

THE RED ACT ARIAS
Texts from Agamemnon of Aeschylus

Introduction to Choral Aria I

The Greeks have destroyed Troy after a ten-year siege, and their fleet has finally set sail for home. But the gods have been watching—taking offense at the desecration and sacking in which the victors have indulged. They summon up the natural elements in retribution, and shatter the Achaean force. One vessel only, King Agamemnon's, escapes ruin and finds landfall at last.

But his reprieve will be short. Clytemnestra, his wife, has brooded throughout his long absence over the King's sacrifice of their daughter, gentle Iphigenia. She is consumed with vengeance, and when Agamemnon returns to Argos, she lures him to his bath, snares him in a tangle of robes and stabs him to death.

Though Clytemnestra's rage wins her the revenge she must have, she is, in turn, banished. However flawed he was (and this is clear), Argos will not forgive such violence of a woman against her husband. The consequence of her irrepressible will is a bitter mix.

The Storm

How shall I tell
of the storm sent on the Achaeans by God's anger?
For sea and fire, of old the deepest enemies,
made a conspiracy
to blast into ruin our unhappy Argive army.
At night the sea began to rise in waves of death.
Ship against ship the stormwind shattered us,
and gored and split, our vessels drove on in darkness,
swept in violence of storm and whirlwind,
beaten by the breaking rain.

But when the sun came up again to light the dawn,
we saw the Aegean Sea blossoming with dead men,
and the wreckage of their ships.

As for us,
Life-giving fortune had deigned to take our ship in charge...

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King of the ships, who tore up Ilium by the roots,
what does he know of this accursed bitch, who licks

his hand, who fawns on him with lifted ears, who like
a secret death strikes the coward's stroke (nor will she fail)?
No, this is daring when the female shall strike down
the male. What can I call her and be right? What beast
of loathing? Viper double-fanged, or Scylla witch
holed in the rocks, bane of men that range the sea;
smoldering mother of death to smoke relentless hate
on those most dear. How she stood up and howled aloud
and unashamed, as at the breaking point of battle,
in feigned gladness for his salvation from the sea!

What does it matter now if men believe or no?
I tell you, you shall look on Agamemnon dead.

* * * * *

Woman, what evil thing planted upon the earth
or dragged from the running salt sea could you have tasted now
to wear such brutality and walk in the people's hate?
You have cast away, you have cut yourself away.
You shall go homeless now,
crushed with men's bitterness.

Great your design, your speech is a clamor of pride.
Swung to the red act the fury drives within your brain.

Introduction to Choral Aria II

The ambitions of Paris—some called him Alexander—overreached the
scope of mortal privilege. He lured Helen from her marriage bed, then
carried her from Greece back to Troy. He was absorbed in desire, then
blinded by pride, and, in the end, justice had its way. Not his wealth,
beauty nor power could prevent the Achaean force from crushing him with
his city .

Neither this son of High King Priam nor the people of Ilium had
suspected in the least that the lulling delight they took in Helen's
beauty could so abruptly melt into the agonies of war, death and
subjugation. One individual's vain dreams can consign an entire people
to disaster. Ruined by the unwise exercise of Power, they smoulder in
their grief.

A Dream of Calm

A man—Alexander—thought

the gods deigned not to punish mortals
who trampled down the delicacy of things
inviolable. That man was wicked.
The curse of great daring
shines clear; it wrings atonement
from those high hearts that drive to evil,
from houses blossoming to pride
and peril. Let there be
wealth without tears; enough for
the wise man who will ask no more.
There is no armor
against perdition
to be found in gold, not
for him who spurns the high altar
of Justice.

Persuasion the persistent overwhelms him,
she, strong daughter of designing Ruin.
And every medicine is vain; the sin
burns to evil beauty.

(...as in a dream...)

And that which first came to the city of Ilium,
call it a dream of calm
and the wind dying,
the loveliness and luxury of gold,
the melting shafts of the eye's glances,
the blossom that breaks the heart with longing.

But she turned in mid-step of her course to make
bitter the consummation,
whirling on Priam's people
to blight with her touch and nearness...

And the prophets
wept aloud and spoke:

"Her images in their beauty
are bitterness to her lord now
where in the emptiness of eyes
all passion has faded."

Shining in dreams the sorrowful
memories pass; they bring him
only vain delight.
Is it not vain, to dream and to see splendors;
and the image slipping from the arms' embrace
escapes on wings drifting down the ways of sleep

not to return again.

Many are they who are touched at the heart by these things.
They mutter in secrecy,
and the slow anger creeps below their grief,
grief at the sons of Atreus and their quarrels.
Young men in their beauty keep
graves deep in the alien soil they hated.

The citizens speak: their voice is dull with hatred.
The curse of the people must be paid for.
There lurks for me in the hooded night
terror of what may be told me.

The black Furies stalking the man
fortunate beyond all right
wrench back again the set of his life
and drop him into darkness. There among
the ciphers there is no more comfort
in power.

Introduction to Choral Aria III

King Agamemnon has returned to Argos from a devastated Troy. But now he can no longer evade the legacies of pride and heedlessness. He sacrificed his favorite daughter to free the Greek fleet to sail against Priam's Ilium. And Clytemnestra was left for ten lonely years to think on this inexcusable vanity. The victorious Greek army dishonored its fallen enemies, desecrated sacred sites and thus called down upon itself a divine anger that brought the returning fleet to ruin.

All the while, in Greece, the people wondered—angered by a war so long, and one fought, as well, over the inconsistent designs of one woman. Now they are alarmed by—without yet comprehending—Cassandra's nightmare prophesies. So much senseless violence, recurring eruptions of unbridled hate among the privileged: dread erodes what remains of hope.

Threnody

Why must this persistent fear
beat its wings so ceaselessly
and so close against my mantic heart?
Why this strain unwanted, unrepaid, thus prophetic?
Nor can hope—
seated near the chambered depth
of the spirit—cast it out

as dreams of dark fancy.
Yet I have seen with these eyes
Agamemnon home again.
The spirit still sings, drawing deep
from within this unlyric threnody of the Fury.

Hope is gone utterly,
the sweet strength is far away.
Surely this is not fantasy.
Surely it is real, this whirl of drifts
that spin the stricken heart.
Still I pray; may all this
expectation fade as vanity
into unfulfillment, and not be.

(...as in a dream...)

Deep within goes the stroke of the dripping fang
as mortal pain at the trebled song of your agony
shivers the heart to hear.

I murmur deep in darkness
sore at heart; my hope is gone now
ever again to unwind some crucial good
from the flames about my heart.