed or read separately from the rest of the *Oresteia*. To do this, however, is to do violence to Aeschylus' dramatic and philosophical purpose. However finely expressed, the morality of *Agamemnon* is both portentous and bleak, 'archaic' to a degree. It is intentionally so: the softening, the means of accommodation between gods and men, is the subject of the rest of the trilogy.

### **The Libation-bearers**

This is the simplest of the plays; its style and language are markedly different from those of *Agamemnon* or *The Eumenides*, and come close at times to the simple, almost 'pastoral' style favoured by Euripides (*Alcestis*, the Iphigenia plays, *Helen*, *The Phoenician Women*).

The action of the play operates almost entirely on the human level: the gods are there, but only as seen and invoked by men. Appropriately, the themes of the play are human too: the constant mortal struggle to bring new life out of death, hope from despair; the contest between honour and degradation, good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Throughout the play, Orestes' actions are presented in human terms, as morally right and just. It is only at the very end, when the Furies gather, that Aeschylus reasserts the divine presence in human affairs, the possibility of a wider context for these murders, this revenge.

A major subject of the play is personal responsibility for action, the motives and effects of human choice. Central to this is the dialogue between Orestes and Klytemnestra (1014-1064). The argument between them is not one of black against white, right against wrong – it is an argument of choice against choice, and it is possible to see Orestes' choice as simplistic and partial, as blind to the wider meaning of events as the actions of Agamemnon his father; Klytemnestra's choice, on the other hand, is more complex, a culmination of all her ironic acceptance of the need to fall in with fate. (In such a context, too, the moral position of Apollo, and Orestes' 'choice' to obey the god's clear directive, are matters of crucial importance to the developing meaning of the whole trilogy.)

Irony is the predominant mode of the play. For us the audience – who know the future results of the characters' actions as they do not – the pure-heartedness, the simplicity of Orestes, *Electra* and

the Chorus has layers of meaning and interpretation of which they are quite unaware. Irony is constantly used to give a moral commentary, in a light, unforced way we might expect more from Sophocles than granite Aeschylus. It is never more strikingly used than in the outburst of old Kilissa (853-888), which touches on the heart of human life (especially the obligation adults owe to children) in a way deliberately made to seem incongruous in its context of heroic determination and unthinking piety.

### The Eumenides

Until now, the unfolding saga of the house of Atreus has told us that there are two sides to things, that everything is a mirror of itself. Love contains hate, and hate love (the snake in Klytemnestra's dream is cradled and given suck: the image of terror is also her beloved son); to kill another is also to sacrifice oneself; parents live in (and on) their children, and children in their parents. Human life is seen as a kind of prism, where events coalesce and are revealed rather than following each other in sequence. Cause and effect are separate revelations of a static whole; there is no causal progression, no dynamism, no creative urge.

In *The Eumenides* this circle is broken at last. Where the old gods (personified in the Furies) made an unchanging, inflexible contract with man, the new, young gods step forward, make concessions, establish a different covenant which for the first time involves them in compromise and sacrifice. The old cycle of murder and vengeance is replaced by a contract where forgiveness and justice are flexible, where reason can enter the dialogue as well as conscience. The irony and moral ambiguity of Agamemnon's 'choices' in *Agamemnon*, and Orestes' obedience to Apollo in *The Libation-bearers*, are resolved in this new covenant: the relationship between gods and men is more complex now, but also, paradoxically, a great deal clearer.

The new compact is symbolised by the creation of the Areopagus: a court where homicide, instead of being automatically punished, is to be tried and judged. It is a court, too, where men and gods are equal partners, where justice is a function of mind, not instinct. To a Greek audience, an Athenian audience, the symbolism would also involve the move from barbarism to

civilisation. The venom in primitive gods is withdrawn, and only their benefits remain: thanks to the softening powers of reason, the Furies' power can now be used for good, instead of exclusively for evil.

In this context, Orestes' final speech after the verdict (848-873) at first seems incongruous and out of place. He speaks in the old, primitive vein: a warlord promising alliance, a power threatening vengeance from the grave if anyone breaks his word. The world is that of Agamemnon, not Athene. Possibly this is because Orestes' dilemma, the whole history of the house of Atreus, has now served its dramatic purpose. The old, heroic age is over; the atmosphere of the play is now the clear air of civilised, Periclean Athens.

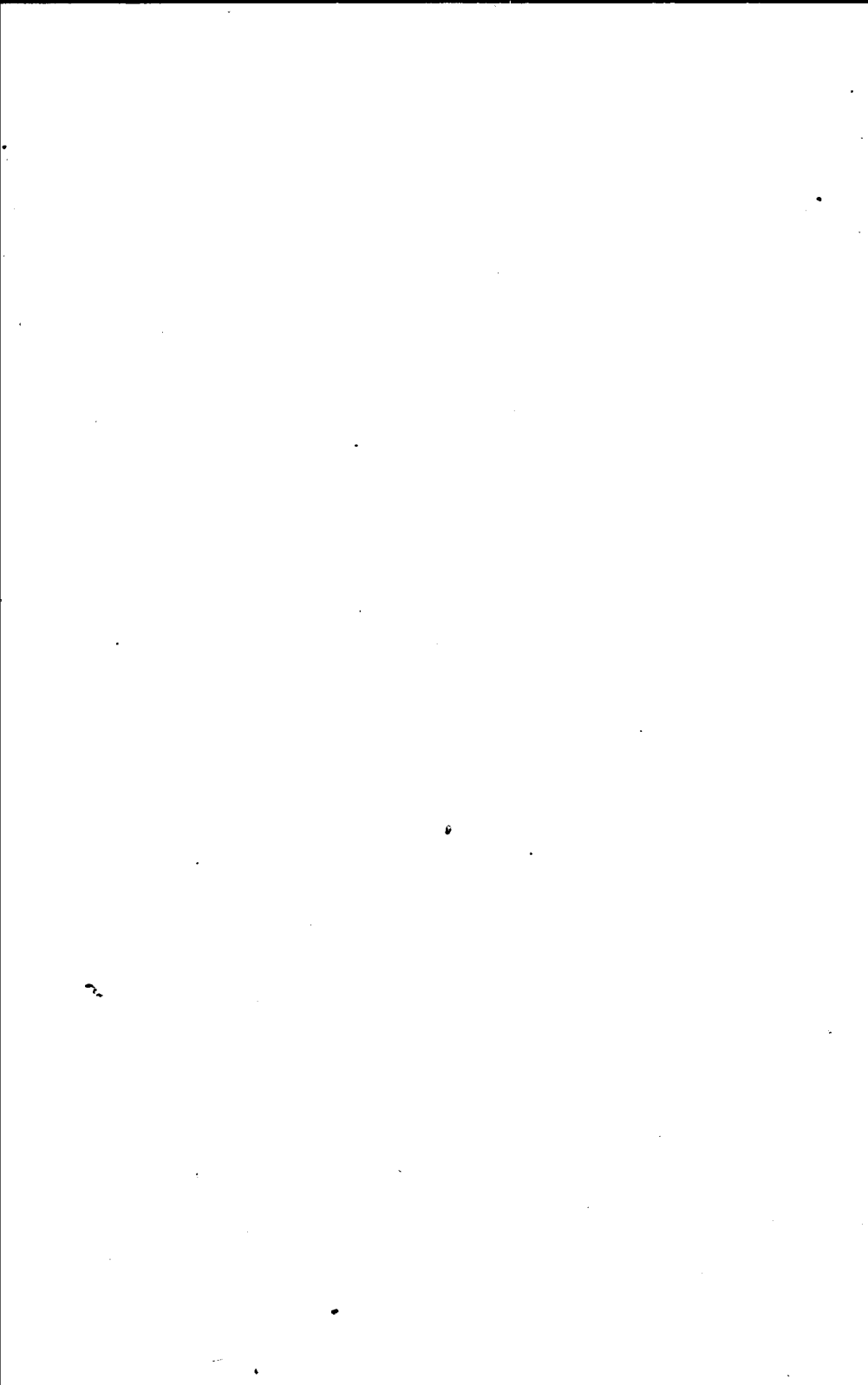
It is here, in the coincidence of form and meaning, that the need becomes clear to view the trilogy as a connected whole. The progression is from the superstitious dark of *Agamemnon* to the light of reason and understanding that ends *The Eumenides*; the dark side of man's nature is not conquered or banished, but taken up and creatively used; the forces outside our nature are still overwhelming and mysterious, but a way of accommodation has been suggested. With the addition of reason to morality, an explanation, a dynamism, has been added to human life.

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# *Agamemnon*



# Agamemnon

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## CHARACTERS

WATCHMAN

AGAMEMNON

KLYTEMNESTRA

KASSANDRA

MESSENGER

AEGISTHUS

GUARDS, ATTENDANTS, SLAVES

CHORUS OF OLD MEN OF ARGOS

---

*AGAMEMNON's palace, Mycenae in Argos. In the background twin towers, with a saddle of land between, rise horned like a bull against the night sky. The palace walls are of massive stones laid without mortar. In the centre are the double gates, heavy, studded, fast shut. GUARDS stand on either side.*

*On the palace roof the WATCHMAN sits, staring out at the dark horizon.*

WATCHMAN

Gods, when will it end?

A long year now I've had the night watch:

A huddled dog on the palace roof.

The home of the sons of Atreus!

I know the going and coming

Of every star in the sky:

The shining lords, bright in their firmament,

Who bring winter or warmth to man.

I watch for a different light: the gleam

Of a beacon fire, the sign that Troy has fallen.

Mycenae's throne is Queen Klytemnestra's now,

And her heart is hard with hope.

Meanwhile, no dreams for me. My bed

Is soaked with dew. I keep a restless watch:

For Fear, not Sleep, is my companion

And holds my eyes awake. I try to whistle,

Or hum a tune to ease the hours . . .

And end, each time, in tears

For this damned place, once blessed, now cursed



O gods, send us some luck at last, an end to pain, 20  
A beacon gleaming in the misty dark.

*In the dark sky, there is a sudden glint of light. The  
WATCHMAN stiffens, looks and looks again. Then he leaps up,  
radiant with joy.*

Light! Light! There in the dark night  
The day-gleam, the dawn, the beacon  
To set all Argos dancing. Luck at last!

*He shouts down to the GUARDS below.*

Quick! Run to Agamemnon's wife. Tell her  
To rise up and dance through the palace  
Singing hymns of joy. The beacon,  
The beacon burns at last!

*The GUARDS hurry inside. He continues, to himself:*

If only the fire speaks true,  
And Troy is really ours. Then I can dance  
And sing indeed. Throw the dice . . .  
Three sixes, luck for master and man alike.  
My lord will return; I'll clasp his dear hand . . .

And then? That's not for me to say:  
'An ox sits on my tongue', as the proverb says.  
Oh, if these walls could speak,  
They'd tell it plain enough. You know  
What I mean, what I'm talking about?  
I'll say no more. You don't? I'll say nothing at all.

*Trumpets; torches; dawn. One by one, slowly, the OLD MEN  
of the Chorus gather in front of the gates. (Sometimes they speak  
as individual voices, sometimes in groups. Parts of what they say  
are murmured or chanted to music. As they speak, they group and  
regroup in restless, shifting patterns.)*

#### OLD MEN

Ten years have passed since Priam's mighty accuser, 40  
Lord Menelaus, and his brother Agamemnon  
(The sons of Atreus,  
Towers twinned in power by Zeus himself)  
Called up from this land