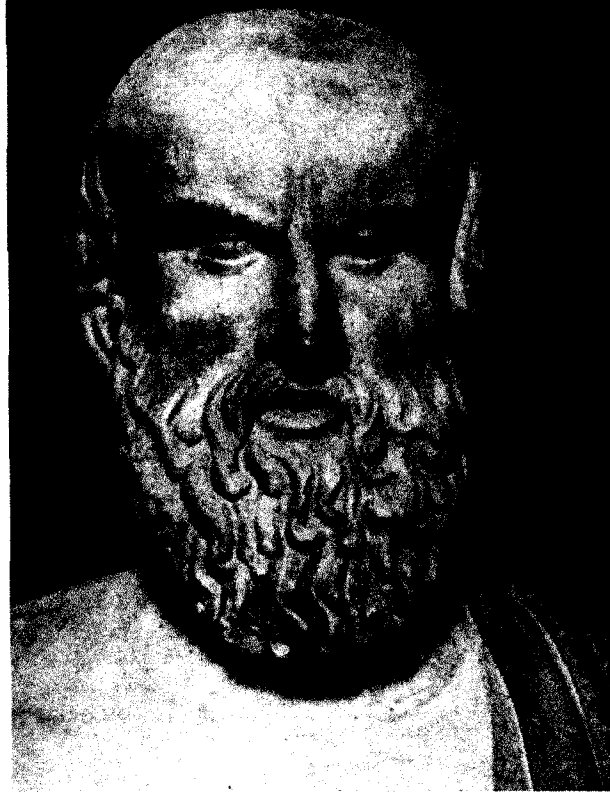


Session 2 – February 21, 1P (Beth El Library)

Reading and discussion of Aeschylus' The Eumenides



Background Information on The Eumenides:

- The role of The Eumenides in “As Old as the World”
- Aeschylus
- The Oresteia Trilogy

Reading and discussion of The Eumenides

Handout: Aeschylus, The Eumenides, (tr. A. Shapiro and P. Burian)

Optional Readings:

G. Thomson, Aeschylus and Athens

Aeschylus, Eumenides (ed. A. Sommerstein)

CHARACTERS

THE PYTHIA priestess of Apollo at Delphi

APOLLO son of Zeus, god of prophecy and purification

ORESTES son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra

CLYTEMNESTRA killed by Orestes, now a ghost

CHORUS of the Erinyes of Clytemnestra

ATHENA daughter of Zeus, patron goddess of Athens

ATHENIAN CITIZEN-JURORS

ATHENIAN WOMEN

The scene is at Delphi, before the oracular temple of Apollo. His priestess, the PYTHIA, enters from the right.

PYTHIA Among the gods I honor in my prayer,
I give first place to the first prophet, Earth,
and second place to Themis, the second one
to hold her mother's seat of prophecy,
or so the story goes. Then third in line,
by Themis' own choice and not by force,
another Titaness took her place: Phoebe,
child of earth, and she in turn gave it
to Phoebus for his birthday, which is why
he added her name to his own.

Leaving 10

the pool and spiny ridge of Delos, he sailed
into the ship-hive coast of Pallas and came here
to this land to make his home on Mount Parnassus.
The children of Hephaestus, road-makers
who tamed the land that was untamed before,
escorted him with deepest reverence.

The people honored him greatly at his coming,
as Delphus did, the country's king and helmsman.
And Zeus infused him with the prophet's art,
and put him as the fourth seer on this throne.
Apollo, then, is spokesman for his father Zeus.

20

I make these gods the prelude of my prayer,
yet in all I say I also honor Pallas
whose shrine stands there, apart, and revere the
Nymphs

whose dwelling is the hollowed Corycian rock,
sweet haunt of birds and spirits lingering.
And Bromius too (I don't forget) has held
sway in this region ever since the day
he, in his true form, led his troop of women,
his wild bacchants, to hunt down Pentheus,

30

to snare him like a hare in a net of death.
 I call on the streams of Pleistus in the gorge below,
 and on Poseidon's power, and on Zeus,
 who brings all to fulfillment, the Most High.
 And as I take my seat to prophesy,
 may they all grant me foresight that exceeds
 whatever foresight I have had before.
 If there are any Greeks here, let them enter
 in order of the lots they drew, as the custom is.
 My prophecies will follow where the god leads.

40

*The PYTHIA enters the temple, then immediately returns,
 but now crawling at first on hands and knees.*

Terror for tongue to tell of, for eyes to see,
 sheer terror has driven me away, again,
 from Apollo's house, so that my strength falters,
 and I can't stand on my own two legs, and
 I go on all fours, trembling, inch by inch,
 because a terrified old woman's nothing
 at all, no better than a child.

I was

making my way into the inner chamber
 where the air glows green from the garlands left there
 when I saw a man polluted before the gods
 sitting the way a suppliant would sit
 on the navel stone, blood dripping from his hands,
 blood also dripping from his just drawn sword;
 he held a tall branch of an olive tree
 wreathed as it should be with a shock of wool,
 the white fleece radiant—this I can say for sure.
 But an astounding gang of women sleeps
 around him, all slouched in chairs. Women?
 No, not women. Gorgons maybe, but, no,
 not even Gorgon shapes could do them justice.
 I saw a painting once of flying female-
 creatures snatching food from Phineus,
 but this gang has no wings, and they're all black,

60

disgusting, and their phlegmy snores spew out
 a stink that blinds and repels, and their eyes drip
 a sickening ooze. Their dark rags, too, aren't fit
 to wear before the statues of the gods,
 or even right to bring into the house.
 I've never seen the tribe this crew belongs to,
 or known a land that could rear a brood like this
 and not be damaged and regret the labor.
 How this will end up now is his concern,
 the master of the house, great Loxias
 himself, the wily one. He is the prophet,
 the healer; he scans the signs to see what is
 to come; he has the power to purify.

70

*The PYTHIA exits to the right. APOLLO and
 ORESTES enter from the temple.*

APOLLO I won't betray you. Your guardian to the end,
 both when I'm here with you and far away—
 I won't ease up against your enemies.

See how I've tamed, for now, these crazed hags,
 lulled them to sleep, these maidens of filth, these
 wrinkled

80

children no god, or man, or any beast
 would want to touch: born evil, born for evil,
 their only dwelling place the evil darkness
 of the deepest underground, despised
 alike by men and all the gods above.
 They're tamed for now. But flee them, don't let up,
 for they will dog you, there at your heels, as you run
 on from horizon to horizon, fast
 at your pounding heels, over the vast mainland,
 and across the sea to sea-encircled cities.
 Don't tire or lose heart till you've shepherded
 your hard task all the way to Pallas Athena's
 city. Once there, sit as a suppliant,
 holding her age-old image in your arms.
 And we'll have judges for your case, and words

90

that spellbind; we will find the means to free you from this toil you've been caught in, once and for all. For I persuaded you to kill your mother.

ORESTES My lord Apollo, you know how not to be unjust; learn, too, how not to be neglectful. Your strength assures me of your power for good. 100

APOLLO Remember, don't let fear overtake you. Now, Hermes, my brother, son of my father too, watch over him; be your own namesake and escort him, guide him well, for he's my suppliant, and Zeus honors the rights of outcasts who are blessed with such a guide back to the world of men.

ORESTES *exits to the left and APOLLO enters the temple. After a brief pause, CLYTEMNESTRA'S ghost appears, perhaps on the roof of the stage building.*

CLYTEMNESTRA Keep sleeping! You there! Ah, what good are you to me asleep? Because of you I go dishonored among the other dead. The spirits of those I killed won't stop accusing me, I wander in disgrace. I tell you, day and night they hector me with blame. And though I too have suffered from my blood relations, none of the gods is angry on my behalf, though I was slaughtered by my own son's hands. Picture my wounds in your heart (for the sleeping mind can see more clearly than the mind awake). Remember where they came from, and don't forget how many offerings I made to you, how you would lap them up, the wineless pourings, sober propitiations, holy feasts burned in a hearth pit in the darkest recess of the night, at an hour not shared by other gods— And all for what? To see my offerings trampled 110 120

while I watch him slip away so easily and vanish like a fawn, watch him leap free out from the middle of your net, and taunt you, mock you, winking, as he bounds off? Hear me! My very being hinges on my plea. Wake up now, goddesses from beneath the ground, for I am Clytemnestra, the dream that calls you. 130

(whining from within the temple)

The more you whine, the farther away he gets, for his friends, unlike mine, know how to help.

(more whining)

More sleep's in you than pity for my pain. Orestes, who ran me—his mother!—through, is gone.

(moaning)

How can you sleep and moan like this? Get up! Get up! Ruin's the job you're meant to do!

(more moaning)

Sleep and exhaustion, those arch-conspirators, have drained the poison from the dread snake's tooth. 140

CHORUS *(moaning twice as loud, still from within)* Get him! Get him! Get him! There! Over there!

CLYTEMNESTRA The quarry you keep hunting's just a dream, and yet you still bay like a hound that can't stop sniffing out the bloodtrail. What are you doing? Get up! Don't let exhaustion overcome you! Don't let sleep slacken your pace, make you forget my misery! Let my just accusations sting your heart awake, for they are sharp goads to the sensible. Breathe over him the blood-reek of your breath, shrivel him in the sizzling 150

gust of your belly's fire! Get after him,
with'er him away with a fresh pursuit!

(CLYTEMNESTRA'S GHOST DISAPPEARS. *The CHORUS
enters from the temple by ones and twos.*)

CHORUS Up now! Wake her, just as I wake you!
Still sleeping? Come on, get up! Kick sleep away,
let's see if this dream is a truthful prelude.

IOU! IOU! POPAX

Strophe 1

Wronged, sorely wronged, my sisters,
Oh I have suffered so much, and for what?

Yes we have suffered

such searing pain, oh yes, a hurt
no one could bear,
the beast has slipped free of the net and vanished:
sleep took me, and the prey is lost.

O child of Zeus, you thief! So young

Antistrophe 1

yet you have trampled down the gray gods
by guarding the suppliant,
the goddess, the mother-hating man.

A god yourself,

you've spirited away the mother-killer.
Could anyone call these actions just?

Blame came to me in my dream—over
and over

Strophe 2

it struck me like a charioteer,
with the goad gripped
tight in his fist; in the heart, in the guts,
it struck, and I feel
the cold sting of the scourger's cruel
quick public lash.

This is what all of you do, you younger
gods,

Antistrophe 2

your power knows no bounds, respects none.
Gore oozes over

Apollo's throne, from the top, to the bottom,
it drips, and I see
the earth's stone navel smeared with filth
from bloody deeds.

A prophet himself, he's dirtied his own
shrine,

Strophe 3

defiled his hearth
at no one's bidding but his own,
invited blight

by placing men above the god-
set limits, breaking
the age-old power of the fates.

Although he hurts me too, he still won't
save

Antistrophe 3

Orestes, never;
for even hid beneath the earth,
this suppliant

will not escape, but come stained,
cursed, to where

a new avenger will rise against him.

APOLLO enters from the temple.

APOLLO Get out of this house, right now, I order you!

200

Away from my temple's deep prophetic chamber
or you'll be bitten by a flying snake
shot from my bowstring's beaten gold, and retch
in agony, coughing up all the black
scum sucked from men, the clotted gore you guzzled.

You have no rights here, no business in this house,
your jurisdiction is where heads are lopped off
in retribution, eyes gouged out, throats slashed;
where the manhood of mere boys is cut away,
their seed squandered, and men—their hands, their
feet,

210

their ears and nose—are maimed, and they are stoned
to death, and where they feel the sharp stake driven
into their backs and groan out loud and long.

Don't you hear then what sort of feasts you crave that make the gods despise you? Your very shape and dress explain it. Creatures like you belong in caves with blood-befouled, blood-lapping lions; you have no business in this prophetic place, rubbing your stinking dirt off on those near you. Get out of here, you herd without a herdsman! No god would ever tend a flock like this.

220

CHORUS LEADER It's your turn now to listen, lord Apollo. You are no mere accessory to this crime; From start to finish, the blame is yours alone.

APOLLO How so? Say just enough to make it clear.

CHORUS LEADER You told your guest-friend he should kill his mother.

APOLLO I told him to avenge his father. What else?

CHORUS LEADER You took him in, blood still wet on his hands.

APOLLO I told him to come for cleansing to this shrine.

CHORUS LEADER And you malign us for serving as his escort?

230

APOLLO You aren't fit creatures to come near my house.

CHORUS LEADER But we as well have our appointed task . . .

APOLLO Appointed? You? Crow on about this noble job.

CHORUS LEADER We hound all mother-killers from their houses.

APOLLO And what about a wife who kills her husband?

CHORUS LEADER That isn't killing one's own flesh and blood.

APOLLO Why, then, you spit on, treat as less than nothing, the solemn vows of Hera, the fulfiller, and of Zeus; and Aphrodite, too, is thrown

away like something worthless by your words, yes, Aphrodite who gives to humankind the deepest and most intimate bond of all. Marriage is a thing of destiny, greater than any oath, and Justice guards it. And so if you let spouses kill each other and overlook it, neither punishing them nor looking on them with a wrathful vigilance, then I maintain this hounding of Orestes isn't just. It's clear to me you're stirred to utter outrage by the one crime while the other doesn't move you in the least. But Pallas, goddess of wisdom that she is, will oversee the issue of this case.

240

250

CHORUS LEADER We'll never stop harassing him, not ever.

APOLLO Go on, then. Make more trouble for yourself.

CHORUS LEADER Don't try to steal our rights with clever words.

APOLLO If someone gave me your rights, I wouldn't take them.

CHORUS LEADER Why should you, high and mighty as you seem near Zeus's throne? But the scent of motherblood drives us, and we will hunt the man down, get our justice.

260

The CHORUS exits to the left.

APOLLO And I will help my suppliant and save him. A suppliant's wrath's a dreadful thing for gods and men alike. I never will betray him.

APOLLO exits into the temple. There is a brief pause. The scene is now set in Athens. ORESTES enters from the left.

ORESTES Queen Athena, I have come at Apollo's command. Receive me graciously, a cursed, a hounded man, but one no longer stained, my hands now clean, my guilt's keen edge now dulled,
worn down to nothing by the crowded paths I've traveled, by the homes I've sheltered in.
270 Holding a firm course over both sea and land, obedient to Apollo's orders, I've come at last, goddess, here to your house, your image, watching and waiting for justice to be fulfilled.

The CHORUS enters by ones and twos, miming hounds tracking a scent.

CHORUS LEADER So, finally, a clear sign of the man.
Here, this way, this is where the voiceless snitch is leading! Like a blood hound on the scent of a wounded fawn, we track him by this trail of blood drops. And he's panting out his guts from all the endless deadly labors, driven like a sheep over every stretch of land while we flew wingless, faster than any ship, across sea after sea, pursuing. I know he's cowering somewhere near here, for the scent of blood is like the warm smile of an old friend.

CHORUS Look! Look again!
Check everywhere —
don't let the mother-killer slip through our clutches and get away unpunished.

290 There he is, himself, there in the flesh!
and once again
protected, his arms around the image
of the immortal goddess,
eager to stand trial for his crime.
But that won't happen. Once a mother's blood
is spilled on the ground,

it can't return again, not ever.
POPOI! The red
stream pools there, seeps into earth, and then
it's gone for good.
You'll have to pay with your own blood for hers.
300 you'll feel me suck the half-
caked gore out of your living flesh;
swill from your very veins
the vile dregs of the drink I crave.
I'll shrivel you up and drag you, still alive,
into the underworld
where you will pay in currencies of torment
for the murder of your mother.
And there you'll see all other mortal sinners,
the ones who flout
the honor owed to gods or guests,
or loving parents —
you'll see them get the justice they deserve.
For Hades holds men mightily to a strict
accounting down below the earth;
he sees all things, inscribes them
within the book
of his remembering.

ORESTES I have been schooled by my own suffering:
I've learned the many ways of being purged.
320 I know where words are proper, and when silence is,
and that on this occasion a wise teacher
has ordered me to speak. For the blood drowns,
sloughs from my hand, the stain of having killed
my mother has been entirely washed away:
when it was still fresh at Apollo's hearth,
he cast it out by sacrificing swine.
My story would be a long one if I told it
right from the start, the many men I met
and mingled with, not one of whom was harmed.
340 Time cleanses what it touches over time.
So now with clean lips and well-omened words
I call Athena, this land's queen, to be

my savior. Not by force of spear or sword,
 she'll claim me, my land, and all the people of Argos,
 as her true allies till the end of time.
 Wherever she is—whether in distant Libya,
 there by the stream of Triton where she was born,
 enthroned or on the march to help her friends,
 or whether like a dauntless leader she over-
 sees the Phlegrean plain—O let her come
 (a god can hear even from far away),
 and save me from the troubles that hound me still.

340

CHORUS LEADER No, not Apollo's, not Athena's strength
 can save you, keep you from going down in disgrace,
 forgotten, no place in your heart for joy, all blood
 sucked from your body till it's nothing but
 death's vaporous feedback, shadowy husk of air.

So you have nothing to say? You just spit at my
 words—
 calf fattened all for me, my living feast,
 my calf not butchered first over any altar?
 Hear the spell we sing to bind you fast:

350

CHORUS Let's dance as well as sing around him,
 hand in hand,
 and let's reveal the terrifying
 power of our dark melody
 and tell the way our company
 fulfills the offices assigned
 to us, our given
 right to guide the lives of men.
 We keep straight on the path of justice,
 that's our belief:
 our wrath is never aimed at the one
 who holds up hands no blood has stained—
 for *that* one lives out his life unharmed.
 But the man, like this one here before us,
 who tries to keep
 his red hands hid, yet reeks of guilt,

360

160

will find us ever at his side,
 bearing witness
 truthfully for those who died,
 the court of last appeal, the final
 blood avengers.

Strophe 1

Mother, O mother Night,
 who bore me as a scourge
 to those under the sun,
 and those in sunlessness,
 hear me. Leto's child,
 Apollo, steals my honor,
 he's trying now to steal
 out of my rightful grasp
 this trembling hare whose blood
 alone is the atonement
 for the motherblood he spilled.

380

Refrain 1

Over our victim's head,
 this is the song we sing,
 this is the maddening song,
 the raging song of fear
 that twists the brain, that binds it,
 the lyre-shunning song
 of the Erinyes, draining,
 withering life away.

390

Antistrophe 1

When Fate, the all-directing,
 spun the unchangeable, ever-
 piercing thread of life,
 this was the task she gave
 us to be ours forever:
 those whom rage seizes, who
 willfully kill their own
 kin with their own hands, we
 will hound them, drive them down
 beneath the earth, and even
 in death they'll find scant freedom.

400

161

Over our victim's head,
 this is the song we sing,
 this is the maddening song,
 the raging song of fear
 that twists the brain, that binds it,
 the lyre-shunning song
 of the Erinyes, draining,
 withering life away.

410

Yes, at our birth, we were given this holy
 task.

Strophe 2

So the high gods steer clear of us, and we of them.
 None of them would feast with us at the same table;
 we have no part in festivals where white robes are
 worn.

The calling I've made my own
 is the destruction of houses
 when the spirit of Ares, reared,
 tamed, pampered in the home,
 cuts down a loved one. Then
 we hunt the doer down,
 strong though he is, we suck
 his blood away to nothing
 for all the blood he shed.

420

Refrain 2

We are all keen to spare others these troubling
 cares,
 keen, too, to keep the gods from meddling with our
 prayers.

But Zeus despises our band as being soaked in blood
 and calls us unworthy to be part of his high company.

The calling I've made my own
 is the destruction of houses
 when the spirit of Ares, reared,
 tamed, pampered in the home,
 cuts down a loved one. Then
 we hunt the doer down,
 strong though he is, we suck

430

Refrain 2

his blood away to nothing
 for all the blood he shed.

But the self-preening conceits of men, swelling
 so big *Strophe 3*
 under the sun, rot away into earth, all dishonored,
 driven
 down by the gale of our black robes rushing upon
 them,

440

by the quick kicks of our raging dance.

Refrain 3

For leaping from a great
 height I bring the full
 force of my foot down
 more heavily upon him;
 unseen, I thrust out my leg
 and even the swiftest runner
 stumbles and falls down
 to ruin beyond enduring.

But as he falls, his mind so crazed he doesn't know

450

Antistrophe 3

it—
 this the miasmal dark that hovers about the man,
 and rumor passes its groan from voice to voice to say
 that a dense fog has shrouded his house.

Refrain 3

For leaping from a great
 height I bring the full
 force of my foot down
 more heavily upon him;
 unseen, I thrust out my leg
 and even the swiftest runner
 stumbles and falls down
 to ruin beyond enduring.

460

This stands fixed. Adept at devising,
 unmatched alike in remembering wrong done
 as in repaying it;
 awful to men, deaf to their pleas,
 detested and dishonored we fulfill

Strophe 4

our given offic; cut off
from the gods, we in the dark slime make
the path rough both for those who live in sunlight
and for those in sunlessness.

470

Who among mortals is immune
to feeling awe and fear when I describe
the covenant that fate
assigned me, that the gods made final?
My privileges, ancient as they are,
remain still no less mine.
And I am no less honored for
the station that I hold beneath the ground
deep in the sunless slime.

Antistrophe 4

ATHENA *enters from the left, in full
armor and wearing her aegis.*

480

ATHENA From the Scamander far away I heard
your call for help, as I took possession there
of land that the Achaean chieftains gave me,
all completely and forever mine,
a rich allotment from the spoils of war,
and a precious gift for Theseus' sons.
From there I sped, my stride unwearied, wingless
but for the flap and billow of the folds
my aegis made.

But now I see a strange
and motley crew of visitors to this land.
Though I feel no fear, my eyes grow wide with
wonder.

490

Who are you? I mean all of you together—
you stranger with your arms around my image,
and you who look like nothing ever born—
not seen by gods among the goddesses,
or shaped in any human form. But, no,
it isn't just to speak ill of another
when he's done nothing wrong; Right won't abide it.

164

CHORUS LEADER Daughter of Zeus, you'll learn all, in a few words:
we are the children of the never-dying Night.
In our homes beneath the earth we're known as
"Curses."

500

ATHENA I now know your descent, and your true names.

CHORUS LEADER And soon you'll learn our privileges as well.

ATHENA I will, yes, if you tell them to me plainly.

CHORUS LEADER We hound from home the ones who kill their own.

ATHENA Do you chase the killer to some final place?

CHORUS LEADER A place where all joy is unknown to him.

ATHENA And this man here, you howl him on that far?

CHORUS LEADER Yes, since he thought it right to kill his mother.

ATHENA Was he made to do it, fearing some other anger?

CHORUS LEADER What spur's so sharp to make one kill his mother?

510

ATHENA The case has two sides; so far we've heard just one.

CHORUS LEADER He won't swear he's innocent, or yield if I swear to his
guilt.

ATHENA So you would rather seem just than act with justice?

CHORUS LEADER How so? Tell me. For you are rich in wisdom.

ATHENA Injustice shouldn't triumph on an oath.

CHORUS LEADER Then question him yourself. And judge him fairly.

165

EUMENIDES

me on with warnings of heart-piercing pain if I failed to get revenge on the murderers. But it's all up to you now to decide whether I've acted justly or not. However the case turns out, I will accept your ruling.

ATHENA This case is too hard for one man to judge. No, even I don't have the right to rule on a murder trial like this one, one that calls down such fierce anger either way, especially as you've come here to my house a proper suppliant who's clean, who bears no danger to us, and I welcome you. And yet these, too, have their appointed task that can't be shrugged off lightly. If they fail to get their way, the poison of their outrage, dripping on the land, will soon become a deadly everlasting sickness. But since the problem's up to me to solve, I'll choose a panel of judges to preside at murder trials like this, and put them under oath, and so set up a court to last forever.

Now call your witnesses, prepare your proofs, bring forth whatever evidence you have that best supports your case. Meanwhile, I'll pick my ablest citizens, and then return to deal with this matter fairly, once and for all.

ATHENA *exits to the right.* ORESTES *stands aside during the following song.*

Strophe 1

CHORUS Catastrophes will come, disasters of new laws, if the mother-killer's mayhem-making plea prevails. This deed, from this time on, will make men poised for any and all outrageousness. Truly, parents will await

580

167

EUMENIDES

ATHENA You'd take my verdict as the final one?

CHORUS LEADER Yes. We pay you the respect you pay to us.

ATHENA It's your turn, stranger. How will you answer them? Say first where you come from, who your family is. Explain your circumstances, and then refute these accusations. If you're sure you sit in justice near my hearth, clutching my image—as a holy suppliant, like Ixion before you, then answer clearly, so I understand.

ORESTES Queen Athena, let me speak first to the keen anxiety your last words hold. I'm not a suppliant in need of cleansing. When I took my seat here at your image, my hands weren't stained with blood. And I can prove my claim with powerful evidence: by law, a killer is forbidden to speak a word till someone with the power to purify has washed away his blood-guilt with the blood of a young beast. I have been long since purged at other houses, both in the blood of sucklings slain to cleanse me, and in clear-running streams. My hands are clean. Put your mind at ease.

Now I can tell you straight out where I come from, who my family is: I am from Argos, and my father, Agamemnon, you know well as warlord of the fleet who helped you turn the city of Troy into no city at all.

When he came home, he died an ugly death: my black-hearted mother cut him down, wrapped him in her subtle net, a net that bore witness to the blood bath of his murder. So I returned, after my years of exile, and killed the very woman who gave me life—I don't deny it—killed her for killing him, the father I loved—although Apollo, too, had an equal hand in this, for he had goaded

520

530

540

550

166