

STATIUS

THEBAID

A Song of Thebes

Translated, with Introductions,
Commentary, and a Glossary by

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Book VII

1-89*

Olympus: Mercury's Mission to Mars

90-144

Argos (in Nemea): Prayer and Panic

Adrastus' Prayer (90-104)

Mars and Panic (105-144)

145

145-226 Olympus: Bacchus' Plea

227-

227-397 Thebes: Preparations for War

227-242 Eteocles Hears News of the Invasion

243-373 Antigônê and Phorbas: The View from the Walls

Catalogue of Theban Leaders and Troops (243-356)

Memories of Laius (356-367)

The Catalogue Continues (368-373)

374-397 Eteocles Addresses the Theban Army

398

398-451 Argos: Marching to Thebes

Evil Omens (398-423)

Fording the Asopos (424-440)

Campgrounds: Nightfall (441-451)

452-469

Thebes: The Last Night

* Line numbers refer to the translation.

470–627 Argos (encamped outside Thebes): The Last Hope
Dawn: Jocasta's Plea (470–561)
Bacchus' Tigers (562–627)

628–823 The Battlefield: The Fighting Begins in Earnest
The Poet's Invocation (628–631)
Scenes of Battle (632–648)
The Poet's Address to Eunaëus (649–652)
Eunaëus vs. Capaneus (652–683)
The Poet's Eulogy of Eunaëus (683–687)
Eteocles vs. Polynices: A Quick Glimpse (688–689)
Amphiaraus: Deeds and Descent
to the World Below (690–823)

INTRODUCTION

As the gateway into the second half of the epic, Book VII provides many links back to previous scenes and much foreshadowing of events to come. In marked contrast to Book VI, with its single location and varied postponement of the inevitable, VII features multiple settings, a frenzied pace, and the two armies engaged in battle at last. In all, there are seven changes of scene in Book VII; the eight resultant sections may be grouped into three sequences.

The first sequence (Olympus-Argos-Olympus) picks up narrative threads left dangling in earlier books, serving to reinforce and finish off the first half of the epic. Equally, this first section accelerates the pace of the narrative. The two Olympian scenes give us contrasting portraits of Mars and Bacchus; most remarkable, however, is the difference we see in Jupiter.

In Book I, Jupiter seemed mild enough; but, in that first encounter, what Jupiter said and how the assembled gods reacted made it clear that his mild manner was deceptive. Now Jupiter reacts vigorously to Argos' delay in attacking Thebes; but, once he has issued his orders and seen Mars hurry to carry them out, Jupiter loses interest (7.84-85). In the second Olympian scene, Jupiter promises Bacchus that Thebes will not fall just at present but that Juno, patron of Argos, "shall moan" (221). As always in the *Thebaid*, whether in the mortal or the immortal dimension, whether it is mindless or willful, power is synonymous with violence and destruction.

In the second sequence of scenes (Thebes-Argos-Thebes-Argos), the poet depicts the simultaneous activities of Thebes and Argos, switching back and forth between the city as she prepares for attack and the army as it advances into Theban territory and establishes camp. Notable in this sequence is the elaborate Catalogue of Theban Leaders and Troops, which balances that for the Argives presented in Book IV (first book of the second quarter of the epic, as VII is of the third). This sequence culminates in a pair of scenes taking place simultaneously inside and outside the Argive camp: Jocasta, a female counterpart to Oedipus, comes from Thebes to the camp in a desperate attempt to mediate between her sons while, outside, the Fury Tisiphonê uses two tigresses sacred to Bacchus to ensure that hostilities erupt into full-scale battle.

The final section, set on the battlefield, is in itself a sequence of scenes, consisting of a new Poet's Invocation (balancing the invocation that begins the epic) and a highly varied account of the first major engagement. Here, in traditional epic manner, Statius includes both quick sketches featuring a variety of characters and an extended narrative focussed on a single hero, the seer Amphiaraus. His *aristeia* (demonstration of heroic excellence) and *katabasis* (descent to the Underworld) bring Book VII (though not this first day of battle) to a climactic finish.

BOOK VII

AND SO, AS THEY delayed the onset of Tyrian war,
Jupiter bent his heartless gaze on Pelasgi and shook
his head—a sharp motion which made high stars fall swooning
and Atlas cry out as his neck felt the added pressure.
Then Jove addressed Tegea's speedy nursling like this:

5

"Go, dear boy! with a rushing leap, swoop into the North Wind's
core! Travel as far as Bistonian homes, as the pole and zone
of the Snowy Star where the Parrhasian feeds the storms
of winter and our rain to her fire forbidden to Odean:
once there, whether Mars has laid his spear aside and is
catching his breath—though he scorns rest!—or whether, as I suspect,
with weapons and bugles in hand, he's wallowing, insatiate,
in the blood of his pet tribe: make haste, proclaim his parent's
warning and anger—don't mince words! Was he not told, long since,
'Kindle Inachian ranks, all that which the Isthmian Umbo
holds apart, that hoarse Malea's anger roars around'?"

10

Having barely set foot outside walls and gates, their boys
are at worship! You'd think they'd *returned* from war, they cheer
so heartily, hunkering down for the Rites of the Outraged Tomb!

Is this your battle lust, Marcher? the discus hits, bounces,
clangs; in bout after bout, Oebalian boxing gloves let fly.

20

If frenzy, the crazed orgasm of iron that makes him swell
is his *own*, he'll blast blameless cities to cinders, an evil
wielder of iron and fire; peoples imploring the Thunderer he'll
stretch out in the dust; he'll suck the whole wretched world dry!

25

Now, as the anger's *ours*—he's gone off war, he's at ease!
But, if he won't precipitate action and, faster than my word
of command, fling Danaan lines at Tyrian walls, then let
him—I make no *cruel* threat!—be a deity meek
and mild, his unbridled passions turned out to pasture;

30

5 *Tegea's speedy nursling: Mercury.*

13 *his pet tribe: the Thracians; his parent: Jupiter.*

14–16 *told, long since: See 3.228ff., where Jupiter resolved upon war between Argos (here, Inachian ranks) and Thebes.*

17 *their boys: the Argive host, engaged in Games at Nemea.*

19 *the Rites of the Outraged Tomb: the Nemean Games in honor of Archemorus (his story told at 5.505ff.), whose tomb now stands for the boy himself, outraged by his untimely accidental death.*

let him turn in his team and sword to me, let him lose
the right to shed blood. I'll smile on the lands and decree
peace for all. Tritonia will do for Ogygia's war."

He had done, and Cyllenius was nearing the fields of Thrace.
But, as he glides down from the pole of the Arctic Portal,
the region's perpetual tempest—its ranks of clouds deployed
all across the sky, North Wind with his teeth bared—drives him
this way and that; volleys of hail rattle against his golden
cloak, nor is his broad Arcadian brim protection enough.

Here the infamous Barren Woods, and the Shrine of Mars
(he shivers to see it), where, on the blind side of Haemus,
the comfortless lodge is hedged round by a thousand Rages.
Iron the studs and joists in its walls, iron the sills scraped
by the gates, while roof beams bear down on columns iron-bound.
Lighting on this, the brightness of Phoebus dims, the very
sunshine dreads this place—its pitiless glare saddens the stars.

Its guard suits the site: from the outermost gates spring mad
Assault and blind Atrocity, Angers flushing dark red,
and bloodless Fear; not far off, with blades concealed, lurk
Ambush and, clutching her two-edged sword, Insurrection. Threats
beyond count make the courtyard ring, Valor most stern
stands in their midst; Rage gloats, and Death in full armor, her face
streaming with gore, sits close by. The only offering on those
altars is blood shed in war, and fire kindled from pillaged towns.

Spoils of nations wherever one looks,
and captured tribes
displayed up on temple pediments;
wrought in iron,
fragments of city gates
and of stout-keeled battleships,
chariots empty, faces crushed by chariots—
one
almost hears the groans!
Yes, violence in all shapes, all
types of wounds. Everywhere, Mars is on view,
but nowhere
with features relaxed:
thus had the Blacksmith's divine artistry

imaged him forth
 (this was before the adultery came to light—
 he'd yet to atone
 in the net-hung bed for his vile seduction).

Scarce had the winged Messenger started his search for the Lord
 of this temple when—! Earth quaked, and, his waters broken off, 65
 horned Hebrus bellowed. Horses bred for battles, which disturbed
 the valley, went streaming over the trembling grasses—a sign
 Mars is near; closed gates of everlasting adamant sprang
 open. Gorgeous in Hyrcanian gore, the War God
 himself swept by in his chariot, staining his broad acres 70
 with a ghastly splatter, spoils and weeping groups in his train.
 Woods and deep snow make him room. Swarthy Bellona guides
 his team with her reeking hand; with her long spear, she urges them
 on to exhaustion.

Cyllenê's offspring froze at the sight
 and lowered his gaze: "*Father himself would experience awe* 75
and, were he near, curb his threats and suppress such commands!"

"What decree from Jove" (the Arms Lord gets in first) "do you
 bring from the great sky *now*? For you don't willingly come
 here, coz, to my blizzard zone: dewy Maenalus—*that's*
 more to your taste, and the calm air of summery Lycaeus." 80

The other conveyed their Father's resolve. No long delay:
 just as they were—panting, lathered, in harness—Mars whipped up
 his flying horses, indignant himself at Greeks hanging
 back from battle. The Father on High beheld and, anger
 ebbing already, ponderous, slow, turned his gaze elsewhere. 85
 So too, once East Wind has blown itself out, leaving the waves
 defeated: an uneasy peace, for the storm, with its last gasp,
 churns up seas as they sink back; wary ships keep their canvas
 reefed, no sailor heaves a sigh of wholehearted relief.

rites in honor of the dead now done, unarmed combats 90
 ended; the crowd, not yet dispersed, fell silent; heroic
 Adrastus, pouring wine on the ground, placated the ashes
 of Archemorus:

62–63 *the adultery*: the affair between his wife, **Venus**, and his brother, **Mars**. The *net-hung bed* refers to **Vulcan's** revenge (*Odyssey* VIII).

90 *unarmed combats*: the contests of the Nemean **Games**, as opposed to the oncoming war. See Book VI, and especially 6.250 where the same phrase is used.

"Little one, grant that this your day
 become a festival no less frequent than that of maimed
 Pelops nearing Arcadian altars and, with his ivory
 knuckles, knocking at Elean shrines; no less than the Snake's swim
 to Castalian springs, or the soul's to his pine-clad Lechaeum.
 We, child—now an army in haste—we keep you from gloomy
 Avernus and instead link these sad solemnities
 to eternal stars. Do but grant that Boeotia falls to our
 steel, and you'll be all the more worthy of high altars;
 then, as a God, you'll see your divinity worshipped throughout
 Inachia—called as witness in captive Thebes as well."

By the leader for all, by each man for himself were these same
 vows made.

Now, with chariot swinging close, the Marcher was cruising
 Ephyre's coast where Acrocorinthos, lifting its head
 high in air, casts its shadow on either sea in turn.
 Mars bade Panic—but one in the dire mob of his comrades—
 to go on ahead of his team: none so apt to instill
 gasping alarm or to make the mind veer away from the truth;
 too many to count, this monster's voices and hands—his face
 is whatever he wills; all things are believed on his "good"
 authority; his attacks terrorize—cities go mad.
 If Panic suggests there are two suns, that the stars will soon fall,
 that the ground is swaying, that ancient forests are on the move,
 presto! poor fools think they've seen it.

Panic devised
 a shrewd new scheme: *Make the Nemean plain boil up
 with illusory dust!*

The leaders looked round, aghast: *dark
 cloud overhead!*

With illusory clamor, Panic heightened
 their growing dismay—mimicked arms, men, horses' hoofbeats,
 seeded the shifting breezes with terrifying war whoops. Hearts
 jumped. The ranks cried out, wavering, undecided:

"What's
 that noise? or am I just hearing things?"

96–97 The *Snake* is the **Python**, and the *soul* that of Melicertes (See **Palaemon**).

106 *Acrocorinthos*: citadel of **Corinth** (575 meters), a sheer limestone mountain south of the city.
 See commentary at vv. 15–16.

“What makes the stars
stall in a sphere of dust?”
“Surely Ismenian troops wouldn’t—?
off their own bat?”

“Yes, they would! they’re coming!”

“That gutsy? *Thebes*?”

“**Sure!** they sit on their thumbs while we tend our ghosts and graves!” 125

Thus Panic in men aghast. What varied guises he wears
among the squadrons—now one of Pisa’s thousands,
now a Pylian, now looks Laconian—swears the foe’s
upon them, throws them into confusion with baseless fear. 130
(No alarm’s false to the frightened!)

But, when Mars himself
struck them witless; when, swept round the sacred valley’s rim
in a whirlwind rush, he three times brandished his spear, three times
cracked the whip at his team, three times clapped shield against chest:
“To arms! to arms!”

Madmen! Each seized his own, anyone’s—! 135

No drill’s observed: they switched helmets, drove their own teams
under another man’s yoke. In every heart, savage lust
for murder and mayhem ran wild (nothing blocks those hell-bent!).
Headlong they raced, made up their lost time. So shores bustle
when a wind rises and the time’s come to leave harbor: sails 140
flapping everywhere, sheets everywhere dangling loose;
oars float, every anchor, weighed, “floats” to the water’s calm
surface; now those out midway on the ocean’s swell look
back at the sweet land, back at companions left far astern.

BACCHUS HAD NOTICED Inachian cohorts rolling en masse 145
at top speed. Now he groans and turns to his Tyrian
city, remembers his nurturing home, the paternal flames.
Normally flushed, his features reflect his heart-heavy distress;
neither garland nor curls are in place, and the thyrsus slips
out of his grasp; from his horns, unnoticed, the bunches of grapes drop. 150
Just as he is, disfigured by tears and a dishevelled cloak, he
stands before Jove (who happened, just then, to have the sky
to himself). Though he’s never seen his son in such a state,
the reasons are clear to the father. The suppliant God holds forth:

132 the sacred valley: Vale of **Nemea**. See 6.255ff.

147 his nurturing home, the paternal flames: See **Ino**, **Semelê**.

148 features reflect: **Bacchus** has gone pale.

155 "Do you, Divine Sire Most High, raze your own Thebes? Is your
 Consort so spiteful? Doesn't the land of your dear beloved
 stir your pity—the household deceived, the ashes of my kin?
 Granted, you only grudgingly flung fire from the clouds—we believe
 160 you. But, once more, you bring black conflagrations to our
 lands, prompted by no Stygian oath, no 'whore's' cajoling.
 Where's the line? Pleased or provoked—either way, Father, you
 blast us? Yet you will not go like this to Danaë's
 doorsill, to Parrhasia's glade, or to Leda's Amyclae!
 So am I, as I suspect, of all your progeny the least
 165 respected? Yet, surely I'm the one whose weight you found
 sweet in the bearing, the one you allowed to step over life's
 threshold twice when womb and mothering months were disrupted.

"Plus the fact that my crowd's unwarlike. Basic training?
 Sporadic: they only know *my* sort of drills, of combat—
 170 twining fronds in their hair and twirling to frenzied boxwood
 pipes. They're frightened of brides with thyrsi, of matronly combat:
 how endure bugles and Mars who—look there!—is blazing,
 preparing how many—? What if he led your dear Curetês
 to war and made *them* with their harmless targets go at it?
 175 Worse yet, you picked—were foes in such short supply?—vile
 Argos! Far more painful, Sire, than our actual peril are your
 orders! Are we ruined to make Stepmother's Mycenae rich?

"Well, I give up. But where do you bid them go—my ruined
 180 people's sacraments, rituals, whatever's left to inter
 of my luckless, pregnant mother? Thracian Lycurgus' woods?
 or India—should I, her captor, flee there in defeat?

"Give this refugee safe haven! My brother could see to
 Leto's rock—I don't begrudge him!—anchoring Delos
 185 to the deep sea bed. Tritonia drove hostile waters
 back from *her* citadel. I myself have seen Epaphus
 ruling in power over Eastern tribes. Bugle calls rouse
 secluded Cyllenê and trouble Minoan Mount Ida
 not at all. Why do our altars alone offend you?

156 *Consort: Juno; your dear beloved: Semelê.*

163 *Parrhasia's glade: home of Callisto, who, like Danaë and Leda, bore offspring fathered by Jupiter.*

165–167 See *Semelê*.

171 *brides . . . matronly combat: Young women of Thrace, infuriated by his rejection of them, tore Orpheus apart; Pentheus met his end while spying on the Bacchantes, one of whom Agavê, his mother.*

"Here you had—since my influence now counts little—nights
Herculean, were pleased to enjoy straying Nyctēis' ardor; 190
here the Tyrian tribe and the bull—more lucky than lightning
was for us: at least watch over Agenor's descendants!"

His jealousy made the tranquil Father smile and lift
to his kisses the one on bended knee with hands outstretched;
in turn he offered a soothing response:

"This, child, is not 195
my Consort's counsel, as you allege, nor have I left
myself open to her spiteful demands. We're spun on the Fates'
unshakable wheel; ancient the causes, late-flowering, of war.
Who lulls his anger so deeply asleep, or so sparingly
uses human blood? Heaven's dome, this my own home, 200
ageless with me and eternal, sees how often I put down
lightning tight-wound, how rarely my fire rules the earth. And
more yet: though they'd borne great wrongs in need of righting, I
—grudgingly!—gave Mars the Lapiths, Diana old Calydon
to blast: too much loss! And it's no easy job, recycling 205
so many souls, reviving so many cadavers. But
descendants of Labdacus and of Pelops—it's high time I
rooted them out. You know yourself (to ignore Doric crimes)
how quick Thebes is to jeer at High Gods; at you, too—
but, as you've doused your old anger, I'll say no more. Still, 210
Pentheus wasn't splattered with *his* father's blood, nor was
he guilty of staining *his* mother's bed and begetting
brothers in sin—and yet, he filled your wild woods with shreds
of his flesh. Where then were your tears, your artful pleading?

"Now, I hold no grudge on my own account nor require the dire 215
Oedipodionidēs to die: this is what Heaven and Earth
demand, and Devotion, wounded Trust, and Nature—even
the laws of the Kindly Ones. But, as for this city of yours,
don't you fret. I have not, just yet, decreed that the state

189–191 **Thebes** deserves **Jupiter's** good will, if not for **Bacchus'** sake, then as the home of **Alcmenē**, **Antiope**, and the Theban people, offspring of **Cadmus** (for the ambiguity of the bull, cf. v. 278; see the commentary at 271–281).

204–205 *gave Mars . . . / to blast*: An obscure version of the myth says **Mars** punished the **Lapiths** because **Pirithoüs** neglected to invite the god to his wedding; **Diana** punished **Calydon** by sending the giant boar in revenge for King **Oeneus'** neglect of her rites.

208 *Doric crimes*: those of **Argive Tantalus**.

210 *your old anger*: **Bacchus's** anger at **Pentheus**.

of Aonia must fall. An age will come, more . . . doubtful,
and other avengers. But, for now, Queen Juno shall moan!"

Hearing this, Bacchus recovered spirits and bearing both:
so too, when the sun's bad, the sirocco fierce, rose gardens
droop, scorched; but, if balmy days and breezy zephyrs refresh
the sky, then all their splendor returns, new buds shoot forth,
rich-hued, each shrivelled stalk flaunts its particular glory.

TO ETEOCLES' HORRIFIED ears, meanwhile, a messenger brought
reports, informing him:

"We've spied Greek leaders marching,
their troops in line—not long till they reach Aonian fields!
Wherever they strike, we all tremble and pity the men
of Thebes!"

He detailed each man's pedigree, name and gear.

The king, hiding his fear, demands to hear more—and detests
the teller. Now he decides to muster support with words
and take stock of his own resources.

Aonia, Euboea,
the neighboring farms of Phocis—all these (for such was
Jove's pleasure) Mars had rallied. The signal flew, relayed
far and swift, according to plan. The troops rushed to show
themselves in arms. They took the field which, doomed to war,
spread out right in front of the city, awaiting their frenzies.
No enemy opposition—yet; but, in fearful file,
mothers mounted the walls, from there to point out to their sons
the flashing weapons, their frightening, helmeted fathers.

In a remote and lonely tower Antigônê, too young
for public view, defended her delicate cheeks with a black
veil. Escorting her, one who had once attended Laius
as squire; an old man now, revered by the royal maid.
She spoke first, thus:

"Is there a hope that these detachments
will hold the Pelasgians, father? We hear that Pelops' entire
nation's descending upon us! Tell me—oh please!—of our kings'
foreign allies, for I see what flags our Menoeceus,
what arms our Creon commands, how Haemon, so tall in his bronze
Sphinx-helm, sallies forth from the huge Homoloidan Gate."

This from artless Antigônê; in answer, old Phorbas:

"A thousand bowmen down from cold Tanagra's slopes,
 led by Dryas—look! His arms, snow-white, show a trident 255
 and a crude thunderbolt of gold—by his valor a true son
 of high Orion! (*Far off, I pray, his ancestor's*
omen! Let virgin Diana's old anger be doused!)

Joining
 Our camp and adding their names to this king's lists are
 Ocalea
 Thisbe Medeon, impassably forested Nisa, 260
 circled by calling birds of Dionê's Daughter.

"Next, Eurymedon who, like Faunus, his father, bears
 rustic arms and a pine-bough wreath (needles for horsehair crest!),
 a woodsman to fear—and like to be so in bloody war,
 I'll warrant! In his company: cattle-ranching Erythrae; 265
 men who occupy Scolos and rough, ridge-packed Eteonos;
 men from Hylê's narrow shore; worthies of Schoenos,
 Atalanta's home, who plow the well-known plain where she ran.
 In the Macedonian manner, they brandish pikes of ash
 and light targets that—not so easily!—ward off grave wounds. 270

"But look! there hasten Neptune's clamorous rank and file
 from Onchestus; men Mycalessos nurtures in stands
 of pine, and Palladian Melas, and Hecatê's gurgling
 Gargaphiê; men Haliartos begrudges their young wheat crops—
 she overruns their sprouting acres with rampant rushes. 275
 Their weapons, rough-hewn trunks; helmets, cured lions' masks;
 curves of tree bark serve as their shields. They're in need of a king, so
 our own Amphion (there!) is leading them. Easy to spot him,
 child! marked out by the lyre on his helm, by his ancestral bull, too.
 (Bless your soul, young man!) He's ready to plunge into swordplay, 280
 to stand up bare-chested on behalf of his dear city walls!

"You too, Heliconian throng! you come to add your strength
 to our forces; and you, O Permessus—you too,
 Olmuis, fruitful in your melodious waters—you've armed
 your nurselings (unlikely warriors!). Hear how their flock 285
 warbles their proud patriotic chorale? Like them, when pale
 winter wanes, swans hymn the glittering River Strymon.
 Onward, you zealots! Never shall your praises expire! In
 song everlasting the Muses will call your battles to mind."

He
 paused and, before he resumed, the maiden briefly inquired: 290

"Those two there—what bloodlines bind them? Are they brothers?
They *must* be—their gear's so alike, so equal in air
the height reached by their helm-crests! Would *mine* felt such harmony!"

Smiling, the elder to her:

"You're not the first, Antigônê,
fooled by misleading appearance! Many—for age deceives—have
called them brothers. He's the father, he the son; but
neither acts his age. The nymph Dercetis, shameless
in lusty desire for nuptials, molested Lapithaon long
before his time, a boy untried in bed, ignorant
of conjugal fires. Not long until handsome Alatreus
was born and soon caught up with his father—then in youth's
first flower—took on his features, and blurred their chronology.
So now they both relish the inexact term 'brothers'—
Father more so! He's long enjoyed his 'coming' adulthood!
Three hundred horse the sire has marshalled, his son as many
again—men who have, according to hearsay, deserted
loamy Glisas and Coronia's clay, men who cultivate
fields of grain in Glisas and rows of vines in Coronia.

"But here, look rather at Hypseus, casting his broad shadow
over his high-stepping team, seven-ply bull's-hide shield
on left arm, chest guarded by triple-meshed chain mail—his
chest, for he feels no fear for his back! A lordly ancient
of the forest, his spear: hurled, it always finds its way
through armor and flesh; his hand never misses its mark.

"Sired by Asopos, they say—a father worth watching, that time
when, in spectacular spate, he ripped out bridges in passing;
or when, as his virgin daughter's swollen avenger,
he lashed his waves, outraged at Thunderer as son-in-law!
for they do tell how Aegina, raped from her father's stream,
lay hidden in Jove's encircling arms; the river went mad
(not even Gods have such license!) and prepared to make
furious war on the stars; bursting with reckless anger, he took
his stand, made his move—he had no God he could call on!—
until, barely subdued by thunder and three-forked lightning,
he fell back. Spirited still, from between his panting banks,
he likes to exhale at Heaven Etna-like vapors
and (signs of his mighty punishment) ashes of lightning bolts.

"Hypseus on the Cadmeian plain we'll likewise admire, if
favored Aegina did indeed make the Thunderer glad.

"He leads Itoneans and Minerva's Alalcomenaeaean
 regiments; men Midea supplies and grape-growing Arnê;
 men who plant Aulis and Graea and verdant Plataea, whose
 furrows master Peteon; men who hold Euripus
 (where it's ours) that washes and wanders in and out; and you,
 bordering Anthedon, from whose grassy verge Glaucus dove
 into seductive waters, his hair and beard already
 sky-blue—though he gasped, for, from the waist down, he was fish!
 Slingshots tight-twisted and pellets piercing the wind are their
 talent, their javelins outstrip Cydonian arrows.

"Cephisus, you'd send the boy of sensational beauty,
 Narcissus, but he, obsessed, grows pale in Thespieae's fields,
 a flower that you, his father, lap with waters bereaved.

"Who could reel off for you Phoebus' troops and those of old
 Phocis? Men of Panopê, of Daulis, of Cyparissos,
 and of your valleys, Lebadia; men of Hyampolis perched high
 on a sharp outcrop; the men who take oxen and turn up
 the paired slopes of Parnassus, Cirrha, Anemoria, and
 the Corycian groves; also Lilaëa gushing forth glacial
 Cephisus' headwaters—where it was once Python's habit
 to slake his panting thirst and divert stream from ocean:
 all these have bay leaves braided with wool on their helmets—see?—
 and armor with Tityos or Delos as blazon, or else those
 the God massacred here, emptying out countless quivers.
 Iphitus (harsh man!) leads them: his sire, lately deceased, was
 Naubolus Hippasidês—who hosted you, O Laius,
 mildest of men!

"I was there, reining the team in tight . . . just
 when your—under the horses it fell, hacked off in spurting
 strokes (and oh! that the blood had been mine!)—*your head fell severed!*"

The speaker's cheeks streamed; pallor spread over all his face;
 a sudden gulping sob broke off his voice, the free flow
 of speech. The chilled old man's kind heart grew warm once more,
 thanks to his ward. Restored to himself, he addressed her, faintly:

"O Antigônê! my anxious pride, my last remaining
 joy! Shameless, I put off my overdue death—for you!—though
 I risk living to see crimes and kindred murders again,

348 Corycian groves: those near the cave on Mount Parnassus.

till I hand you over, still untouched, ready for marriage.
This is enough, then release me, Spinners—I'm weary of life.

"Well! while I've been swooning and slack, how many leaders—look!
now I'm watching again—have passed by! I've not mentioned
Clonis, the long-haired Abantiadès, nor you, rocky
Carystos, nor low-lying Aegae and high Caphereus!
But my strained sight fails, the men are all in position,
and sssh! your brother's calling for quiet."

370

Thus, scarce done,
the old man on the tower; on the ramparts, the ruler began.

"Bravehearts! Kings! Leader though I am, there's not one of you
I'd not, as a common soldier, obey in the fight for my Thebes!
nor would I presume to exhort you, for your rush to arms
is by choice—of your own free will you champion my righteous wrath.
Nor would my words suffice to praise you and thank you as you
deserve: once the foe's defeated, High Gods and your own
hands will pay you! A city of allied birth, you have come
to preserve one assailed, not by some belligerent scourge
sprung from alien shores, from foreign soil, but a native
son who, playing at king in his hostile camp over there,
has a father *here*, mother *here*, own blood sisters *here*,
and—until lately!—a brother *here*."

375

380

385

"Take a look, scum!
you plot wholesale dynastic destruction: Aonia's peoples
came—*volunteered*! I've not been left to *your* savagery!
What this regiment wants, even you should have recognized:
me resign my reign? they *forbid* it!"

Speech done, he dispatched
all in good order—who should engage, who guard the walls;
some units he sends to the front, some to his main force. So too,
the shepherd: unbolting the light-riddled doors and wattled
pens while earth freshens, he bids the leaders form the front
line; their wives fall in behind, a jostling corps. He
himself eases the pregnant ewes, whose udders near scrape
the ground, and he brings to their dams the wobbly new lambs.

390

395

MEANWHILE, IN arms, Danaans marched double-time—night
and day, and again a night and a day—so carried along
were they by their anger. Halts were scorned—why, they hardly
took time out to sleep or eat! Like men fleeing, they
sped *toward* the foe.

400

Nor were they deterred by omens, the long
 knotted by Chance, that portentous prophet, Fate's herald.
 Signs cropped up, dire indeed, sown by birds and wild beasts,
 by planets and rivers, their customary courses reversed; 405
 the Father thundered in violence, evil lightning flared;
 terrible shrieks in the shrines, the Gods' doors—of their own accord!—
 slammed shut; now a shower of blood, and now one of stones;
 ghosts sprang up, and weeping ancestors barred their path.
 Oracles at Apollonian Cirrha fell silent; 410
 all night long Eleusis wailed—but not in appointed
 months; doors of the temple swung open, and what Sparta saw
 (horrible!) filled her with dread—Amyclae's brothers fighting;
 Arcadians claim, in the still night, Lycaon's crazed shade
 howled; Pisa reports that her own Oenomaus barrelled across 415
 the cruel plain; an Acarnanian vagabond told
 a sorry tale—"Acheloüs has lost his other horn!"
 Mycenae appeases Perseus and Juno—her ivory
 image frowns, his is gloomy. Farmers recount how mighty
 Inachos bellowed; a man living by the double sea, 420
 how Theban Palaemon made the whole ocean moan.
 All this the phalanx of Pelops heard, but war hunger
 jammed the Gods' signals and made men impervious to fear.

Arrived at your banks, Asopos, at your Boeotian
 streams, the squadrons lacked the nerve to cross your hostile 425
 waters straight off—which, as it happened, were rushing in floods
 over the terrified meadows: either a soaking rainbow
 or mountain cloudbursts had swollen his current—or else the River
 Father purposely blocked and forbade their weapons with waves.
 Then fierce Hippomedon forced his hesitant mount to jump down 430
 with a mighty splash and, from out in midstream, holding his reins
 and weapons both, he shouts at the leaders left on shore:

"Forward, men! and I'll be first—I swear it!—to lead
 you onto the walls, first to smash through the Gates of Thebes!"

All plunged headlong into the flood, ashamed they'd hung back 435
 like cattle which stand in a wretched huddle, whose herdsman
 has made them come to an unknown stream: all think the far bank's
 too far, the fear between broad; but, once the lead bull

420 a man living by the double sea: an inhabitant of the Isthmus of Corinth.

wades in and breaks its force, then the current's gentler,
the plunge is easy, the banks seem to draw together.

440

Not far from there, they noticed a ridge and suitable grounds
for a safe camp: good view of the city's Sidonian towers,
a viable site whose shelter they felt they could trust,
the hill being wide at its summit, beneath which the campground
sloped, an open field; no other mountains stood close,
no overlooks. Very little work added extensive
fortifications, for Nature had wrought wonders there: cliffs
sprang up into ramparts, the ground dropped sheer to make moats,
and a fortuitous mound formed four merlons. The men set
to supplying the rest, working till all light had crept off
down the hillsides, and sleep brought weary creatures repose.

445

450

WHO WITH MERE words could paint the scene of thunderstruck
Thebes?

With enemy troops in full view, preparing her doom, night
terrified the sleepless city with dark threats of a new day.
Men rush about on the walls: in such dread, nothing's secure,
nothing's defended enough—Amphion's fortress looks feeble.
Everywhere, there's a different rumor; Terror announces
yet more and larger armies. They stare at Inachian tents
("Right over there!") and, in their own hills, outlanders' watchfires.
Some call on the Gods with prayers and wails, some encourage
martial weapons and warhorses; some embrace their loved ones
and weep, and wretchedly order the funeral pyres they'll need
tomorrow. If fitful sleep has shut their eyes for a trice,
they dream war. Now delay's a boon, now life's a bane—
so the thunderstruck see it: they fear dawn, they pray for dawn.

455

460

465

Shaking a brace of vipers, Tisiphonê runs amok
through both camps, setting brother against brother, their father
against them both—he, down in his underground dwelling, aroused,
makes an appeal to the Furies, insists *he wants back his eyes*.

BY NOW, THE COOL Moon and fading stars had been sucked dry
by first light; and now Ocean was swelling with imminent fire,
and now—disclosed by the new Sun—was sinking back, broad
surface unruffled under that breathless, radiant team
when—! With matted white hair hanging in front of her fierce eyes,
Jocasta displays her cheeks bloodless, her upper arms bruised
with grief-blows, branches of olive knotted with tufts of black

470

475

woolike the most august of Furies, she stalks out through
the Gates with all the majestic might of her misfortunes.
Flanked by her daughters (the sex now preferred!), she speeds up her
old woman's pace, going farther than she has strength to. 480
Leaning on them, she comes up to the foe and, with breasts bared,
knocks at the hostile barricade; in quavering wails, she pleads
to be let in:

"Open up! War's unnatural mother
begs you. Your camp owes my womb *some* sort of perverse
justice!"

Maniples quaked and grew pale at the sight—at 485
the sound, more so. A messenger sent to Adrastus now
returns; as ordered, the men admit her, making a way
between their swords. One glimpse of Achaean leaders and,
driven mad with grief, she unleashes a hair-raising shriek:

"Leaders of Argos: which of you will point out the foe, 490
him I gave birth to? Which helmet—tell me!—conceals
my son?"

Into the stricken woman's path the Cadmeian
hero stepped and, clutching her, drenched her with tears of joy;
holding her close, he consoled her, between sobs crooning, "Mother,
Mother," was pressing now her to his heart, now his sisters, 495
when, mixing rage with her tears, the old woman rasped:

"Why do you fake these melting tears and reverend names
for me, Argive 'king'? why hug me and hold me close? why
rub your iron-clad chest up against your detested mother?
So now you're a stranger? a homeless, pitiful refugee? 500
Who wouldn't feel sorry for *you*? with long lines of men
at your command and many a sword gleaming beside you?
Pity poor mothers! Is it *he*—is it *you* I wept for night
and day?

"If the words and warnings of your kin still have
your respect, now, while the camps are calm and Devotion shrinks
back 505

in suspense ('Will there be war?'), I, who birthed you, command
and plead:
come with me, at least look at your country's Gods, at the roofs
that will burn, and at your brother—why turn aside? Come talk
to your brother, demand the kingdom—I'll be judge for now!
Either he'll yield, or you, justified, pick your blade back up. 510

"Or do you fear a ruse perhaps, and that I, your mother, would connive at deceit? Decency has not entirely fled our wretched hearth! You'd scarce need feel fear, did Oedipus lead! I married sin and I brought it forth, but I love you both as you are (ah, pain!); even now I excuse your frenzies; but, if you persist, we freely accord you the 'victory,' savage! Tie your captive sisters' hands behind them, clap me in irons! Here too will your father be dragged, bowed down though he is!

"Moaning, I now turn to you for compassion, sons of Inachus, for you've each left old folks and little ones at home—and such tears! Entrust to a mother her own flesh and blood! If, in so little time, you hold this man dear—as I pray you do!—what of me, Pelasgians, what, I ask, of these breasts? This much I'd have got from Hyrcanian kings or Odrysian, from any—if they exist!—more frenzied than ours. Agree! or else, arms round my son, survived by the war, here I die!"

Her words made the pumped-up cohorts break down: you could see the men's helmets nod, their armor splashed with pious tears. Lions, likewise: when they, enraged, have by frontal assault strewn the ground with weapons and men, straightway their anger lessens, and they can then postpone their feast, sure of a captured carcass. So the swayed hearts of Pelasgians wavered, their burning greed for steel died down.

Polynices—in view of all!—turned now to his mother's kisses, now to artless Ismenê's, now to Antigônê's pleas (more tears stirred!), and, in the wild storm of his mind's confusion, he'd have renounced the kingdom, was eager to go—and mild Adrastus approved—but Tydeus, mindful of righteous wrath, broke in:

"Send *me*, allies! I've had a taste of Eteocles' good faith lately—and I wasn't his brother! Send *me* to face the king to whose notable love of peace and of keeping his word my flesh bears witness. Where were you *then*, Mother Ambassador for Peace-in-Good-Faith, that night your style of hospitable charm bore me down? You drag off your son to transactions like those? Lead him instead to that field which is steaming still, fat with your blood, fat with mine.

"Follow her that far, will you,

all

too mild and all too forgetful of your people?

But, of course! when all around you show fierce right hands
with blades bared, *she* sheds a tear and your weapons go slack.

You idiot! once you're shut up within those walls, *owned* 550
by his hatred, will he send you back to the Argive camp?

This lance will sooner shake off its iron and grow leaves,
sooner will our Inachus and Acheloüs flow backwards!

But it's mild-mannered parley they're after, a truce for fierce arms:
well, this camp too lies open, has yet to give cause for fear— 555

or am I suspect? I withdraw—make you a gift of my wounds.

Let him in: here too, the same mother and sisters mediate:

suppose he's persuaded and yields the kingdom as agreed—
will *you* give it up again?"

Once more, troops veer round,
swayed by these words, just as, in a sudden churning of air, 560
rushing at North Wind, the South whips the sea round in reverse.

Arms

are in favor again, and fury.

The fierce Erinys
seizes the moment, sowing seeds of initial conflict:—

Sauntering along by Dircê's stream, a pair of tigresses—
tame, trained to the yoke, once hitched to the war car that conquered 565
the East: lately returned triumphant from Red Sea shores,
Liber had sent them for well-earned rest to Aonian fields.

These the God's entourage and an elder priest duly tend;
bloodshed's forgotten—they reek of Indian costmary, sport vines 570
ripe with bunches of grapes and speckled clusters of ivy
berries, the spaces between their stripes tinted with purple dye.

By now, the very hills and—who would believe it?—even
the flocks dote on them, heifers make bold to low all around them.

For no hunger goads them—there's always a hand to feed them,
they take food freely, open their hideous jaws for jets 575

of wine. They roam the countryside, sleep where they will; if,
padding, benign, they enter a town, each house, each shrine glows
with sacred fires, believing Lyaeus himself has come.

When the Kindly One gave each tigress three flicks with her viper-
lash and forced their nature back to its former furious 580

state, they burst forth, turned into something the fields knew not—as
if two bolts of lightning had burst at once from a distant

562, 579

The fierce Erinys and the Kindly One: Tisiphonê.

point in the sky, hurtling, blazing a long trail through the clouds;
 with a course no less rapid, with monstrous roaring, the two
 bounded over the plains and, in one stupendous spring,
 mauled your charioteer, Amphiaraus! *Not* a good
 omen: by chance he came first, leading his master's horses
 to pools nearby; the next man, Taenarian Idas,
 then Aetolian Acamas too they attacked; grim the stampede
 over the fields till the tigers turned for the walls of home.

On fire at sight of slaughtered men, Aconteus—nerve
 steeled to bring down big game (he was Arcadian)—gave
 chase with a barrage of spears, picking up many he'd flung, then
 three times, four times stabbed with a spear shoved hard in their backs,
 in their flanks. Spilling a long trail of blood, the tigers
 dragged to the Gates the shafts that bristled from both their sides;
 they yowled, a sound like pitiful human cries; half-dead,
 they leant their riddled chests against the walls they loved.

You'd think temples in every quarter were being looted,
 Sidonian homes fired with nefarious brands, such a din
 went up when the Gates opened; they'd rather the cradle of great
 Hercules crashed, or Semelê's bride-bed, or the private boudoir
 of Harmony. Bacchus' votary Phegeus sought Aconteus
 —weaponless now and exulting over his double kill—
 had at him with sword drawn. Young men of Tegea rushed up
 to help—too late: already, atop the tigers' sacred
 corpses, the youth lay dead—avenging the sorrow of Bacchus.

And in the camp: a sudden riot broke off the Greek
 debate. Daring to plead no longer, Jocasta fled through
 ranks openly hostile, who drive her and her daughters
 out—men but now so mild!—and Tydeus makes quick use
 of the moment:

“Go on—get! Now hope for peace and good faith!
 Surely he could've postponed this outrage—at least delayed it
 till his own mother got safely back!”

With that, he draws
 his sword and summons the allies.

Savage the clamor now,
 anger glows hot here, and here; war comes, helter-skelter—
 leaders mill about with the ranks, commanders' orders
 unheeded; cavalry, troops of infantry—all mixed up—
 speeding chariots too; mobs of men press upon those

attacking, no time to show themselves, none to assess
the foe. 620

Thus—in improvised close formations—did Theban
and Argive youth clash: at the rear, banners, and bugles
behind, and trumpets chasing after to find the war!

(Such raw violence springs from a drop of trifling blood!)

Wind too builds up its early force within the clouds;
still gentle, it plucks at leaves and spreading treetops, but
has soon uprooted the grove and stripped hills of their shade. 625

*(COME, PIERIAN SISTERS, come! We ask about no far-
distant deeds, but Your own battle lines—tell of Your dear
Aonia! For You, with Mars closing in, saw Helicon's
plectra tremble at fanfares bawled by Tyrrhenian brass!)* 630

Sidonian Pterelas, whose steed inclined to be battle-shy,
hauled at the reins till his hands cramped; he eased up, and his horse,
given its head, went plunging along the lines. Came a spear—
Tydeus': pierced the brute's shoulder, entered the youth's left groin,
pinned slumping rider to horse which, stitched to its dead master, 635
bolted and bore him still, though he guided weapons and reins no
more—like a Centaur not yet deprived of both its lives,
whose man-half sinks down, dying, upon his own horse-back.

In the sword fight of their lives, furious men face their opponents: 640
Hippomedon slew Sybaris; Menoeceus, Pylion Periphas;
Parthenopaeus, Itys—Sybaris dies by the bloodstained
sword, by a spear fierce Periphas; Itys, a bowshot betrayed.
Mavortian Haemon slashed through Inachian Caeneus' neck
with an iron blade; across the parted flesh, staring 645
eyes sought trunk as brave soul sought head. Abas, stripping
the fallen man's gear, was caught by an Argive cornelwood
shaft and, dying, dropped his enemy's shield and his own.

*(Who, Eunaëus, who persuaded you to abandon
Bacchic rituals and the groves no priest is allowed to leave,
to exchange the frenzy that, to Bromios, is usual?
Who'd be afraid of you?)* 650

The penetrable frame of his shield
was swagged with pallid ivy, the garlands of Nysa; beneath
the tip of his vinewood javelin, white streamers were tied; long

hair hid his shoulders, his cheeks showed their first growth of beard;
 blushing, too, his corselet, unwarlike with Tyrian threads;
 wrist-length sleeves, sandals with narrow embroidered straps;
 long linen folds; a fibula—smooth, polished gold—clasped
 with its yellow jasper a mantle of Spartan crimson cloth
 over which, at his back, arrows rattled; there too hung
 bow and the speeding quiver of gold-spangled lynx hide,

He goes, God-maddened, among the many thousand men,
 and shrieks from afar:

“Hands off! These bastions Apollo revealed
 by that favorable omen, the Heifer of Cirrha! Spare them! for they
 were built when, unaided, the willing stones moved into place.
 We’re a sacred race: Jove is this city’s son-in-law, Mars is her
 father-in-law, Bacchus—we tell no lie!—is our nurseling,
 mighty Alcides too!”

As he flung such futile words at them,
 violent Capaneus rushed at him with spear sky-high—
 like a lion: at daybreak he has, in his pitch-dark den,
 roused his ravening hunger and now, from his savage cave, spots
 stag or steer, its brow not yet bellicose; out he goes,
 joyfully roaring; huntsmen with spears and packs of dogs
 cut him to ribbons but, eyes on the prize, he ignores his wounds.
 So too Capaneus: licking his lips at the easy prey,
 he hefts the cypress he’ll soon launch with mighty momentum—
 but first:

“Why, in your last moments, make men wince with your
 womanish trills? I just wish the One you rave for *would*
 show up! Sing *this* to your Tyrian mothers!”

Jeering, he hurled
 his spear which, flying as though no force could stop or slow it,
 scarce rang on Euneus’ shield but passed clean through the man.
 His gear slid to the ground; with each sobbing breath, gold clinked;
 spurts of blood outcrimsoned his cloak.

(*You fall, bully boy,
 you fall—another one dear to Aonian Lyaeus! For you,*

664 the Heifer of Cirrha: Arrived in Greece, **Cadmus** was told by the Delphic Oracle to give up the search for **Europa** and instead to follow a white cow; where she lay down, he was to found a city.

665 See **Amphion** (1).

666–667 His liaison with **Semelê** makes Jove . . . [the] city’s son-in-law; **Harmonia**, wed to **Cadmus**, is the daughter of **Mars**.

672 brow not yet bellicose: The stag is too young to have grown antlers, the steer to have grown horns.

676 cypress: Gigantic **Capaneus**’ spear is the trunk of a cypress tree; see 4.176.

for you did drowsy Ismara break her thyrsus in grief, 685
and Tmolus too, and rich Nysa and Thesean Naxos,
and Ganges, sworn in awe to observe the rites of Thebes!)

Nor did Argive squadrons find Eteocles sluggish;
 Polynices' sword, more sparing, shrank back from citizens.

Outshining the rest by far was Amphiaraus, whose 690
 horses already distrusted the ground as, with much dust, his wheels
 rutted the vexed field. To his servant, grieving Apollo lent
 hollow glory and, making his final hours illustrious,
 set the man's shield and helmet to sparkling with splendid
 starlight. You, Marcher, ungrudgingly granted Your brother 695
 that no hand, no human weapons should harm the seer
 in battle: to Dis let him go, a dead man revered
 and holy. In such guise was he borne amidst the foe, marked
 (he was certain) for destruction. This assurance of doom
 boosts his strength: so the hero's limbs appear larger, day 700
 brighter, his skill at scanning the heavens never more keen—had
 he the time. But, setting all that aside, Valor, Death's close
 neighbor, makes him burn with unquenchable love of fierce war,
 taking delight in dexterity, pride in his fiery spirit.

(Is this the man who so often eased human misfortunes 705
 and loosened the Fates' grip? How suddenly changed from the seer
 trained to interpret Tripods and bay leaves, trained to salute
 the Sun God, to read every bird flying out of the blue!)

Like a season of plague or a baleful star's oppressive glare,
 he slaughters countless young men, offers them up to his own 710
 shade: with javelin brings down Phlegyas, with javelin, proud
 Phyleus; with scythe-wheeled chariot, Clonis and Chremetaon—
 one stood to fight, one fled and was cut off at the knees;
 with spearpoint he stabs Chromis, Iphinous, Sages,
 unshorn Gyas, and (unintentionally) a priest of Phoebus, 715
 Lycoreus: he'd already driven his stout ashwood spear
 home when the crested helm was knocked off and the fillet revealed.

Alcathous he kills with a stone: near Carystean shoals
 this one had home, wife and children, who love the shore, where
 he'd lived for a long time, a poor man probing the waters; 720
 land hooked this fisherman—dying, he lauded winter squalls,
 tempests, the familiar sea with its now preferable perils.

Hypseus Asopius had, for some time, observed from afar the carnage and rout, burning to draw off the fight, although he in his chariot was likewise spilling Tirynthian strength; but, one glimpse of the augur, and blood within reach palled—*heart and steel, he wants that man!* But a flank of his enemy's serried ranks was between him and his goal; from his high seat, he aimed a spear, its wood grown on his river father's banks, but first:

"Lavish source of Aonia's wealth of waters!
Asopos, famous still for Gigantic embers: grant
my hand grace. Your son and the shaft Your stream fostered both
seek this. It's meet and right for me to despise Phoebus,
if the Sire Divine battled You. All his arms I'll sink
in Your springs, and the fillets grieving without the augur."

His father heard; but, although *he* was glad to comply,
Phoebus forbade and deflected the cast onto Horses the driver,
who toppled. The God himself took over the flapping reins,
feigning with false appearance the Lernean Haliagmon.

Now his priest blazed! Not one platoon offered resistance.
Sheer terror topples the trembling cowards—they died even
before they were wounded! Those watching were puzzled: that driver—
was his weight holding the yoked team back? or urging them onward?
Say an early winter storm has loosened a cloud-hung
mountainside—or that, worn out by time, it has let go:
down on the plain it crashes—horrendous terror; headlong
in its multiple paths, it sweeps up farms, yeomen, aged
oaks, until at last, exhausted, its turmoil spent, it
either scoops out a valley or cuts a river in half.
No different, the way that chariot, heavy-laden with huge man
and great God, goes swirling from one bloodbath to the next.

From the bench, Delius tends to weapons and reins himself,
himself coaches the seer's shots and deflects opponents'
shafts, ensures that their flying javelins have no luck.
Dead on the ground sprawl Melaneus (foot soldier), Antiphus
(his tall charger no defense), Aëtion (born of the Nymph
Heliconis), Politês (a blackguard who'd murdered his own brother),

731 *Gigantic embers*: remains of the Cyclopean thunderbolts; see vv. 325–327 and the commentary at 309–342.

and Lampus—he'd tried to tussle filleted Manto
into bed: Phoebus himself lent sacred shafts for *him*!

Hooves pounding, the team, trembling and snorting at moribund flesh, 760
rake the track in search of clear ground, but each wheel plows
through corpses, red and up to its hub in severed limbs.
Some that the pitiless axle crushed were unconscious by then,
but others—wounded, half-dead, and paralyzed—watch
it come, rolling straight toward their faces. Reins are now 765
greasy with gore, slippery floorboards give no purchase, blood
clogs the wheels, each hoof is slowed, mired in a tangle of ripped-
out guts. The seer, berserk, snatches up lances abandoned
among the dead and javelins poking up, points sunk
in their bones. Spirits shriek and chase after his chariot. 770

For the last time, Apollo revealed himself to his servant,
then said:

“Use the light you have, acquire lasting fame,
while I at your side make irrevocable Death afraid! . . .
We're beaten: you know the pitiless Spinners never rewind
life's threads. Go, dear man! you're a joy long pledged to the throngs 775
in Elysium. *You'll* not have to endure Creon's orders
—that is clear—and lie exposed, sepulture forbidden!”

The other, taking a breather from battle, replies:

“Long since,
Cirrhaean Father, the shaking axle informed us You'd
taken the bench (why such honor to wretches?), that You steered my 780
doomed team. How much longer will You delay looming death?
I already hear the current of rapid Styx, the black
rivers of Dis, His vicious guard dog's three jaws barking.
Receive the glory that decks my brow, receive these laurels
which it would be wrong to take to Erebus. One last word: 785
if any thanks whatsoever are due Your departing priest,
then to You, Phoebus, I entrust my deprived household,
punishment of my nefarious spouse, and my son's excellent rage.”

776–777 For **Creon's** ban on burial, see 11.661–664.

779 *the shaking axle*: Even in disguise, a god is noticeably heavier than a mortal; see vv. 742–743.

783 The vicious guard dog of **Dis**: **Cerberus**.

788 *my nefarious spouse*: **Eriphylê**; *my son*: **Alcmaeon**. See 2.269–305.

Grieving, Apollo sprang down and turned to hide his tears;
 then in truth did the chariot moan, and the desolate team.
 No different when, at night, in the blinding swirl of a Nor'-
 wester, a doomed ship knows she's going down when Helen's
 brothers have fled the canvas their sister's fire has condemned.

And now, just about to open, little by little, the Earth
 began to ripple, high ridges to quake, dust to boil up
 in dense clouds; now the battlefield bellows, rumbling below.
 Startled men take thought—"The war! this is the din of war!"—
 and quicken their pace. A second tremor knocks weapons,
 warriors, staring horses flat. Now leafy mountaintops
 nod, now the walls, and Ismenos makes his escape through cracked
 banks.

At once, all wrath fell away: men stuck their nodding
 spears in the ground, or, reeling, leant on the unsteady shafts. Face
 to face, each drew back at sight of another's pallor.
 So too, when Bellona stirs up a naval battle
 in calm waters: comes a storm (less cruel than war!), and it's
 "Every man for himself!" The threat of disaster puts up
 their swords, and their mutual fears have made peace. Such was the scene
 now on dry land—a battle tossing up and down!

Whether Earth, laboring hard with gusts of chambered air,
 expelled the rage and pent-up fury of winds; or whether,
 eating away in secret, water scraped and scooped out
 the crumbling soil; or, just here, revolving Heaven's
 mechanism heeled over; or Neptune's tines broomed the waves
 and rolled a too-heavy sea onto outermost shores;
 or that *crack!* saluted the seer; or Earth threatened the brothers—
 look there!

Deep down, a sheer drop, the ground springs apart
 in a vast chasm, frightening stars and shades in turn.
 The huge crater swallows the man and engulfs the horses
 struggling to cross; neither arms nor reins did he let slip
 but, just as he was, drove the chariot straight into Tartarus
 and, falling, flung one last look skyward and groaned as the ground
 closed over him. Then, an aftershock drew the gaping
 verges together and shut the light out from Avernus.