Agamemnon

Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is the only surviving Greek trilogy we have. Aeschylus apparently preferred to compose his tragedies in trilogies, where Sophocles and Euripides did not do so. These plays were performed in 458 BC, only two years before Aeschylus’ death, and were perhaps the last trilogy of Aeschylus the Athenian audience saw while Aeschylus was alive. He died while traveling in Sicily – the folk tradition has him killed when an eagle drops a turtle on his bald head, mistaking it for a rock on which to break open the turtle’s shell, so the eagle can get at the gooey goodness within. This story is likely untrue, but is too good to pass unnoticed.

Robert F. Kennedy, when he was running for President in 1968, referred to Aeschylus as his favorite Greek author, and attributed to him the following statement: “the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” I don’t know where such a statement is directly made in Aeschylus, but the spirit of that statement is present in the *Oresteia* – in a play covering a couple of generations, but covering a story going back several generations, we see Zeus and Apollo, who are the gods of justice, moving rather slowly from the uncertain justice of blood vengeance (you killed my pa, I’m gonna kill your pa) to a sense of justice as the duty of the state. This was not a quick decision anywhere, but a gradual change over time. In this trilogy we are invited to look at the workings of the universe at particular moments in time where that breakthrough to civic justice seems not even on the horizon, until, one day, it’s there.

Some scholars think that it was for this trilogy that the permanent scene building (a permanent structure on stage) was created and used. For us, this seems like no big thing, but consider the effect on an Athenian audience, coming into the Theater of Dionysus and seeing a brand-new and permanent scene building – here acting as the palace of Agamemnon for the first two plays. Not only that, but you have an actor, playing the part of a palace guard, atop the building and speaking his lines. A guy who was perhaps not noticed, suddenly stands up, and begins the play with his lament on how rotten things are in Argos – all eyes on the building, and on this guy – I think this alone would have likely got Aeschylus first prize in 458. As you read the lines, notice how often the “House of Atreus” is referred to – of course, this means the line of Atreus (Agamemnon’s dad) – and how often characters point to or comment on the house or palace. Woo hoo! State of the art stagecraft in 458 BC!

1: God: in this play, though there are the gods, Zeus is “God” and is something approaching the monotheistic concept of deity. Zeus is the god of justice.
2: **long year's vigil**: Clytemnestra has posted a guard and set up an early-warning system to let her know when Agamemnon has taken Troy, so she and Aegisthus can be ready for him. The watchman is to look for a beacon on a hill several miles to the east.

10: **News of the fall of Troy**: the beacons work as follows. Troy falls, and some point in the Greek islands, near enough to see Troy in flames, lights a beacon atop the highest hill on the island, and so forth from island to island, until it gets to the Greek mainland, and there, from peak to peak, to Argos in southern Greece.

11: **whose purpose is a man's**: Clytemnestra, though a woman, plans and feels like a man, which makes her dangerous.

14: **fear stands at my pillow**: he is on guard duty – he may sit, huddled, or even lie down, but he dare not fall asleep. You don’t want Clytemnestra to be angry at you. It is also possible that the watchman hints at some other fears – no one is sure Clytemnestra will act against the king, but there are some lingering doubts and fears.

16ff.: **And whenever I start to sing or hum a tune….royal house**: he tries humming or singing a song, but whatever he starts soon becomes a blues tune for the house. This statement sets the tone for the first play – there’ll be a lot of foreshadowing and foreboding. Think of the first scene in *Hamlet*, which leads a character to note, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark…”

Before 21: **The beacon flashes**: I’m not sure how this would be done in an open theater. In a production done here on the banks of the Brush Creek, the show began just before the sun rose, so that, with careful timing, the watchman (in that production, it was me) could look to the East and have the light beam on his face – it was very effective.

30f.: **My master’s dice…three sixes**: Dice were common in ancient Greece as were knucklebones – there is a Greek vase that has Achilles and Ajax throwing dice – Ajax calls out “four” on the vase. Three sixes was called “Aphrodite” or “Venus” for the Romans – it was the best throw you could get.

34ff. **The rest is secret. A heavy ox…**: the watchman’s metaphor – an ox sits on his tongue, so he cannot wag it. This also hints to some danger, as there are secrets that he will not tell to anyone, not a sign of a healthy house.

Chorus: the chorus are made up of old men. All Greek tragedies that survive had a chorus, which would have consisted of 12-18 members. The chorus often chanted and danced as a unit, though sometimes they broke up into smaller groups and even individual speakers. In dialog, the chorus leader generally spoke for the chorus. It is thought that Aeschylus was probably the chorus leader here – it would also have been the tragedian’s job to train the chorus.

When they enter, they know that something is going on, but do not know that Troy has fallen. They give us some back story, but begin with a metaphor.

38??ff: **It is ten years**: in this opening paragraph, the chorus refer to Agamemnon and Menelaus as twin prosecutors of Justice – they are the
enforcers sent by Zeus to punish Paris, who violated the guest’s role by absconding with the host’s stuff (in this case the host’s wife, Helen). As such, they are associated with Zeus by being compared to twin eagles who are going after some creature who took an eaglet. Apollo and Zeus are cited as sending after the robber (Paris) “a Fury.” Furies are those figures who avenge blood guilt. In a sense a fury is not appropriate here – there was no blood guilt, but there is a Fury behind the House of Atreus because of all the crimes in that family’s history.

39: **the end is unalterable:** one cannot make up for a crime such as Paris committed – there has to be a reckoning. Paris may not pay for years, but he will pay, just as Clytemnestra and Aegisthus will pay for what they do in this play.

42??: **like dreams in the daylight:** this metaphor might also be used of the dead – the old men in the chorus cannot do what they could as young men, and so they are compared to cicadas, uttering empty sound, or here to daydreams – no real effect on the world around them. The chorus was often old men or a group of women – their situation made them perfect observers, but inadequate agents. As they’ve been around, they know a lot, but they cannot effect any action. They are running around after Clytemnestra trying to get her to tell what is going on.

There would have been a small little shrine in the orchestra (the chorus’ dancing area in front of the stage) and a little fire has been lit on that shrine.

I. 45ff.: the chorus tells of the marshalling of forces, with the Atreidai at the head. And they see two eagles, one light, one dark, attack and kill a pregnant hare. This image is a striking one and a puzzling one. It was common for Greeks and Romans to look to the world of nature for omens, signs of the gods’ pleasure or displeasure. When these two eagles attack the hare, the eagles are associated with the kings, who are agents of Zeus – the eagle is his bird, and their bird. This attack, though, offends Artemis, who defends wild animals, especially the harmless. And so, she demands a sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter, Iphigenia, in recompense for the death of the hare. The eagles may represent the two kings, but the kings did not kill the mama hare and her babies, so it seems unfair to punish the kings for what the eagles did – but that doesn’t matter to the gods.

49: **Ailinon cry, but let good conquer:** this will be repeated – aillinon could be translated “alas” or “woe.”

I. 50ff.: The priest here is the prophet Calchas, the chief prophet for the Greeks. He interprets the eagles attacking and killing the hare (with its nine babies) as a sign that the Greeks will take Troy (an enclosure) in 10 years (mama + 9 babies). Artemis “loathes the rapacious/Beagles of Zeus” – Artemis is angry at the eagles, and their human counterparts. Here they are called the “rapacious Beagles of Zeus” as if they were hunting dogs.

I. 58ff.: here the priest is praying to Artemis and Apollo to avert their anger. He seems to suggest that it is Apollo who may keep the fleet from sailing,
whereas the usual explanation is that Artemis keeps that from happening. Both Apollo and Artemis are ardent supporters of Troy.

66: a child’s death: the child referred to here is the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon to get good winds for Troy – Clytemnestra could never forgive her husband for this, and in this play that killing is seen as Agamemnon’s part in the bloodletting in the family’s long history of blood.

68ff: Zeus, whoe’er he be...: this is a common trope, but best stated here – whatever name you want to give to Zeus, we are praying to the god commonly called Zeus, but are willing to call him another name if he wish it. The names of the gods are conventional – Xenophanes would agree with this. He used Zeus to refer to the “one God,” while he criticized Homer and Hesiod for their portrayal of the gods. Zeus can make a man’s life easier, if he so choose. He did not so choose in Agamemnon’s case.

83ff: that man/Must in sorrow learn and through/Pain to wisdom find his way: this, in a nutshell is the cardinal truth of Greek tragedy. Humans learn wisdom, through suffering. The truth here is that the movement of the universe is something beyond human control, and so Agamemnon, though a king, is just a pawn in the greater sense.

92: rather than distrust a priest: Agamemnon is not happy to hear the news, that he must sacrifice Iphigenia, but he accepts that verdict and carries it out. Before we get judgmental – he should have given up the expedition to Troy and saved his daughter – he is not acting alone. He is the agent of justice and representative of Zeus, who wants Troy to pay for its crime. He cannot just walk away. He is stuck!

113: I have no choice but wrong: If Agamemnon abandons the expedition, he is failing the Greeks and Zeus; if he kills his daughter, well, there is no way sacrificing his daughter can be good or easy.

116f. bowed down beneath the harness/Of cruel coercion: metaphor is that of an ox yoked to a plow – he is not a free agent. There will be other metaphors of confinement throughout this play – watch for them.

125ff. She cried aloud ‘Father!’: the description of the sacrifice – no details given – is very sad and piteous. She is Agamemnon’s first child, so the first to call him Father, and yet he must kill her. In killing her, instead of marrying her to a young man, Agamemnon is not doing what is natural. This scene is compared to a picture – she is silent and gagged so she cannot speak, looking piteously up at the Greek leaders – my guess is there was a famous painting, a wall painting, that depicted this scene in Athens, and it is to this that Aeschylus is referring. Ancient painting largely has not survived, except in Pompeii or Herculaneum, where there is such a painting.

144: For Justice first chastens, then she presses home her lesson: another apothegm – here the chorus note that it’s a double whammy – Justice gets your attention and then wham. They are afraid the wham hasn’t hit yet.
150ff.: Our humble salutations to the queen: the chorus is very diplomatic towards the queen. They don’t seem to know, or want to admit her hatred for Agamemnon. She is playing the dutiful spouse.

163: You have given ear to some beguiling dream: the chorus doesn’t understand how Clytemnestra could know about Troy hundreds of miles away – they don’t know about her early warning system. Clytemnestra is taken aback that they think she is some superstitious figure who believes in dreams.

165: Rumors have wings: the chorus now assumes that she’s heard a rumor, without any evidence. She is taken aback that they think her green like a girl, easily taken in.

169: What messenger could bring the news so fast?: If it just happened last night, how could we get news this fast? This is a legitimate query. Under normal circumstances, no message could get from Troy to Greece in less than several days.

170ff.: Clytemnestra details the relay and how it worked. At each point, eyes were focused on some other point closer to Troy, and each in turn would light their beacons, to be seen by the next, and so on. Such a system could possibly work, and would take little more than an hour to travel that great distance.

175ff: Up, up it soared, luring the dancing fish: it was such an unusual sight that the flying fish, dart from the water to get a better look at it. It’s a nice visual image.

209ff. provided that they show due respect ... are not/Tempted to lay coarse hands on sanctities: Clytemnestra’s point is well taken, though it is unclear whether she is hoping for that which she says hasn’t happened. The chief instance of impiety on the Greek side is that of Ajax, son of Oileus, who raped Cassandra in the Temple of Athena. He and his fleet were lost on the return voyage home. Agamemnon will trample upon some precious carpets later in the play which suggests this lack of care when it comes to holy and precious things.

214: Guiltless before God: in Clytemnestra’s view, Agamemnon is not guiltless, having killed their daughter Iphigenia.

217: May all end well, and may I reap the fruit of it: This is dramatic irony – Clytemnestra is speaking of her own plans – to kill Agamemnon and take the throne, though it sounds to the chorus that she is praying for the safe return of Agamemnon.

222: a net so fine: the metaphor of the net is used a lot in this play, and the metaphor will be realized (made real) when Agamemnon is caught in a real net and killed in the bath later in the play.

223: shaft from his outstretched bow: the bow is not generally associated with Zeus, but with Apollo.

225f.: heaven pays heed to those who trample...: this is echoed in Agamemnon’s trampling the fine carpet set before him later in the play.
228f. **all sinners filled/With pride**: pride in tragedy is called *hubris*, and it is the most common tragic flaw. Some of that comes from a foolish belief that having attained greatness, a mortal can hold on to it. The key element in tragedies is the idea of a sudden reversal in fortune, which the characters often cannot see coming – Agamemnon certainly suffers a fate other than the one he envisioned.

232f. **the sinner kicks/Justice out of his sight**: again the foolish idea that you can pull something over on Justice or the gods – you will be found out.

235ff. **sweet temptation … into the death trap**: again the idea of a trap one cannot escape, but here the sense that one can be seduced into such a trap.

245f. **Paris**: Paris is seen by the chorus as someone who thought he was getting away with something, but could not. His sin was taking Helen from his host, Menelaus. The violation of the guest-host relation is seen as very serious and the basis for the whole war – Agamemnon went to war to avenge this. Of course, the house of Atreus itself is full of people violating the guest-host relationship.

249: **She took to Troy in lieu of dowry death**: Helen went with Paris as if a bride, but did not bring a dowry. Instead she brought death for all Troy.

258: **Here a ghost seems to rule the palace**: the chorus suggests that Helen’s absence left a haunted sense to the palace in Sparta. Of course, there are ghosts aplenty in the House of Atreus’ history.

269f. **in each house … that sent its dearest**: though the crime was against Menelaus, all of Greece sent people to war, and so all of Greece has paid for the war with life.

278ff.: the image of Ares with a scale in which the living person is put, and on the other part of the scale is the funeral urn with their ashes – this is the exchange – you sent a living loved one, but only get the remains.

286: **All to avenge another man’s wife**: there is a hint here of a great deal of bitterness against Helen, but also against Menelaus and Agamemnon.

298ff. The chorus here suggests that if a person is lucky, they get overconfident and think the luck will last, but, as Justice is not behind it, that luck will someday be overturned.

308ff. **Can it be true…**: Here the chorus breaks into two or more groups and each group gets some of these lines. They are now suggesting that all the talk of Clytemnestra was just that – how could she know about Troy’s fall? After all, she’s just a woman.

325 **(Enter HERALD)**: this is a herald sent ahead by Agamemnon so that everything will be ready for his arrival. That a herald could come so quickly (within a few hours of the torch signal) is something we’re not supposed to think too much about. Greek tragedies generally take place in one day’s time, even if that time frame is impossible.

331: **Pythian king**: this is Apollo, who was on the Trojan side in the war, and whose attack on the Greeks comes in *Iliad* I.
334: **Savior Apollo**: Apollo is the god of plague, but also the god of healing, and the herald hopes for real healing to begin now that they’re home.

335: **Hermes, too**: of course, the herald prays to Hermes, who is his patron god.

336: **and the spirits of our dead**: the ghosts of the dead were seen as serving as a protection to their land, but the dead associated with the House of Atreus are unquiet dead.

344: **mattock of just-dealing Zeus**: a mattock is a tool for digging stuff up or uprooting stumps – it’s something like a pick-axe.

356: **We have had many anxieties here at home**: The chorus does not want to speak their misgivings – they are speaking of trouble with Clytemnestra and her boy-friend. The herald doesn’t understand, but they do not enlighten him.

359ff. The herald’s speech is a variation of the War is Hell speech, but now that he is home he wants to leave war and all its pains back on the battlefield.

388: **And people mocked me**: Clytemnestra is likely giving the chorus leader the evil eye as she sarcastically utters these lines.

398ff.: **What day is so sweet**: Clytemnestra plays the loving wife here – what is better for the wife than that her husband come home. As she plans to kill him, her joy at his return is not that of a loving wife, but of someone who knows she has trapped her enemy.

401: **A wife as loyal as he left her**: well, this isn’t saying much as she had already given up her love for Agamemnon. This line is meant ironically, but the chorus must pick up on it.

405f. **Such a protestation …Is it not unseemly**: the herald, though he doesn’t doubt Clytemnestra’s virtue, finds her bragging about it unseemly. Also, there is something of the feeling one gets when one protests one’s goodness – it rings hollow.

410: **Menelaus**: the chorus hopes that the herald has news of Menelaus. The only news he has is that they saw Menelaus’ ship caught up in a storm and they have no knowledge of his survival. Menelaus is still lost at sea or in Egypt at this point. It will take him 7 years to get home.

426: **Sing anthems to the Furies down in hell**: the Furies are the spirits that avenge blood guilt. Here the herald suggests that any messenger who would mix his good message with bad news might as well be invoking the Furies. Though he does not mean the actual Furies, those Furies are behind all the blood guilt in the House of Atreus, and will make an appearance in the *Eumenides*.

438f.: **we saw the Aegean in blossom/With a waving crop of corpses and scattered timbers**: after the storm, the sea looked like a field, but with bodies and flotsam instead of wheat. Menelaus and his people were not part of that storm, but that storm did drive Menelaus’ ship off. The herald claims that only the Sun, who sees all, might know where Menelaus is.

457: **Helen – hell indeed**: this is a pun in the Greek as well. The chorus’ point is that Helen was well named, as she brought destruction to so many.
466ff.: **Furies, instruments of God's/Wrath** …: the chorus’ point is that Helen and the Furies were the means the gods used to bring Troy to its knees for the crime of violating guest-host relations.

476ff.: The analogy of the lion cub – the chorus tells of the story of a man who found a lion cub and raised him as a pet; once full grown, the lion reverted to his nature and killed the man’s family. This story brings to mind Helen, whom the Trojans took into their city, though she meant destruction, which they couldn’t see.

484ff.: **She is seen now as an agent of death… a Fury**: Helen is now seen as the force of destruction that enforces justice against the Trojans. This line is uttered just before Clytemnestra returns to the stage – she sees herself as an agent of Justice as well, and she does continue the blood guilt of Atreus’ house by her part in the killing of Agamemnon. In that sense, she is a Fury. And in the *Eumenides*, the Furies are Clytemnestra’s agents.

489: **tares and tears**: “tares” is some sort of weed – when one gets too wealthy or fortunate, it is time for Nemesis to reset the balance, so that instead of a garden, you have nothing but weeds. The translator used this word for its biblical connotations, and because it serves as a near-rhyme with “tears.”

499: **But where is Justice**: at this point, the chorus can easily ask this – justice seems far away, the world is topsy-turvy. Justice won’t really come until the third play in the trilogy. “The Arc of the Universe is long, but it bends towards Justice.” The chorus, though they are doubtful, utter some nostrums about how Justice appears everywhere from hut to palace.

502ff.: The chorus greets Agamemnon who comes in a chariot. How this was staged is unclear – a horse would not be able to appear on the stage. It is usually assumed that he appears in the orchestra (the dancing pit before the stage, where the chorus is – a small chariot could enter there. This would make his advance to the palace on the red carpet even longer and more ominous. The chorus now tells Agamemnon that they thought he was crazy to go to war over Helen, but now that he’s returned, they are happy for his victory.

505ff.: Agamemnon’s speech – Agamemnon comes across as something of a blowhard politician – he makes a big speech about showing deference to the gods and thanking them for victory in a contest where they were the agents of the gods.

509ff.: **When the supreme court of heaven**: as the final play has a trial scene with a jury, this image is telling. The gods held court and unanimously found Troy guilty. This is not really the case, as some gods – Aphrodite, Ares and Apollo, chiefly, are on the Trojan side, and so would not find them guilty, even if they didn’t fight the judgment of Zeus and others.

522f.: **like a hungry lion**: Agamemnon compares the Greeks coming out of the Trojan Horse as a hungry lion.

527: **many dissemblers**: Agamemnon’s point is that he’s known people who pretend to be his friend, but are not. As this follows the chorus’ gushing over
his return, one might be inclined to think he was taking a jab at them. But their own honest statement that they thought he was crazy seems to be taken by Agamemnon as a sign they are honest and not flatterers. He cites Odysseus as the only guy he could really trust at Troy – I guess Odysseus never tried to appeal to his ego.

541f.: I shall declare without shame ... My feelings for my husband: of course, she’s lying, and I think the chorus knows she is lying. The chorus seems to believe that, now that Agamemnon is home, he’ll be able to set things right.

546: Waiting for news...: Clytemnestra describes her situation as a wife waiting for news – she hears several stories about Agamemnon’s death, only to recover from that news to get another news flash that he’s been killed. One can imagine that she was quite happy to hear such news, though she doesn’t say it here, and that she may very well have been imagining such bloody ends for her husband.

551: Geryon: Geryon is a monster (a giant) who has three heads, or as Aeschylus suggests, three bodies. Hercules steals his cattle as his 10th labor.

557ff. Orestes... lives ...with an old friend, Strophius: Strophius is the King of Phocis, and Orestes seems to have been sent away by Clytemnestra for his safe-keeping. Aegisthus would want him killed as well. He must be a pre-teen or so at this point. He will return from Phocis and avenge his father in the Choephoroi ("Liberation Bearers"). She does say that the people are restive, which is news – it is not elsewhere noted. It is likely that the Mycenaean lands did fall apart after the upheaval of the long Trojan War. It may be why that war played such a large part in the Greek psyche.

562f. the fountains of my tears: I guess to explain why she’s not weeping for joy now. There seems to be no love lost between the power couple, but she is trying to appear the doting wife.

566: a gnat’s faint whine: she’s so nervous and so light a sleeper that a gnat wakes her.

575ff.: Spread out beneath those feet that have trampled Troy/A road of royal purple: Clytemnestra calls for the servants to spread out a great red carpet for Agamemnon to walk on. As this is a costly carpet such as one would offer to the gods in a temple, it is presumptuous for a mortal to walk on it and ruin it. Of course, it represents in a vivid sense the blood Agamemnon has spilled at Troy, but also the bloody history of Agamemnon’s house. Of course, it looks like Agamemnon is walking along a bloody river into the house from which the blood comes. Keep in mind this would have been state of the art stagecraft in Aeschylus’ day. I can well imagine that people swooned when Agamemnon walked on the red carpet.

578f.: our vigilant care/Shall dispose of everything as the Gods have ordained: ironic statement on Clytemnestra’s part – what she’s saying to those who understand (the audience) is “I love it when a plan comes together.”

580ff. Agamemnon’s speech sounds like a political speech to me – he wants to walk on that carpet and strut his stuff, but here he suggests that such pride
and extravagance fit an Eastern monarch (like Priam), but not a good and moderate ruler like himself.

602: **Well may the victor yield a victory:** I think if I were staging this, I’d have Clytemnestra utter this line as a young woman trying to win a favor from her boyfriend – she’s trying to seduce him into the house here. Her argument seems to be that “I went to all this trouble for you, boopsie – won’t you do this for little old me?”

604ff. Agamemnon yields, and makes it sound like he’s only doing this, against his better judgment, because of his wife. Again – I think he really wants to walk on this carpet, but this gives him an out.

617f.: **unfailing streams of purple and blood-red dyes./So too this house...:** purple and red dyes came from shell-fish, and there’s plenty of such dye available (though there never was a lot – it’s why such colors were reserved for royalty – only they could afford it). But in noting that the color is blood red, and that the house has plenty more (money she seems to be saying, but blood could be inferred by the way the statement is framed).

630f.: **Zeus, perfecter of all things, fulfil my prayers/And fulfil also your own purposes!**: Clytemnestra wants her scheme to succeed, and Zeus does let her have her way, but only so that ultimately there will be a court trial which will change the means of justice from blood feuds to civic trials.

632f. **What is this delicious dread...:** the chorus suspects something is wrong, but they don’t know what. The chorus is a bunch of old guys, but they seem especially dense.

663ff. The chorus in this section makes reference to the rain that enriches the land, but also to blood spilled from a man which results in his death, something that cannot be undone since Asclepius, son of Apollo, once brought a man back to life – after that, such healing art was forbidden. This connection of rain to blood spattered will be picked up by Clytemnestra later.

676ff. Clytemnestra comes out to bring Cassandra into the house. Her argument at first is that this is an old house and so she’ll be well treated as a slave, unlike those slaves in the homes of the nouveau riche.

680f. **Even Heracles/Submitted once to slavery...:** Hercules was slave to a queen named Omphale for one year. During this time, he had to dress in women’s clothes, and other non-heroic things. Clytemnestra could also have mentioned Apollo who served Admetus for one year as a slave.

686: **Caught in the net:** again that imagery – here uttered unwittingly by the chorus.

690ff. **The victims are/All ready for the knife to render thanks/For this unhoped-for joy:** Clytemnestra here is being ironic – the chorus does not pick up on it.

699: **Oh! Oh! Apollo:** To us this doesn’t seem like a big thing, but Greek theatre conventions allowed for 3 actors who divided up all the speaking roles. There could be as many non-speaking roles as you like. In a production of this play, Cassandra has been on stage, but not speaking for a good 15 min. or more
(this scene is trimmed somewhat here) before she speaks. When she does, she cries out. For a Greek audience, it was expected that she was a non-speaking role – she’s not going to talk, but will eventually go into the house, but then, suddenly, she cries out. I’d be willing to bet that the original audience probably fell out of their seats when she shouted – think of the same sort of shock in a horror film when people are going quietly through a house; suddenly, there is a loud noise that startles the characters and the audience – I think that’s what you have here. It would have been a show-stopper moment. Cassandra is a daughter of Priam and Hecuba, and so sister to Paris and Hector. She was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, and then she rejected him. He twisted the gift so that no one would believe her. In this play, she manages to prove her ability by talking about the history of the House of Atreus (something she would not know as an outsider), and she gets the chorus to say that they believe her. Then she tells them that Clytemnestra is going to kill her husband, and they immediately revert to disbelief.

711: A charnel house that drips with children’s blood: here she refers to the killing of Thyestes’ sons by Atreus, who served the boys up to their dad in a stew. She is reacting to the house – again here we likely have a brand new permanent stage building, and our attention is again focused on the house.

718: The hoped-for savior is far away: she is referring to Orestes, who will avenge this crime, but can do nothing to prevent it.

722: She speaks in riddles, and I cannot read them: already, the chorus is puzzled, though she has proven her qualifications (this is more apparent in the full play).

723: A net! Cassandra knows who Agamemnon will be killed – stabbed in his bath, with a net thrown over him, as if he were a fish.

730: let the bull beware: Cassandra speaks in veiled language, which the Greeks would understand as typical of Apollo’s prophecies – the oracle at Delphi often gave unclear or cloudy answers to questions.

739: Where have you brought me?: Cassandra is addressing Apollo. Though she spurned him, she is still his prophet, and so she speaks to him. For dramatic reasons she asks this, but as a prophet who knows the future, she has to have known all about this eventuality.

742: Itys, Itys! She cries, the sad nightingale: Procne was a queen whose husband, Tereus, raped her sister and cut out her tongue so she couldn’t tell the story, but she wove a tapestry with the story depicted. In revenge, Procne killed her son by Tereus and served him up to Tereus. Later, Procne was changed to a nightingale, who sings a sad song (of remorse) and Philomela was changed into a swallow.

743: It is not so: as Procne became a bird, she forgot what she had done as a human, and so was spared the awful knowledge of her life. Cassandra’s situation is quite different – she knows exactly what will happen to her and cannot escape.
749ff: O wedding day…: Wedding days are supposed to be happy, but Paris’ wedding to Helen brought the destruction of Troy. Then she recalls the Scamander river, the river near Troy, but laments that it is the Acheron river she’ll be visiting, in the Underworld.

768ff. Upon this roof … stands a choir … a gallery…: Again, calling attention to the building. The choir and gallery she refers to are all the victims in the history of this family – Tantalus chopping up his son Pelops, and Atreus chopping up his nephews, and Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia.

789: Your prophecies seem credible enough to us: and yet, they don’t believe her a few lines later. It is possible that the audience, shocked by the new building, shocked by Cassandra’s outburst, might be lulled here into believing that somehow, she’ll escape her fate.

821f. Cassandra points out that she’s speaking Greek, but the chorus gets a zinger in – Apollo’s prophet also speaks Greek, but it is often puzzling.

827ff.: Why were these mockeries…: Cassandra is wearing the fillets (a headband) which marks her as a prophet. Here she tears them off and casts them away – what good did her prophecy do her? Where is Apollo now?

836f. Now far away,/The exile shall return…: she predicts Orestes’ eventual return and revenge. Perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that the murderers will get theirs.

841: I name this door the gate of Hades: again focus on the building! Also remember that the red carpet is likely still down, as well, which suggests some hellacious river.

850: while there is life there’s hope: just what you want to hear as you’re facing death, some bromide – this is typical of the chorus, and especially this chorus of old dotards.

858: It is only the blood of their fireside sacrifice: The chorus just doesn’t get it, and the last chance for Cassandra is now past.

872ff. The chorus here utters a variation on the theme of the reversal – if Agamemnon, great warrior chief, who just now appeared as a god, can be brought down because of his past, who can escape?

879ff. The chorus here splits up, running about with each member uttering one of the lines. Some want action, but others suggest that they don’t know what those noises were and must investigate. A word on this convention here. The chorus cannot take action – they are observers. They are on the orchestra (the “dancing plane”) which is in front of the stage and below it. Hearing the noises, they should do something, but they can’t, so Aeschylus makes them dither and argue until Clytemnestra makes her dramatic entry.

S.D. The doors are thrown open and Clytemnestra is revealed with the bodies. Actually the way this would be done is the doors would swing open, and a platform on wheels called the ekkyklema would be wheeled out to reveal an interior scene. If this was the first use of the permanent stage building, it would likely be the first use of the ekkyklema – again, the audience would go wild!
In these deathly dew-drops…: the imagery Clytemnestra uses is that of life-giving rain moistening the ground and helping things grow. Here it is Agamemnon’s blood which spatters her compared to the life-giving rain. The implication is that she is Gaia, or some other earth goddess figure, fertilized by this bloody deed. In this scene, she makes Lady MacBeth seem like a weak sister.

You treat me like an empty-headed woman: ideally, for the Athenians, women were all empty-headed. But Clytemnestra throughout is compared to men, and here, she distinguishes herself from other women.

Which acted justly: though she killed Agamemnon in part because of Aegisthus, whom she seems to love, she also claims that she was serving as Iphigenia’s fury, getting revenge for her slain daughter against the father that killed her.

Clytemnestra responds to the chorus’ cry that she has to pay for her crimes that they never spoke up when Agamemnon did the unspeakable. She concludes by suggesting that the chorus will learn to change its tune, but only through suffering. This is a common motif in tragedy—the gods teach humans through suffering. Here, Clytemnestra is using this trope to hint at coercive measures which will teach the chorus a lesson or two.

By Justice… By the Fury: by the final play, justice will be distinguished from the Furies that are associated with blood guilt. Under the system of blood guilt, Clytemnestra has a just claim to killing Agamemnon, who killed her daughter (his daughter too). The rest of this trilogy will suggest she was not motivated by Justice, but that the whole case was a means to bringing murder from vengeance to justice in court trials.

For woman’s sake/Long he fought overseas: The chorus uses the argument that Agamemnon was fighting on behalf of Clytemnestra and the home front—I’m not sure that argument can easily be made—he was fighting for loot, and perhaps to avenge Menelaus, but not really for anyone on the home front.

Now you speak truth, naming the thrice-fed demon: here Clytemnestra acknowledges the words of the chorus which back up her claim that she is an avenging Fury in this bloody house.

Nothing is here but was decreed in heaven: the chorus reiterates the idea that this is all part of some divine plan.

It was not my doing: here Clytemnestra says this was not personal—she was merely carrying out the directive from the Furies on behalf of Thyestes.

No I’ll bury him…By the waters of Acheron Iphigenia… He will be buried, and not left to rot, but she seems to want to do this so that his ghost can explain the whole sacrifice thing to Iphigenia.

I would be content that the spirit of vengeance would rest: Clytemnestra hopes this will be the end of it. This may be self-preservation talking, or a real desire for the whole cycle to end here.
992-end. Aegisthus enters claiming that justice is on his side, as the son of the man who killed his brothers and served them to his father as stew is dead. The chorus make fun of him calling him a “girlie – man” Aegisthus claims that he was just being smart, but we are encouraged to see him as a weakling, driven to do this by Clytemnestra. It is Clytemnestra who ends the play with lines that pretty much mean – ignore them, for we hold the power now. At the end of the play, the bad guys have apparently won.

Play # 2: Choephori (Libation Bearers). This play tells the story of Orestes’ return to Argos after years in Phocis (in Central Greece), where he had been sent by Clytemnestra. This play takes place sometime between 7 and 10 years after the Agamemnon. The title of the play comes from the chorus, a group of Trojan women slaves who accompany Electra as she brings libations to the grave of Agamemnon. The chorus here are slave women, where the chorus in the first play were Argive elders. As Trojan slaves, they have every reason to hate Agamemnon, but perhaps even more reason to hate Clytemnestra. They are sympathetic to Electra and her plight. This part of the story is unusual in that it is the only Greek story where we have treatments by all three of the great tragedians. Aeschylus’ treatment came first, in 458 BC. Next came Euripides’ treatment, probably sometime around 416-15 BC, and Sophocles’ treatment, sometime around 410 BC. Both Euripides and Sophocles named their plays Electra, and the focus in both their treatments is Electra herself – it is Electra in Euripides’ play who drives Orestes to kill their mom; Sophocles’ chooses to focus on Electra’s pain and the recognition scene that comes early in the other plays occurs in Sophocles’ play about 4/5 of the way through the play.

The Choephori that we have is missing some 50-100 lines from the start of the play, and it is the shortest Greek tragedy we have at a little more than 1000 lines long (the Agamemnon is the longest surviving tragedy at about 1800 lines). In our book, the first 3/5 of the play has been omitted so as to focus on the killings of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus at the end of the play. Here’s what’s happened so far:

Orestes and his friend Pylades have arrived in Argos from Phocis. They have come in secret to see what the situation looks like. Orestes has come to his father’s grave and leaves a lock of his hair as an offering to the dead. Electra and the chorus enter, and Orestes and Pylades move to the side of the stage to watch the unfolding action. They utter a dirge on behalf of Agamemnon and Electra prays for his avenger to come. Electra notices the lock of hair and footprints near the grave. Noting that the hair is the same color as hers, and that the footprints match hers, she concludes that Orestes has returned. Orestes reenters the scene, and Electra finally recognizes him by means of a cloak he has made from his baby blanket. This “recognition scene" was
ridiculed by Euripides in his *Electra*, where it is noted that a man’s hair will be lighter than a woman’s (men are outside more, so the hair is bleached), and no man’s footprint is the same as his sister’s footprint. There it is Agamemnon’s sword that serves as the means of recognition. Following the recognition, the brother and sister plot the revenge – Orestes will pose as a messenger from Phocis who has news that Orestes has died. This will get him access to Aegisthus unawares, and he can then kill him. At this point, the selection of the play we have begins.

1: **It is soon told:** Orestes is responding to Electra or the chorus who’ve asked what the plan is. The she mentioned is Clytemnestra, who will send for Aegisthus.

7: **Phocian dialect:** as to why Electra would not immediately recognize her brother, or Clytemnestra her son – he has spent a large part of his life in Phocis, in N Central Greece, but has returned to Argos in S. Greece. Imagine a boy from New Orleans, sent to the Bronx in NYC, and then returned to New Orleans years later – he might sound like a New Yorker and not at all like someone from the Crescent City. These dialects would be very different. A strange thing in the production, though – all the dialog sections or the sections spoken by characters – these are composed in the Attic dialect (the dialect of Athens, in NE Greece); all of the chorus odes are composed in the Doric dialect (the dialect of S Greece, which was known for choral poetry). In that sense, everyone of the characters is speaking the same type of Greek, and the chorus, who are supposed to be Trojan slaves, are speaking in the dialect appropriate to the area in which the play is set.

9-10: **We will wait till the passerby/Take stock and say: ‘Where is Aegisthus?’** I find this a bit strange – there is no such reluctance on the part of the house to recognize guests, but here Orestes is suggesting a Plan B – if they don’t let us in, we’ll just hang around until the neighbors start talking about what a rotten host Aegisthus is.

17f.: **so a Fury … third great draught of blood:** Not sure what he means the other two instances of a Fury attacking – is it Atreus’ crime and Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia? Is it the killing of Agamemnon and Cassandra (seems most likely given Orestes is speaking this)?

21: **Silence in season and timeliness in speech:** Orestes gives directions to the chorus not to give the plan away. The chorus almost never takes any action. Sometimes the chorus, by its silence or careful speech, helps the main characters take some action, as here.

31ff: This part of the choral ode treats the matter of how depraved can men be – referring to the actions of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Rather surprisingly, they are quicker to attack women as even worse: **Once a woman’s lawless lust…**

41: **Althaea:** she was the queen of Calydon and the mother of Meleager, the great hero of Calydon. The story goes that she was given a log of wood which, so long as it was preserved, would represent the life force of her son,
Meleager. At one point, mom and her son had a great argument over his treatment of his brothers and his favoring of the woman athlete, Atalanta, and, in anger, she tossed the log in the fire, where it was consumed and her son died.

47ff. **Scylla… Nisus**: Nisus was the king of Megara, and Scylla was his daughter. She was bribed by Minos, the king of Crete, to cut a purple lock of her father’s hair which would cause him to lose his invincibility, and he lost the battle and was killed. This is similar to the Samson and Delilah story from the Old Testament.

59: **A wife's deceit framed against a warrior**: -- this alludes to Clytemnestra’s betrayal of Agamemnon.

63ff. **Lemnian...** the women of Lemnos (a volcanic island associated with Hephaestus) had insulted Aphrodite and she made them stink so bad that their men wanted nothing to do with them. The men attacked a neighboring land and seized the women. When the stink had passed, the Lemnian women pretended to want their husbands back, and managed to convince them to return. The women got them drunk and, other than the princess, Hypsipyle, who spared her father, all the women killed their men folk.

73ff. **unerring Justice…those who trample underfoot**: the idea of Justice again – according to the chorus, it is unerring, and Justice will eventually triumph. The image of trampling underfoot recalls Agamemnon’s stepping on the carpet, and Aegisthus and Clytemnestra also stepping all over Justice with their bloody feet.

81f. **Obeying some/inscrutable Fury...**: the Furies again – Orestes can claim the Furies are behind his actions, but he generally claims that he is an agent of Justice.

92ff.: **Here you shall have/A welcome such as the house is noted for – Warm baths...**: I think that Clytemnestra is not making a threat here, but given the result of the bath of Agamemnon, one cannot hear this line without some shiver.

98ff: Orestes’ story – he says that he is from Phocis, and coming to Argos on business, he was asked by Strophius, the king of Phocis (and Pylades’ dad), to bring news of Orestes’ death. Keep in mind that Orestes would have (though in performance, perhaps not) an accent that marked him as a member of a different city-state, and so Clytemnestra might not recognize him.

111ff.: Electra’s lament – in this play, Electra knows that Orestes is home and she is merely playing a part, that of the sister who was counting on Orestes’ return – she’s making the sale. In Sophocles’ version of the story, Electra never gets the chance to speak with Orestes before he launches his narrative (which is quite detailed – a chariot accident) and brings in a jar with “Orestes’” ashes. In that play, the focus is on Electa’s near breakdown, but here it is on Orestes’ plan.
122: Orestes here speaks conventional words – I wish I could have come with better news. Messengers with good news were often rewarded for their news, while those with bad news sometimes had to fear a beating.

134-5: I shall inform the master...all our friends: she does not call Aegisthus her husband, and he isn’t really the master of the house – she is. And the bit about friends – who are they? One never gets the sense that their action had much popular support. Certainly no one comes to their aid.

143: Hermes arise out of the darkness: the chorus may be referring to Hermes as psychopompus, the one who accompanies the dead to the Underworld, and therefore a connection between Agamemnon and his family, or just as the trickster, as Orestes is engaged in deceit.

141ff. The scene with the Nurse, Cilissa. This is a rather touching common character. A lot of Greek tragedy deals with the royalty and heroes, but here we have a common character, just as we had the Watchman in Agamemnon. The nurse delivers typical nurse tropes – I cleaned your poopy diapers, and when you used to puke up your food, and now you’re dead. What is noteworthy is that the nurse, in effect, is Orestes’ mom. His biological mother seemed not to care for him, but the nurse (nanny) would have taken care of all those concerns and really loved him. What is missing here is any sense of what it has been like for her to live in this house with the murderer of the king for several years. We also do not get Cilissa’s reaction to the good news – she doesn’t reappear, in part because of the limit on actors (3 actors to do all the roles).

169: He is told to bring his royal bodyguard and 170: Not a word about that!: Aegisthus would have a bodyguard. Even popular rulers had to fear attacks, and he is not popular. Here the chorus actually intervenes, speaking in a timely manner to convince the Nurse to leave Aegisthus vulnerable. She wonders what’s up, but does not pursue the matter.

200-1: Hermes … the keen and cunning one: the chorus invokes Hermes as a trickster to help Orestes in his plot.

210: Let him cry ‘Father!’ and kill her!: The chorus imagine that Clytemnestra will try to play on Orestes’ feeling (as she does), and they imagine that he’ll counter her reminder that she is his mom with a cry that points out he is his father’s son and is avenging him. It is unclear if Clytemnestra is killed in any version of the story earlier than Aeschylus. Homer in the Odyssey speaks several times about Orestes killing Aegisthus, but there is no statement that he killed Clytemnestra too.

212: Hard as Perseus’: I’m not sure what this refers to – Perseus kills only one relative, his grandfather, Acrisius, but that is by accident. He does treat Polydectes and company rather cruelly with Medusa’s head – maybe that’s the reference.

217ff.: Aegisthus’ entrance – he speaks as though Orestes’ death would be painful, but it is something he clearly wants. He has come to investigate as he doesn’t trust the nurse – she’s an old woman and maybe has gotten
something wrong. Later he notes that he will not be fooled by these messengers. My wits are wide awake: but he is tricked, of course.

226: He faces alone two monsters: Orestes has to kill the two murderers, and this act is cast in heroic terms, though there is nothing particularly heroic about his killing them – he is not facing overwhelming odds.

239: beneath the axe of Justice: Aegisthus’ servant comes running onto the stage freaked out by his master’s death – he calls for Clytemnestra – she must be warned, and she apparently is better able to handle all this. In using this image, he calls to mind an executioner who would behead a criminal. Of course, it is Clytemnestra who comes on to the stage calling for an axe!

240: It means the living are being killed by the dead: as the story was that Orestes was dead. It’s a bit enigmatic, but Clytemnestra picks up the meaning right away.

242: a man-axe: were there women axes? An axe is a man’s weapon, but perhaps she means here a battle-axe as opposed to an axe for cutting wood.

246f. Orestes is taken aback by Clytemnestra’s cry of concern for Aegisthus – You love him? That he finds particularly distasteful. Of course, Clytemnestra immediately pulls the mom card, and Orestes’ determination is blunted. Why is that? It would seem that his anger at finding out that mom really loved this guy (and so was not just an innocent pawn of Aegisthus) would steel him to do the job.

249f. This bosom…toothless gums: this is a common mom tactic, though not one we use much. Hecuba uses the same argument to Hector in Iliad XXII when she tries to convince him to come inside the city and avoid Achilles.

252ff: PYLADES SPEAKS!!!: sorry to be so dramatic, but this is huge. If people fell out of their seats when Cassandra spoke, some must have had heart attacks when Pylades speaks. Let me explain why: Pylades is in all three versions, but he speaks only here. He has been on the stage the entire play, but said nothing. The audience clearly believes he is a silent actor. Then he speaks, but only 2 lines (in the Greek it is two lines). These lines are dramatic – Remember what Apollo said! Listen to the gods! This gives him an almost biblical authority at this point. Silent guy suddenly talks, and he says something brief but significant. One final thing: as he has been on the stage the entire play, this would mean that all the remaining parts would have to be done by only 2 actors if we follow the rule that there can only be 3 speaking actors. And this is just about impossible. It seems likely that Aeschylus here used an additional actor to deliver a couple of lines. It is possible that the playwright himself delivered these lines, taking the actor’s part. Still, highly unconventional and totally unexpected. All of that really underscores these lines – Orestes kills his mom, but because Apollo told him to do so, and threatened him with reprisals if he did not. That puts a different spin on the story.
255ff: the scene between Orestes and Clytemnestra. She uses the argument that she is his mom! Then she uses the argument that Agamemnon too had committed crimes (and so she was obliged to do something about it). Orestes is steeled against the mom argument by his Chatty Cathy friend’s two lines and the reminder of Apollo’s command; and he simply isn’t buying the second argument – he was a warrior, and so some allowances are to be made in his case. One argument that Orestes does not use here, but does elsewhere – as the son of Agamemnon, he should have become king on the old king’s death. In sharing the throne with Aegisthus, not only has Clytemnestra killed Orestes’ dad, but has taken away his legal position as king.

279: I gave birth to a snake and not a son: This refers to something in the passage skipped. Clytemnestra has been having bad dreams – she gave birth to a snake and the snake bit her on the bosom. Here she understands that her son was that serpent and he will not sting her with a sword and so kill her.

281ff. The chorus’ final ode is a hymn in honor of Justice and Zeus as its agent. Priam was brought low for the crimes of Paris; Agamemnon also paid a price, and now these evildoers have been brought low. And to clinch the argument, they cite that Apollo made the statement from Delphi.

SD after 311: again we have the ekkyclema with Orestes standing above his mother and Aegisthus just as Clytemnestra appeared over Agamemnon and Cassandra in the Agamemnon. This is generally staged in such a way that the visuals are the same. We don’t have justice yet – we had the pendulum swing one way in Agamemnon and now back in Choephori – true Justice will come with play #3.

312ff.: Orestes' speech. Here he claims Justice and points to the net which was used to trap his father (as if he were a beast). I can’t help feeling as I read these lines of thinking about Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, where Antony holds up the toga of Caesar and shows the crowd – “Here Cassius struck, and here Brutus! This was the unkindest cut of all...” And he continues the imagery in his next speech.

348: Orestes speech. Orestes here is careful to not claim victory (which is what the chorus is urging him to do). First he must be purified of the crime (even if justified, it is a crime) by going to Delphi where Apollo will purify him. At this point, he is still o.k., but careful.

372f.: those women, like Gorgons,/All clothed in black: the Furies appear, but only Orestes sees them. I think this would have been most effective in the theatre. He should be taking his victory lap, and now suddenly he looks like he’s seen a ghost. The audience probably started to look around to see what Orestes sees. Like the chorus, they see nothing. The chorus suggest that this is the excitement of the deed and it will pass.

385-end: the Chorus have the final say, and it’s pretty weak: Hope you’re o.k. When will all this trouble end for this house?
Eumenides

The third play in the trilogy is unusual in a couple of ways – first it violates the unity of place that Aristotle claims was best – the scene opens at Apollo’s shrine at Delphi, but concludes, a year later, in Athens. So far as I can tell, it is the only play that covers that stretch of time or has scenes so far apart. Second, the chorus are interested parties in the action. They are the Furies who have been sent by Clytemnestra’s ghost against her son, and they want to kill him or drive him mad. So the chorus are not just observers of the action, as is usual, but actual participants in the action. The title means “the Kindly Ones,” the title given to the Furies after they agree to become the protector of Athens rather than evil spirits hounding mortals to their death.

1ff.: the play opens with a single character on stage, the priestess of Apollo at Delphi. She begins by speaking of the history of prophecy at Delphi, first connected with Gaia and Themis, and later with Apollo.

8: native isle of Delos: according to tradition, Apollo was born on the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea.

10: sons of Hephaestus: not sure who is referred to here. Hephaestus is the blacksmith god, but I know of no child.

15: Homage to Athena: I don’t know of any reason why she should worship or honor Athena particularly.

17: Parnassus: this is one of the mountains at Delphi.

17ff. where Dionysus led/... frenzied Bacchants to ... kill/King Pentheus...:
Dionysus was supposed to have been born to Semele, a princess in Thebes (located near Delphi). When he returned to Greece from Asia, he was not worshipped by the Greeks, and especially not by Pentheus, the young king of Thebes that thought Dionysus worship was a dangerous cult. He was killed by his own mother, who mistook him for a mountain lion during a Bacchic ritual.

21ff.: Poseidon... springs of Pleistus: I can think of only one reason for Poseidon being mentioned. He is the sea god, but is indirectly associated with other waterways, including this spring near Delphi.

26ff. Let all Greeks/Approach by lot.....: the priestess turns to the audience as if they were the people who came to consult the oracle. They would have drawn lots and would have consulted the oracle based on their lot.

29ff.: When the priestess goes into the stage building, which represents the temple of Apollo, she sees Orestes with bloody hands holding on to the omphalos ("navel"), an ornamental stone at Delphi that was supposed to be the center of the earth. She also sees the Furies, but she doesn’t quite recognize them – she calls them Gorgons, but then says they look like something she saw in a painting of Phineus – which would make them Harpies. At this point, we do not see them. The stage directions here suggest we see them on an ekkylema, but I’m not so sure about that – after all, the chorus is 12 strong, and that’s too many people for the ekkylema.
50ff. *whose company/Is shunned by God*....: the newer generation of gods does not care for the older generation of gods, who have attained the status of demons.

53: **bottomless pit of Tartarus**: Tartarus is the dark area of the Underworld and is an area of punishment. The Furies are associated with it.

54ff.: Apollo tells Orestes to find sanctuary in Athens, but he also suggests that he travel around the Mediterranean. There is a version where Orestes does travel around the world trying to escape the guilt. Here, Apollo’s direction to travel about does not seem clearly defined. The **primeval image** mentioned is an old wooden statue of Athena that was supposed to be located in Athens from its very founding.

66: **Hermes**: there is no actor representing Hermes, so it is unclear if this is meant as a real direction for Hermes. At any rate, he is the god of travel and so makes a suitable choice to protect Orestes.

67: **outcast...blest of Zeus**: Orestes is an outcast because he is a matricide, but Zeus has chosen him to be the test case for “trial by jury” instead of blood feuds, and so he is blest of Zeus and Apollo.

68ff.: Clytemnestra’s ghost appears – she chastises the Furies who have fallen asleep. While they slept, Orestes left the stage and the area. When she says **with none to defend me**, she speaks the truth. Orestes killed his mother, and there is no other relative who can take vengeance against him, so it has become the Furies’ job. Of course, Helen is still alive, and could, technically, be her sister’s avenger, if she were so minded.

78: **many a solemn midnight**: one worships these underworld deities at night.

104ff. This is the entrance song of the chorus. Though they have been speaking already, I’m not sure that the audience gets a good view of them until this point. The tradition has it that women had miscarriages at seeing the horrific looking Furies. Once again, we have something bold and shocking – I’m sure there were no miscarriages (and some doubt women attended plays in Athens), but their appearance must have been very shocking.

108ff. **son of Zeus... a youth to flout powers fixed long ago**: the Furies yell at Apollo. He is a new generation of gods, and so disdains the older generation of gods. According to Apollo, no one on Olympus likes the Furies though.

111f.: **a swift/Charioteer’s sharp lash**: I think this is a metaphor – Clytemnestra’s words got under their skin as they slept, and here it is compared to being whipped.

115: **This is the doing of the younger gods**: again the generational problem.

118f. **navel-stone... blood**: that this sacred object is defiled with blood is too much for the Furies who want to avenge Clytemnestra.

121: The Furies claim that Apollo is setting himself up against what is right.

130ff. Apollo tells the Furies to get out of his shrine, and go where they belong, where people are being executed, or punished in some other gruesome way.

140: **You are the culprit**: in a sense, this is true – Apollo told Orestes to do this. Such a command will force the trial, which seems to be part of the plan.
151ff. The Furies and Apollo argue over the killings. They want Orestes because he killed his mom, to whom he is connected by blood. Though Clytemnestra killed her husband, that is not a blood crime, as they are not related by blood. Apollo counters by saying that as marriage is sanctioned by Zeus and Hera, a crime within marriage is a serious crime as well. And that, in letting Clytemnestra go, the Furies have lost any moral authority to pester Orestes.

SD after 172: a year passes: How this is represented on stage is unclear to me. Was there some musical or other interlude to give the sense of the passing of time? Not so far as we know, but otherwise, how do we know that time has passed.

173ff. Orestes argues that there is no longer any blood pollution – he has atoned, and is ritually clean.

196f. For Hades is a stern inquisitor…: it is clear that Aeschylus’ vision of the afterlife is different from Homer’s. In Homer’s account, there seems to be no real distinction between heroes and sinners in the afterlife, except for the worst sinners. Here, there is a statement that Hades judges the dead and does so rather sternly.

199ff.: Orestes here asks Athena for sanctuary. He makes the point that he has been ritually purified by a sacrifice of pigs at Delphi (must have happened before the play). He also notes that no one has suffered any trouble from coming into contact with him in the meantime as he traveled around the Eastern Mediterranean. Phlegra was located in Thrace and it was where the gods fought a great battle against the Giants.

217: Let us dance: the chorus, though Furies, do dance and sing. The dance of this particular chorus must have been something to see.

221: Mother Night: Night is the mother of the Furies.

235f.: Such are the powers…/None of the Gods of Olympus…: the Furies throughout point out that they represent an older group of gods – the new generation of gods, the Olympians, want nothing to do with them.

243: Shuns us because we are covered in blood: the Olympians are cleaner and more “high class” and so shun the Furies.

262ff.: The Furies finish their song and dance by noting that they do what others spurn, but they have their honors too, even in Hell.

273: Beside Scamander: Athena claims she has just come from Troy. Not sure why she would be there now about 10 years after Troy’s fall. She notes that they are now her lands, but I don’t know of the myth suggesting this. And the Athenians were certainly not claiming a right to Troy, as that land was in the 5th c. under Persian control. The Athenians managed to defeat the Persians, but they were too powerful to offend.

283f.: Nor yet divine…: Athena does not recognize the Furies; she only notices how horrible they look.

295: Was he driven to it perhaps against his will? Athena is already suggesting a line of defense, that Orestes had legitimate reasons for what he did. The
Furies are having none of it, suggesting that matricide cannot be justified in any circumstances.

300: **You seem to seek only the semblance of justice:** in other words, Athena suggests that the Furies are not interested in justice, but only give lip service. True justice would seek out the truth, and not just apply a punishment uniformly on an action. The implication here is that Athenians, with their trial by jury, are interested in getting at the truth and justice, and not just its forms. The Furies are so convinced of their right that they agree to let Athena hold a trial, commending her as **a worthy daughter of a worthy father.**

325f.: **was Agamemnon, The great commander:** It seems unlikely that Athena wouldn’t know this, but perhaps this is just following trial procedure, where you have to state your name, even if everyone knows you.

Orestes’ argument is that he was following the orders of Apollo, and so could not be in the wrong, though the action of matricide might be seen as evil on the face of it.

340ff.: **who has done no wrong/Against this city:** Athena states the normal procedure towards a suppliant – to welcome the suppliant, and not ask too many questions about what the suppliant may have done elsewhere. In this case, though, Athens cannot just welcome him because of possible repercussions from the Furies (**your opponents here/Are not so gentle...**)

349f. **I will appoint judges for homicide./A court set up in perpetuity:** Aeschylus sets the trial by jury in the Mycenaean world, to give it added weight. And he suggests that Athena herself set up the practice. In this play she determines that there will be a homicide court held on the Areopagus (**“Mars’ Hill”**), a place where the Athenian Council of Elders had met. In the early part of the 5th c. BC, the law-making power was taken from this select group and given to the people (democracy); the role of the Areopagus assembly was then restricted to being a trial for murder cases. Here Aeschylus gives a mythological explanation and mythological support for the limited role of the Areopagus assembly.

359: **Crime shall spread:** the Furies’ argument is that without the threat of dread punishment, people will run wild and everything will get out of hand. They continue this argument by saying **Times there are when fear is good (365).**

415: **The God of prophecy ordered matricide?** I don’t understand this statement by the Furies – they know this and have already blamed Apollo. Perhaps they are taking this tack because they can punish Orestes, but not the gods.

419ff. The interchange here between the Furies (the prosecuting attorneys) and Orestes is interesting. Orestes claims that her crime was particularly vile in that she killed her husband, and in so doing killed his father. This has no effect on the Furies who are interested in avenging blood crime, and, as they point out Agamemnon was not related to Clytemnestra by blood.

425: **Am I then bound by blood to my mother:** huh? This seems to simply set up the reply. I’m not sure how Orestes can make this statement. Of course, later, Athena will argue that the father is the true parent and the mother merely the...
receptacle of transmission, which ties in with this idea, in that it devalues the woman’s role in procreation.

432ff. Apollo makes the argument that he cannot lie, and that he was following orders from Zeus, so that any action taken by Orestes following his orders must be just.

442ff. Apollo’s argument for the justice of killing Clytemnestra is that she was guilty of regicide, which is more serious than any old murder, that she was a woman and not a man doing this action, that he was a war-hero, and that he was dispatched in an unmanly and scandalous way.

453ff. The Furies counter with the point that Zeus himself deposed his father, and so he cannot value a father particularly highly. Apollo counters by noting that there is a difference between deposing a king and killing him.

470ff. Apollo plays his trump card – he argues that the mother is not a parent, only the nurse/Of the seed – in other words, the father’s seed is the child, and mom is simply an incubation chamber for the kid. Modern genetics would argue this point. I’m not sure that ancient Athenians believed this – the point is not that Apollo speaks scientific truth, but that the defense makes a compelling argument for acquittal.

495: Where long ago the Amazons encamped: this is the Areopagus, or Hill of Ares.

505: Athena makes an impassioned plea for a middle course between autocracy and anarchy. The Furies argue that only the fear of hell keeps people in line, but Athena argues for something more moderate. And she calls Athens An impregnable fortress of liberty. The Athenians were proud of their democracy, which was unusual in the 5th c. Most places were monarchies, or tyrannies, or oligarchies.

535: If the votes are equal, Orestes wins: a word here on Athenian trials. The jury could be made up of as many as a few hundred citizens chosen by lot. There was pay for jury duty and elderly citizens could count on jury duty helping them make ends meet. In our criminal system, a jury must be unanimous in finding the defendant guilty. In Athens, the jury could find someone guilty by simple majority. But the prosecution did need a majority. A tie was a vote for acquittal. The idea was that Athena always voted for acquittal, so she broke the tie for the defendant. And she will do that later in the play.

537f.: Orestes calls out to bright Apollo, and the Furies to black mother Night – this suggests that Apollo is better.

547ff. Orestes' appeal to the jury seems to include a bribe, or a promise that, should he be found not guilty that Argos would not attack Athens. This speaks to political concerns in Aeschylus' day – Athens and the Peloponnese (under Spartan leadership) had fought together against Persia, but Sparta and her allies (including Argos) was afraid of Athens’ growing power. In 431 a war would break out between the two powers, despite what Orestes promises here. In 458 when this play was performed, there were still hopes of a lasting peace between the two Greek powers.
562: **you junior gods … have trod under foot:** here too that image – we had
Agamemnon trod on the purple carpet, and there was talk in the second
play of criminals stepping on the rights of others. So the Furies see the gods as
overstepping their bounds.
570: The Furies, the **maids of Night**, vow that they’ll pay Athens back for this.
571ff. Athena pleads for Athens, but she doesn’t beg. She points out that the
Furies did not lose by much, and so their arguments had some weight. And it
was Zeus’ will that Orestes do this deed and not come to harm. Besides, there
is a place in Athens for the Furies if they choose it – they will become
defenders, not attackers, and be called the “Eumenides” (“Kindly Ones”).
582: **Oho, you junior gods, etc.**: here they repeat their last refrain. This will
happen again, where they will repeat their refrain.
583ff. Athena continues to try to win the Furies over by persuasion. It is
interesting that she chooses to avoid Apollo’s direct attack of the Furies, but
rather acts deferentially towards them, hoping to broker a peace.
600ff.: **You are my elders… not so wise as you:** Athena is careful to praise the
Furies and acknowledge their place in the scheme of things. Apollo does not
do this.
625: **please, reside with me:** she continues to press this point, to keep on inviting
them to be part of Athens’ team. This whole segment seems to suggest the
belief in Aeschylus of the power of the word, the power of persuasion.
653ff. The Furies accept the deal, and refer to Athens as **Jeweled crown of
Hellas.** And in later statements they will utter blessings rather than curses.
665: **Pan:** Pan is a goat/human god – he represents the spirit of Nature.
685 or so – **ESCORT OF WOMEN:** this is, in effect, a second chorus –
again, this would be seen as a pretty big end – there’s a procession, with
several silent figures and a whole other chorus. It would be a big finale to the
trilogy and a show-stopper ending to a trilogy that had a lot of show-stopping
moments. The play ends with a big parade as the Furies join the women and
others in a torchlight procession out of the theatre.

One final note: at the Athenian City Dionysia, where this would have been
performed, Aeschylus would have submitted 3 tragedies and 1 satyr play.
The satyr play for this trilogy is not known, but would likely be the story of
Tantalus or Atreus, who served up family members. This would have been
done as a burlesque, with a chorus of guys dressed up as satyrs (goat men
with large phalli). Given the power of the tragedy here, it is thought that the
satyr play would have been used to bring the audience back to earth, to
lighten the spirit of the crowd somewhat. To us, given the power of this trilogy,
this seems bizarre, something that would ruin the whole event (imagine
ending a program of Beethoven Symphonies with a medley of Warner
Brothers cartoon themes – it just wouldn’t seem right).