

AGAMEMNON

Aeschylus

Ten years previously, Agamemnon set sail to fight the Trojan Wars, and in order to get wind for his sails, he strapped his daughter to the mast of his ship and offered her as a sacrifice to the gods. On his return, Clytemnestra sought her revenge for the death of their daughter, and killed Agamemnon. In this speech, she is defending her actions.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

Though much to suit the times before was said,
It shames me not the opposite to speak:
For, plotting against foes,--our seeming friends,--
How else contrive with Ruin's wily snare,
Too high to overleap, to fence them round?
To me, not mindless of an ancient feud,
Hath come at last this contest;--late indeed.
The deed achieved, here stand I, where I slew.
So was it wrought (and this I'll not deny),
That he could neither 'scape, nor ward his doom;
Around him, like a fish-encircling net,
This garment's deadly splendour did I cast;--
Him twice I smote, and he, with twofold groan,
His limbs relaxed;--then, prostrate where he lay,
Him with third blow I dowered, votive gift
To nether Hades, saviour of the dead.
Thus as he fell he chafed his soul away;
And gurgling forth the swift death-tide of blood,
He smites me with black drops of gory dew,
Not less exultant than, with heaven-sent joy
The corn-sown land, in birth-hour of the ear.
For this great issue, Argive Senators,
Joy ye, if joy ye can, but I exult.
Nay, o'er the slain were off'rings meet,--with right
Here were they poured,--with emphasis of right.
Such goblets having filled with cursed ills
At home,--himself on his return drains off.
Me thou dost doom to exile,--to endure
The people's hate, their curse deep-muttered,--thou,
Who 'gainst this man of yore hadst naught to urge.
He, all unmoved, as though brute life he quenched,
The while his fleecy pastures teem'd with flocks,
His own child slaughtered,--of my travail throes
To me the dearest,--charm for Thracian blasts.
Him shouldst thou not have chased from land and home
Just guerdon for foul deed? Stern judge thou art
When me thou dost arraign;--but, mark my words,
(Nerved as I am to threat on equal terms,)

If with strong hand ye conquer me, then rule;--
But should the god decree the opposite,
Though late, to sober sense shalt thou be schooled.

ANTIGONE

Sophocles

In this scene, Antigone, a princess of Greece, has been condemned to death for performing burial rites on her brother Polynices, who had been as a traitor by Creon, the King of Greece. She is standing up to Creon, defending her decision.

ANTIGONE:

So to my grave,
My bridal-bower, my everlasting prison,
I go, to join those many of my kinsmen
Who dwell in the mansions of Persephone,
Last and unhappiest, before my time.
Yet I believe my father will be there
To welcome me, my mother greet me gladly,
And you, my brother, gladly see me come.
Each one of you my hands have laid to rest,
Pouring the due libations on your graves.
It was by this service to your dear body, Polynices,
I earned the punishment which now I suffer,
Though all good people know it was for your honour.
O but I would not have done the forbidden thing
For any husband or for any son.
For why? I could have had another husband
And by him other sons, if one were lost;
But, father and mother lost, where would I get
Another brother? For thus preferring you,
My brother, Creon condemns me and hales me away,
Never a bride, never a mother, unfriended,
Condemned alive to solitary death.
What law of heaven have I transgressed? What god
Can save me now? What help or hope have I,
In whom devotion is deemed sacrilege?
If this is God's will, I shall learn my lesson
In death; but if my enemies are wrong,
I wish them no worse punishment than mine.

WOMEN OF TROY

Euripides

In this scene, Cassandra, a high-priestess who has the gift of prophecy but cannot be understood due to a trick of the god Apollo, is performing a religious rite.

CASSANDRA:

Lift, lift it high:
Give it to mine hand!
Lo, I bear a flame
Unto God! I praise his name.
I light with a burning brand
This sanctuary.
Blessed is he that shall wed,
And blessed, blessed am I
In Argos: a bride to lie
With a king in a king's bed.

Hail, O Hymen red,
O Torch that makest one!
Weapest thou, Mother mine own?
Surely thy cheek is pale
With tears, tears that wail
For a land and a father dead.
But I go garlanded:
I am the Bride of Desire:
Therefore my torch is borne--
Lo, the lifting of morn,
Lo, the leaping of fire!--

For thee, O Hymen bright,
For thee, O Moon of the Deep,
So Law hath charged, for the light
Of a maid's last sleep.

Awake, O my feet, awake:
Our father's hope is won!
Dance as the dancing skies
Over him, where he lies
Happy beneath the sun!...
Lo, the Ring that I make....

(She makes a circle round her with a torch, and visions appear to her)

Apollo!... Ah, is it thou?
O shrine in the laurels cold,
I bear thee still, as of old,
Mine incense! Be near to me now.

(She waves the torch as though bearing incense)

O Hymen, Hymen fleet:
Quick torch that makest one!...
How? Am I still alone?
Laugh as I laugh, and twine
In the dance, O Mother mine:
Dear feet, be near my feet!

Come, greet ye Hymen, greet
Hymen with songs of pride:
Sing to him loud and long,
Cry, cry, when the song
Faireth, for joy of the bride!

O Damsels girt in the gold
Of Ilion, cry, cry ye,
For him that is doomed of old
To be lord of me!

WOMEN OF TROY

Euripides

In this scene, Hecuba is lamenting the new life that she will be living as a slave, as opposed to her old life as the Queen of Troy.

HECUBA:

Let lie ... the love we seek not is no love....
This ruined body! Is the fall thereof
Too deep for all that now is over me
Of anguish, and hath been, and yet shall be?
Ye Gods.... Alas! Why call on things so weak
For aid? Yet there is something that doth seek,
Crying, for God, when one of us hath woe.
O, I will think of things gone long ago
And weave them to a song, like one more tear
In the heart of misery.... All kings we were;
And I must wed a king. And sons I brought
My lord King, many sons ... nay, that were naught;
But high strong princes, of all Troy the best.
Hellas nor Troaes nor the garnered East
Held such a mother! And all these things beneath
The Argive spear I saw cast down in death,
And shore these tresses at the dead men's feet.
Yea, and the gardener of my garden great,
It was not any noise of him nor tale
I wept for; these eyes saw him, when the pale
Was broke, and there at the altar Priam fell
Murdered, and round him all his citadel
Sacked. And my daughters, virgins of the fold,
Meet to be brides of mighty kings, behold,
'Twas for the Greek I bred them! All are gone;
And no hope left, that I shall look upon
Their faces any more, nor they on mine.
And now my feet tread on the utmost line:
An old, old slave-woman, I pass below
Mine enemies' gates; and whatso task they know
For this age basest, shall be mine; the door,
Bowing, to shut and open.... I that bore
Hector!... and meal to grind, and this racked head
Bend to the stones after a royal bed;
Tom rags about me, aye, and under them
Tom flesh; 'twill make a woman sick for shame!
Woe's me; and all that one man's arms might hold
One woman, what long seas have o'er me rolled

And roll for ever!... O my child, whose white
Soul laughed amid the laughter of God's light,
Cassandra, what hands and how strange a day
Have loosed thy zone! And thou, Polyxena,
Where art thou? And my sons? Not any seed
Of man nor woman now shall help my need.
Why raise me any more? What hope have I
To hold me? Take this slave that once trod high
In Ilium; cast her on her bed of clay
Rock-pillowed, to lie down, and pass away
Wasted with tears. And whatso man they call
Happy, believe not ere the last day fall!

WOMEN OF TROY

Euripides

In this scene, Andromache is explaining the pain of living in extreme grief. She believes that to die would be easier.

ANDROMACHE:

O Mother, having ears, hear thou this word
Fear-conquering, till thy heart as mine be stirred
With joy. To die is only not to be;
And better to be dead than grievously
Living. They have no pain, they ponder not
Their own wrong. But the living that is brought
From joy to heaviness, his soul doth roam,
As in a desert, lost, from its old home.
Thy daughter lieth now as one unborn,
Dead, and naught knowing of the lust and scorn
That slew her. And I ... long since I drew my bow
Straight at the heart of good fame; and I know
My shaft hit; and for that am I the more
Fallen from peace. All that men praise us for,
I loved for Hector's sake, and sought to win.
I knew that always, be there hurt therein
Or utter innocence, to roam abroad
Hath ill report for women; so I trod
Down the desire thereof, and walked my way
In mine own garden. And light words and gay
Parley of women never passed my door.
The thoughts of mine own heart ... I craved no more....
Spoke with me, and I was happy. Constantly
I brought fair silence and a tranquil eye
For Hector's greeting, and watched well the way
Of living, where to guide and where obey.
And, lo! some rumour of this peace, being gone
Forth to the Greek, hath cursed me. Achilles' son,
So soon as I was taken, for his thrall
Chose me. I shall do service in the hall
Of them that slew.... How? Shall I thrust aside
Hector's beloved face, and open wide
My heart to this new lord? Oh, I should stand
A traitor to the dead! And if my hand
And flesh shrink from him ... lo, wrath and despite
O'er all the house, and I a slave!

One night,
One night ... aye, men have said it ... maketh tame
A woman in a man's arms.... O shame, shame!
What woman's lips can so forswear her dead,
And give strange kisses in another's bed?
Why, not a dumb beast, not a colt will run
In the yoke untroubled, when her mate is gone--
A thing not in God's image, dull, unmoved
Of reason. O my Hector! best beloved,
That, being mine, wast all in all to me,
My prince, my wise one, O my majesty
Of valiance! No man's touch had ever come
Near me, when thou from out my father's home
Didst lead me and make me thine.... And thou art dead,
And I war-flung to slavery and the bread
Of shame in Hellas, over bitter seas!
What knoweth she of evils like to these,
That dead Polyxena, thou weapest for?
There liveth not in my life any more
The hope that others have. Nor will I tell
The lie to mine own heart, that aught is well
Or shall be well.... Yet, O, to dream were sweet!

WOMEN OF TROY

Euripides

In this scene, Helen is defending her actions, and explaining why she ran away from her husband Menelaus, to live with Paris, a Trojan prince, in Troy.

HELEN:

It may be that, how false or true soe'er
Thou deem me, I shall win no word from thee.
So sore thou holdest me thine enemy.
Yet I will take what words I think thy heart
Holdeth of anger: and in even part
Set my wrong and thy wrong, and all that fell.

(Pointing to Hecuba)

She cometh first, who bare the seed and well
Of springing sorrow, when to life she brought
Paris: and that old King, who quenched not
Quick in the spark, ere yet he woke to slay,
The fire-brand's image.--But enough: a day
Came, and this Paris judged beneath the trees
Three Crowns of Life, three diverse Goddesses.
The gift of Pallas was of War, to lead
His East in conquering battles, and make bleed
The hearths of Hellas. Hera held a Throne--
If majesties he craved--to reign alone
From Phrygia to the last realm of the West.
And Cypris, if he deemed her loveliest,
Beyond all heaven, made dreams about my face
And for her grace gave me. And, lo! her grace
Was judged the fairest, and she stood above
Those twain.--Thus was I loved, and thus my love
Hath holpen Hellas. No fierce Eastern crown
Is o'er your lands, no spear hath cast them down.
O, it was well for Hellas! But for me
Most ill; caught up and sold across the sea
For this my beauty; yea, dishonoured
For that which else had been about my head
A crown of honour.... Ah, I see thy thought;
The first plain deed, 'tis that I answer not,
How in the dark out of thy house I fled....
There came the Seed of Fire, this woman's seed;
Came - O, a Goddess great walked with him then--
This Alexander, Breaker-down-of-Men,
This Paris, strength-is-with-him; whom thou, whom--
O false and light of heart--thou in thy room

Didst leave, and spreadest sail for Cretan seas,
Far, far from me!... And yet, how strange it is!
I ask not thee; I ask my own sad thought,
What was there in my heart, that I forgot
My home and land and all I loved, to fly
With a strange man? Surely it was not I,
But Cypris, there! Lay thou thy rod on her,
And be more high than Zeus and bitterer,
Who o'er all other spirits hath his throne,
But knows her chain must bind him. My wrong done
Hath its own pardon....

One word yet thou hast,
Methinks, of righteous seeming. When at last
The earth for Paris oped and all was o'er,
And her strange magic bound my feet no more,
Why kept I still his house, why fled not I
To the Argive ships?... Ah, how I strove to fly!
The old Gate-Warden could have told thee all,
My husband, and the watchers from the wall;
It was not once they took me, with the rope
Tied, and this body swung in the air, to grope
Its way toward thee, from that dim battlement.
Ah, husband still, how shall thy hand be bent
To slay me? Nay, if Right be come at last,
What shalt thou bring but comfort for pains past,
And harbour for a woman storm-driven:
A woman borne away by violent men:
And this one birthright of my beauty, this
That might have been my glory, lo, it is
A stamp that God hath burned, of slavery!
Alas! and if thou cravest still to be
As one set above gods, inviolate,
'Tis but a fruitless longing holds thee yet.

WOMEN OF TROY

Euripides

In this scene, Andromache is sending her son off to his death, as he is about to be thrown off the walls of Troy. He is still a very young child.

ANDROMACHE

(to the child)

Go, die, my best-beloved, my cherished one,
In fierce men's hands, leaving me here alone.
Thy father was too valiant; that is why
They slay thee! Other children, like to die,
Might have been spared for that. But on thy head
His good is turned to evil.
O thou bed
And bridal; O the joining of the hand,
That led me long ago to Hector's land
To bear, O not a lamb for Grecian swords
To slaughter, but a Prince o'er all the hordes
Enthroned of wide-flung Asia.... Weepest thou?
Nay, why, my little one? Thou canst not know.
And Father will not come; he will not come;
Not once, the great spear flashing, and the tomb
Riven to set thee free! Not one of all
His brethren, nor the might of Ilion's wall.
How shall it be? One horrible spring ... deep, deep
Down. And thy neck.... Ah God, so cometh-sleep!...
And none to pity thee! Thou little thing
That curlest in my arms, what sweet scents cling
All round thy neck! Beloved; can it be
All nothing, that this bosom cradled thee
And fostered; all the weary nights, wherethrough
I watched upon thy sickness, till I grew
Wasted with watching? Kiss me. This one time;
Not ever again. Put up thine arms, and climb
About my neck: now, kiss me, lips to lips....
O, ye have found an anguish that outstrips
All tortures of the East, ye gentle Greeks!
Why will ye slay this innocent, that seeks
No wrong?... O Helen, Helen, thou ill tree
That Tyndareus planted, who shall deem of thee
As child of Zeus? O, thou hast drawn thy breath
From many fathers, Madness, Hate, red Death,
And every rotting poison of the sky!
Zeus knows thee not, thou vampire, draining dry.
Greece and the world! God hate thee and destroy,
That with those beautiful eyes hast blasted Troy,
And made the far-famed plains a waste withal.
Quick! take him: drag him: cast him from the wall,
If cast ye will! Tear him, ye beasts, be swift!
God hath undone me, and I cannot lift
One hand, one hand, to save my child from death....
O, hide my head for shame: fling me beneath
Your galleys' benches!

WOMEN OF TROY

Euripides

In this scene, Hecuba is performing the burial rights for her grandchild, who has just been thrown from the walls of Troy by the Greeks.

HECUBA:

Set the great orb of Hector's shield to lie
Here on the ground. 'Tis bitter that mine eye
Should see it.... O ye Argives, was your spear
Keen, and your hearts so low and cold, to fear
This babe? 'Twas a strange murder for brave men!
For fear this babe some day might raise again
His fallen land! Had ye so little pride?
While Hector fought, and thousands at his side,
Ye smote us, and we perished; and now, now,
When all are dead and Ilium lieth low,
Ye dread this innocent! I deem it not
Wisdom, that rage of fear that hath no thought....
Ah, what a death hath found thee, little one!
Hadst thou but fallen fighting, hadst thou known
Strong youth and love and all the majesty
Of godlike kings, then had we spoken of thee
As of one blessed ... could in any wise
These days know blessedness. But now thine eyes
Have seen, thy lips have tasted, but thy soul
No knowledge had nor usage of the whole
Rich life that lapt thee round.... Poor little child!
Was it our ancient wall, the circuit piled
By loving Gods, so savagely hath rent
Thy curls, these little flowers innocent
That were thy mother's garden, where she laid
Her kisses; here, just where the bone-edge frayed
Grins white above--Ah heaven, I will not see!
Ye tender arms, the same dear mould have ye
As his; how from the shoulder loose ye drop
And weak! And dear proud lips, so full of hope
And closed for ever! What false words ye said
At daybreak, when he crept into my bed,
Called me kind names, and promised: 'Grandmother,
When thou art dead, I will cut close my hair
And lead out all the captains to ride by
Thy tomb.' Why didst thou cheat me so? 'Tis I,
Old, homeless, childless, that for thee must shed
Cold tears, so young, so miserably dead.
Dear God, the pattering welcomes of thy feet,

The nursing in my lap; and O, the sweet
Falling asleep together! All is gone.
How should a poet carve the funeral stone
To tell thy story true? 'There lieth here
A babe whom the Greeks feared, and in their fear
Slew him.' Aye, Greece will bless the tale it tells!
Child, they have left thee beggared of all else
In Hector's house; but one thing shalt thou keep,
This war-shield bronzen-barred, wherein to sleep.
Alas, thou guardian true of Hector's fair
Left arm, how art thou masterless! And there
I see his handgrip printed on thy hold;
And deep stains of the precious sweat, that rolled
In battle from the brows and beard of him,
Drop after drop, are writ about thy rim.
Go, bring them--such poor garments hazardous
As these days leave. God hath not granted us
Wherewith to make much pride. But all I can,
I give thee, Child of Troy.--O vain is man,
Who glorieth in his joy and hath no fears:
While to and fro the chances of the years
Dance like an idiot in the wind! And none
By any strength hath his own fortune won.

MACBETH

William Shakespeare

In this scene, Macbeth has come back from trying to kill the king, and decided against it. Lady Macbeth is persuading her husband to do the deed.

Lady Macbeth:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'
Like the poor cat i' the adage?

What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.

We fail!
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep—
Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey
Soundly invite him—his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbeck only: when in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie as in a death,
What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan? what not put upon
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell?

THE TEMPEST

William Shakespeare

Ariel, a magical spirit, is sent by Prospero, the Duke of Milan, to warn the men who overthrew that they will get their just punishment in due course.

Ariel:

You are three men of sin, whom Destiny,
That hath to instrument this lower world
And what is in't, the never-surfeited sea
Hath caused to belch up you; and on this island
Where man doth not inhabit; you 'mongst men
Being most unfit to live. I have made you mad;
And even with such-like valour men hang and drown
Their proper selves.

(The men draw their swords)

You fools! I and my fellows
Are ministers of Fate: the elements,
Of whom your swords are temper'd, may as well
Wound the loud winds, or with bemock'd-at stabs
Kill the still-closing waters, as diminish
One dowle that's in my plume: my fellow-ministers
Are like invulnerable. If you could hurt,
Your swords are now too massy for your strengths
And will not be uplifted. But remember—
For that's my business to you—that you three
From Milan did supplant good Prospero;
Exposed unto the sea, which hath requit it,
Him and his innocent child: for which foul deed
The powers, delaying, not forgetting, have
Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures,
Against your peace. Thee of thy son, Alonso,
They have bereft; and do pronounce by me:
Lingering perdition, worse than any death
Can be at once, shall step by step attend
You and your ways; whose wraths to guard you from—
Which here, in this most desolate isle, else falls
Upon your heads—is nothing but heart-sorrow
And a clear life ensuing.

HAMLET

William Shakespeare

Ophelia is talking to her father about an upsetting conversation with her fiancée, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, who appeared to her disturbed and confused.

Ophelia:

O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted

(Polonius: With what, i' th' name of God?)

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
Ungart' red, and down-gyved to his ankle;
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors- he comes before me.

He took me by the wrist and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As he would draw it. Long stay'd he so.
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
And with his head over his shoulder turn'd
He seem'd to find his way without his eyes,
For out o' doors he went without their help
And to the last bended their light on me.