

THE SUPPLIANT WOMEN

Translated by FRANK WILLIAM JONES

THE SUPPLIANT WOMEN: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

It is not certain when Euripides' *Suppliant Women* was first produced, but scholars have used possible allusions in the play to contemporary political events and analysis of its metrical features to suggest a date between 424 and 420 BCE, perhaps 423 BCE. 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, and how they fared in the competition, are unknown.

The Myth

The Suppliant Women takes place in the aftermath of the attack of the Seven against Thebes. After Oedipus' removal from the throne, his sons Eteocles and Polynices could not share the rule of Thebes amicably, and Eteocles exiled Polynices 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 slain—Eteocles and Polynices killed each other—and Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, adopted the extreme measure of refusing to grant them burial.

It is at this point that Euripides' play begins. Adrastus, the king of Argos, and the mothers and sons of the Seven come to Eleusis in Attica, where they ask the Athenians for help to bury their dead. They appeal first to Aethra, the mother of the Athenian king Theseus, and then to Theseus himself. Aethra overcomes Theseus' initial reluctance to help; Theseus then spurns the threats of a herald from Thebes; and in the subsequent battle Theseus and the Athenians are victorious over Creon and the Thebans. The bodies of the Seven are mourned by their relatives and eulogized by Adrastus; Evadne, the wife of Capaneus, one of the Seven, leaps to her death in his funeral pyre. The play concludes with the forecast of a second

expedition against Thebes by the sons of the Seven and of an alliance between Argos and Athens.

Euripides' play combines two legendary themes, both of which were very popular and presumably well known to his audience. The first involves the vicissitudes of the Labdacids, the royal dynasty of Thebes: king Laius, his wife Jocasta, and their son Oedipus, and then their children Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. The story had long been an important part of early Greek epic and oral legend. While the outline remained constant from version to version, the versions varied significantly in outcome, characterization, motivation, and moral evaluation. The myth was one of the most frequently dramatized in Attic tragedy. The attack of the Seven is presented in such plays as Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* and Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (written about 409 BCE) and is forecast in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. The aftermath of their defeat, which forms the subject of Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, was also treated in Sophocles' *Antigone* among others.

The second theme of the play is Athens' acceptance of foreign suppliants and its military and religious protection of them against their enemies. This too is a kind of story popular among fifth-century Athenian audiences. Some years earlier, Euripides himself had treated an analogous legend in his *Children of Heracles* (written ca. 430 BCE), and Aeschylus in his lost *Eleusinians* had dramatized the very same events as the ones in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. Broadly similar episodes also serve as the basis for Euripides' lost *Erechtheus* (written about the same time as his *Suppliant Women*) and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. In addition, such patriotic stories of Athenian religiosity, generosity, and prowess were commonplaces among orators of this period, especially when commemorating Athenian soldiers who had fallen in combat. This particular story is not attested before the fifth century BCE and may well have been invented in Athens as a symbol of civic pride during Euripides' lifetime, though probably not by Euripides himself. Quite rightly, ancient scholars commented on *The Suppliant Women* that "the drama is an encomium of Athens."

Transmission and Reception

The Suppliant Women has never been one of Euripides' most popular plays. It survived antiquity only because it was one of the so-called "alphabetic plays" (see "Introduction to Euripides" in this volume, p. 3). Like the others in this group, it is transmitted only by a single manuscript in rather poor condition (and by its copies) and is not accompanied by the ancient commentaries (scholia) that explain various kinds of interpretative difficulties. Further evidence that it was not very popular in antiquity is that no papyri bearing any parts of its text have been discovered. The play has left little or no traces in ancient pictorial art; one Athenian cup, dated to about 430 BCE, has been found on which one of the mothers of the Seven is shown supplicating Theseus, but it is far from certain that the image should be linked to this play rather than to another version of the legend.

So too, the influence of the play on modern literature and art has been negligible.

THE SUPPLIANT WOMEN

Characters

AETHRA, mother of Theseus

THESEUS, king of Athens

ADRASTUS, king of Argos, and leader of the Seven against Thebes

A HERALD from Thebes, former servant of Capaneus

A MESSENGER from Thebes

EVADNE, widow of Capaneus, who fell in the war of the Seven against Thebes

IPHIS, her father

ATHENA

CHORUS: Mothers of the Seven against Thebes and their handmaids

SECOND CHORUS: A group of sons of the Seven against Thebes

Scene: The temple of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, near Athens.

(Enter Aethra. The Chorus of the Mothers of the Seven sit at her feet as suppliants, while Adrastus lies separately on the ground.)

AETHRA

Demeter, enshrined in this land

Eleusis,

and you who tend the goddess'

temple,

bless me and bless Theseus my son

and the city of Athens, and Pitt heus'

land,

5 where in prosperous halls my father

reared me,
Aethra, and wed me to Pandion's son
Aegeus, as Loxias' oracle bade him.

So I pray as I look upon these
women
burdened with years, who left their
homes in Argos
10 to fall with suppliant branches at my
feet
in dreadful loss: their seven noble
sons
are dead at Cadmus' gates, and they
are childless.
Adrastus, lord of Argos, led the men
to claim for his son-in-law, exiled
Polynices,
15 a share of Oedipus' inheritance.
They perished in the struggle, and
their mothers
desire to bury them; but those in
power
spurn what the gods hold lawful and
refuse
even to grant removal of the bodies.
20 The burden of these women's need
for me
Adrastus also bears: look where he
lies,
with tearful face mourning the
grievous doom
that met the army he dispatched from
home.

Through me he seeks a champion in
my son
25 who shall prevail by words or force
of arms
to take the dead and give them
burial.
Only this he asks of my child and
Athens.

I happen to be here for sacrifice
that the land be fruitful; I left my
house
30 for this sanctuary, where first of all
the corn ear bristled above the
ground.
And still I stay by the holy hearth
of the two goddesses, the Maiden
and Demeter,
wearing a bondless bond of leaves,
35 in pity for these gray, childless
mothers
and reverence for their sacred
wreaths.
I have sent a herald to town, to
summon
Theseus, that either he drive from the
land

these people and the distress
they bring,

or free them from their suppliant
needs—
40 doing a pious action for the gods.
It is proper for women, if they are

wise,
always to get things done by men.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*I appeal to you, old woman,
from aged mouth:
old, I fall at your knee.
45 Free my children^o—
left by lawless men
to body-slackening death,
food for mountain beasts!*

ANTISTROPHE A

*See the piteous
tears at my eyelids
50 and wrinkled tearings of hands
at hoary flesh
because I could not lay out
my dead sons in my house
or see their tombs of earth!*

STROPHE B

*Gracious lady, you too once bore a son,
55 in blessing of the bed
for your husband: now to me
grant a part of your loving kindness,
in recompense for grievous pain
from the death of those I bore:
60 prevail, we beg, upon your son*

*that he go to Ismenus and bring to my hands
the bodies of the youthful dead that long for the tomb.*

ANTISTROPHE B

*Not for holy rites but in need I came
to fall and pray at the goddesses'
fire-receiving altars;
65 justice is ours, and you have power—
for you are happy in your child—
to take away my trouble.
My plight is pitiful: I beseech
your son to bring to these poor hands
70 the corpse, my son's sad limbs, for my embrace.*

*(Their handmaids begin to beat their breasts, scratch
their cheeks, and wail in sign of mourning.)*

STROPHE C

*And now the strife of wailing, wailing!
Cry against cry, clashing of servants' hands!
Let blows resound together!
Moan in the strain
75 of the dance that Hades loves!
Bloody the fingernail
along the white cheek, and stain the skin!
To mourn the dead
brings honor to those who live.*

ANTISTROPHE C

*Insatiable delight of wailing,
abounding in labor, carries me away,
80 as from a towering rock*

*cool water flows
unceasing ever: I wail,
for it is natural for women, when children die,
85 to undertake the labor of lament.
Ah! I only wish that in death
I might forget these griefs!*

(Enter Theseus from the side.)

THESEUS

Whose are those wails I heard, and breast-beating,
and dirges for the dead? Here, from this temple,
the echoes came. Alarm takes hold of me:
90 my mother has been long away from home;
I come to find her; has she met with trouble?

Aha! What's there? I see strange things to speak of!
My aged mother sitting by the altar,
and foreign women with her, all awry
95 in shapes of woe: from age-dimmed eyes they shed
piteous tears to earth; their hair is shorn,
the robes they wear are not for festivals.
Mother, what does this mean? Yours to reveal,
mine to listen. I expect bad news.

AETHRA

100 These women, child, are mothers of the sons—
seven commanders—who died at Cadmus' gates;
and now with suppliant branches they watch and wait,
circled around me, as you see, my son.

THESEUS

And that man, groaning bitterly at the door?

AETHRA

105 They say he is Adrastus, lord of Argos.

THESEUS

And the boys beside him? Children of the women?

AETHRA

No, they are sons of the warriors who fell.

THESEUS

Why do they stretch out suppliant hands to us?

AETHRA

I know why; but it's for them to speak, my son.

THESEUS

110 You there, I call on you, you hidden beneath your cloak!
Leave off your wailing, bare your head and speak:
nothing advances without the tongue's help.

ADRASTUS

O Theseus, glorious victor king of Athens,
I come as suppliant to you and to your city.

THESEUS

115 What do you seek, and what is your need?

ADRASTUS

You know of my ruinous campaign?

THESEUS

Your passage through Greece was hardly silent.

ADRASTUS

In it I lost the finest men of Argos.

THESEUS

Such are the doings of wretched war.

ADRASTUS

120 I went to Thebes to request the dead be returned.

THESEUS

For burial, by the laws of war?

ADRASTUS

And now the ones who killed them will not let me.

THESEUS

What are their grounds? Your request is sacred.

ADRASTUS

They have no grounds. They are bad winners.

THESEUS

125 So you come to me for advice—or what?

ADRASTUS

I want you to bring back Argos' sons.

THESEUS

And where stands Argos? Are her boasts in vain?

ADRASTUS

Defeated, finished. So we come to you.

THESEUS

By your design alone, or the whole city's?

ADRASTUS

130 All Danaus' descendants beg you to bury our dead.

THESEUS

Why did you march those seven bands against Thebes?

ADRASTUS

To please the men who married my two daughters.

THESEUS

To which of the Argives did you give your children?

ADRASTUS

The bond I formed was not among my kin.

THESEUS

135 To strangers, then, you wedded Argive girls?

ADRASTUS

Yes: to Tydeus, and to Theban Polynices.

THESEUS

How did you come to want them for your kin?

ADRASTUS

Puzzling riddles of Phoebus lured me on.

THESEUS

What words of Apollo meant marriage for the maidens?

ADRASTUS

140 That I give my daughters to a boar and a lion.

THESEUS

And how did you unravel the god's pronouncement?

ADRASTUS

A pair of exiles came to my door at night ...

THESEUS

What pair? You speak of two at once: explain.

ADRASTUS

... Tydeus and Polynices, and fought each other.

THESEUS

145 They were the beasts? You gave your girls to them?

ADRASTUS

Yes, they looked like two wild creatures fighting.

THESEUS

Why had they left the borders of their countries?

ADRASTUS

Tydeus in guilt of shedding kindred blood.

THESEUS

And what brought Oedipus' son away from Thebes?

ADRASTUS

150 A father's curse: that he would kill his brother.

THESEUS

Then voluntary flight was wise of him.

ADRASTUS

True; but those remaining wronged the absent.

THESEUS

You mean his brother robbed him of his goods?

ADRASTUS

To punish that wrong I went to Thebes, and lost.

THESEUS

155 You asked the seers, and watched their sacrificial flames?

ADRASTUS

Ah! You pursue me where my case is weakest.

THESEUS

The gods, it seems, did not approve your mission.

ADRASTUS

I also flouted Amphiaras' will.

THESEUS

So lightly you ignored the gods' own signs?

ADRASTUS

160 Unruliness of youthful men confused me.

THESEUS

You followed strength of heart, not strength of mind.

ADRASTUS

This is a course that ruins many generals.°
But lord of Athens! Crown of power in Hellas!
I am ashamed—a gray-haired man who once
was king, and fortunate—that now I fall
165 to earth and clasp your knee; and yet I must
submit to my disaster. Save my dead!
Have pity on my woes, and on these mothers
170 of fallen sons! Struck childless in old age
with feeble limbs they come to a strange land—
not to attend Demeter’s mysteries,
but seeking burial of the dead whose hands,
175 in pious duty, should have buried them.
The sight of poverty is wise for wealth;
the poor should gaze with envy on the rich,
to learn the love of goods; untroubled men
are well advised to look at wretchedness.°
180 The poet bringing songs into the world
should work in joy. If this is not his mood,
he cannot—being inwardly distressed—
give pleasure outwardly. That stands to reason.
You may well ask: “Why pass by Pelops’ land,
185 and seek to lay this task of yours on Athens?”
In fairness, I would make this answer. Sparta
is savage; its ways are devious; and the others
are small and weak. Yours is the only city
with strength enough to undertake the task:
190 Athens sees what misery is, and as its leader

has you, a good and youthful shepherd. Ruin
has come to many states that lack such leadership.

CHORUS LEADER

Theseus! I join my prayer to his:
pity my wretchedness.

THESEUS

195 I have heard such arguments before,
from others,
and fought them hard. It has been said
that life
holds more of worse conditions than
of better;
but I oppose that doctrine. I believe
the good outweighs the bad in human
life.

200 If it did not, the light
would not be ours.

I praise the god who set our life in
order,
lifting it out of savagery and
confusion.
First he put wits in us, and then gave
language,
envoy of words, to understand the
voice;
205 and fruits of earth to eat, and for this
food
watery drops from heaven, to quench
our thirst
and nourish the yield of the land;

providing also
defense against winter, against the sun
god's fire,
and commerce over sea, that by
exchange
210 a country may obtain the goods it
lacks.
Things without mark, not clearly
understood,
are brought to light by seers who study
fire,
the folds of entrails, and the flight of
birds.
Now, if all this is not enough for us—
215 so well equipped for living, by the
god's gift—
are we not spoiled and greedy? And
yet arrogance
wants more than godly power; our
minds grow proud,
until we think we are wiser than the
gods.
That is the brand of unwisdom you
have shown.
220 First, bowing to Phoebus' words, like
one who thinks
the gods gave them, ^o you gave your
girls to strangers:
a mating of fair with foul, to hurt your
house!
Wrongdoers' bodies should not be
joined to the just;
a wise man will ally his family

225 with well-regarded people. For when
fortunes are shared
in common, a man who has done no
wrong
and is not sick may be destroyed by
the gods
together with his truly diseased
neighbor.

Then,
when
you
took

all Argos with you on that expedition,
230 the seers spoke omens but you slighted
them,
flouted the gods, and laid your city
low.

You were led astray by glory-loving
youngsters,
promoters of unjust wars, who ruin the
townsmen.

One of them wants to be a general;
235 another to seize power and riot in it;
a third is set on gain. They never think
what harm this brings for the majority.
The classes of citizens are three. The
rich

are useless, always lusting after more.
240 Those who have not, and live in want,
are a menace,
ridden with envy and fooled by
demagogues;
their malice stings the owners. Of the

three,
245 the middle part saves cities: it guards
the order
a community establishes.

And so
I am to be your ally? What fine words
will make my citizens favor that?
Farewell!
You planned your actions poorly. Take
what comes:
wrestle with fate alone, and let us be.°

CHORUS LEADER

250 He blundered. That is natural in the young,
and should be pardoned in him. We have come
to you, my lord, as healer of these ills.°

ADRASTUS

In choosing you, my lord, I did not think
that you would sit in judgment on my woes,
255 or estimate and punish any act
of wickedness I may have carried out;
I only wanted help. If you refuse,
I have no choice; I must obey.
Now, aged ladies, please go forth. Lay down
your branches green with foliage on this spot,
260 calling to witness gods and earth and sun
and Queen Demeter, bearer of the torch,
that prayers to the gods have availed us nothing.

CHORUS LEADER

O King, you are of Pelops' line, and we are from his country:
the same ancestral blood is ours. How can it be
265 that you forsake this cause, and drive out of your land
old women who have gained nothing that is owed them?
We pray you not to do this. Beasts have rocks for refuge;
slaves, the altars of the gods; city huddles with city
270 when storms come. Nothing mortal prospers to the end.

CHORUS [*singing*]

*Woman of sorrows! Leave
Persephone's sacred ground;*

*go up to him and throw your
arms about his knees;*

*beg him to bring your sons' dead
bodies—Oh, the grief!*

*The young men whom I lost beneath
Cadmean walls.*

275 *Alas! these poor old hands: take
them, guide them, support them.*

*Friend! Honor and glory of Hellas! I
touch your beard;*

*here at your knees I fall and seek
your hand in my woe.*

280 *If you would shelter a wanderer, pity
me—*

*suppliant for my children, piteously
lamenting.*

*Child! I appeal to you: you are
young, do not leave my sons
unburied in Cadmus' land, to
gladden the wild beasts!*

I fall and clasp your knees: see the

tears at my eyelids!
285 *I beg you, bring to fulfillment the
burial of my children!*

THESEUS

Mother: you hold your finespun cloak to your eyes.
Why do you weep? Is it because you hear
the lamentations uttered by these women?
Somehow, they pierce me too. Raise your white head:
290 no more tears, at Demeter's sacred hearth!

AETHRA

Ah!

THESEUS

Their troubles should not make you moan.

AETHRA

Poor women!

THESEUS

You do not belong to them.

AETHRA

Child! May I speak, for the city's good and yours?

THESEUS

Many wise things are said even by women.

AETHRA

295 I shrink from showing what I have in mind.

THESEUS

It is shameful to hold back words that might help your kin.

AETHRA

I would not now be still, and afterward
blame myself for a silence wrongly kept;
or fear that women's well-meant words are wasted,
300 and in that dread let my goodwill be lost.
My child, I bid you: first, look to the gods;
for if you slight them you will fall. Intentions
good in themselves are wrecked by that one fault.°
If you weren't asked to launch an enterprise
305 in order to help those wronged, then certainly
I would be silent. But you must be told
how greatly it would honor you (so much
that I am not afraid to urge it, child!)
if cruel men, who would deny the dead
the rights of burial and their funerals,
310 were forced to grant this, by your hand, and stopped
from violating what all Greece holds lawful.
The power that keeps cities of men together
is noble preservation of the laws.
It will be said that, lacking manly strength,
315 you stood aside in fear and lost a chance
to win a crown of glory for the city.
They will say you hunted boars, a mean pursuit,
and proved a coward at the call of action,
the time for spear and helmet. Child of mine,
320 this must not be! Remember your descent!
Do you see your country's Gorgon stare when taunted

with lack of resolution? Athens thrives
on strenuous action; but those cautious states
325 that do their work in darkness wear a somber look
to match their caution. Child, won't you go to help
the dead, and these poor women in their need?
It is a just campaign; and I have no fear:
the sons of Cadmus now have been successful,
330 but soon the dice will fall another way.
I hold this certain. God reverses all.

CHORUS LEADER

O best-loved lady! Nobly have you spoken,
for him and me, giving a double joy.

THESEUS

Mother, what I have said now to
this man
335 I still consider right. I spoke my
mind
on the designs that led him to his
ruin.

But I also see the truth of what
you tell me:

that it is not in keeping with my
ways
to run from risk. By many noble
deeds
340 I have made myself a byword to
the Greeks:
they count on me to punish
wickedness.
I am unable to refuse a task.

What then will hostile persons say
of me
if you, my mother, you who fear
for me,
345 are the first to urge me to
undertake this labor?
Forward, then; I shall go and free
the dead.
Persuasion first: if that does not
succeed,
then force of arms will gain my
end. The gods
will not be jealous. I desire the city
with all its voices to approve this
plan.
350 It will approve because I want it to:
but if I state my reasons, I shall
have
more favor from the people, whom
I made
sole rulers when I set their city free
and gave them equal votes. So I
shall take
Adrastus to support my argument
and go to all the citizens
355 assembled,
convince them that this must be
done, pick out
a group of young Athenians, and
return.
Then, resting on my weapons, I
shall send
to ask the bodies of the dead from

Creon.

Matrons: take off these garlands
from my mother.

360 I must conduct her to the house of
Aegeus,
clasping her loving hand. I think it
wrong
that a child should not return his
parents' care.

Noblest of gifts! By granting it, he
earns
from his own children what he
gives his elders.

(Exit Theseus, Adrastus, and Aethra to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

365 *Argos, my fatherland, pasture of horses:
you heard him speak, you heard from the king
words that respect the gods,
words that mean greatness for Greece and Argos.*

ANTISTROPHE A

370 *May he go to the end of my woes, and beyond;
may he rescue the mother's bloodstained precious
darling, and thus make friendship
firm with the land of Inachus.*

STROPHE B

*A work of piety brings honor and glory
to cities*

*and earns thanks that
last forever.*

375 *What dare I hope from the city? Will it
truly give
a pledge of friendship for me, and
graves for my sons?*

ANTISTROPHE B

*City of Pallas! A mother begs you to protect her and prevent
the desecration of human law.
You revere right, despise crime, and are ready
380 always to help the unfortunate.*

(Enter from the side Theseus, Adrastus, and an Athenian herald.)

(To the herald.)

THESEUS

The skill you have as bearer of proclamations
has given constant service to me and the city.
Now you must cross the streams Asopus and Ismenus
and tell the haughty ruler of the Cadmeans this:
385 “Theseus asks you, by your grace, to bury the dead. His country
neighbors yours, and he believes the request is worth the granting.
Do this and you will have all of Erechtheus’ people for friends.”
If they consent, commend them and hasten back.
If they refuse, deliver a second message:
390 “Welcome my band of revelers, men who carry shields!”
A ready task force waits, under review,
here and now at the sacred Fount of the Dance.
The city, when it saw I willed this effort,
was ready to accept it, even glad.

(Enter from the other side a Theban Herald.)

395 But who comes here, to interrupt my words?
I cannot tell for sure; he seems to be
a Theban herald. Stay a while. His coming
might fit my plans, and you would be released.

HERALD

What man is master in this land? To whom
400 must I give the word I bring from Creon, ruler
in Cadmus' country since Eteocles
fell at his brother Polynices' hand
beside the seven-mouthed gates?

THESEUS

One moment, stranger.
Your start was wrong, seeking a master here.
405 This city is free, and ruled by no one man.
The people reign, in annual alternations.
And they do not yield the power to the rich;
the poor man has an equal share in it.

HERALD

That one point gives the better of the game
410 to me. The town I come from is controlled
by one man, not a mob. And there is no one
to puff it up with words, for private gain,
swaying it this way, that way. Such a man
first flatters it with wealth of favors; then
415 he does it harm, but covers up his blunders
by blaming other men, and goes scot-free.

The people are no right judge of arguments;
so how can they give right guidance to a city?
For time, not speed, gives better understanding.
420 A poor man, working hard, could not attend
to public matters, even if ignorance
were not his birthright. When a wretch, a nothing,
obtains respect and power from the people
425 by talk, his betters sicken at the sight.

THESEUS

What bombast from a herald! Waster
of words,
if it is argument you want—and you
yourself
have set the contest going—listen.
Nothing
is worse for a city than an absolute
ruler.
430 For first, if so, there are no common
laws:
one man has power and makes the law
his own;
there's no equality. With written laws,
people of small resources and the rich
both have the same recourse to justice.
So^o
435 a man of means, if badly spoken of,
will have no better standing than the
weak;
and if the little man is right, he wins
against the great. This is the call of
freedom:

“What man has good advice to give the
city,
440 and wishes to make it known?” He
who responds
gains glory; the reluctant hold their
peace.
For the city, what can be more fair than
that?
Again, when the people are master in
the land,
they welcome youthful townsmen as
their subjects;
but when one man is king, he finds this
hateful,
445 and if he thinks that any of the nobles
are smart, he fears for his despotic
power
and kills them. How can a city become
strong
if someone takes away, cuts off bold
youths
like ears of corn in a spring field?
What use
450 to build a fortune, if your work
promotes
the despot’s welfare, not your
family’s?
Why bring up girls well and modestly,
fit
for marriage, if tyrants may take them
for their pleasure—
a grief to parents? I would rather die
455 than see my children forced to such a

union.

These are the responses I shoot at
what you say.

What have you come to
ask of this, our
country?

You talk too much; you would regret
your visit
had not a city sent you. Messengers
460 should state their mission promptly,
then depart.
I hope that henceforth, to my city,
Creon
sends a less wordy messenger than
you.

CHORUS LEADER

When fortune aids the wicked, how they revel!
They act as if their luck would last forever.

HERALD

465 Now I shall speak. On what has been debated,
you may hold your views, I the opposite.
I and the whole Cadmean people say
Adrastus must not pass into this land.
If he has entered it, you must strip off
470 his sacred ritual wreaths and drive him out
before the sun god's flame has set. His dead
must not be removed by force; the Argives' city
is no concern of yours. Do what I say
and you will steer your city's course in calm.
If you refuse, there will be much rough water

475 for us, for you, and for our allies: war.
Think now: do not let anger at my words
goad you to puffed-up answers. You are free;
that does not make you powerful. Hope has driven
many cities against each other; it stirs
480 an overreaching heart; it is not to be trusted.
When the people vote on war, nobody reckons
on his own death; it is too soon; he thinks
some other man will meet that wretched fate.
But if death were before his eyes when he cast his vote,
485 Hellas would never be ruined by battle-madness.
And yet we men all know which of two speeches
is better, and can weigh the good and bad
they bring: how much better is peace than war!
First and foremost, the Muses love her best;
490 and the goddess of vengeance hates her. Peace delights
in healthy children, and she glories in wealth.
But evilly we throw all this away
to start our wars and make the losers slaves—
man binding man and city shackling city.
And you would help our enemies in death,
495 taking away for burial men who fell
by their own insolence? Don't you think it right
that thunderbolts made smoke of Capaneus,
the one who thrust the ladders at the gates
and swore to sack the city whether god
willed it or not? The bird interpreter,
500 was he not swallowed by a gulf that opened
around his four-horse chariot? There they lie,
the other squadron leaders, by the gates;
rocks have crushed the framework of their bones.

So either boast a greater mind than Zeus,
505 or grant that the gods punish the bad justly.
Wise men should cherish their children first, then parents,
then their country—and that they ought to strengthen,
not devastate. A bold leader or sailor
brings peril; the man who knows when not to act
510 is wise. To my mind, bravery is forethought.

CHORUS LEADER

Zeus the punisher was enough. No need
for you to gloat like this over their downfall.

ADRASTUS

You miserable wretch—

THESEUS

Silence, Adrastus!
Restrain yourself. Do not give precedence
515 to your words over mine. This message comes
to me, not you; and I must answer it.

(To the Herald.)

First I shall answer what you stated first.
I have not heard that Creon is my master,
or that he has more power than I. How then
can he compel Athens to do his bidding?
520 If we serve him, the world runs backward! I
did not begin this war: I was not with them
when they invaded Thebes; I only think it just
to bury their dead. I mean no harm to the city,

525 no man-destroying struggles: I uphold
the law of all the Greeks. Is that unfair?
Yes, certainly the Argives caused you harm,
but they are dead. You fought them off with honor,
530 to their disgrace; and now the case is closed.
Come! Let the dead be covered by the ground,
and let each part regain the element
from which it came to light: the spirit, air;
the body, earth. The flesh is only ours
535 to dwell in while life lasts; and afterward
the giver of its strength must take it back.
Do you think to hurt Argos by leaving her dead unburied?
You miss your target. All Hellas is concerned
when anyone tries to strip the dead of their due
540 and keep them from the tomb. If that were custom,
brave men would turn cowards. And yet you come
to threaten me with frightful words. Do you dread
the corpses? If they are hidden in earth, what then?
Will they overthrow your country from the grave,
545 or beget children in the womb of earth
who will avenge them some day? Fears like these
are base and vain, a waste of breath to speak.
Fools! Be instructed in the ills of man.
550 Struggles make up our life. Good fortune came
formerly to some, to some hereafter; others
enjoy it now. Its god luxuriates.
Not only is he honored by the hapless
in hope of better days, but lucky ones
exalt him too, fearing that they'll lose
the favorable breeze.
555 Aware of this, you should not take it hard

when moderately wronged, or do a wrong
so great that it will hurt your city. Therefore
you ought to grant the bodies of the fallen
to us, who wish to do them reverence.

560 If you choose otherwise, my course is clear:
I shall compel their burial. Never shall
the Greeks have this news to hear: that ancient law,
established by the gods, appealed to me
and Pandion's city, only to be annulled.

CHORUS LEADER

Courage! Keep alive the light of justice,
565 and much that men say in blame will pass you by.

HERALD

May I make a speech that is short and plain?

THESEUS

Say what you like: you're not the silent type.

HERALD

You will never take Argos' sons from my country.

THESEUS

Now hear me, if you will, in turn.

HERALD

570 I listen; I must grant your due.

THESEUS

I shall bury the dead away from Thebes.

HERALD

First you must risk a clash of shields.

THESEUS

I have come through many other trials.

HERALD

Did your father make you a match for all comers?

THESEUS

575 For offenders, yes; I do not crush virtue.

HERALD

You and your city are busybodies.

THESEUS

By laboring hard she earns prosperity.

HERALD

Go, and be killed by a Sown Man's spear!

THESEUS

What warlike fury can come from a dragon?

HERALD

580 Feel it and know it. You are still young.

THESEUS

You cannot rouse my mind to wrath
by boasting. Take the foolish words
you brought, and leave the country. Talk
will gain us nothing.

(Exit the Theban Herald to the side.)

585 Forward, every man
who fights on foot, on horse, or from a chariot!
Let cheek-pieces rattle, flecking the horses' mouths
with foam as they gallop toward the Theban land!
I march on Cadmus' seven gates; I bear
590 sharp iron in my hand and act as herald
on my behalf. Adrastus, I command you,
stay here; do not attach your fate to me.
I shall lead the army, guided by my god,
as a new commander with a new armed force.
Only one thing I need: to have with me
595 the gods who honor justice. That support
gives victory. Human excellence means nothing
unless it works with the consent of god.

(Exit Theseus to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing one to another*]^o

STROPHE A

Pitiful mothers of lost commanders!
Yellow fear sits on my heart. ◦

600 —*What new word is this you bring?*
—*How will the mission of Pallas stand the test?*
—*By fighting, did you say, or exchange of words?*
—*I pray that goodwill come of it!*
But what if it ends in slaughters by Ares,

605 *battles, din of beaten breasts throughout the city?*
 Then what could I find to say,
 I, who caused it all?

ANTISTROPHE A

—*The man who glories in his luck*
 may be overthrown by destiny;
 in that hope I rest secure.

610 —*Then you believe in gods who stand for justice.*

—*Of course; what other beings make such things happen?*

—*I see great difference between the gods and mortals.*

—*That is because you are crushed by fear*
 from the past. But justice has called for justice, blood for blood;
 the gods, who hold in their hands the end of all,
615 *give men rest from pain.*

—*How might we leave this sacred fount of the goddess*
 and reach Thebes' plains with the beautiful towers?

STROPHE B

620 —*If one of the gods would give you wings ...*

—*... on the way to the two-rivered city.*

—*You would know, then you would know how our friends are*
 faring.

—*What destiny, what turn of fate, I wonder,*

625 *is waiting for this country's mighty lord?*

ANTISTROPHE B

*—Again we call on gods we invoked
already:*

*here is the foremost hope of the
frightened.*

*—O Zeus, who fathered a child for the
heifer*

daughter of Inachus, mother of old,

630

*favor this my city and help
its cause.*

*Your glory, the city's mainstay, has
been outraged;*

*bring him back, I pray, to be readied
for the pyre.*

(Enter a Messenger from Thebes, from the side.)

MESSENGER

Women, I bring much news that you will welcome.

635

I have come through to safety after capture
in the battle which the seven companies
of fallen masters fought by Dirce's stream.

I am here to tell of Theseus' victory.

To spare you long inquiry: I was a servant

640

of Capaneus, whom Zeus's flaming bolt
riddled to ashes.

CHORUS LEADER

Oh, with joy we greet

your news of coming home, and hear the word
you bring of Theseus! If Athens' army too
is safe, then all you have to tell is welcome.

MESSENGER

Safe; and it did what should have been achieved
645 by Adrastus with the Argives when he marched
from Inachus against the Cadmean city.

CHORUS LEADER

How did the son of Aegeus and his comrades
gain victory? Tell us now. You saw it happen;
you can give joy to those who were not there.

MESSENGER

650 A brilliant shaft of sunlight, straight
and clear,
lit up the field as I stood at Electra
gate,
where a tower gave a sweeping
view. I saw
three forces marshaled. Infantry
with armor
655 extended toward high ground: the
Ismenian hill,
I heard it called. The famous son of
Aegeus,
with men from old Cecropia held
the right;
the left wing, spear-armed Coast
men, took positions
660 beside the Spring of Ares. Cavalry

massed
at each wing's end, in equal groups;
and chariots
665 stood at the foot of Amphion's
sacred mound.

Cadmus' men, posted before the
walls, had put
the corpses, cause of conflict, at
their rear.

Horsemen faced horsemen; chariots
stood ready,
equipped to battle four-horse
chariots.

Then Theseus' herald spoke these
words to all:

"Silence, my men; silence,
Cadmean troops.

670 Hear me: we come to take the dead.
We wish

to bury them, and so uphold
the law

of all the Greeks. It is not our desire
to shed more blood." Creon gave no
command

to answer this, but sat in silence,
ready.

675 Then the charioteers began the
combat.

Driving their chariots toward and
past each other,
they set their fighters down, in line
of battle.

While these crossed swords, the

drivers turned their horses
back to support their men. When
680 Phorbas, captain
of Athens' horsemen, and the
overseers
of Theban cavalry saw the chariots
clustered,
they threw their forces into the tide
of war,
now one side gaining advantage,
now the other.
As witness, not from hearsay—I
was close
685 to the battleground of chariots and
riders—
I know the many sufferings there,
but not
where to begin. With the dust that
rose toward heaven?
How thick it was! Or men tossed up
and down,
690 caught in the horses' reins? Or
streams of blood
from men who fell, or were flung
headfirst to earth
when cars were shattered, leaving
their life beside
wreckage of chariots? When Creon
saw
695 our mounted forces winning, he
took his shield
and advanced to keep his allies
from despair.

Then all the middle of the field was
spattered
700 as men slew and were slain; and the
word passed,
shouted aloud among them: "Strike!
Thrust back
the spear at Erechtheus' sons!" But
Theseus' fortunes
were not to fall by delaying.
Snatching up
his shining arms, he charged at
once. Fiercely
the host that grew to men from
dragon's teeth
705 opposed us, pushing our left wing
back; but theirs
lost to our right and fled. The scales
of war
stood even. Then our general earned
praise;
not seeking only to follow up
advantage,
he hurried to his forces' breaking
point,
710 shouting so loud that he made the
earth resound:
"Hold, lads, against these dragon
men's stiff spears,
or else farewell to Athens!" That
stirred courage
throughout the Cranaid army. Then
he seized
his Epidaurian weapon, a ghastly

club,
715 and swung it right and left, dealing
his blows
on heads and necks together; the
massive cudgel
mowed off and snapped their
helmets; turning to flee,
they could hardly move their feet. I
rejoiced and danced
720 and clapped my hands. The
Thebans made for the gates.
Then there were cries and groans
throughout the city
from young and old; frightened,
they thronged the temples.
Now Theseus might have gone
inside the walls;
but he held back, declaring that his
purpose
725 was not to sack the town but claim
the dead.
That is the kind of general to
elect:

one who puts forth his
strength in time of danger,

and hates an insolent people that
keeps climbing
to the ladder's top even when times
are good
730 and wrecks the happiness it might
enjoy.

CHORUS LEADER

Now, having seen this day, surpassing hope,
I believe in gods. The lesser share of evil
seems to be mine now; Thebes has paid the price.

ADRASTUS

Zeus! Who dares call us hapless mortals wise?
735 You dangle us; whatever you want, we do.
Argos, we thought, was irresistible:
we were so many, young, and strong of arm!
Eteocles would have come to terms; his offer
740 was fair; but we refused, and lost.
The winners then, the malignant folk of Cadmus,
ran riot like a pauper newly rich;
but now their rioting brings them down, in turn.
O you who try to shoot beyond the mark,
745 you mindless mortals! Richly you deserve
your many woes; you listen not to friends,
but to your interests. Cities! You might use
reason to end your troubles; but instead
with blood, not words, you ruin your affairs.—Enough!

(To the Messenger.)

750 I would like to know how you reached safety;
then I will ask my other questions.

MESSENGER

When the city shook in turmoil of war,
I went through the gates where the troops came in.

ADRASTUS

Do you bring the dead for whom they fought?

MESSENGER

755 Yes, the captains of the seven armies.

ADRASTUS

But the mass of the fallen—where are they?

MESSENGER

Buried near Cithaeron's folds.

ADRASTUS

This side, or that? By whom were they buried?

MESSENGER

At Eleutherae's shady ridge. By Theseus.

ADRASTUS

760 Those he did not bury—where have you left them?

MESSENGER

Close by. Speed makes all roads short.

ADRASTUS

Did it pain the servants to bring them out of the carnage?

MESSENGER

No one who was a slave had charge of that.

ADRASTUS

Did Theseus welcome the task?◦

MESSENGER

You would have said so

if you had seen his loving salute to the dead.

ADRASTUS

765 And did he wash the victims' wounds himself?

MESSENGER

He even spread the biers and covered the bodies.

ADRASTUS

That was a dreadful burden, bringing shame.

MESSENGER

How can humanity's common ills be shameful?

ADRASTUS

Oh, how much rather had I died with them!

MESSENGER

770 Your laments are vain, and make these women weep.

ADRASTUS

Yes. It was they who taught me. Now I cease.

I'll go and raise my hand when I meet the dead,
and speak, in long and tearful chants of Hades,
to friends by whom I am left to mourn alone.

775 If you lose money you can get it back, but no one
recovers this expense: a human life.

(Exit Adrastus and Messenger to the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

Part well, part ill—this turn of fate.
780 *For city and generals who went to war,*
glory and honor redoubled;
for me, to look upon my children's bodies—
a bitter, lovely sight, if ever I see it,
and the day despaired of,
785 *greatest pain of all.*

ANTISTROPHE A

Would that old Time, father of days,
had left me unwed all my life.
What need had I of children?
790 *Once, I thought, I could not bear the sorrow*
of being barred from marriage. Now
the loss of dearest children
is an evil plain to see.

(Enter Theseus and Adrastus from the side with attendants,
bearing the five corpses of the fallen chiefs.)

[chanting]

795 *The woeful sight has come: my fallen children's bodies!*
Oh, to join them in death and go down to Hades together!

ADRASTUS *[singing throughout this lyric interchange, with the Chorus*
singing in reply]

STROPHE B

Mothers! Wail for the dead who are underground!
800 *Wail in answer when you hear my moans!*

CHORUS

*Children! I bid you now in death
a bitter farewell from loving mothers.*

ADRASTUS

O grief, O grief!

CHORUS

805 *For my own woes I cry.*°

ADRASTUS

We have borne ...

CHORUS

... the most tormenting evils.

ADRASTUS

O Argive city! Do your folk not see my downfall?

CHORUS

810 *They see me too in my wretched state, barren of children.*

ADRASTUS

ANTISTROPHE B

*Bring on the bloodstained bodies of the doomed—
champions in war, laid low by lesser men.*

CHORUS

815 *Give me my children to take in my
arms;*

*my hands are ready for that
embrace.*

ADRASTUS

You have and hold ...

CHORUS

... burden enough of woes.

ADRASTUS

Alas!

CHORUS

No word for the mothers?

ADRASTUS

Hear me.

CHORUS

820 *You groan with your pain and mine.*

ADRASTUS

I wish the Theban columns had struck me down in the dust.

CHORUS

Would that my body had never been yoked to a husband's bed.

ADRASTUS

EPODE

825 *O wretched mothers of children!*
Behold, a sea of troubles.

CHORUS

Our nails cut furrows down our cheeks;

we have poured dust over our heads.

ADRASTUS

Oh, oh, ah me!

Swallow me, earth!

830 *Whirlwind, tear me apart!*

Blaze of Zeus's fire, swoop down upon me!

CHORUS

Bitter the wedding you saw,

bitter the word of Phoebus;

a Fury, bringer of grief,

835 *has abandoned Oedipus' house and come to yours.*

THESEUS

Before your long lament in front of the army^o

I would have asked you this, but I refrained

840 from speaking then, and so I let it pass.

But now, Adrastus, I ask: these are men whose spirit
has brought them fame. What is their lineage?

843 Speak, from your greater knowledge, to the young
among our citizens; you have understanding.^o

846 One thing I ask not, or you'd laugh at me;
who it was that each warrior stood and fought against,
or from which foe he took a spear wound. Vain

850 to tell or hear such tales—as if a man
in the thick of combat, with a storm of spears
before his eyes, ever brought back sure news

on who was hero. I can neither ask
such questions nor believe those who make bold
855 to answer them. When you stand against the foe,

it is hard enough to see what must be seen.

ADRASTUS

Hear, then. By granting me the privilege
of praising friends, you meet my own desire
859 to speak of them with justice and with truth.
[844 I saw the deeds—bolder than words can tell
—°

by which they hoped to take the city.

845] Look:

860 this dead one here is Capaneus. Through
him
a fierce lightning bolt went. A man of
means, he never
flaunted his wealth but kept an attitude
no prouder than a poor man's. He avoided
people who live beyond their needs and load
their tables to excess. He used to say
865 that good does not consist in belly-food,
and satisfaction comes from moderation.
He was true in friendship to present and
absent friends;
not many men are so. His character
was never false; his ways were courteous;
870 his doings, in house or city, were always
modest.

Second I name Eteoclus. He practiced
another kind of virtue. Though he lacked
means,
this youth held many offices in Argos.
875 Often his friends would offer to give him
gold,

but he never took it into his house. He
wanted
no slavish way of life, haltered by money.
He kept his hate for wrongdoers, not the
city;
a town is not to blame if a bad pilot

makes men speak ill
of it.

third of the heroes, showed his nature thus:
while yet a boy he had the strength of will
not to take up the pleasures of the Muses
that soften life; he went to live in the
country,
giving himself hard tasks to do, rejoicing
in manly deeds. He hunted, delighted in
horses,
and stretched the bow with his hands, to
make his body
useful to the city.

There lies the
son

890 of huntress Atalanta, Parthenopaeus,
supreme in beauty. He was Arcadian,
but came to Inachus' banks and was reared
in Argos.

After his upbringing there, he showed himself,

as resident foreigners
should, not
troublesome

or spiteful to the city, or disputatious,

895 which is what makes one hardest to tolerate
as citizen and guest. He joined the army
like a born Argive, fought the country's
wars,
was glad when the city prospered, took it
hard
if bad times came. Although he had many
lovers,
900 and women flocked to him,° still he was
careful
to do them all no wrong.

In praise of
Tydeus

907 I shall say much in little.° He was ambitious,
908 greatly gifted, and wise in deeds, not words.
From what I have told you, Theseus, you
should not wonder
910 that these men dared to die before the
towers.
To be well brought up develops self-respect:
anyone who has practiced what is good
is ashamed to turn out badly. Manliness
915 is teachable. Even a child is taught
to say and hear what he does not yet
understand;
things understood are kept in mind till age.
So, in like manner, train your children well.

CHORUS [*singing*]

*O my child, to an evil fate I bred you,
carried you in my womb
920 and felt the pangs of birth!*

*Now, alas! Hades holds my burden,
and I have none to cherish me in age,
though I bore a child, to my sorrow.*

THESEUS

And what of Oecles' noble son? His praises
are uttered by the gods, who bore him off
alive, with his chariot, into the depths of earth.
I too, in all sincerity, might honor
Oedipus' son: I speak of Polynices.

930 Before he left Cadmus' town, he stayed with me
till he chose Argos for his place of exile.
Now, do you know what I wish to do with the fallen?

ADRASTUS

This only I know—to obey your orders.

THESEUS

Capaneus, struck by Zeus's fire—

ADRASTUS

935 You will bury apart, as a sacred corpse?

THESEUS

Yes. But one pyre for all the others.

ADRASTUS

Where will you set his single memorial?

THESEUS

Beside this shrine I will build the tomb.

ADRASTUS

The slaves will look to that labor now.

THESEUS

940 And I to the rest. Bearers, move on.

ADRASTUS

Sorrowful mothers! Draw near your children!

THESEUS

Adrastus! That was not well said.

ADRASTUS

Why? Must the parents not touch their children?

THESEUS

To see their state would be mortal pain.

ADRASTUS

940 Yes; corpse wounds and blood are a bitter sight.

THESEUS

Then why would you increase the women's woe?

ADRASTUS

I yield.

(To the women.)

You must be brave, and stay where you are.

Theseus is right. When we have put them to the fire,
you will take home their bones. O wretched mortals,

950

why do you slaughter each other with your spears?
Leave off those struggles; let your towns take shelter
in gentleness. Life is a short affair;
we should try to make it smooth, and free from strife.

*(Exit to the side Theseus, Adrastus, the sons of
the Seven, and the funeral procession.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

955 *Blest no more with children, blest no more with sons,
I have no share in happiness
among the boy-bearing women of Argos.
And Artemis, who watches over birth,
would have no word for childless women.*
960 *My life is a time of woe;
I am like a wandering cloud
sent hurtling by fierce winds.*

ANTISTROPHE

Seven mothers, we gave birth to seven sons
965 *who gained the heights of fame in Argos;
but that has brought us suffering.
And now, without a son, without a child,
most miserably I grow old,
neither a living creature
nor one of the dead, my fate*
970 *something apart from both.*

EPODE

Tears are left to me; sad

*memorials of my son are in my house:
locks shorn from my hair, and no wreaths for me, in mourning,
975 libations for the vanished dead, and songs
unwelcome to golden-haired Apollo.
At every dawn I shall wake to weep
and drench the folds of my dress at the breast with tears.*

(Enter Evadne above the temple.)

*[chanting]
980 Already I can see the vaults
of the sacred tomb of Capaneus,
and Theseus' memorials to the dead, outside the temple.
And close at hand I see Evadne,
985 famous wife of him who died by lightning,
daughter of Iphis the king.
Why has she climbed that path
to stand on a lofty rock
that towers above this shrine?*

EVADNE *[singing]*

STROPHE

*990 Over what blaze, what gleam did sun and moon^o
drive their chariots through the air
where the light-bringers ride,
995 on that dark day when Argos' city
built towers of song and greetings
for my wedding and the bridegroom,
bronze-armored Capaneus? Ah!
1000 To you I come, wildly running from home!
I shall enter the glow of the pyre and share your grave,*

*making Hades my release
from the weary weight of life
1005 and the pain of being.
This is the sweetest death: to die with loved ones dying,
if a god should so decree.*

CHORUS LEADER

*You see this pyre; you stand above and near it;
1010 it is the treasure-house of Zeus. There lies
your husband, victim of the lightning flash.*

EVADNE [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE

*From here I see where I shall end. °
1015 Fortune guides the leap of my feet to glory.
From this rock I will dive
into the flames. My body will mingle
1020 in fiery glow with my husband,
his loved flesh close to mine.
So shall I come to Persephone's halls,
resolved never to cheat your death by living
1025 upon this earth. Daylight, wedlock, farewell!
May better fortune attend Argive marriages
shown to be true by my children!
Devoted husband,
may you dwell happy, drawn to your noble wife
1030 by steady winds of love!*

(Enter Iphis from the side.)

CHORUS LEADER

Your father, aged Iphis, comes upon
strange words, unheard-of, that will hurt to hear.

IPHIS

O women of sorrows! To my sorrowful age
1035 my family has brought a double grief.
I have come to take my dead son home by ship—
Eteoclus, who fell to the Theban spear—
and to seek my daughter, wife of Capaneus,
who sped from my house in longing to die with her husband.
1040 Before this, she was watched at home; beset
by present troubles, I dismissed the guards;
and she has gone. I think she must be here;
if you have seen her, tell me.

EVADNE

1045 Why ask them?
I am here on a rock above his pyre, my father—
lightly poised, like a bird, for a flight of doom.

IPHIS

My child, what wind has blown you here? What errand?
Why did you slip from home and come to this land?

EVADNE

1050 You would be angry if I told my plans;
I do not wish you to hear about them, father.

IPHIS

What? Is it not right that your father should know?

EVADNE

You would not be an able judge of my intent.

IPHIS

For whom have you put on this finery?

EVADNE

1055 My dress has glory in its meaning, father.

IPHIS

You don't look like one in mourning for her husband.

EVADNE

No, I have made myself ready for something new.

IPHIS

And yet you appear beside his tomb and pyre?

EVADNE

I come to celebrate a victory.

IPHIS

1060 I beg you, tell me over whom you won it.

EVADNE

Over all women on whom the sun looks down.

IPHIS

In Athena's skills, or in the ways of prudence?

EVADNE

In valor: I shall lie with my husband in death.

IPHIS

You speak in sickly riddles. What is this?

EVADNE

1065 I rush to the pyre of fallen Capaneus.

IPHIS

My daughter! Do not speak such words in public.

EVADNE

I want it known by everyone in Argos.

IPHIS

I shall not suffer you to do this thing.

EVADNE

No matter; I am beyond the reach of your hand.

1070 My body falls! a flight not dear to you
but to me and the husband who will burn with me.

(Exit Evadne leaping down into the pyre.)

CHORUS [*singing, while Iphis speaks in reply*]

Woman! Terrible the deed you brought to pass!

IPHIS

Daughters of Argos! I am ruined, doomed.

CHORUS

Having borne this heavy woe,

1075 *ah! can you bear to see*
her wildly daring deed?

IPHIS

The world holds no more miserable man.

CHORUS

*What suffering is yours! A part of Oedipus' doom
has befallen you, old sire, and my poor city.*

IPHIS

1080 In grief I ask: Why cannot mortals be
twice young, then reach old age a second time?
If anything goes wrong at home, we right it
by afterthoughts; but not so with a life.

1085 If youth and age came twice, a double life
would be our lot, and we could set things right
no matter what mistakes we'd made. When I saw others
with families, I became an adorer of children
and sorely longed for some to call my own.
If I had come to this experience

1090 with children, and known what it is for a father to lose them,
never would I have reached the point of woe
where now I stand: having brought into the world^o
a noble youth, then to be robbed of him.
And now, in my wretchedness, what shall I do?

1095 Return to my house, to see the emptiness
of many rooms, and a hopeless round of living?
Or shall I go where Capaneus once dwelt?
What a delight that was, when I had my daughter!

1100 But now she is no more—she who would draw
my cheek to her lips and clasp my head in her hands.
To an old father, nothing is more sweet
than a daughter. Boys are more spirited, but their ways
are not so tender. Quickly, take me home

1105 and give me to the dark, to starve until
my aged frame is wasted and I die.
What will I gain by touching my child's bones?
O harsh old age! How loathsome is your grip!
How I hate those who want to stretch life out,
1110 counting on meats and drinks and magic spells
to turn the stream aside and stave off death.
They're useless to the world, they ought to die:
away with them! Let them leave it to the young.

*(Exit Iphis to one side. Enter from the other side Theseus, and
the sons of the Seven carrying urns containing their ashes.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Look, look! Alas! They are bringing
the bones of my children who perished.*
1115 *Attendants, take hold of a weak old woman.*
Grief for my children has robbed me of my strength.
I have been alive for many lengths of time
and many woes have made me melt in tears.
1120 *What greater pain can mortals feel than this:*
to see their children dead before their eyes?

BOYS^o [*singing, with the Chorus singing in reply*]

STROPHE A

Sorrowful mothers! Out of the fire
I bring, I bring my father's limbs;
1125 *a weight not weightless, so great is my grief*
as I gather my all in a little space.

CHORUS

*Ah, ah! Why do you bring
tears for the mother whom the fallen loved?
1130 A little heap of dust instead of bodies
once glorious in Mycenae?*

BOYS

ANTISTROPHE A

*You are childless! childless! and I,
having lost my unhappy father, will dwell
an orphan in a house of loss,
cut off from the man who gave me life.*

CHORUS

*1135 Ah, ah! Where is the labor
spent on my children? Where, the reward of childbirth,
a mother's care, sleepless devotion of eyes,
the loving kiss on the face?*

BOYS

STROPHE B

*They have gone, they are no more. Oh, my father!
1140 They have gone.*

CHORUS

*The air holds them now,
crumbled to dust in the fire;
they have winged their way to Hades.*

BOYS

Father, I beg you, hear your children's cries!°

*Shall I ever set my shield against your foes,
1145 making your murder engender death? May that day come!*

BOYS

ANTISTROPHE B

*If a god is willing, justice will be done
for our fathers.*

CHORUS

*This evil sleeps not yet.
It grieves me. I have had enough
ill chance, enough of woe.*

BOYS

*1150 Some day Asopus' gleam will welcome me
as I march in the bronze armor of Danaus' sons
on a campaign to demand revenge for my fallen father.*

BOYS

STROPHE C

Still I seem to see you, father, before my eyes ...

CHORUS

... planting your kiss, so loved, upon my cheek.

BOYS

*1155 But your encouraging words
are borne away on the air.*

CHORUS

He left woe to us both: his mother,

and you, whom grief for your father will never leave.

BOYS

ANTISTROPHE C

I bear so great a burden that it has destroyed me.

CHORUS

1160 *Come, let me lay the dear dust close to my breast.*

BOYS

*Oh, piteous words! I weep
to hear them; they pierce my heart.*

CHORUS

*Child, you have gone: never again
shall I see you, darling of your beloved mother.*

THESEUS

1165 Adrastus! Women born of Argive families!
You see these boys, holding in their hands
the bodies of their fathers, noble men
whom I took up for burial. To them
I and the city now present the ashes.
1170 You, who see now what you have gained from me,
must keep this act in grateful recollection,
and tell your children constantly to honor
this city, handing down from son to son
the memory of answered prayers. Zeus
1175 and the gods in heaven know the kindnesses
of which we thought you worthy. Go in peace.

ADRASTUS

Theseus, we are aware of all the good
you have done the land of Argos, in its need
of benefactors, and our gratitude
will never fade. We've been nobly treated by you,
and we owe you noble actions in return.

THESEUS

1180 How can I be of further service to you?

ADRASTUS

By faring well, as you and your city deserve.

THESEUS

We shall; and may you have the same good fortune.

(Athena appears from above.)

ATHENA

Theseus, hear what I, Athena, tell you.
There is a duty that you must perform
1185 to help the city now. Do not entrust
these bones to the boys, to take to the land of Argos,
releasing them so lightly. First exact
an oath, in compensation for the efforts
you and the city have made. Adrastus here
must swear—he has authority, as king,
1190 to take an oath on behalf of all the land
of Danaus' sons. And this shall be the oath:
“Argos will never bring against this country
its armed forces in war. And if others try
to invade it, she will resist them by arms.”

But if they break their oath and attack, then pray
1195 that the Argive land may fall again to ruin.
Now hear me name the vessel for the blood
from the sacrifice you must perform. You have
inside your house a tripod with feet of bronze.
After destroying Ilium's foundations
long years ago, Heracles, going forth
1200 on another labor, told you to set that vessel
on the altar of Apollo. Over it
you must cut the throats of three sheep, and inscribe
the oath on the hollow of the tripod; then
present it to the god who has charge of Delphi,
to be preserved in memory of the oath
and as witness to it in the eyes of Hellas.
1205 The sharp-edged knife, with which you will perform
the sacrifice and deal the death-wound, you must bury
deep in the earth, here, beside the seven
pyres of the fallen. Then, if the Argives ever
attack the city, the knife, displayed, will work
fear in their hearts, and an evil journey home.
1210 After all this is done, then escort the dead from the land,
and dedicate a shrine to the god beside
the crossroad to the Isthmus, where the bodies
were purified by fire.

These are my words
to you. To the sons of the Argives, I proclaim:
when you are men you will sack Ismenus' city,
1215 avenging the murder of your fallen fathers.
You, Aegialeus, will take your father's place
as a young commander, and you, the son of Tydeus

from Aetolia, named Diomedes by your father.
No sooner shall you get your beards than you'll march
1220 a mighty force of bronze-clad Danaans
against the Thebans' seven-mouthed walls. Your coming
will bring them sorrow—lion cubs you are,
true-bred sackers of cities! This shall befall:
you'll be known through Greece as the Successors of the Seven,
1225 a theme of future song. So great will be
your expedition, favored by the gods.

THESEUS

I shall obey your orders, Queen Athena!
You have corrected me; I won't go wrong again.
Now I shall bind this man to me by oath.
1230 Only, I pray you, set me in the right path;
so long as you mean kindly to the city,
our life will be secure to the end of time.

(Exit Athena.)

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Now let us go, Adrastus, and give our word
to this man and his city, whose deeds for us
deserve the highest honors we can give.*

(Exit all.)