

# THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN

*Translated by* ELIZABETH WYCKOFF

# THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN: INTRODUCTION

## *The Play: Date and Composition*

It is not certain when Euripides' *Phoenician Women* was first produced, but external evidence, supported by metrical features, suggests a date of around 411–409. Presumably Euripides wrote it for the annual competition at the Great Dionysian Festival in Athens. What the other three plays were in Euripides' tetralogy of that year is unknown; a very poorly preserved "hypothesis" (ancient scholarly summary) preceding the play in a number of manuscripts perhaps indicates that he came in second in that competition.

Ancient scholars noted that the play has an abundance of scenes of suffering, that it presents many characters, and that it is full of finely phrased maxims. They stated their approval of the theatricality of its visual spectacle but criticized it for containing a number of irrelevant scenes: in particular, Antigone's view of the enemy captains from the walls of the city, Polynices' arrival in Thebes under truce to negotiate with his brother, and Oedipus' lyric song and banishment at the end of the play. Many modern scholars too have been bothered by what they have considered to be the play's excessive length, repetitiousness, contradictions, and extraneous material, as well as by numerous smaller metrical and linguistic difficulties, and have suggested that the text as we have it contains a number of interpolations, including not only isolated lines and groups of lines but even entire scenes. Suspicion has fallen especially upon Antigone's view from the walls, Eteocles' farewell speech, the Messenger's catalogue of the seven champions, Creon's lament for his dead son, and the ending of the play; and it has been suggested that some or all of these passages may have been composed by other poets for later performances. But recent critics have been more cautious about condemning whole sections of the tragedy as inauthentic; some have pointed out that the play as a whole is a kind of encyclopedic compendium of motifs and topics from the Theban mythic

complex and that overfullness and the inclusion of only tangentially related material are part of its very character. The question remains open.

### *The Myth*

The play's title does not provide much of a clue regarding its mythic content. Instead it designates the chorus, which is composed of Phoenician women from the city of Tyre who have been sent to Delphi to serve Apollo in his temple but, having stopped on the way in Thebes, are unexpectedly trapped there by the Argive invasion. Their relation to the events of the play is thus little more than that of horrified witnesses—though they are also connected to what happens in Thebes by a very remote genealogical link: Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, was originally from Tyre too.

*The Phoenician Women* dramatizes the attack of the Seven against Thebes, one of the grimmest episodes from a legendary saga that was very popular and well known to Euripides' audience: the vicissitudes of the Labdacids, the royal dynasty of Thebes—King Laius, his wife Jocasta, and their son Oedipus, and then the children of Oedipus and Jocasta's incestuous marriage, Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. The story had been an important part of early Greek epic and had continued to remain a familiar theme of lyric poetry (most notably in Stesichorus, a poet of the sixth century BCE), oral legend, and tragedy. While the different versions often varied significantly in outcome, characterization, motivation, and moral evaluation, the basic outline remained constant from version to version. After Oedipus' removal from the throne, his sons Eteocles and Polynices could not share the rule of Thebes amicably. They arranged to alternate annually as sole ruler, but when Polynices' time came Eteocles refused to yield the kingship and instead exiled him to Argos. There Polynices raised an army that he and six other champions led to attack seven-gated Thebes. The Argive invaders were defeated and their champions were slain—Eteocles and Polynices killed each other. Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, adopted the extreme measure of refusing to grant Polynices burial.

The myth was one of the most frequently dramatized in Attic tragedy. Most of the other tragic versions seem, as far as we can tell, to have focused

on only one episode of the story in any one play. Thus the account of three generations of the Labdacids had been presented by Aeschylus in the three plays of a connected trilogy (468 BCE): the first two plays, *Laius* and *Oedipus*, have been lost, but the third one, *The Seven against Thebes*, recounting the attack of the Seven, survives (ancient scholars noted that *The Phoenician Women* presents the same mythic material as does this play but adds Jocasta). Sophocles at different points in his career devoted at least three plays, all of which survive, to individual tragic events from this mythic complex: *Antigone* (ca. 440 BCE), on the aftermath of the attack of the Seven and Antigone's decision to bury Polynices despite Creon's prohibition; *Oedipus the King* (date unknown), on Oedipus' discovery that he is the killer of his father and the husband of his mother; and *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 BCE), on his reception as a refugee and eventual death in the local district of Colonus in Attica.

Among Euripides' other surviving tragedies, only his *Suppliant Women* (produced about 423 BCE), which presents the aftermath of the defeat of the Seven, derives from this complex of Theban legends. Euripides is also known to have written at least two lost plays on the subject: *Chrysippus*, on the origin of the gods' hatred for Laius, and *Oedipus*, in which Oedipus is blinded by Laius' servants before his identity is revealed. He also wrote an *Antigone* (also lost), about which very little is known.

In contrast to the apparent tendency of the other tragedians, Euripides' *Phoenician Women* presents a comprehensive synopsis of the whole story by focusing one after another on a large variety of events, characters, and themes all having to do with the fall of Oedipus' family. The play begins with a monologue by Oedipus' wife and mother, Jocasta, mother of the two brothers Eteocles and Polynices. (In this version, unlike in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, she has not committed suicide upon discovering that Oedipus is her son.) Then Antigone appears on the top of the palace together with her old tutor; in a scene reminiscent of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, the tutor identifies for her the seven enemy captains who will attack the city. Polynices enters to negotiate, futilely, with Eteocles. In this play, in what is presumably a surprising Euripidean innovation, Polynices is the more positive character. Then Teiresias announces that Thebes can be saved only if Creon's son Menoeceus is sacrificed; Creon refuses, but Menoeceus tricks him and goes off to commit suicide. The

Thebans defeat the enemy army but the two brothers kill each other and Jocasta slays herself on their corpses. Antigone is left to mourn the three corpses together with old Oedipus, who in a final dramatic surprise enters from the palace to witness and lament the end of his lineage.

### *Transmission and Reception*

The evidence of quotations and allusions among later authors and the survival of at least twenty-four papyri and other ancient texts containing fragments of the play (more than for any other Greek tragedy except Euripides' *Orestes*) indicate that *The Phoenician Women* was extremely popular throughout antiquity perhaps in part because it provides a kind of handy compendium of the legends relating to the house of the Labdacids. Further evidence for the play's continuing vitality on ancient stages may be the numerous interpolations in the text that have been detected by scholars; some of these may well have been due to expansion by directors or actors. *The Phoenician Women* not only was selected as one of the ten canonical plays of Euripides most studied and read in antiquity, but, together with *Hecuba* and *Orestes*, became one of the three plays of the so-called Byzantine triad. As a result, it is transmitted by hundreds of medieval manuscripts and is equipped with very full ancient and medieval commentaries. Given the great popularity of Euripides in later antiquity, and of *The Phoenician Women* in particular, it was inevitable that Greek and Latin authors who portrayed the fall of the Labdacids drew upon this tragedy even more than upon Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* or Sophocles' *Antigone*. Thus it was on Euripides' play that Seneca based his own (incomplete) tragedy *Phoenician Women* and Statius his epic poem *Thebaid*, which transmitted the story to the Latin Middle Ages.

The popularity of *The Phoenician Women* (and of Statius' *Thebaid*) in the Middle Ages meant that during the Renaissance in the West this continued to be one of the most widely read tragedies. It inspired such dramatists as Jean Racine (*La Thébaïde*, 1664) and Vittorio Alfieri (*Polinice*, 1783) and was translated by Hugo Grotius (1630) and Friedrich Schiller (1789). But by the end of the eighteenth century its fortunes had already begun to decline. Precisely its combination of extreme pathos and

polished rhetoric and the fullness of its treatment of the legend, which had helped secure its success in earlier ages, made it inimical to the taste of the Romantics and later writers; and the increasing popularity of Aeschylus and especially of Sophocles meant that, in the past two centuries, their versions have eclipsed Euripides'. A production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Katie Mitchell in 1995, is one of the few professional stagings of the play in the modern era. Perhaps now, with changes in our world and in our tastes, the time is right for its revival.

# THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN

## *Characters*

JOCASTA, mother and wife of Oedipus; sister of Creon

OLD TUTOR

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta; sister of Polynices and Eteocles

CHORUS of young women from Phoenicia

POLYNICES, son of Oedipus and Jocasta; brother of Eteocles and Antigone

ETEOCLES, son of Oedipus and Jocasta; brother of Polynices and Antigone

CREON, brother of Jocasta

TEIRESIAS, a blind Theban seer

MENOECEUS, son of Creon

TWO MESSENGERS

OEDIPUS, husband of Jocasta; father of Antigone, Polynices, and Eteocles

*Scene: Thebes, before the royal palace. Jocasta enters from its door.*

JOCASTA

You who cut your way through heaven's stars,<sup>o</sup>  
riding the chariot with its welded gold,  
Sun, with your swift mares whirling forth your light,  
evil the shaft you sent to Thebes that day  
5 when Cadmus came here, leaving Phoenicia's shore,  
he who wed Cypris' child, Harmonia,  
fathering Polydorus, who in turn

had Labdacus, they say, and he had Laius.

10        Now I am known as daughter of Menoeceus,  
Creon my brother by the selfsame mother,<sup>o</sup>  
my name Jocasta, as my father gave it,  
Laius my husband. When he still was childless  
after long marriage with me in the palace,  
15        he went to Phoebus asking and beseeching  
that we might share male children for the house.  
But he said, “Lord of Thebes and its famed horses,  
sow not that furrow against divine decree.  
For if you have a child, him you beget  
20        shall kill you, and your house shall wade through blood.”  
But Laius, in his lust, and drunk beside,  
begot a child on me, yet when he had,  
knowing his error, as the god had said it,  
he gave the child to shepherds to expose  
25        in Hera’s Field, high on Cithaeron’s rock,  
when he had pinned its ankles with sharp iron<sup>o</sup>  
(and this is why Greece called him Oedipus).  
Then Polybus’ herdsman took the child  
and brought it home and gave it to their mistress.  
30        She took my labor’s fruit and, nursing it,  
convinced her husband to rear it as her own.

      When his red beard was growing, my young son,  
who had guessed or heard the truth, set off to learn,  
35        at Phoebus’ shrine, his parents. So did Laius,  
seeking to learn if the child he had exposed  
were still alive. They met in middle journey  
at the same spot in the split road of Phocis.  
Then Laius’ driver ordered him away:  
40        “Stranger, yield place to princes.” But he went on,



silent, in pride. So with their sharp-edged hooves  
the mares of Laius bloodied up his feet.

And so—why give the details of disaster?—  
a son slew his father, and he took the team  
to give to Polybus, his foster parent.

45 When the Sphinx attacked and crushed our city down,  
my husband gone, Creon proclaimed my marriage:  
whoever might solve the clever maiden's riddle,  
to him I should be wed. And so it happened.

50 Oedipus, my son, did somehow guess her song.  
So he became the ruler of this land<sup>o</sup>  
and got the scepter of this realm as prize.  
Poor man, unknowing, he wedded with his mother;  
nor did she know she bedded with her son.

55 And to my son I bore two further sons,  
Eteocles and famous Polynices,  
and daughters two. Her father named Ismene  
while I before had named Antigone.

When Oedipus learned I was his wife and mother,  
60 he who'd endured all suffering then struck  
with terrible gory wounding his own eyes,  
bleeding the pupils with a golden brooch.

When his sons' beards had grown, they shut him up  
behind the bolts, that this fate might be forgotten—  
65 though it needed much contrivance to conceal.

There in the house he lives, and struck by fate  
he has called unholy curses on his children:  
that they'll divide this house with sharpened steel.

70 They were afraid that if they lived together  
the gods might grant his prayers. So they agreed

that Polynices should go, a willing exile,  
while Eteocles stayed in this land and held the scepter,  
to change though, year by year. Yet when Eteocles  
sat safe on high, he would not leave the throne,  
75 but kept his brother exiled from this land.  
He went to Argos, married Adrastus' daughter,  
and brought the Argive force he had collected  
against these very seven-gated walls,  
80 seeking his share of the land, and his father's scepter.  
I have persuaded son to come to son  
under a truce before they take to arms.  
I hope for peace. The messenger says he'll come.  
O Zeus who lives in heaven's shining folds  
85 save us and let my sons be reconciled.  
If you are wise you should not leave a mortal  
constantly wretched throughout his whole life.

*(Exit jocasta into the palace. Antigone and  
the old Tutor appear on its roof.)*

#### TUTOR

Antigone, flower of your father's house,  
your mother has said you may leave the maiden's room  
90 to climb the very steepest of the roof  
and see the Argive army, as you asked.  
But wait, that I may track the road before you  
in case some citizen is in the way.  
95 If so, some blame would come on me the slave,  
and on your highness. Since I know, I'll tell  
all that I saw and heard among the Argives  
when I went there from here to make the truce

with your brother, and also when I came back again.

No citizen is near the house at all.

100 Try the old cedar ladder with your feet,  
look over the plain and see by Ismenus' stream  
and Dirce's spring how great the enemy host.

*(Antigone goes up to the top of the steps.)*

ANTIGONE [*singing, and then alternately singing and speaking in this lyric interchange while the Tutor speaks in response*]

*Reach your old hand to my young one. Help me step*  
105 *up from the stairs.*

TUTOR

Take hold, my girl. You're here, but just in time.  
The Argive army is moving, the companies part.

ANTIGONE

110 *Hecate, Leto's child!. The lightning-*  
*shine*  
*of bronze all over the*  
*plain!*

TUTOR

Polynices comes no trifler to this land.  
He brings the clamor of many horse and foot.

ANTIGONE

*The gates, and their locks! Are the brazen bolts*  
115 *holding firm Amphion's wall of stone?*

TUTOR

Take heart, all's well and safe inside the city<sup>o</sup>  
Look at the first man, if you want to mark him.

ANTIGONE

*Who is he with the crest of white*  
120 *who comes at the head of the host and lightly shakes*  
*the brazen shield on his arm?*

TUTOR

A captain, lady.<sup>o</sup>

ANTIGONE

*Yes, but who, and whence?*

*[speaking]*

Speak out, old man, and tell me: what's his name?

TUTOR

125 He boasts his birth from Mycenae and he lives  
by Lerna's waters: lord Hippomedon.

ANTIGONE *[singing]*

*How prideful, how hateful to see!*  
130 *Like an earth-born giant hurling flame in a picture,*  
*not like the race of day.*

TUTOR

Do you see that captain crossing Dirce's stream?

ANTIGONE *[speaking]*

How strange, how strange his arms! And who is he?<sup>o</sup>

TUTOR

Tydeus, the warrior from far Aetolia.

ANTIGONE [*singing*]

135     *Is this the one who has married the very sister  
          of Polynices' bride?*

[*speaking*]

How strange his arms, half-barbarous to see!

TUTOR

          All the Aetolians carry such a shield  
140     and hurl their javelins, child, to hit the mark.

ANTIGONE

Old man, how did you learn all this so well?°

TUTOR

I knew them, for I saw their arms before  
when I went from here to there to make the truce  
with your brother. So I know them in their harness.

ANTIGONE

Who is this one who comes by Zethus' tomb,

[*singing*]

145     *with falling curls,  
          a youth, and frightful to see?*

[*speaking*]

Some captain, since an armed crowd follows on.

TUTOR

150     Parthenopaeus, Atalanta's son.

ANTIGONE [*singing*]

*I hope that Artemis, ranging the hills, kills his mother  
with her shaft and destroys him  
who comes to plunder my town.*

TUTOR

I hope so, child. But the right is on their side.

155 And I am afraid the gods may see things clearly.

ANTIGONE

*And where is he whom my selfsame mother bore  
to a painful fate?*

[*speaking*]

Dear old man, tell me, where is Polynices?

TUTOR

He stands with Adrastus, close by the maidens' tomb,

160 Niobe's seven daughters. You see him now?

ANTIGONE

Not clearly but enough to guess his shape.

[*singing*]

*Oh, could I run on my feet like a wind-swift cloud through the sky  
to my own dear brother, and throw my arms round his neck,  
165 poor exile—but how*

[*speaking*]

he shines forth in his golden arms, old man,

[*singing*]

*ablaze with the light of dawn.*

TUTOR

170     He is coming to this house, you may be glad,  
         under a truce.

ANTIGONE [*speaking*]

But who comes here, old man?

Who mounts and drives a chariot of white?

TUTOR

That is the prophet Amphiaraus, lady,  
bringing the victims whose blood shall please this land.

ANTIGONE [*singing*]

175     *Selene, daughter of shining-girdled Sun, °*  
         *you with your round gold light, how calm he comes,*  
         *how gently guides his horses!*

[*speaking*]

Where is the man who insulted us so fiercely,  
Capaneus?

TUTOR

180             There he marks the approaches out,  
         takes the walls' measures up and down the towers.

ANTIGONE [*singing*]

*Nemesis, and you, deep thunder of Zeus,*  
*and shining flare of the lightning, it is for you*  
*to put his boasting to sleep.*

185     *He said he would bring the Theban girls °*

*as slaves to Mycenae's women,  
would give them to Lerna's triple fount,  
slaves to Poseidon's lover's waters.*  
190 *Artemis, golden-haired, child of Zeus, may I never  
endure that slavery!*

## TUTOR

Child, back into the house, and stay inside  
your maiden chamber. You have had the joy  
195 of that desired sight you wished to see.  
Noise in the city proves a crowd of women  
is pressing toward the royal palace now.  
The female sex is very quick to blame.  
If one of them gets a little launching place,  
200 far, far she drives. There seems to be some pleasure  
for women in ill talk of one another.

*(Exit Antigone and the Tutor into the palace. Enter  
from the side the Chorus of Phoenician women.)*

## CHORUS [*singing*]

### STROPHE A

*I came, I left the wave of Tyre,  
the island of Phoenicia,  
205 as prize for Loxias, slave to Phoebus' house,  
to rest by Parnassus' snowy ridge.*  
*I came on a ship through the Ionians' sea,  
210 over the fruitless plain,  
though the west wind rushed past Sicily,  
a beautiful blast from heaven.*



## ANTISTROPHE A

Chosen most beautiful of my town,  
215 an offering to Apollo,  
I came to Cadmus' land, as I am  
Agenor's kin,  
sent to Laius' kindred towers.

220

*Like the golden statue-  
girls,*

*I have begun to serve Phoebus.  
But Castalia's water is waiting still  
225 to wet my hair for his service.*

## EPODE

*O rock that shines in the fire,  
double gleam on the heights  
where Dionysus dances,  
230 and vine that distils the daily wealth,  
the fruitful cluster of grapes,  
holy cave of the serpent, mountain rocks  
where the goddesses keep watch, O sacred mountain of snow,  
235 may I, unfearing, dance the Immortals' dance  
by Phoebus' central hollow, with Dirce left behind.*

## STROPHE B

*Now before the walls  
240 savage Ares comes  
kindling the flame of death  
for this city—may it not happen.  
Shared are the griefs of friends,  
shared; if she must suffer,  
245 this seven-gated land, then does Phoenicia share it.*

*Common blood, common children,  
through Io who wore the horns.  
I share in these troubles.*

#### ANTISTROPHE B

250 *A cloud about the town,  
a close cloud of shields,  
kindles the scheme of death.  
Soon shall Ares know  
that he brings to Oedipus' sons*  
255 *the curse of the very Furies.  
Ancestral Argos, I fear your strength,  
and I fear the gods' part too.  
For this man at arms*  
260 *comes against our home with justice.*

*(Enter from the side Polynices, with drawn sword.)*

#### POLYNICES

The warders' bolts have let me through the walls  
with ease, and so I fear once in the net  
265 I won't get out unbloodied. Thus I look  
hither and yonder, watching for a trick.  
My hand that holds this sword will give me courage.  
Ah, who is there? Or is it a noise I fear?  
270 All things seem terrible to those who dare  
when they set foot upon the enemy's land.  
I trust my mother, and I do not trust her,  
who brought me here under a pledge of truce.  
275 Defense is close. The sacrificial hearths  
are near, nor is the palace desolate.

I'll thrust my sword in the darkness of its case  
and ask who are these women by the house.

Say, foreign ladies, what land did you leave  
to come to our Greek halls?

CHORUS LEADER

280 It was Phoenicia reared me. Agenor's grandsons  
have sent me here a captive, prize for Phoebus.  
And while the son of Oedipus delayed  
to send me on to Loxias' oracle  
285 there came the Argives' war against this city.  
Give answer in return, you who have come  
to the gated fortress of the Theban land.

POLYNICES

My father is Oedipus, Laius' son, my mother  
Jocasta, daughter of Menoeceus.  
290 The Theban people call me Polynices.

CHORUS LEADER

Kin of Agenor's children who are my lords,  
who sent me here!

CHORUS [*singing*]

*Master, I fall on my knees,  
heeding the habit of home.*  
295 *At last you have come to your father's land.*  
*Queen, queen, come forth,  
open the gates!*  
*Mother who bore him, do you hear us now?*  
*Why your delay in leaving the halls*

*and taking your son in your arms?*

*(Enter Jocasta from the palace.)*

JOCASTA [*singing*]

*I heard your Phoenician cry,<sup>o</sup>  
girls, and my poor old feet,  
trembling, have brought me out.*  
305 *My child, my child, at last I see you again.  
Embrace your mother's breast with your arms,  
stretch forth your face and your dark curly hair,  
to shadow my throat.  
Oh, oh, you have finally come,  
310 unhopd for, unexpected, to your mother's arms.  
What shall I say, how phrase the whole  
delight in words and actions  
315 that compasses me about?  
If I dance in my joy shall I find the old delight?  
Child, you went as an exile; your father's house  
was left in desolation, your brother's doing.  
320 But your own yearned after you,  
Thebes itself yearned.  
And so I weep, and cut my whitened hair.  
No longer, child, do I wear white robes,  
325 I have changed to these dark gloomy rags.  
And the old man in the house, the blind old man,  
since the pair of you left the house,  
330 clings to his weeping desire. He seeks the sword  
for death by his own hand; he casts a noose  
over the roof beams mourning his curse on his children.  
335 He is hidden in darkness and steadily wails his woe.*

*But I hear that you have paired yourself in marriage,  
 the joy of making children.*  
 340 *In a foreign house you have taken a foreign bride,  
 a curse to your mother and Laius who was of old.  
 Doom brought by your wedding!  
 I did not light your wedding<sup>o</sup> torch  
 345 as a happy mother should.  
 Ismenus gave no water to the marriage;  
 the coming of your bride was never sung in Thebes.*  
 350 *May the cause of these sufferings perish, be it the steel  
 or Strife, or your father, or a demon-rout  
 in Oedipus' house.  
 For all their grief has fallen upon me.*

#### CHORUS LEADER

355 How strange and terrible for women is childbirth!  
 Therefore all women love their children so.

#### POLYNICES

Mother, with reason, unreasoning have I come  
 among my enemies. But all men must still  
 love their own country. Who says something else  
 360 enjoys his talk while thinking far away.  
 I was so scared, had gone so far in fear  
 lest my brother's tricks might kill me on the way,  
 that through the town I came with sword in hand,  
 365 turning my face about. Just one thing helped,  
 the truce—and your own pledge which led me on  
 through the ancestral walls. I came in tears  
 seeing at last the halls and the gods' altars,  
 the schools that reared me, and the spring of Dirce,

from all of which unjustly banished now  
370 I live in a foreign town, eyes blurred with tears.  
I come from grief and find you grief indeed.  
Your hair is shorn; your garments are of black.  
Alas, alas, my sorrows and myself!  
Mother, how frightful is the strife of kindred,  
375 and reconciling is hard to bring about!°  
What does my father do within the house,  
he who sees darkness? What of my two sisters,  
do they, poor girls, lament my exile now?

JOCASTA [*now speaking*]

Some god is ruining all of Oedipus' children.  
380 The beginning was my bearing a forbidden child.  
It was wrong to marry your father and bear you.  
But what of this? The god's will must be endured.  
Still, I must ask you, fearing it may sting,  
one question for whose answer I am yearning.

POLYNICES

385 Ask openly, leave nothing out at all.  
Your wish is mine, my mother.

JOCASTA

So now I ask what first I wish to know.°  
What is it to lose your country—a great suffering?

POLYNICES

The greatest, even worse than people say.

JOCASTA

390 What is its nature? What's so hard on exiles?

POLYNICES

One thing is worst: a man can't speak out freely.

JOCASTA

But this is slavery, not to speak one's thought.

POLYNICES

One must endure the unwisdom of one's masters.

JOCASTA

This also is painful, to join with fools in folly.

POLYNICES

395 One must be a slave, for gain, against one's nature.

JOCASTA

The saying is that exiles feed on hopes.

POLYNICES

Lovely to look at, but they do delay.

JOCASTA

And doesn't time make clear that they are empty?

POLYNICES

They have seductive charm in a man's troubles.

JOCASTA

400 How were you fed before your marriage fed you?

POLYNICES

Sometimes I'd have a day's worth, sometimes not.

JOCASTA

Your father's foreign friends, were they no help?

POLYNICES

Hope to be rich! If you are not—no friends.

JOCASTA

Your high birth brought you to no lordly height?

POLYNICES

405     Need's the bad thing. My breeding did not feed me.

JOCASTA

It seems one's country is the dearest thing.

POLYNICES

You couldn't say in words how dear it is.

JOCASTA

How did you get to Argos, and with what plan?

POLYNICES

Apollo gave Adrastus a certain answer.

JOCASTA

410     What sort? Why mention this? I cannot guess.

POLYNICES

To marry his daughters to a boar and a lion.

JOCASTA

What has my son to do with wild beasts' names?



POLYNICES

I do not know. God called me to my fate.

JOCASTA

For the god is wise. How did you meet your marriage?

POLYNICES

415 It was night; I came upon Adrastus' portal.

JOCASTA

A wandering exile, looking for a bed?

POLYNICES

Just so—and then another exile came.

JOCASTA

And who was he? Wretched as you, no doubt.

POLYNICES

That Tydeus who is named as Oeneus' son.

JOCASTA

420 But why did Adrastus think you were those beasts?

POLYNICES

Because we fought over the pallet there.

JOCASTA

And then he understood the oracle?

POLYNICES

And gave us two his daughters two to wed.

JOCASTA

Were you happy or unhappy in these weddings?

POLYNICES

425 Right to this day I have no fault to find.

JOCASTA

How did you get the army to follow you here?

POLYNICES

Adrastus promised his two sons-in-law,  
Tydeus and me—Tydeus is now my kinsman—  
that both would be brought home, but I the first.

430 So many Mycenaean chiefs are here  
and many Danaans, doing me a favor  
which hurts me, though I need it. My own town  
I fight against. I call the gods to witness:  
against my will I fight my willing kindred.

435 But you can possibly undo these troubles.  
Mother, you reconcile these kindred-friends,  
save you and me and the city from these sorrows.  
This has been sung before, but I shall say it:

“Men honor property above all else;  
440 it has the greatest power in human life.”  
And so I seek it with ten thousand spears.  
A beggar is no nobleman at all.

*(Enter Eteocles from the side.)*

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes Eteocles to hold his parley.  
Jocasta, as their mother, it's for you

445 to say the words to reconcile your sons.

#### ETEOCLES

Mother, I'm here. I came to do a favor  
for you. Now what's to come? Let someone speak.  
I have broken off my marshalling of warriors<sup>o</sup>  
about the walls that I might hear from you  
450 at your persuasion the arbitration for which  
you admitted this man within the city walls.

#### JOCASTA

Wait for a moment. Swiftmess brings not justice.  
It is slow speech that brings the greatest wisdom.  
Check your dread glare, the seethings of your spirit.  
455 It is not Gorgon's severed head you see;  
you look upon your brother who has come.  
And you, Polynices, look upon your brother,  
for if you look upon his face once more  
you will speak better and will hear him better.  
460 I want to give you both some good advice.  
When friend falls out with friend and they come together  
looking at one another, let them look  
at that for which they came, forget old wrongs.  
465 Son, Polynices, you may speak the first.  
For you have come, and brought the Argive army,  
as one who claims a wrong. Now may some god  
be judge and reconciler of these griefs.

#### POLYNICES

The word of truth is single in its  
nature;

470 and a just cause needs no  
interpreting.  
It carries its own case. But the unjust  
argument,  
since it is sick, needs clever  
medicine.

I took good foresight for our  
father's house,  
for him, and for myself, hoping to  
flee  
475 those curses with which once our  
father cursed us.  
So willingly myself I left this land,  
leaving the rule to him for a year's  
circle,  
so that I myself might take the rule in  
turn.◦

Thus we would not fall into hate and  
envy  
480 doing and suffering evil—but that has  
happened.  
For he who swore this, and called the  
gods to witness,  
did nothing of what he promised and  
still holds  
the kingship and his share of my own  
house.

And now I am ready, if I get my  
own,  
485 to send away the army from this land,

to take my own house for  
my proper turn,

and yield it back to him for equal

time,  
so as not to plunder my country nor  
besiege  
her towers with the scaling ladder's  
steps.  
490 But if I get not justice I shall try  
to do exactly this. The gods be  
witness:  
I have done all in justice, but most  
unjustly  
I am being robbed of my country, an  
offense to heaven.  
The facts I've told you, Mother,  
without heaping  
495 great twists of argument. The clever  
and the humble  
alike can see that I have spoken right.

#### CHORUS LEADER

I think, though I am not a Hellene born,  
that what you say is argued very well.

#### ETEOCLES

If all men saw the fair and wise  
the same  
500 men would not have debaters'  
double strife.  
But nothing is like or even  
among men  
except the name they give—  
which is not the fact.  
I'll speak to you, Mother,  
without concealment:

I'd go to the stars beyond the  
eastern sky  
505 or under earth, if I could do one  
thing,  
seize Tyranny, the greatest of the  
gods.  
I will not choose to give this  
good thing up  
to any other, rather than keep it  
myself.  
It's cowardice to let the big thing  
go

510 and settle for the smaller.  
Besides, I would feel shame

if he should come in arms and  
sack the land,  
and so achieve his purpose. This  
would be for Thebes  
disgrace, if fearing spearmen  
from Mycenae  
I yielded up my scepter for him  
to hold.

515 He should not seek his truce  
with arms in hand,  
for argument can straighten out  
as much  
as enemy steel can do.  
If he will live here on some other  
terms,  
he can. But what he asks I will  
not yield.

520 When I can rule should I become  
his slave?◦

So—on with fire, on with  
swords of war,  
harness the horses, fill the plain  
with chariots,  
knowing that I will never yield  
my rule.  
If one must do a wrong, it's best  
to do it  
525 pursuing power—otherwise,  
let's have virtue.

CHORUS LEADER

It isn't right to speak so well of evil.  
That is no good thing, but a bitterness to justice.

JOCASTA

My son Eteocles, old age is not  
a total misery. Experience helps.  
530 Sometimes we can speak wiser than the young.  
Why do you seek after the goddess Ambition?  
The worst of all, this goddess, she is unjust.  
Often she comes to happy homes and cities,  
and when she leaves, she has destroyed their owners,  
535 she after whom you rave. It's better, child,  
to honor Equality who ties friends to friends,  
cities to cities, allies to allies.  
For equality is stable<sup>o</sup> among men.  
If not, the lesser hates the greater force,  
540 and so begins the day of enmity.  
Equality set up men's weights and measures,  
gave them their numbers. And night's sightless eye  
equal divides with day the circling year,

545 while neither, yielding place, resents the other.  
So sun and night are servants to mankind.  
Yet you will not endure to hold your house  
in even shares with him? Where's justice then?°

Why do you honor so much tyrannic power  
550 and think that unjust happiness is great?  
It's fine to be looked up to? But it's empty.  
You want to have much wealth within your halls,  
much trouble with it?

And what is "much"? It's nothing but the name.  
Sufficiency's enough for men of sense.  
555 Men do not really own their private goods;°  
we just look after things which are the gods',  
and when they will, they take them back again.  
Wealth is not steady; it is of a day.

Come, if I question you a double question,  
560 whether you wish to rule, or to save the city,  
will you choose to be its tyrant? But if he wins  
and the Argive spear beats down the Theban lance,  
then you will see this town of Thebes subdued  
and many maidens taken off as slaves,  
565 assaulted, ravished, by our enemies.  
Truly the wealth which now you seek to have°  
will mean but grief for Thebes; you're too ambitious.  
So much for you.

Your turn now, Polynices:

ignorant favors has Adrastus done you,  
570 and you have come in folly to sack your city.  
Come, if you take this land—heaven forbid it—  
by the gods, what trophies can you set to Zeus?



How start the sacrifice for your vanquished country,  
and how inscribe your spoils at Inachus' stream?  
575 "Polynices set these shields up to the gods  
when he had fired Thebes"? Oh, never, son,  
be this, or such as this, your fame in Greece!  
But if you are worsted and his side wins, then how  
shall you go back to Argos, leaving here  
thousands of corpses? Some will surely say:  
580 "Adrastus, what a wedding for your daughter!  
For one girl's marriage we have all been ruined."  
You are pursuing evils—one of two—  
you will lose the Argives or fail in winning here.  
Both of you, drop excess. When two converge  
585 in single folly, that is worst of all.

#### CHORUS LEADER

O gods, in some way yet avert these evils  
and make the sons of Oedipus agree!

#### ETEOCLES

Mother, it's too late for talking, and this intermission time  
has been wasted; your good purpose can accomplish nothing now.  
590 For we cannot come to terms except as I have laid them down:  
that I shall hold the scepter of power in this land.  
Leave off your long advisings, now Mother, let me go.  
And as for you—outside these walls, or you shall die.

#### POLYNICES

What invulnerable someone will lay a sword on me  
595 for slaughter and not find himself receiving death in turn?

ETEOCLES

Near enough, he hasn't left you. Do you see these hands of mine?

POLYNICES

Oh, I see you. Wealth's a coward and a thing that loves its life.

ETEOCLES

Then why come you with so many for a battle with a no one?

POLYNICES

Oh, a prudent captain's better than a rash one in a war.

ETEOCLES

600 You can boast, when we've a truce that saves you from your death.

POLYNICES

So can you. Again I'm claiming rule and the sharing of this land.

ETEOCLES

No use to ask. My house shall still be ruled by none but me.

POLYNICES

Holding more than is your portion?

ETEOCLES

Yes. Now leave this land at once.

POLYNICES

Altars of our fathers' worship ...

ETEOCLES

—which you come to plunder  
now!

POLYNICES

... hear me!

ETEOCLES

Which of them will hear you  
when you

605 fight your own country?

POLYNICES

Temples of the gods who ride white horses ...

ETEOCLES

—and who hate you!

POLYNICES

... I am driven from my country ...

ETEOCLES

—for you came to ruin it!

POLYNICES

... wrongfully, O gods.

ETEOCLES

Don't call on these gods, but Mycenae's!

POLYNICES

Impious by nature ...

ETEOCLES

Never have I been my country's

foe.

POLYNICES

... who drive me off without my portion.

ETEOCLES

610 And I'll kill you yet, besides!

POLYNICES

Oh, my father, hear my sorrow!

ETEOCLES

And he hears what you are doing.

POLYNICES

And you, Mother!

ETEOCLES

It's indecent that you speak of her  
at all.

POLYNICES

O my city!

ETEOCLES

Go to Argos, and call on Lerna's  
stream.

POLYNICES

I'm going, never worry. Thank you, Mother.

ETEOCLES

Leave the land!

POLYNICES

I am going, but our father, let me see him.

ETEOCLES

615

You shall not.

POLYNICES

Or the girls, our sisters.

ETEOCLES

Never shall you look on them  
again.

POLYNICES

O my sisters!

ETEOCLES

Now why call them when you are  
their enemy?

POLYNICES

Fare you very well, my mother.

JOCASTA

Well, I suffer very much.

POLYNICES

I'm no longer a son of yours.

JOCASTA

I was born for suffering.

POLYNICES

For this man has done me insult.

ETEOCLES

620

And I stand insulted back.

POLYNICES

Where'll you be before the towers?

ETEOCLES

And why should you ask that?

POLYNICES

I shall stand against, to kill you.

ETEOCLES

I desire the selfsame thing.

JOCASTA

Oh, woe is me, my children, what will you do?

POLYNICES<sup>o</sup>

You'll see.

JOCASTA

Won't you flee your father's cursings?

POLYNICES

Let the whole house fall to ruin!

625     Soon my bloody sword no longer shall be lazy in its sheath.

But the land herself who bore me and her gods I call to witness,  
that dishonored, badly treated, I am thrust outside the land  
like a slave, as if I were not a son of Oedipus, as he is.  
O my city, if you suffer, lay the blame on him, not me:  
630 I attack against my will, I was thrust away<sup>o</sup> unwilling.  
    Apollo of the roadways, and my rooftops, fare you well,  
and my friends of youth and statues of the gods we drenched with  
offerings.  
I don't know if I shall ever speak a word to you again.  
But I still have hope that somehow if the gods are on my side  
635 I shall kill him and be master of this our Theban land.

ETEOCLES

Leave this place; your name means "quarrel"  
and our father named you well.

*(Exit jocasta into the palace and Polynices to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*Tyrian Cadmus came to this land.*  
640 *Here the heifer bent her legs and fell,*  
*proved the oracle, told him here to build*  
*his house on the fertile plain,*  
645 *where comes the moisture of fair-flowing waters,<sup>o</sup>*  
*Dirce's water over the sprouting furrows, seeded deep,*  
650 *where his mother bore Bacchus after her marriage with Zeus.*  
*He was still a child when the twining ivy came,*  
*green tendrils and all, to cover him over,*  
655 *to be part of the Bacchic dances of Theban girls*  
*and the women who call his name.*

## ANTISTROPHE

*And there the bloody dragon was,  
savage monster who guarded Ares' spring,  
660 looked with his roving eyes on its running stream.  
The beast was slain with a boulder  
when Cadmus came seeking water of lustration,  
665 and struck the bloody head with the blows of his monster-slaying  
arm,  
sowing its teeth in the furrows deep, at unmothered Pallas' bidding.*  
○

*670 Then earth sent up armed terror over its surface.  
Iron-hearted slaughter sent them back again,  
and their blood bedewed the land which had briefly showed them  
675 to the shining winds of heaven.*

## EPODE

*On you also I call, Io's child,  
Epaphus, son of our mother, and of Zeus,  
680 —with barbarian cry, with barbarian prayers—○  
come, come to this land!  
It was your descendants who founded it,  
685 and the two-named goddesses own it, Kore and dear Demeter,  
who is ruler of all, nurse of all, the earth.  
Epaphus, send us the goddesses of the torch,  
defend this land. For the gods all things are easy.*

*(To an attendant.)*

## ETEOCLES

*690 Go, and bring here Creon, Menoeceus' son,○  
the brother of Jocasta, my own mother;*



tell him I would consult him on private matters  
and state affairs before I go to war.

695        But he has saved your trouble; here he is.  
I see him now, he's coming to my house.

*(Enter Creon from the side.)*

CREON

I've traveled<sup>o</sup> far, trying to see you, King  
Eteocles; round the Cadmean gates  
and all their guards I went, to hunt you down.

ETEOCLES

700        Creon, be sure I wished to see you too.  
I found the terms of peace from Polynices,  
when we discussed them, far from what we need.

CREON

I've heard that he is arrogant toward Thebes,  
trusting his new connection and his army.  
705        But this we must leave hanging on the gods.  
I've come to tell you what's immediate.

ETEOCLES

What's this? I do not know what you will tell.

CREON

We have a prisoner from the Argive side.

ETEOCLES

What does he say that's new from over there?

CREON

710     He says the Argive host will shortly circle,  
armor and all, the old Cadmean town.

ETEOCLES

Then Thebes must bring her arms outside the town.

CREON

But where? Are you too young to see what's needed?

ETEOCLES

Outside the trenches, where they are to fight.

CREON

715     This land is few in numbers, they are many.

ETEOCLES

And well I know that they are bold—in speech.

CREON

Well, Argos has a swelling fame in Greece.

ETEOCLES

Fear not. I'll fill the plain up with their blood.

CREON

I hope so. But I see much labor here.

ETEOCLES

720     Well, I'll not coop my army within walls.

CREON

To take good counsel—this brings victory.

ETEOCLES

You want me to turn to some other roads?

CREON

All of them, lest our fate depend on one.

ETEOCLES

Should we lay ambush and attack at night?

CREON

725 So, if you failed, you would come safe again.

ETEOCLES

Night holds all even, but favors more the daring.

CREON

It's dread to have ill luck under the darkness.

ETEOCLES

A spear attack while they are at their dinner?

CREON

A brief surprise—but we need victory.

ETEOCLES

730 But Dirce's stream is deep for their retreat.

CREON

Nothing's as good as holding on to safety.

ETEOCLES

Suppose we rode against the Argive camp?

CREON

They're well walled in, with chariots around.

ETEOCLES

What shall I do? Give enemies the town?

CREON

735 No, but take counsel, since you are so clever.

ETEOCLES

And what forecounsel's cleverer than mine?

CREON

They say that seven men, as I have heard ...

ETEOCLES

What's their assignment? This is a small force.

CREON

... will lead their companies to assault the gates.

ETEOCLES

740 What shall we do? Not wait till we are helpless?

CREON

You also choose out seven for the gates.

ETEOCLES

To take command of troops, or fight alone?

CREON

With troops, when they have chosen out the best.

ETEOCLES

I see—to ward off scalings of the walls.

CREON

745 And choose lieutenants; one man can't see all.

ETEOCLES

Choosing for courage or for prudent minds?

CREON

Both. Neither's any good without the other.

ETEOCLES

So be it. To the seven-gated walls

I'll go, and set the captains as you say

750 in equal numbers against their enemies.

It would take long, long talk to give each name,  
now while the enemy camps outside our walls.

But I will go, my arm shall not be idle.

I hope my brother may be my opponent,<sup>o</sup>

755 that I may fight and take him with my spear  
and kill the man who came to sack my fatherland.

The marriage of Antigone, my sister,  
and your son Haemon, will be your affair  
if I should fail. Their earlier betrothal

760 I ratify, as I move off to war.

You are my mother's brother. I need not tell you  
to care for her, for my sake and your own.

My father bears the weight of his own folly,  
self-blinded. I won't praise this. But his curse

765 may kill his sons if it is brought to pass.

One thing we haven't done. We should find out  
if seer Teiresias has some word for us.  
I'll send your son Menoeceus after him,  
770 the boy who has your father's name, to bring him.  
With kindness he will come to speak to you,  
but I have blamed his seercraft and he hates me.  
I lay one charge on you, and on the city:°  
775 if our side wins, let never Polynices  
be buried here in Theban earth. If someone  
tries burial, he must die, though he be kin.  
So much to you.

And now to my own followers:  
bring out my arms and armor. To the fight  
780 which lies before me now I go with Justice,  
who will bring victory.° And I pray to Prudence,  
most helpful of gods, that she will save this city.

*(Exit Eteocles to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

#### STROPHE

*Ares, who brings us trouble, lover of blood and death,*  
785 *why do you love them, why stand away from Bromius' feasts?*  
*Never, when dances are fair and the girls are crowned,*  
*do you loosen your locks and sing to the breath of the pipe*  
*which the Graces have given for dancing. No, you rouse the host,*  
790 *the armed host of Argos, against our Theban blood.°*  
*You dance first in the dance that knows no music.*  
*Not when the thyrsus whirls and the fawn skins are there°*  
*do you come to Ismenus' stream.*

But with sound of chariots, clatter of bits and hooves,  
795 you urge the Argives against our earth-sown race,  
a dancing crowd in arms that swells with shields,  
decked in bronze to batter our walls of stone.  
Strife is a terrible god, she who has planned  
800 these sufferings for our rulers, the Labdacid kings. °

#### ANTISTROPHE

O glade with the holy foliage, loved by the many beasts,  
Artemis' own Cithaeron that wears the snow,  
would you had never taken Jocasta's child  
and brought to rearing Oedipus, child cast out of his house,  
805 marked by the golden pins. And would that the winged maid,  
the mountain portent of grief, had never sung her songs,  
the Sphinx whose music was no music at all,  
who scratched our walls with hoof and claw  
and dragged our youth on high  
810 to heaven's height untrodden, she whom Hades sent  
against the people of Cadmus. And another evil strife,  
the strife of Oedipus' children, comes on the town and its homes.  
815 Evil is never good, nor are these lawless sons,  
their mother's travail, their father's shame.  
She came to her kinsman's bed ... °

#### EPODE

Earth, you bore, you bore  
—I heard the barbarian tale in my home, I heard it well—  
820 the race that grew from the teeth of the crimson-crested monster,  
Thebes' noblest shame.  
And the sons of heaven, they came to Harmonia's marriage;  
the walls of Thebes, they rose to Amphion's lyre,

825     *midway between the streams*  
          *which pour their moisture over the rich green plain*  
          *from Dirce and Ismenus.*  
          *And Io, my horned mother, was also mother to kings of Thebes.*  
830     *This city has shifted from one blessing to another, and ever*  
          *has stood on high, decked with the crowns of Ares.*

*(Enter the prophet Teiresias from the side, led by his  
young daughter, accompanied by Menoeceus.)*

TEIRESIAS

Now lead me on, my daughter. You're the eye  
835     for my blind steps, as a star is to a sailor.  
Now set my path upon the level ground  
and lead me lest I stumble. Your father's weak.  
Guard my lot-tablets with your maiden hand  
840     which on my holy seat of prophecy  
I drew when I had marked the oracle birds.  
O young Menoeceus, Creon's son, now tell me,  
how far is still our journey to the town,  
and to your father? My knees begin to buckle.  
I've come so far I hardly can go on.

CREON

845     Take courage. You have come to harbor now,  
among your friends. Now hold him up, my son.  
Children, ° and old men's feet, they need the help  
of someone else's hand.

TEIRESIAS

Ah, we are here. Why did you want me, Creon?



CREON

850 I've not forgotten. But collect your strength,  
and draw your breath; forget your laboring road.

TEIRESIAS

I am fatigued, since only yesterday  
I came here from the town of Erechtheus' sons.  
There they had war against Eumolpus' spear,  
855 and I gave Cecrops' children victory.  
So, as you see, I wear a golden crown,  
as first fruit of their plunder from the foe.

CREON

I'll take your crown of victory as an omen.  
We're in midwave of danger, as you know,  
860 Danaus' sons against us, strife for Thebes.  
Our king is gone, dressed in his warrior arms,  
against Mycenae's force, Eteocles.  
But he enjoined me to find out from you  
what we should do in hope to save our city.

TEIRESIAS

865 As far as he goes, I'd have locked my mouth,  
withheld the oracles. But at your asking,  
I'll tell you. Creon, the land has long been sick,  
since Laius made a child against heaven's will,<sup>o</sup>  
and begot poor Oedipus, husband to his mother.  
870 The bloody ruin of his peering eyes  
is the gods' clever warning unto Greece.  
And Oedipus' sons who tried to cloak this up  
with the passage of time, as if to escape the gods,

erred in their folly, since they gave their father  
875 neither his rights nor freedom to depart.  
And so they stung the wretch to savage anger.  
Therefore he cursed them terribly indeed,  
since he was ailing and, besides, dishonored.  
What did I not do, what did I not say?  
All the result was hatred from those sons.  
880 Death by their own hands is upon them, Creon;  
and many corpses fallen over corpses,  
    Argive and Cadmean limbs<sup>o</sup> mingled together  
will give the Theban land a bitter mourning.  
    You, my poor city, will be buried with them,  
885 if no one is persuaded by my words.  
This would be best, that none of Oedipus' house<sup>o</sup>  
live in the land as citizen or lord,  
since the gods hound them on to spoil the state.  
But since the bad is stronger than the good  
890 there is one other way to save the town.  
But since for me it is not safe to speak  
and bitter to those involved for me to state  
the cure that yet could save this city, I'll leave.  
Farewell. One among many, I will take  
895 whatever comes. What else is there to do?

CREON

Stay here, old man.

TEIRESIAS

Do not lay hands on me.

CREON

Now wait! Why flee?

TEIRESIAS

Luck flees you, not myself.

CREON

Speak the salvation of the town and townsmen.

TEIRESIAS

Now you may wish it; soon you'll wish it not.

CREON

900 I could not fail to wish my country's safely.

TEIRESIAS

You really want to hear, and you are eager?

CREON

What should I be more earnest for than this?

TEIRESIAS

Soon you will hear about my prophecies.

—But first there's something that I need to know.

905 Where is Menoeceus, he who brought me here?

CREON

He isn't far away, he's close to you.

TEIRESIAS

Let him withdraw, far from my prophecies.

CREON

He is my son and will not talk at large.

TEIRESIAS

You wish that I should speak while he is here?

CREON

910 Yes. He'll be glad to hear of what will save us.

TEIRESIAS

Then shall you hear the way of prophecy,  
what you must do to save the Theban town.  
You must kill Menoeceus for his country's sake,  
your child—since you yourself have asked your fate.

CREON

915 What are you saying? What's your word, old man?

TEIRESIAS

Just what it is, and this you needs must do.

CREON

Oh, you have said much evil in short time.

TEIRESIAS

Evil to you, great safety to your city.

CREON

I wasn't listening, didn't hear. City, farewell.

TEIRESIAS

920 This is no more the man he was. He dodges.

CREON

Go, and good-bye. I do not need your seercraft.

TEIRESIAS

Has truth now died because you are unfortunate?

CREON

Oh, by your knees and by your old man's beard ...

TEIRESIAS

Why fall before me? Accept what can't be changed.

CREON

925 ... be quiet; don't reveal this to the town.

TEIRESIAS

You tell me to do wrong; I won't keep quiet.

CREON

What will you do? You plan to kill my child?

TEIRESIAS

Others must deal with action. I must speak.

CREON

Why is this curse on me, and on my son?

## TEIRESIAS

- 930     You are right to ask, and bring me to debate.  
He must, in that chamber where the earth-born dragon  
was born, the watcher over Dirce's streams,  
be slaughtered, and so give libation blood  
for Cadmus' crime, appeasing Ares' wrath,  
935     who now takes vengeance for his dragon's death.  
Do this, and Ares will be your ally.  
If Earth gets fruit for fruit, and human blood  
for her own offspring, then this land shall be  
friendly to you, she who sent up the crop  
of golden-helmeted Sown Men. One of their race,  
940     child of the dragon's jaws, must die this death.  
You are the one survivor of the Sown,  
pure-blooded, on both sides, you and your sons.  
Haemon's betrothal saves him from the slaughter.°  
945     For he is not unwedded, though still virgin.  
This boy, who belongs to none but to the city,  
if he would die, will save his fatherland,  
make harsh homecoming for Adrastus and the Argives,  
950     casting the dark of night upon their eyes,  
and make Thebes famous. There you have your choice,  
to save your city or to save your son.  
Now you have all I know. Child, take me home.  
A man's a fool to use the prophet's trade.  
955     For if he happens to bring bitter news  
he's hated by the men for whom he works;  
and if he pities them and tells them lies  
he wrongs the gods. No prophet but Apollo  
should sing to men, for he has none to fear.

*(Exit Teiresias and his daughter to the side.)*

CHORUS LEADER

960 Creon, why are you silent, holding your tongue?  
Myself, I'm no less stricken and amazed.

CREON

What can one say? But my response is clear.  
I'll never walk into such wretchedness  
as to give my city the slaughter of my son.  
965 It's part of human life to love one's children.  
No one would give his own son up to death.  
Let no one praise me who would kill my sons!  
Though I, since I am in the prime of life,  
am ready to die to set my country free.  
970 Up, son, before the whole town learns of this,  
pay no attention to these wanton bodings,  
fly quickly, get yourself outside this land.  
For he will tell this to the chiefs and captains,<sup>o</sup>  
making the rounds of the gates and their commanders.  
975 If we anticipate him, you are safe.  
If you come second, we're destroyed, you die.

MENOECEUS

Where shall I flee, to what city and what friend?

CREON

As far away from here as you can get.

MENOECEUS

You'd better tell me where, and I will do it.

CREON

Go beyond Delphi...

MENOECEUS

980

And where on beyond?

CREON

... into Aetolia.

MENOECEUS

And where after that?

CREON

Thesprotia's plain.

MENOECEUS

Where holy Dodona stands?

CREON

Yes.

MENOECEUS

What protection will that be for me?

CREON

The god will guide you.

MENOECEUS

And for my supplies?

CREON

I'll give you gold.



MENOECEUS

985

You talk good sense, my father.

Go get it then. I'll go to see your sister  
Jocasta, she who nursed me at her breast,  
when my mother died and I was left an orphan.  
I'll visit her, then go and save my life.

990

Please hurry now, may you not be delayed. °

*(Exit Creon to the side.)*

995

Women, how well I've taken away his fear,  
cheating with words, to get what I desire.  
He'd steal me out, robbing the state of safety,  
give me to cowardice. This could be forgiven  
in an old man, but not pardoned in myself,  
that I should so betray my fatherland.

1000

Know well, I'm going, and I'll save the town  
and give my life to death to save this land.  
How shameful if men who are not under omens,  
and so constrained by heaven's necessity,  
stand at their shields and do not shrink at death,  
fighting before the towers for their country—  
while I, betraying my father and my brother  
and my own city, leave the land, a coward.

1005

Wherever I'd live, I'd show myself a weakling.  
By Zeus, among the stars, and bloody Ares,  
who set the Sown Men, offspring of this land,  
to be its rulers, I am going now.

1010

I'll take my stand on the high battlements  
over that precinct where the dragon lived,  
there slay myself above its gloomy depths

that the seer spoke of; so I'll free the land.  
I've said my say, and now I go to give<sup>o</sup>  
my city no mean gift. I'll cure this ailing land.  
1015 If every man would take what good he can  
and contribute it to his city's common good,  
cities would suffer less, be happy from now on.

*(Exit Menoeceus to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*You came, you came,  
1020 you wingèd thing, Earth's offspring, monster's child,  
to seize the sons of Cadmus:  
half a maiden, a fearful beast,  
1025 with roving wings and claws that fed on blood.  
You who snatched the youths from Dirce's plain,  
crying your Fury's shriek,  
the song that knows no music,  
1030 you brought, you brought sorrows upon our land,  
bloody ones—and bloody was the god  
who brought these things about.  
Mournings of the mothers,  
mournings of the maidens,  
1035 filled our homes with grief.  
Groan and cry ran back and forth  
from one to another through the town,  
1040 like thunder they groaned  
each time the wingèd maiden seized one of the city's men.*

ANTISTROPHE

*In time there came  
—the Pythian sent him—Oedipus the wretched,  
1045 here to this land of Thebes.  
First we were glad, but later we grieved.  
He conquered the riddle; poor wretch, he wed his mother.  
1050 He stained the town and through slaughter he came to strife,  
casting the curse on his sons.  
We praise him who goes,  
1055 we praise the man who is dying to save his land.  
Lament he leaves to Creon.  
But to the town's seven gates  
he brings a glorious triumph.  
1060 Pallas, make us mothers  
of sons as good as this,  
you who checked the dragon blood,  
by the rock you urged Cadmus to throw.  
1065 Yet from this victory came  
a curse of god on this land, and slaughter with it.*

*(Enter one of Eteocles' soldiers as Messenger from the side.)*

*(Calling at the door of the palace.)*

MESSENGER

You there, whoever's watching at the gate,  
open, and bring Jocasta from the house.  
Open, I say! You've waited long, but now  
1070 come forth and listen, famed wife of Oedipus,  
leaving your wailing and your tears of grief.

*(Enter Jocasta from the palace.)*

JOCASTA

Dear friend, you haven't come to tell disaster,  
Eteocles' death, you who march by his shield,  
constantly keeping off the enemy shafts?  
1075 What is the new word that you bring to me?  
Is my son alive or dead? Now tell me true.

MESSENGER

He lives, so tremble not, that fear is gone.

JOCASTA

How is the circuit of the seven gates?

MESSENGER

They stand unbroken, the city is not plundered.

JOCASTA

1080 Were they endangered by the Argive spear?

MESSENGER

Right on the verge. But our Cadmean Ares  
was stronger than the Mycenaean spear.

JOCASTA

By the gods, tell one thing more! What do you know  
of Polynices? I care for his life too.

MESSENGER

1085 Both of your sons are living to this moment.

JOCASTA

God bless you! How, when you were sore besieged,  
did you force back the Argives from the gates?

Tell me, that I may please the blind old man,  
sitting inside, with news of the city's rescue.

MESSENGER

- 1090 When Creon's son, who died to save the city,  
on the highest tower standing, had thrust his sword  
through his own throat and saved this land of ours,  
your son sent seven companies and their captains,  
to the seven gates, to keep the Argives off.
- 1095 Horses against the horsemen did he set,  
foot against infantry, so where the wall  
was weak against assault, he guarded it.  
From the high citadel we saw the host,
- 1100 white-shielded men of Argos. They left Teumessus,  
they rushed the ditch to set the town on fire.°  
Then the paeon and the trumpet played together,  
from there, and from our walls.  
Then first attacked were the Neïstan gates°
- 1105 by a company bristling with its thick-set shields.  
Parthenopaeus led them, the huntress' child.  
A fitting sign was blazing on his shield,  
Atalanta with her distant-ranging arrows  
killing Aetolia's boar. Against the gate  
of Proetus came the seer, Amphiaraus,
- 1110 with sacrificial offerings on his car,  
modestly, no insolent sign on his blank shield.  
Against the Ogygian gate the lord Hippomedon  
came with a sign in the middle of his shield,
- 1115 the All-Seeing one, with eyes all over him,  
some eyes that look forth as the stars come up,  
others that hide among the setting stars,

as later we could see when the man was dead.  
 Against Homoloid gate Tydeus took his stand.  
 1120 He bore a lion's hide upon his shield  
 with bristling mane, and like Prometheus held  
 in his right hand a torch to burn the town.  
 Your Polynices by the Gate of Springs  
 led on the war. Upon his shield the fillies  
 1125 of Potniae raged and ran in panic fear,  
 moving by pivots near the handle grip.  
 They did seem mad indeed.  
 And he who loves war even as Ares does,  
 Capaneus led against the Electran gate.  
 1130 The iron markings on his shield were these:  
 an earth-born Giant carried on his shoulders  
 a whole town wrenched away from its foundations,  
 this to suggest what our town would endure.  
 Adrastus himself was at the seventh gate.  
 1135 A hundred snakes were pictured on his shield.  
 Yes, on his left arm rode the Argive Hydras.  
 And from our walls these snakes, with snatching jaws,  
 were taking Cadmus' children.  
 Now all these things I very well could see  
 1140 since it was I who took the password round.  
                     So first we fought with arrows and throwing-spears  
 and far-flung slingshots and the crash of stones.  
 When we had won this fighting, Tydeus cried,  
 sudden, so did your son, "O Danaan men,  
 1145 do not delay, before their shafts have shredded you,  
 charge at the gates, light-armed, and horse, and chariots."  
 And when they heard the cry, no man was slow,  
 and many fell, their heads bedaubed with blood,

1150 while from our walls you could have seen large numbers  
dive to the plain and breathe their life away.

They dewed the thirsty earth with streams of blood.

Then that Arcadian, Atalanta's son,  
no Argive, rushed upon the gates a storm,  
crying for double axes and for fire,  
1155 meaning to overturn our town. But then  
the sea god's son, Periclymenus, cast a stone,  
a wagon's load, from the high cornice-top,  
broke up his yellow head, shattered the joinings  
1160 of bone on bone; straightway his blushing face  
blushed with his blood. He'll not return alive  
to the queen of archers, his mother, the mountain maid.

When he had seen that this gate was defended,  
your son went on, I followed, and I saw  
1165 Tydeus and many shieldmen by his side  
dashing Aetolian spears against the top  
of our defenses, so that many fled  
the upper battlements. But against him too  
your son brought on the crowd as a huntsman does  
1170 and saved the towers. So to the next gate  
we hurried on, having stopped the sickness there.

How can I tell you how Capaneus raged?  
For he came with the steps of a long ladder.  
1175 This was his boast, that Zeus's awful fire  
could not hold him back from overturning the city.  
He cried this as they threw the stones against him,  
and still climbed up the ladder, coiled within  
his shield, step after step, and rung by rung.  
1180 Just as he reached the cornice of the wall

Zeus struck with lightning, and the earth rang out  
so all were frightened. From the ladder he fell,  
limbs whirling like a sling. His hair streamed high;  
his blood fell down to earth. His arms and legs  
1185 went spinning like Ixion on his wheel.  
He fell upon the ground a flaming corpse.

When Adrastus saw Zeus was his enemy,  
he drew his army back behind the ditch.  
But we, who saw the omen on our side,  
1190 horsemen and chariots and infantry rushed out.  
We drove our spears into their very center.  
Ruin was everywhere. They died, they fell  
down from the chariot's rim. The wheels rebounded.  
1195 Axle on axle, corpse on corpse was heaped.

This land's defenses have been kept from ruin  
this day. The gods must see if this our land  
remains successful. For some god has saved her.

#### CHORUS LEADER

1200 How fair is victory! If the gods have still  
a better plan, I'll hope for my own fortune.

#### JOCASTA

The gods and fortune both have  
served us well.

My sons are alive. The country  
has escaped.  
1205 But Creon, he has reaped a  
mournful harvest,  
who married me to Oedipus.  
Gone is his son:



good fortune for the town, a  
grief to him.

Go on now, tell me what my  
sons will do.

MESSENGER

Let be the rest. So far your fortune holds.

JOCASTA

1210 Suspicious sayings. This I'll not allow.

MESSENGER

What more do you want than to know your sons are saved?

JOCASTA

To hear if I have happiness in the future.

MESSENGER

Let me go. I'm your son's attendant, and he needs me.

JOCASTA

You hide some evil and cover it up in dark.

MESSENGER

1215 I would not add your sorrows to your gains.

JOCASTA

You must, unless you fly away to heaven.

MESSENGER

Alas, why not let me leave good news behind me?

Why force me to tell the bad?

Your sons intend—oh shameful of daring!—

1220 a single combat, severed from the host.  
And they have said to Argives and Cadmeans<sup>o</sup>  
words which they never should have said at all.  
Eteocles began. High on a tower,  
he ordered that the army be called to silence  
1225 and said, "O leaders of the land of Hellas,  
lords of the Danaans, you who here have come,  
and Cadmus' people, not for Polynices  
nor for myself should you exchange your lives.  
For I myself, putting this danger off,  
1230 alone will join in battle with my brother.  
If I kill him, I'll hold my house alone;  
if I am worsted, to him alone I'll yield it.  
Give up the struggle, Argives: you'll depart  
this land without leaving your own lives here;  
1235 and of the Sown Men there are already dead enough."

So much he said, and your son Polynices  
straightway leapt up and praised what he had said.  
And all the Argives shouted their approval,  
and Cadmus' people, for they thought it just.  
1240 So truce was made. In no-man's-land the chiefs  
took solemn oath they would abide by it.  
Then did they cover their bodies with brazen arms,  
the two young sons of the old Oedipus.  
Their friends were arming them. The Theban lords  
1245 saw to our captain, the Argive chiefs to the other.  
Then they stood shining, and they had not paled  
but raged to cast their spears at one another.  
And from about their friends came up to them,  
cheered them with speech and said such words as these:  
1250 "Polynices, now you can set up for Zeus

his triumph statue and make Argos famed.”

To Eteocles: “Now you are fighting for your city;  
now when you conquer, you will hold the rule.”

Such things they said, exhorting them to battle.

- 1255 The seers slew sheep and marked the points of flame,  
its cleavages, any damp signs of evil,  
and that high shining which may have two meanings,  
a mark of victory, or of the losing side.  
If you have strength or any words of wisdom  
1260 or spells of incantation, go, hold back  
your children from dread strife. The danger’s great.  
Your dreadful prize will only be your tears<sup>o</sup>  
if you should lose both sons this very day.

JOCASTA [*calling into the palace*]

My child Antigone, come outside the house.

- 1265 No help for you in maidens’ works and dances.<sup>o</sup>  
The gods have set it so. But those brave men  
your brothers, who are rushing on their death,  
you and your mother must keep from mutual murder.

(*Enter Antigone from the palace.*)

ANTIGONE

- 1270 Mother, what new terror for our family  
do you cry out before the palace front?

JOCASTA

Daughter, your brothers’ lives are falling fast.

ANTIGONE

What do you say?

JOCASTA

They're set for single fight.

ANTIGONE

Oh no! What words are these?

JOCASTA

Hard words. Follow me.

ANTIGONE

Where, as I leave my chamber?

JOCASTA

1275

To the armies.

ANTIGONE

I fear the crowd.

JOCASTA

Modesty will not help.

ANTIGONE

What shall I do?

JOCASTA

Undo your brothers' strife.

ANTIGONE

But how?

JOCASTA

By supplicating them, with me.

*(To the Messenger.)*

Lead us to the battlefield. We can't delay.°  
1280 You hurry, hurry, daughter. If I catch them  
before they raise their spears, my life's in light.°  
But if they die, I'll lie with them in death.

*(Exit Jocasta, Antigone, and the Messenger to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*Alas, alas, my shuddering heart!*  
1285 *Pity, pity goes through my flesh*  
*as I think of that wretched mother.*  
*Which of her children will kill her child*  
1290 *—Oh, the sufferings, Zeus, Oh Earth—*  
*cutting his brother's throat, spilling his brother's breath?*  
1295 *And I, poor soul, which corpse shall I lament?*

ANTISTROPHE

*Woe, oh woe, twin beasts!*  
*Bloody spirits, shaking the spear,*  
*how soon they will work their murders!*  
1300 *Unhappy that ever they thought of this duel.*  
*With barbarian wailings I'll mourn the dead.*  
*The fortune of death is near, the sword° will show what comes.*  
1305 *This murder the Furies have wrought is a fate beyond all fates.*

CHORUS LEADER

But I see Creon coming to the house  
with clouded face, and break off this lament.

*(Enter from the side Creon, and attendants  
carrying the body of Menoeceus.)*

CREON<sup>o</sup>

- 1310 What shall I do? And should my tears lament  
myself, or this poor city, held in gloom  
as if it traveled down to Acheron?  
My child has perished, dying for this land.  
The name he leaves is noble, but sad for me.
- 1315 Just now I took him from the dragon rocks,  
took in my arms my son who killed himself.  
My whole house mourns. And I, in my old age,  
I come for my old sister, Queen Jocasta,  
to lay my son out for his funeral.
- 1320 For to the dead we who are not yet dead  
must pay respect, honoring the god below.

CHORUS LEADER

Gone is your sister, Creon, from the house,  
and with her went the maid Antigone.

CREON

Where? And what trouble called them? Tell me now.

CHORUS LEADER

- 1325 She heard her sons were planning single fight  
with spear and shield over the royal house.

CREON

What are you saying? This I had not heard,  
since I was caring for my own son's corpse.

CHORUS LEADER

Your sister left the house some  
time ago.

1330 I think the mortal combat of those  
sons,

Oedipus' sons, is at an end by  
now.

*(Enter a Messenger from the side.)*

CREON

Alas, indeed I see a sign of that:  
the dark and scowling face of one who comes  
to bring the news of everything that's happened.

MESSENGER

1335 Woe is me, how tell my story or the groaning that I bring?

CREON

We are ruined, I can tell it from the gloom with which you start.

MESSENGER

"Woe is me," I cry again, for the trouble I bring is great.

CREON

To be heaped upon the sufferings we had suffered. What's your  
news?

MESSENGER

Creon, your sister's children are no longer in the light.

CREON [*singing*]

1340 *Alas!*

*Great is the sorrow you bring, for me and for the city.*

*O house of Oedipus, have you heard the news?*

*Your sons have perished, both in one disaster.*

CHORUS LEADER

The house would weep, if it could understand.

CREON [*singing*]

1345 *Alas, disaster, born of heavy fate!*

*Ah, for my sorrows, how I suffer now!*

MESSENGER

And if you knew the further misery!

CREON [*now speaking*]

How could there be a worser fate than this?

MESSENGER

Your sister died along with her two sons.

CHORUS [*singing*]

1350 *Lead off the wailing, batter your head in mourning*  
*with your fair white arms!*

CREON

Jocasta, what an ending to your life,  
and to your marriage, caused by the Sphinx's riddle.

CHORUS LEADER<sup>o</sup>



Tell me about the slaughter of the sons,  
1355 the working-out in fight of Oedipus' curse.

MESSENGER

You know our first good fortune before the towers,  
for the city walls are not so far away  
you couldn't see the things that happened there.  
When they were fitted with their shining arms,  
1360 the two young sons of Oedipus the old,  
they rose and went into the middle plain,  
the two commanders, the pair of generals,<sup>o</sup>  
for the struggle of the single fight in arms.  
Looking toward Argos Polynices prayed,  
1365 "O lady Hera, yours I am: I'm wed  
to Adrastus' child and living in your land.  
Grant I may kill my brother, so my hand  
show sign of victory, my opponent's blood."  
He asked a shameful crown, his brother's death.<sup>o</sup>  
1370 Tears came to many at this monstrous prayer,  
men looked at one another in the crowd.  
Eteocles prayed, looking toward the house  
of golden-shielded Pallas, "Daughter of Zeus,  
grant me to drive my spear in victory  
1375 into my brother's breast with this my arm,  
to kill the one who came to sack my land."<sup>o</sup>  
Then the Tyrrhenian trumpet-blast burst forth,  
like fire, as the signal for the fight;  
they ran a dreadful race at one another  
1380 and like wild boars that sharpen their savage tusks  
drew close, both foaming slaver down their beards.  
Both lunged with spears, but drew within their shields

so that the steel might spend itself in vain.  
If either saw the other's eye peer up  
above the rim, he darted with his spear,  
1385 hoping to catch him quickly with its point.  
But both were clever, peering through the shield slits,  
so neither's spear was any use at all.  
We who were watching sweated more than they,<sup>o</sup>  
all fearful for our friends.

Eteocles slipped a little on a stone  
1390 that turned beneath his foot. One leg came out  
around the shield; and Polynices struck,  
seeing the mark thus offered to his steel.  
The Argive spear went cleanly through his calf  
1395 and all the Danaan army cried in joy.  
And Eteocles, wounded,<sup>o</sup> saw his brother's shoulder  
exposed in the struggle, and he struck at that.  
Thebans rejoiced; but the spearhead broke off short.  
1400 His spear no use, he fell back step by step,  
then seized and hurled a rugged rock which broke  
his brother's spear, so now on even terms  
they stood, since neither had a lance in hand.

Then snatching at the handles of their swords  
1405 they came together, and they clashed their shields,  
pushed back and forth, and frightful was the noise.  
Eteocles, who'd been to Thessaly,  
had learned and used a fine Thessalian trick.  
He disentangled from their present struggle,  
1410 fell with his left foot back, watching his mark  
in his foe's belly. Then he jumped ahead  
on his right foot and struck him in the navel.

The sword went through and reached right to the spine.  
1415 Stooped over his belly Polynices fell  
with gasps of blood. The victor stuck his sword  
into the earth, began to strip his arms,  
not mindful of himself, only of that.  
This was his finish. The other had some life left,  
1420 had kept his sword all through his painful fall.  
Scarcely he managed, but he thrust that sword,  
he the first-fallen, through his brother's liver.  
They bit the dust and lie near one another;  
the two divided thus their heritage.

#### CHORUS LEADER

1425 O Oedipus, how much I mourn your woes.  
It seems a god has now fulfilled your curse.

#### MESSENGER

Hear now the woes that followed  
upon these.  
Just as her fallen children left this  
life  
their wretched mother came upon  
them both,  
1430 she in her hurry, with her daughter  
too.  
And when she saw them with their  
mortal wounds,  
she groaned, "O children, I bring  
help too late."  
Falling upon her children, each in  
turn,  
she wept, she mourned them, all her

nursing wasted.

1435 Their sister at her side like a  
warrior's helper  
cried, "O supporters of our mother's  
age,  
you have betrayed my marriage,  
dearest brothers."  
Eteocles' hard dying breath was  
coming  
out from his chest, and yet he heard  
his mother,  
laid his damp hand on hers. He could  
not speak.

1440 But tears fell from his eyes in sign of  
love.  
The other had breath, and looking  
toward his sister  
and his old mother, Polynices said:  
"Mother, we're dead. I pity you  
indeed,  
1445 and this my sister and my brother's  
corpse,  
my friend turned enemy, but still my  
friend.  
Mother, and you, my sister, bury me  
in my own land. Persuade the angry  
city  
to grant me this much of my father's  
soil,  
1450 though I got not our house. Close up  
my eyes,  
Mother," he said, and put her hand  
upon them.

“Farewell, the darkness now is  
closing in.”

So both together breathed out  
their sad lives.

1455 But their mother, when she looked on  
this disaster  
snatched a sword off the corpses and  
she did  
a dreadful deed. Straight through her  
neck she drove  
the steel. So now she lies among her  
own.  
In death her arms are cast about them  
both.

1460 Then did the armies rush to  
strife of words,  
we claiming that my master won the  
day,  
and they the other. The captains  
quarreled too.  
Some claimed that Polynices’ spear  
struck first,<sup>o</sup>  
the others that dead men have no  
victory.

1465 Meanwhile, Antigone had left the  
army.  
They rushed for weapons, but by  
prudent forethought  
the Theban host had halted under  
arms.

So we fell on them not yet in  
their armor,

swooping upon the Argive host in

haste.

1470 No one withstood us, they fled, and  
filled the plain.  
Blood flowed from myriad corpses  
slain by spears.  
When we had conquered, some set  
up for Zeus  
his trophy statue, others stripped the  
corpses  
1475 and sent the shields within the walls  
as spoils.  
And others, with Antigone, bring the  
dead  
so their own friends may give them  
mourning here.  
Of these sad contests, some have  
ended well  
for this our city, others ill indeed.

*(Exit Messenger to the side. Enter Antigone from the other side, with attendants bearing the bodies of the two brothers and of Jocasta.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

1480 *No longer for hearing alone  
is the city's grief. You may see  
the three dead on their way  
near to the palace, they who found  
together their darkened end.*

ANTIGONE [*singing*]

1485 *No veil now covers the curls on my  
delicate cheek,  
nor in maiden shame have I hidden the*



alone, without my mother,  
helping the song of my grief.  
Woe for the wailings with which I mourn,  
1520 I who shall live my life alone  
among my falling tears.  
On which of them first  
shall I cast the first fruits  
1525 of my shorn-off hair?  
On my mother's two breasts  
where I drew my milk,  
or the horrible wounds of my brothers?  
1530 Oh, oh, come forth from the house,  
with your blinded face,  
old father Oedipus, show your wretched  
self,  
you who drag out a wretched long life  
1535 after casting the dark on your eyes. °  
Do you hear me,  
wandering old-footed in the courtyard,  
or are you lying wretched in bed?

*(Enter Oedipus from the palace.)*

OEDIPUS [*singing throughout this lyric interchange with Antigone, who sings in response*]

1540 Why have you brought me forth to the light,  
dragging my blindness along on a stick,  
with your pitiful tears, from my bed in the dark,  
1545 a gray, invisible ghost of the air, a corpse, a flying dream?

ANTIGONE



*You must hear the telling of dreadful news.  
Father, your sons are dead.  
And so is the wife who tended and guided your stumbling steps,*  
1550 *O Father, woe is me.*

OEDIPUS

*Woe for my frightful griefs. I must moan, I must cry aloud.  
Three lives gone! My child,  
how did they leave the light; what was the fate that fell?*

ANTIGONE

1555 *Not in reproach do I say it, nor glad at your grief,  
but in simple sorrow: the avenging power of your curse,  
heavy with swords and fire and wicked fightings, fell,  
Father, on your sons.*

OEDIPUS

*Alas'.*

ANTIGONE

1560 *Why this lament?*

OEDIPUS

*My children!*

ANTIGONE

*You are in grief.  
But, Father, if you could see the chariot of the sun  
and cast your eyes on these corpses!*

OEDIPUS

1565 *It's clear what disaster came on my sons.*

*But what doom struck down my wife?*

ANTIGONE

*She showed all men her groaning tears.  
She went to her sons as a suppliant, to adjure them by her breast.  
Their mother found them like lions wild,  
wielding their spears in war with each other.  
1570 There in the flowering meadow,<sup>o</sup>  
beside Electra's gate,  
they were fighting and wounded; already the blood  
1575 was running to make them cold,  
Hades' libation, which Ares grants.  
So taking the bronze-hammered sword from the dead,  
she plunged it into her flesh, and in grief for her sons,  
she fell on their corpses.  
The god who brought this about  
1580 has brought together all of these griefs for our house,  
Father, in one short day.*

CHORUS LEADER<sup>o</sup>

*This day has started very many sorrows  
for Oedipus' house. May our own life be better!*

CREON

*Cease from your mourning. Now it is the time  
1585 to think of burial. Oedipus, hear this speech:  
Eteocles, your son, gave me the rule  
over this land, and made that rule the dowry  
for Haemon's marriage with Antigone.  
I will not let you live here any more,  
1590 for clearly has Teiresias said that never,*

while you are here, can the city prosper well.  
So, on your way! This proclamation comes  
not as an insult, nor am I your enemy.  
I simply fear that the Avengers who pursue you  
may do more damage to this land of ours.

OEDIPUS [*now speaking*]

1595 O fate, you bred me wretched from  
the start  
for suffering, if ever mortal was.  
Before I came to light from my  
mother's womb  
Apollo prophesied that I, the unborn,  
should kill my father—  
suffering indeed.

Once I was born, the father who  
begot me,  
1600 counting me as his enemy, tried to  
kill me,  
since he must die through me, and so  
he sent me,  
still a breast-loving baby, to be food  
for the wild beasts.  
There was I saved. Cithaeron, you  
should sink  
1605 in the depthless chasms of the  
underworld,  
you who did not destroy me, but a  
god  
gave me in servitude to Polybus.  
So when, ill-fated, I had killed my  
father,

I came into my wretched mother's  
bed  
1610 and begot brother-sons whom now  
I've killed,  
passing on to my children Laius'  
curse.

For I am not so foolish in my nature  
as to do what I did to my eyes, and to  
their lives,  
if it were not some god who had  
contrived it.

1615 Well, what's to do now with my  
wretched self?

Who is to guide this blind man? She  
who's dead?

Full well I know, were she alive, she  
would.

Or my good pair of sons? They are  
no more.

Am I still young enough to make my  
living?

From what? Creon, why kill me  
utterly?

1620 For you are killing me if you cast me  
out.

Yet I'll not clutch your knees and  
prove a coward.

Even in misery, I won't betray my  
birth.

CREON

1625 It is well spoken not to grasp my knees;  
I shall not let you live within this land.

Now, of these dead, the one must straight be taken  
into the house. The other, he who came  
to sack his fatherland with foreign help,  
that Polynices, do you cast his corpse  
1630 beyond the boundaries of this land unburied.  
And this shall be proclaimed to all the Thebans:  
“Whoever lays a wreath upon this corpse  
or buries him, shall find reward in death.  
Leave him unwept, unburied, food for the birds.”  
1635 And you, Antigone, leave your triple dirge  
and come inside the house. For the time being  
you’ll stay a maiden, but before long Haemon  
and marriage are for you.

ANTIGONE [*now speaking*]

Father, what wretchedness is on us now!  
1640 I mourn for you still more than for the dead.  
For yours is not mixed grief heavy and light;  
but you are perfect in your misery.  
But you, new ruler, I would ask you this:  
Why wrong my father, sending him from the land?  
1645 Why lay down laws against a pitiful corpse?

CREON

This was Eteocles’ decision, and not mine.

ANTIGONE

Senseless. And you a fool to follow it.

CREON

Is it not right to do what is commanded?

ANTIGONE

Not when the orders are wrong and wickedly spoken.

CREON

1650 Is it not right to give him to the dogs?

ANTIGONE

The punishment you seek is not the law's.

CREON

It is, for the city's foe who was our friend.

ANTIGONE

But didn't he yield his life up to his fate?

CREON

And therefore let him yield his burial.

ANTIGONE

1655 What was his crime to seek his share of earth?

CREON

Be sure, this man is going to lie unburied.

ANTIGONE

Then I shall bury him, though the state forbids.

CREON

Then will you bury yourself close by that corpse.

ANTIGONE

It's glorious that two kin should lie together.

CREON

1660 Lay hold of her and take her to the house.

ANTIGONE

Oh no! I will not loose my hold on him.

CREON

The gods' these judgments, and not yours, my girl.

ANTIGONE

And it is not judged right to outrage a corpse.

CREON

No one shall lay the damp dust over him.

ANTIGONE

1665 They will. I swear it for Jocasta's sake.

CREON

You toil in vain. You cannot get your wish.

ANTIGONE

At least allow me but to bathe his body.

CREON

This too shall be forbidden by the state.

ANTIGONE

But then to bandage up his savage wounds.

CREON

1670 There is no honor you may give this corpse.

ANTIGONE

O dearest, but at least I kiss your mouth.

CREON

Don't mar your marriage with these lamentations.

ANTIGONE

Do you think that I shall live to wed your son?

CREON

You'll be forced to it. What refuge from his bed?

ANTIGONE

1675 That night will make me one with the Danaids.

CREON

Do you see the daring of her insolence?

ANTIGONE

Let the steel know. My oath is by the sword.

CREON

Why do you wish so to avoid this marriage?

ANTIGONE

I'll go to exile with my wretched father.

CREON

1680 You show nobility, as well as folly.

ANTIGONE

And know you well that I will die with him.



CREON

Go! You'll not kill my son. Now leave the land.

*(Exit Creon into the palace.)*

OEDIPUS

Daughter, I praise your loving zeal for me.

ANTIGONE

How could I marry and send you alone to exile?

OEDIPUS

1685 Stay and be happy. I will bear my woes.

ANTIGONE

But you are blind. Who'll care for you, my father?

OEDIPUS

Where fate decides it I will fall and lie.

ANTIGONE

Ah, where is Oedipus and his famous riddle?

OEDIPUS

Perished. One day blessed me, and one day ruined.

ANTIGONE

1690 Should I not have some part in all your troubles?

OEDIPUS

Exile with a blind father is disgrace.

ANTIGONE

Not for the dutiful. Then it is an honor.

OEDIPUS

Now lead me forward, that I may touch your mother.

ANTIGONE

There. Lay your hand upon that dear old woman.

OEDIPUS

1695 O Mother, O unhappy wife of mine!

ANTIGONE

She lies there piteous, having suffered all.

OEDIPUS

Where is Eteocles' corpse, and Polynices'?

ANTIGONE

Here lie they, stretched out close to one another.

OEDIPUS

Put my unseeing hand upon their faces.

ANTIGONE

1700 There. Lay your hand upon your sons in death.

OEDIPUS

O dear dead sons, unhappy as your father!

ANTIGONE

O Polynices, dearest name to me.

OEDIPUS

Now Loxias' doom is working to its end.

ANTIGONE

What is it? Further woes on top of woes?

OEDIPUS

1705 That, wandering, I shall die on Attic soil.

ANTIGONE

Where? Which of Athens' forts will shelter you?

OEDIPUS

Sacred Colonus, where the horse god lives.

But come, help your blind father on his way,  
since you are eager to be exiled with me.

ANTIGONE [*singing henceforth with Oedipus, who sings in reply*]

1710 *On to our exile. Father, stretch out your hand.  
I help your steps as the wind helps on the ship.*

OEDIPUS

*I come, I come.  
Oh my poor child, now lead me.*

ANTIGONE

*I do, I do, most wretched I,  
of all the girls of Thebes.*

OEDIPUS

1715 *Where shall I set my old foot?  
Daughter, give me my staff.*

ANTIGONE

*This way, this way, with me.*  
1720 *Like this, like this, your feet.*  
*Your strength is like a dream.*

OEDIPUS

*Oh me, oh me, who am driven, an ancient man,*  
*in exile from my land.*  
1725 *What terrible things I have suffered!*

ANTIGONE

*Why of your suffering speak? Justice regards not the wicked.*  
*She gives no prizes for folly.*

OEDIPUS

*And I am the one who reached the heights of song.*  
1730 *When I found out the maiden's riddle, no fool was I.*

ANTIGONE

*You go back to the Sphinx, and our shame.*  
*Stop speaking of past good fortune.*  
1735 *There awaits you pitiful suffering*  
*and, somewhere, an exile's death.*

*And I leave tears for the girls my friends*  
*as I part from my fatherland*  
*to wander, unmaidenly.*

OEDIPUS

1740 *Alas for your honest heart!*

ANTIGONE

*It will give me fame concerning my father's sorrows.*

*I mourn for your wrongs, and for those which are done my brother,  
who goes from the house a corpse to lie unburied.  
Father, even if I must die,  
1745 in secret I'll bury that body.*

OEDIPUS

*Return again to your friends!*

ANTIGONE

*My own laments are enough.*

OEDIPUS

*You can pray to the holy altars.*

ANTIGONE

1750 *They have had enough of my troubles.*

OEDIPUS

*Then go to Bacchus' shrine in the hills  
where none but the maenads are!*

ANTIGONE

*To go where once I went  
1755 in Theban fawnskin clad,  
and danced in Semele's holy choir!  
It was a graceless grace I did the gods.*

OEDIPUS [now speaking]

*You that live in my ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus,<sup>o</sup>  
him who knew the famous riddles and who was a man most great.  
1760 It was I alone put down the murdering power of the Sphinx.  
Now it's I who go dishonored in sad exile from the land.*

Yet why do I lament these things and mourn for them in vain?  
The constraint the gods lay on us we mortals all must bear.

*(Exit Oedipus and Antigone to the side.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*O great Victory, stay with me*<sup>o</sup>  
1765 *all my life.*  
*Nor cease to give me crowns!*