



Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama

Aeschylus  
**Agamemnon**

A new translation and  
commentary by Philip de May

Introduction to the Greek Theatre  
by P.E. Easterling

Series Editors: John Harrison and Judith Affleck



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# *List of characters*

WATCHMAN	servant of the palace at Argos
CHORUS	old men of Argos
CLYTAEMNESTRA	queen of Argos, wife of King Agamemnon
HERALD	messenger from the army at Troy
AGAMEMNON	king of Argos and commander of the expedition against Troy
CASSANDRA	daughter of Priam, king of Troy, and Agamemnon's prize of war
AEGISTHUS	cousin to King Agamemnon



*Agamemnon, from the National Theatre production, London, 1981.*

## PROLOGUE (1–39)

The prologue is the part of a tragedy before the entry of the chorus (see **The Chorus** page 4); often a character sets the scene for the audience, who do not necessarily know the play's setting. This play takes place in front of King Agamemnon's palace in Argos; it opens with a speech by a watchman, probably crouching on the palace roof. Since Greek tragedies were performed in daylight, the impression of night is created by the watchman's words. The image of the fire and a lonely beacon with which the trilogy opens (see *Background to the story*) recurs with the procession of massed torches at its close.

**1 an end to this work** The work of the watchman is to stay awake all night and watch for a signal of fire (9–10) that Troy, which has now been under siege by the Greeks for ten years, has been captured.

### The sons of Atreus

**3 Atreidae** A plural word, meaning the two sons of Atreus: Agamemnon, king of Argos, and Menelaus, king of Sparta. Greek heroes are commonly referred to by their patronymic (father's name). Here, as several times in the play, the plural is used to refer to one brother only (see note on 384, line 511).

**8 signal from a fire-beacon** A series of beacons has been stationed between Troy and Argos and will be lit in sequence to relay news of Troy's capture as quickly as possible; later there is a lengthy description of how the relay works (267–302).

### Male and female

**10–11 the authority of/A woman's mind** The woman is Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife: she has authority (see **Authority** page 26) in Argos in her husband's absence. For a woman in ancient Greece to hold any sort of authority was highly irregular (see below) and here is occasioned by Agamemnon's absence. This first mention of Clytaemnestra establishes that though she is a woman, she has qualities that the watchman would expect to find in a man (see **Male and female** pages 30 and 48, line 1597).

### The house

**18 this house** The ancient Greeks often use house (*oikos, domos*) to mean the people inside rather than the building itself; thus 'the house' may signify not the actual palace but the family, past and present, and slaves who live in it. Usually the male head (*kurios*) of the household presides over the house.

**WATCHMAN** I beg the gods for an end to this work,  
 To my year-long vigil. Lying  
 High up on the roof of the Atreidae like a watchdog,  
 I have come to know the throng of nightly stars,  
 Those that bring summer and winter to mankind, 5  
 Lords of light, stars bright in the sky –  
 When they set and when they rise. And all the while  
 I am on my guard for the signal from a fire-beacon,  
 Which will bring a blazing message of flame from Troy –  
 News of its capture; such is the authority of 10  
 A woman's mind: expectant, determined like a man's.  
 My bed, often shifted during the night,  
 Is unvisited by dreams and now sodden with dew,  
 Since fear – not sleep – stands over it,  
 So my eyes never firmly close in sleep. 15  
 Whenever I want to sing or hum,  
 To shape some soothing song as an antidote to sleep,  
 I weep for this house and grieve for its difficulties:  
 It is not managed as well as it once was.  
 But now I wish that the fire of good news would appear 20  
 Through the darkness and put a welcome end to my work.

**22 Hail** The long-awaited beacon is sighted.

**28 cry of joyous welcome** This loud cry (*ololugmos*) is one of joy, usually associated with women, and used to honour the gods (568, 576, 1207) or thank them.

**29 Ilium** is an alternative name for Troy – hence the *Iliad*, Homer’s epic poem set at Troy.

**33 thrown me this triple six** The watchman uses an image from a game. Looking out for the beacon fire has in the end produced the best possible result for him: in gaming language, he has thrown a triple six, the highest throw. Agamemnon too has had his own ‘lucky throw’: he has captured Troy.

**36–7 A great ox/Stand on my tongue** The watchman uses a colloquial metaphor to mean that he will not speak about other goings-on in the palace.

### **The watchman’s speech (1–39)**

- What do we learn about the character and attitudes of the watchman?
- Does he give any clues that all is not well in the house of Atreus? What notes of foreboding can be found in his speech?
- How does the watchman communicate the loneliness and length of his watch?

### **PARODOS (ENTRY OF THE CHORUS) (40–243)**

At this point in the original performance, the Chorus would have entered through the side entrances (*parodoi*) to arrive at the *orchēstra*, the circular dance-floor in front of the stage (see *Introduction to the Greek Theatre*). The *parodos* is both the Chorus’ entrance and their first song: in this translation choral passages are centred. This *parodos* is the longest in extant tragedy; its subject-matter can be divided into four sections: 40–103, 104–48, 149–69, 170–243.

### **The Chorus**

A chorus in Greek tragedy is a group of 12 to 15 unnamed characters who sing and dance together between scenes or *episodes*. Once they enter, they are present for the rest of the play. They express their thoughts on what is currently happening, or they may relate other events which are of relevance to the action. Sometimes they speak during the action itself but they only rarely participate in it (see **The Chorus debate** page 100).

The Chorus in *Agamemnon* are old men of Argos, too old to have accompanied Agamemnon on his expedition against Troy (72–82). They do not know that the watchman has seen the signal from the beacon.

Hail, beacon of the night that signals a light like day;  
You will bring much dancing  
To Argos in thanks for what has happened.  
*Look! Look!* 25  
This is my clear sign to Agamemnon's wife  
To get out of bed and with all speed  
Raise a cry of joyous welcome in the house for this fire-signal,  
If the city of Ilium has been taken,  
As the beacon clearly tells us. 30  
I will make a start by dancing myself  
From pleasure at my master's good fortune,  
Since my beacon-watch has thrown me this triple six.  
If only I may clasp in this hand  
The kindly hand of the master of the house on his return. 35  
As for the rest – I'll keep quiet. A great ox  
Stands on my tongue, though the house itself, had it a voice,  
Could speak most clearly. My words are meant for those  
In the know. Those who are not will find me – forgetful.



(a) **40–103** *In veiled and metaphorical language the Chorus sing of the Greek expedition to punish Paris for abducting Helen and the Trojans for harbouring the couple. They speak of their own weakness and old age, then address Clytaemnestra, asking her why there are now sacrifices being made all over the city.*

### Legal imagery

**41 Priam's mighty prosecutors** During the play the Trojan War is often spoken of as if it were a court case. The defendants are Paris, Priam and Troy; the prosecution Agamemnon and Menelaus, as agents of Zeus, god of hospitality (60–1, 348–9) and justice (356, 507). The charge is Paris' theft of Helen from his host Menelaus (see **Hospitality** page 8, lines 385–6), and Priam and Troy's subsequent harbouring of the couple; in addition, as king of Troy and head of the household (see **The house** page 2), Priam must answer for the actions of his son Paris. On the judge's bench are Zeus and Justice. The defendants are found guilty (515); the sentence is the destruction of Troy (516–17, 786–7), together with the deaths of Paris and Priam (802). Image becomes reality later in the *Oresteia* trilogy, which ends in a trial scene.

### Zeus

**44 Zeus** A king's power traditionally derives from Zeus as king of the gods (*Iliad ii*, 100–8). In his omnipotence Zeus is ultimately responsible for ordering human affairs (1458–60): this belief is also expressed in the opening lines of the *Iliad*. Although his laws are unbending (1535–6), he is benign towards humankind (163–9), just (506–7) and protects the sacred laws (356–7).

### Names for the Greeks

**46 Argive** At the time of the Trojan War, Argos is the largest territory in the Greek world and therefore the Greek force is often called 'Argive'. In the play the Greeks are variously called Argives, Danaans (63) and Achaeans (107) as they are in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The use of these names adds epic resonance to the play.

**48 a loud cry of War** The text has 'Ares' not 'War': Ares is the god of war.

CHORUS

The tenth year this is  
Since Priam's mighty prosecutors,  
Kings Menelaus and Agamemnon, relentless pair of Atreidae,  
Two thrones and two sceptres,  
Honours from Zeus,  
Sent from this land  
The Argive fleet of a thousand ships,  
A force to champion their cause,  
Yelling a loud cry of War from the heart –

40

45



*The Chorus, from the National Theatre production, London, 1981.*

## The language of the Chorus

**49–54 Like vultures** The language and imagery that Aeschylus uses are often rich and complex, nowhere more so than in the choral odes (see **Legal imagery** page 6): images can work on several different levels (see notes on 404, 714 and 957; **An urgent warning** page 62), and at times the distinction between reality and image is blurred (421–7); there is also frequent use of metaphor, for example ‘pulling at their winged oars’ (52) for flying. Here the Chorus imagine that two vultures (the sons of Atreus) find that their young (Helen) have been stolen from their nest.

- What might this image for Helen suggest about the way a wife was viewed by the family into which she married? What other impressions does the image create?

**55–6 high up some Apollo/Or Pan or Zeus** Apollo may be associated with birds in his role as god of prophecy, which often involves reading the flight of birds (see **Omens** page 14); Pan lives in wild countryside, including the mountains; Zeus lives on the heights of Mount Olympus and sees everything (see **Zeus** page 6).

## The Furies

**58 a Fury** The birds’ cries cause one of the gods to send a Fury against the thief. The Furies (*Erinyes*) are goddesses of vengeance, most often for murder: they hound the victim’s murderer and family until he is avenged. In the concluding play of this trilogy, the *Eumenides*, they form the Chorus. Here the Chorus see the Atreidae as avenging *Erinyes* sent by Zeus (60–2) to exact punishment from Paris for his abuse of hospitality (see below).

## Hospitality

**60 guardian of hospitality** The relationship between host and guest is accorded great importance in the Greek world and is sacred to Zeus (see **Zeus** page 6). A host is responsible for his guest; thus the guest owes a sacred obligation towards his host: together they are ‘guest-friends’. This mutual obligation can be passed down the generations (in *Iliad vi*, 144–236 the Greek Diomedes encounters the Trojan Glaucus, but they do not fight as their fathers were guest-friends). Paris’ breach of this relationship with Menelaus by his abduction of Helen ensures the righteousness of Agamemnon’s cause (60) and helps justify eventual Trojan defeat (380–6).

**62 much married** Helen marries Menelaus, then Paris; some legends also have her first marrying Theseus, and finally Paris’ brother Deiphobus.

Like vultures high above their nests	
Sorrowing for their young far from home,	50
Soaring, circling,	
Pulling at their winged oars:	
Their vigil over the nest,	
Their exertion for their young – wasted.	
But high up some Apollo	55
Or Pan or Zeus hearing the grief of his neighbours,	
The shrill lament voiced by the birds,	
Sends a Fury, to bring vengeance at last	
Upon the transgressors.	
So mighty Zeus, guardian of hospitality,	60
Sends the sons of Atreus after Paris	
For the sake of a woman much married.	

**63 Danaans and Trojans alike** The Chorus stress the suffering endured by both the Danaans (see note on 46) and Trojans, a sentiment expressed often in the *Iliad* and in tragedy: there is no romantic notion that victory comes without suffering on both sides.

**66 in the first engagements** That is, right from the start of the Trojan War. The Greek *proteleia* (first engagements) often refers to the rites preliminary to marriage, though Helen and Paris are already married (684–6) when the fighting starts.

**69–70 Not with burnt offerings/Nor by pouring from unburnt libations** Offerings of food and drink are made to placate angry gods. The Chorus explain that in this case no offerings of any type will help avert the ‘inexorable’ anger of Zeus and the Furies (see **The Furies** page 8), who are angry at Paris’ abuse of hospitality (60) in stealing Helen.

**72 With no honour** The idea that war is where honour is won (106) is traditional: one of Homer’s epithets for war is ‘where men win glory’.

**78 there is no fighting here** The text has ‘nor is Ares at his post’ (see note on 48).

**80 on three feet** The Chorus mean their own two feet plus their staff. This image is found in the Sphinx’s riddle solved by Oedipus: ‘What has four feet in the morning, two at midday and three in the evening?’ The answer is ‘man’: he crawls on all fours as a baby, walks on two feet in the prime of life and uses a stick as he grows old.

He inflicts the struggles on Danaans and Trojans alike,  
     Numerous and exhausting,  
     Knees strained in the dust, 65  
 Spear-shafts splintered in the first engagements.  
     Things are as they now are  
 And move towards fulfilment of their destiny.  
     Not with burnt offerings  
     Nor by pouring from unburnt libations 70  
 Will anyone charm away inexorable anger.  
  
     With no honour in our aged flesh,  
     Left behind at that time by the expedition,  
 We remain, propping our childlike strength  
     On our staffs. 75  
     The new marrow  
     Pushing up within our breasts  
 Is that of old men: there is no fighting here.  
 Extreme old age, its leaves already withering,  
     Makes its journey on three feet. 80  
     As unsteady as a child,  
     It drifts like a daydream.

## A silent presence

**83 But you, daughter of Tyndareus** The Chorus address Clytaemnestra directly: this is the first reference to the possibility that she is on stage (see **Clytaemnestra's entrance** page 24). It is unusual for a character to enter unannounced (see **Character introduction** page 42, note on 1549) during a choral ode, but there are no absolute rules or conventions in the plays of fifth-century Athens.

Clytaemnestra seems to be organising sacrifices (87, 91, 101) which are visible to them: she may therefore – possibly with attendants – be busy with rituals at altars on stage. The sacrifices are mentioned again (247, 575). Tyndareus is Clytaemnestra's father: her mother is Leda (see note on 887), who is also Helen's mother.

**88 All the gods** Various gods watch over the city: 'Those above' are those that live on Mount Olympus or elsewhere, 'those below' are the chthonic gods, those that live below in the Underworld.

**90 the agora** The market-place (*agora*) is the town centre where people shop, meet and pass the time. It is a public place and therefore its gods are contrasted with 'Those of the home'.

**95 sacred oils** Certain oils are valued for the soothing fragrance they give off when burnt, and are often used to accompany a sacrifice (see **Sacrifice** page 22), either to please the gods by their fragrance or to impress them that such a valuable substance is being burnt in their honour.

**99–102 anxiety** An atmosphere of anxiety already established by the watchman (1–9, 36–9) is now reinforced by the Chorus, even though they have explained that Zeus supports Agamemnon's case against Troy (60–1) and will ensure justice.

- Is it clear what the Chorus are anxious about?

But you, daughter of Tyndareus,  
 Queen Clytaemnestra,  
 What is it? What news? What have you heard? 85  
 What news do you trust that  
 You bid sacrifices be burned all around?  
 All the gods that watch over our city,  
 Those above, those below,  
 Those of the home, those of the agora – 90  
 All their altars burn with offerings.  
 In this direction and in that  
 Torch flames reach as high as the heavens,  
 Fed with the pure, soothing comfort  
 Of sacred oils 95  
 Mixed deep inside the palace.  
 Of these matters tell us  
 What you can and may,  
 And cure us of our anxiety,  
 Which at times rises malevolent; 100  
 But because of the sacrifices you now proclaim,  
 Hope is forcing back the insatiable worry  
 And the soul-destroying grief from my heart.



(b) **104–48** *The Chorus now sing of the Greek army as it sets out for Troy and the omen that occurs while it is assembled at the port of Aulis (see map, page x) waiting to board the ships: two eagles fly out and devour a pregnant hare. Calchas, the army prophet, interprets the omen and predicts that Artemis will demand a sacrifice in return for the dead hare.*

## Metre

### **104–6 I have it in me ... / ... Persuasiveness/Breathes down on me**

These words, like the invocations to the Muse at the opening of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, suggest poetic or prophetic inspiration, though the Chorus later imply that they themselves witnessed the events of which they speak (234). In the original Greek of lines 104–48 the Chorus use a *dactylic* metre similar to that of Homer, which gives their song epic resonance; lines 40–103 are *anapaests* – a sort of chanted, marching rhythm. The choral odes, however, are made up of a variety of metres, which are known collectively as *lyric*. The metre for ordinary dialogue in tragedy is *iambic*.

## Omens

**105 The fine omen** Omens indicate the wishes of the gods: those skilled in reading them can discover the gods' will. Common omens are: the unusual behaviour of birds or animals; the sudden appearance of birds in the sky; thunder and lightning (especially in a clear sky). Many omens feature birds, perhaps because they live in the sky, just as the gods do. The eagle (111) is closely associated with Zeus because of its majesty (power, size and speed) and the fact that it is difficult to escape.

**108 Hellas** The Greek name for Greece as a whole, used from the seventh century BC to the present day.

**109 Teucer** was the first king of Troy.

**113 on the right, the spear-side** Birds flying on the right-hand side, the hand that holds the spear, constitute a favourable omen.

## Optimism and pessimism

**117 Cry out, cry out in anguish, but may good prevail** The text has *ailinon*, a word uttered in lamentation: this refrain rounds off each of the three verses in this section of the *parodos* (117, 131, 148). The Chorus are often pessimistic (see note on 99–102; lines 439–56, 948–73), but make up for this with an overall optimism that Zeus (see **Zeus** page 6, lines 149–69, note on 164) and Justice (756) will ensure the proper outcome. Despite the overall positive nature of this omen, the choral refrain (117) expressing hope is also sensitive to the suffering anticipated in the violent destruction of the hare and her brood (see note on 121; lines 115, 122–30; **Optimism and pessimism** page 60).

- What are we to understand by 'good' (117, 131, 148)?

I have it in me to sing of a command over men in their prime and  
 The fine omen on their journey, for still a divine Persuasiveness 105  
 Breathes down on me, though my old age leaves me fit for bravery  
     Only in song. The twin-throned majesty of the Achaeans,  
         Like-minded leaders of Hellas' youth,  
 Are sped on their way by a bird-omen against the land of Teucer,  
         Hands of vengeance on their spears: 110  
         A king of birds for each king of ships,  
             One dark, one white tailed.  
 Appearing near the palace on the right, the spear-side,  
         They rest visible to all,  
 Feeding on a mother-hare, her swollen belly pregnant with young, 115  
         Cut short on her final dash.  
         *Cry out, cry out in anguish, but may good prevail.*

## Calchas

**118 The army's noble seer** Calchas accompanies the army and interprets the gods' wishes. It is Calchas who explains at the start of the *Iliad* that Apollo is angry with the Achaeans: his explanation leads to the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles, which is the starting-point of events in that poem.

## Meaning of the omen

**121 In time this expedition** Calchas interprets the omen (121–4): the two eagles are the sons of Atreus (see note on 3) and they will feast on the hare (Troy) and its 'brood' (the Trojans). This suggests the terrible suffering of the Trojans, in particular the women and children within the city. The cruelty of this omen is like that in *Iliad ii*, 303–32, when a snake devours a sparrow and her young at the departure of the Greeks from Aulis for Troy.

**125 may no divine malice** Calchas is worried that the gods may begrudge Greek success; thus at the outset of the expedition he has expressed his fears, fears that are echoed by the Chorus now during the *parodos* (see note on 99–102). The gods are thought to keep human success in check by causing the downfall of those who have too much of it (see **Resentment** page 40), just as the Greek army is now checking Troy for breaking the laws of man and god (see **Hospitality** page 8).

## Artemis

**127 holy Artemis** is daughter of Zeus and goddess of the hunt; despite this, she is also the protectress of animals (132–5). Like all the gods, she can try to oppose Zeus (128) or reach a compromise with him (136), but Zeus has ultimate power.

**128 father's winged hunters** These are the eagles (111), called 'hunters' here because they hunt down the hare.

## Apollo the Healer

**138 I cry *i-ē* to Apollo the Healer!** Apollo is god of prophecy and healing. Perhaps the prophet Calchas addresses him as his patron or he may invoke Apollo in his capacity of 'Healer' because, as Artemis' brother, he may be able to assuage her anger. Apollo is frequently invoked by the cry '*i-ē*'.

- Does Calchas imply that what happens is fixed or that Apollo can prevent it?

The army's noble seer watched them feasting on the hare  
 And took them for the two warlike Atreidae,  
 Twins in bravery, sovereign leaders, and he spoke 120  
 In prophecy thus: 'In time this expedition will take  
 The city of Priam and a violent doom  
 Will plunder the city's treasure,  
 All the heaped possessions in its towers.  
 But may no divine malice cast a shadow over 125  
 The great army forged to curb Troy;  
 For out of pity holy Artemis bears a grudge  
 Against her father's winged hunters  
 Which sacrifice the piteous hare and brood unborn;  
 She hates the eagles' feast.' 130  
*Cry out, cry out in anguish, but may good prevail.*  
 'Such is the fair goddess' love  
 For the cubs of fierce lions, too dangerous to touch,  
 And such her delight too in the suckling young  
 Of all animals that roam the fields, 135  
 That she asks that these signs be fulfilled.  
 Favourable and yet flawed are the omens:  
 I cry *i-ē* to Apollo the Healer!

## Sacrifice at Aulis

**140 hold the ships back interminably** An omen at Aulis is mentioned in the *Iliad* (see note on 121). The Chorus' version is different, however: the fleet is delayed by adverse winds (see note on 173) and then Agamemnon's daughter Iphigeneia is sacrificed (191–233).

## A cycle of vengeance

**141–4** Calchas speaks in grim terms of a 'second sacrifice' to come (141); his prophecy is enigmatic, but he is referring to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia; the first sacrifice was the dead hare (129) and now Iphigeneia will be sacrificed as payment to Artemis for its death. This second sacrifice becomes part of a cycle of vengeance and we hear in cryptic terms of the 'discord' (142) it will cause and of a fearsome individual back in the palace at Argos, the 'one/Who runs the house' (142–3) who waits to take revenge for this sacrifice of a child (144). Though this is the primary meaning, Iphigeneia is not the only child whose death requires vengeance: it will later (1067–8) become apparent that the children of Thyestes have yet to be avenged (see *Background to the story*).

(c) **149–69** *The Chorus break from events at Aulis to sing in praise of Zeus and his willingness to help mankind reach understanding.*

## Third generation of gods

**156–60 Not even he** refers to Uranus and 'he who came next' to Cronos. The first king of the gods, Uranus (*ouranos* means 'heavens') is deposed by his son Cronos, who eats his own children to ensure that he is not deposed in turn, but his youngest son Zeus is rescued and grows up to overthrow his father. This story is told in the *Theogony* by Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer, which describes a powerful and just Zeus establishing order from primitive chaos.

**160 Matched and thrown** The metaphor comes from a wrestling match, in which one has to throw one's opponent three times to win.

## Learning and suffering

**164 his binding law** The Chorus are essentially optimistic (see **Optimism and pessimism** page 14). They realise that men suffer for their actions, but they believe that there is purpose in this suffering: men will learn from it. Out of this learning process come understanding (162–3) and knowledge.

**169 bench** The image is of the helmsman guiding the ship as he sits on his bench; in the same way the gods guide mankind to understanding.

Let her not cause the winds to blow against the Danaans,  
 To hold the ships back interminably without sailing, 140  
 Nor hasten a second sacrifice, without feasting, without music,  
 Born to create discord, afraid of no man. For the one  
 Who runs the house, formidable and deceitful, is waiting  
 To rise up again: child-avenging Anger that will not forget.<sup>7</sup>  
 Such fateful events did Calchas cry out to the royal house 145  
 Together with great blessings as he read the birds  
 Along the journey; in accord with this  
*Cry out, cry out in anguish, but may good prevail.*

Zeus, whosoever he may be, if by this name  
 He is pleased to be invoked, 150  
 By this I address him:  
 I cannot – as I weigh in the balance all things –  
 Compare anything with Zeus,  
 When there is true need  
 To throw off the vain burden of anxiety; 155  
 Not even he who was great in times past,  
 Bursting with belligerent audacity,  
 He shall not be spoken of: he is no more;  
 And he who came next is gone,  
 Matched and thrown three times. 160  
 But Zeus – whoever cries out a loyal victory-song to him  
 Shall reach complete understanding.

He set mortals on the road to understanding,  
 He made ‘Learning comes through suffering’ his binding law.  
 Pain that recalls past woes 165  
 Drips into our hearts while we sleep;  
 Even the unwilling come to understand this.  
 The gods force this kindness on us  
 As they sit at their august bench.

**(d) 170–243** *The Chorus return to events at Aulis: Agamemnon's response to Calchas' interpretation of the omen, his dilemma and his eventual decision. However, they stop short of describing events to their conclusion. The parodos proper ends with expressions of fear: the Chorus know that the bulk of Calchas' prophecy has come true (139–42), but are reluctant to think about the final part (142–4) of it.*

**173 Added his breath to this adverse wind** Agamemnon takes no action to help the fleet, in effect assisting the adverse winds to keep the ships penned at Aulis.

**176–8 Chalcis ... Aulis ... Strymon** See map on page x.

**185 A remedy yet more grim** The Chorus do not explain the remedy themselves.

- Why do the Chorus choose to explain Calchas' remedy through Agamemnon's words (192–203) rather than their own?

**188–9 beating/The ground** This gesture of discontent is also found in *Odyssey ii*.

**196 a daughter's** Iphigeneia, who was at home at Argos, had to be summoned to Aulis. In one version of the story (Euripides' play *Iphigeneia at Aulis*), Agamemnon summons her on the pretext that she is to be married to Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors who went to Troy.

**200 It is right for you to insist** It would be right and proper for the chiefs to be angry if Agamemnon refuses to sacrifice Iphigeneia and instead betrays the fleet (198–9) by cancelling the expedition against Troy.

And then the elder commander 170  
     Of the Achaean ships,  
     Blaming no prophet,  
 Added his breath to this adverse wind,  
     While the Achaean army  
 Laboured: no sailing, supplies diminishing, 175  
     Stuck opposite Chalcis  
 On the beaches of Aulis which echo to the roar.

There blew in from Strymon winds of  
     Hunger, ill-mooring, foul idleness  
     Causing the men to stray, 180  
     Merciless to cables and ships:  
     They made time twice as long,  
 Wearing down, tearing at the flower of the Argives.

But then the seer cried out to the leaders  
     A remedy yet more grim 185  
     Than the bitter weather,  
     Citing Artemis.  
     The Atreidae, beating  
 The ground with their staffs, did not  
     Hold back their tears. 190

And then the sovereign king replied:  
 ‘Heavy is my heart if I do not obey,  
     Heavy too, if  
 I butcher my child, pride of my house,  
     Smearing a father’s hands 195  
 In a daughter’s blood-bath at the altar.

    Is either course without evil?  
 How can I become traitor to the fleet,  
     Fail the alliance?  
     It is right for you to insist 200  
     In angry frustration  
 On a sacrifice of virgin blood to calm the winds.  
     May good come of it.’



## Agamemnon's dilemma

**204 he buckled on the harness of necessity** Agamemnon faces a tragic dilemma, for he cannot fulfil both his public duty as a commander and private duty as a father: whatever action he takes, he will do wrong. The Chorus use an image of an ox attached to a yoke by means of a harness, to illustrate how Agamemnon (the ox) is tied to necessity (the yoke) by means of his actions (the harness).

- What factors must Agamemnon take into account when deciding whether to sacrifice Iphigeneia?
- Does it seem that Agamemnon truly has a choice?

## Sacrifice

**210 to be the one to sacrifice** Sacrifice is a common ritual of Greek community life and has two main purposes: to thank the gods for their help or to ask them for it. Sacrifices follow a routine: an animal (usually domesticated) is sprinkled with corn and wine, and led to be sacrificed (it must appear to go willingly), perhaps by a priest on the altar in front of a temple or the head of the household (see **The house** page 2) at the altar in the home. The animal is then killed, its blood is collected and poured onto the ground; the edible meat is cooked and shared out, the inedible parts (mainly the bones and the fat) are burnt for the gods to enjoy the savour of the roasting, which might be enhanced by aromatic oils (see note on 95). For Agamemnon to treat his own daughter like a sacrificial animal is 'evil', 'unholy' and sacrilegious (205–9). He ignores her prayers (214), muzzles her (221) and stifles her cries: all of this would mark him out for inevitable justice (236).

**212 a woman** Helen.

**228 Like the subject of a painting** The Chorus imagine that while looking at a painting, their eyes are automatically drawn to the character at its centre, who seems on the verge of speaking. In the same way the eyes of those present at the sacrifice are drawn to Iphigeneia as she tries to speak.

- Does the vividness of the language suggest the Chorus were present at the sacrifice (234)?

**230–1 at her father's house/In the men's lavish quarters** A reference to a royal girl in the men's quarters of the palace is surprising. Respectable women or girls would not appear there, whether to sing the traditional hymn to Apollo at the end of the meal or for any other reason.

- What is the effect of this detail in the narrative?

**232 libation** A libation is an offering of liquid to the gods. All or part of the liquid (wine, milk, olive oil or honey) is poured onto the ground or an altar. The third libation (see **A thank-offering to Zeus** page 102) is reserved for Zeus.

But when he buckled on the harness of necessity,  
 And blew his thoughts down an evil course, 205  
     Unholy, unsacred – from that moment  
     He set his mind on boundless audacity.  
 For such derangement emboldens men –  
     Wretched, evil thinking, seed of sorrow;  
 And so he brought himself to be the one to sacrifice 210  
     His daughter, to safeguard  
     A war of vengeance over a woman,  
     A first sacrifice for the fleet.  
  
     Her prayers, her cries of ‘father’,  
     Her innocent youth, the leaders, 215  
     Intent on war, valued at nothing;  
 After a prayer her father told his attendants  
     To lift her like a goat  
     Face downwards over the altar  
 – As she fell about his robes in desperation – 220  
     And with a muzzle over the soft curve  
     Of her mouth to prevent  
     Any utterance, any curse on the house.  
  
 She waits voiceless under constraint of the gag;  
     As her saffron-dyed robe trailed down, 225  
     She hit each of the sacrificers  
     With a pitiable shot from her eye,  
     Like the subject of a painting  
     Ever wishing to speak,  
 For she had often sung to them at her father’s house 230  
 In the men’s lavish quarters, still unviolated and with pure voice;  
 As her beloved father poured the third libation, she would lovingly  
     Sing Apollo’s joyous hymn.